Canadian parents’ knowledge and satisfaction regarding their child’s day-care experience

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to examine parental selection criteria and satisfaction with day care, knowledge about centre philosophy, teacher education and quality of the day-care environment. Parents (n = 261) and educators (n = 94) in 44 non-profit centres in three Canadian cities participated. Parent knowledge was assessed by phone interview, and day-care quality was rated. Many parents reported knowledge of the centre’s philosophy and were highly satisfied with the care but sometimes held inaccurate views of the teacher’s education. Parent education positively predicted parental knowledge of centre philosophy, while a trend was evident between parent knowledge of centre philosophy and the quality of the day-care environment (i.e. educator–child interaction), after accounting for site effects. Given that parent knowledge about their child’s day-care experience may sometimes be incomplete, more frequent and informative parent–educator communication is required, particularly about children’s learning and development.

Keywords
centre philosophy, day-care quality, parent knowledge, teacher education

What do parents know about the day-care experiences of their young children? This question forms the central focus of the current study. There is limited literature on parental selection factors and satisfaction with day care (e.g. Gamble et al., 2009), and even less is known about parents’...
understanding of their child’s experience once enrolled. Increasing numbers of Canadian parents work, and children spend long hours in care (www.statcan.gc.ca); thus, investigating parental knowledge is an important issue in the investigation of factors associated with quality of care. In particular, knowledge about the philosophy of the day-care centre should inform parents about their children’s experiences because (a) centre philosophy and (b) teacher beliefs about philosophy and curriculum are argued to guide the children’s daily activities and experiences (McMullen et al., 2006; Winsler and Carleton, 2003) and, therefore, may influence child development outcomes (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997). However, little research has investigated parental knowledge of centre philosophy and classroom quality. Research has demonstrated that day-care quality is a function of a number of factors, for example, educator training. Educators with formal training in early childhood education often provide higher quality care, engage in more sensitive child interactions and engage in greater parent communication (Ackerman, 2006; Ghazvini and Readdick, 1994). Given the importance of these factors, we investigated parental (a) criteria for centre selection, (b) satisfaction with the care, (c) knowledge of centre philosophy and (d) knowledge of the teacher’s education level. Our final question investigated whether classroom quality, and teacher and parent education predicted parent knowledge about centre philosophy.

**Parental knowledge of day care**

**Selection factors**

The most frequently cited parental selection criteria for American parents are convenience, location, cost and, sometimes, developmental considerations (e.g. whether a setting was appropriate given the age and abilities of the child; Early and Burchinal, 2001; Peyton et al., 2001). Parents with greater education were more likely to consider the programme’s educational characteristics when selecting care than less educated parents (Johansen et al., 1996). Gamble et al. (2009: 70) demonstrated that parents hold ‘coherent belief sets’ about key selection factors (e.g. programmes that foster school readiness skills, social skills), while simultaneously considering their child’s developmental needs. They also argued that information about selection criteria provides insight into parents’ values and discernment as consumers. Therefore, we examined the selection criteria of parents because little is known about the critical factors considered by Canadian parents.

**Centre functioning**

Our next research question addressed the issue of what parents know about the daily functioning of the centre. The research indicates that parental knowledge is generally limited to health, safety and structural issues but is often not concordant with information provided by centre directors (Rassin et al., 1991). For example, Shpancer et al. (2002) interviewed directors and parents about structural (e.g. group size) and procedural (e.g. how often toys are washed) features. Parents and directors only agreed on 45 per cent of the responses; specifically, disagreements included centre (e.g. teacher education) and classroom (e.g. daily schedule) factors, whereas they agreed on policies (e.g. behaviour management) and licensing status. Social desirability may have influenced directors’ answers about procedural issues (i.e. frequency of washing toys), although it seems less likely for structural factors (e.g. class size) since these features are regulated and easily verifiable. As outlined below, information about parental knowledge of other aspects of centre functioning (i.e. centre philosophy) is lacking.
**Parent satisfaction**

Parents may lack some critical information about the centre’s functioning, nevertheless they report high satisfaction and rate it highly (Shpancer et al., 2002). Parental satisfaction was predicted by perceived social support and frequency of parent involvement but not interactive (e.g. activities) or structural quality (e.g. group size) factors (Britner and Phillips, 1995). Thus, we examined parental satisfaction with day care.

**Critical factors for parents to know**

As discussed below, we also investigated the factors associated with parental knowledge regarding the centre’s philosophy. Such information can provide guidance for parents in their search for a centre that will support their child’s developmental and family needs. Since centre philosophies reflect values and principles that inform centre practices, this information also provides guidance for parents who are looking for a centre with a philosophy reflective of their own values. Additionally, this knowledge can provide a basis for parents to make an ongoing assessment of the suitability of the programme for their child.

**Programme philosophy and children’s experiences**

Centre philosophy is a written statement of the values, beliefs and principles from which the programme or curriculum emanates (Chandler, 2006). One purpose of a philosophy is ‘the provision of guidance and support for staff in their daily practice’ (Friendly et al., 2006: 18). Thus, the educator’s curriculum (e.g. daily activities) should reflect the centre’s philosophy, the children’s needs and interests and the educator’s knowledge of child development (Winsler and Carleton, 2003). Indeed, the educator’s curriculum is at the heart of the child’s day. McMullen et al. (2006) reported that teachers who espoused a child-centred or a ‘developmentally appropriate’ philosophy were more likely to provide child-initiated play/decision making and emergent literacy/language activities, whereas teachers with a traditional or ‘academic-oriented’ philosophy emphasized classroom organization, predetermined curriculum, routines and teacher-directed instruction (p. 81).

Therefore, we were interested in what parents know about the philosophy of their child’s centre and considered the child’s educator as the most likely source of information. In fact, parent–educator communication is considered one of the hallmarks of high-quality programmes and has been linked with positive child outcomes (Van Ijzendoorn et al., 1998). Studies have focused on issues such as sharing information about the child, home and day-care experiences provided via different forms of communication (Owen et al., 2000) but have not specifically addressed communication about curriculum. Since the centre’s philosophy is designed to guide the teacher in creating the daily curriculum, knowledge about philosophy should inform parents about their child’s day and whether the environment meets their child’s developmental needs.

Finally, we know that more educated mothers considered the developmental aspects of care or placed their children in centres with higher quality child–educator interactions (Holloway and Reichhart-Erickson, 1989; Johansen et al., 1996), but how parental education is associated with knowledge regarding programme philosophy once the child is enrolled is unknown. Therefore, we investigated how parental education was associated with knowledge about centre philosophy and asked whether more educated parents are more knowledgeable?
Quality of care

Quality of care matters for children’s cognitive, language and social–emotional development (Lamb and Ahnert, 2006) and has been defined by structural (e.g. teacher education) and process (e.g. teacher–child interactions) variables. The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale–Revised (ECERS-R; Harms et al., 2005) has been widely used as a measure of the quality of the day-care environment; specifically, its ‘focus is on the needs of children and how to meet those meets to the best of our current understanding’ (Harms et al., 2005: 2).

Both American and German parents rated the programme quality of their child’s day care consistently higher than trained observers (Cryer and Burchinal, 1997; Cryer et al., 2002). Parents and observers agreed on the specific characteristics that define quality care (e.g. safety, activities); however, trained observers were more likely to make discriminations between low- and high-quality programmes, whereas parents generally rated all programmes as high quality (Cryer et al., 2002). Lamb and Ahnert (2006) proposed that given the difficulty in finding appropriate care and fears about the risks associated with group care, high parent ratings may reflect a desire to alleviate their own anxieties.

These varying perspectives suggest that it is important to investigate parent knowledge about day-care quality given that parents are users of the service, and they consider the curriculum to be an important aspect of high-quality care (Yamamoto et al., 2011). Yet, parents typically only spend short periods of time in the classroom (e.g. drop-off and pick-up) and communicate briefly with teachers; thus, their knowledge of centre philosophy and the daily curriculum may be limited. Therefore, we examined the following associations (a) parent knowledge of centre philosophy and (b) classroom quality (as assessed by trained observers on the ECERS-R).

Teacher education

Some studies demonstrate a positive association between teacher education and programme quality (e.g. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)1 Early Child Care Research Network, 2002); other studies, at best, show weak or no links between teacher education and quality in preschool classrooms (Early et al., 2007; Phillipsen et al., 1997). In studies demonstrating a link, teachers with formal and specialized education were more likely to provide high-quality, developmentally focused programmes and to have warmer and more sensitive child interactions (Ackerman, 2006; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1996). In particular, teachers with Bachelor of Arts (BA) degrees provided higher quality care than those with less or no formal education. Ghazvini and Readdick (1994) also reported positive associations between training in early childhood and/or child development and more frequent communication with parents, although centre philosophy or curriculum issues were not addressed. Given the literature above showing positive associations of day-care quality and teacher education, more educated teachers might possibly engage in more parent communication. Thus, one of our research questions examined the association between teacher education and parent knowledge of the centre’s philosophy.

Further, Shpancer et al.’s (2002) findings suggest that many parents do not provide accurate reports about the teacher’s education. Given the teacher’s important role in creating classroom quality, parent knowledge of teacher education provides insight into their understanding of the care environment. Thus, we also examined the accuracy of parental reports of the teacher’s education and associations with knowledge of philosophy and classroom quality.
The present study

Our purpose was to investigate parental (a) selection criteria and (b) satisfaction with the centre, as well as parents’ knowledge of (c) the centre’s philosophy and (d) the teacher’s education level. Using multiple methods (i.e. interviews, observations), we examined associations between parent knowledge of centre philosophy and centre quality (Harms et al., 2005), and links with teacher and parent education.

Data for the present report were drawn from a larger intervention study (Howe et al., 2007) regarding methods of delivery for in-service professional development. During the pre-test portion of the study, we interviewed parents about their experiences with the centre, and these data are used here but were not included in the report of the intervention study.

First, we examined descriptive information regarding parental selection criteria, satisfaction, knowledge of centre philosophy and teacher education so as to provide a detailed picture of parents’ understanding of the specific day-care centre. Second, we predicted that parents with greater education would be more knowledgeable about the centre’s philosophy than parents with less education (Johansen et al., 1996). Third, we expected that both higher classroom quality scores (ECERS-R) and teacher education would positively predict parent knowledge based on research demonstrating that teachers with intermediate or advanced levels of education are more likely to create developmentally focused environments and engage in more parent communication (Ghazvini and Readdick, 1994; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1996).

Method

Participants

A total of 44 non-profit day-care centres in three Canadian cities were recruited based on information from provincial Ministries or professional associations (15 centres each in Winnipeg and Halifax and 14 in Montreal). One 4-year-old classroom in each centre participated (mean number of educators = 2.1, range = 1–5); when centres had more than one 4-year-old classroom, we selected the class where teachers all had formal education. All 94 participants volunteered (89 female and 5 male; Montreal = 25, Winnipeg = 38, Halifax = 31) and had an average of 7.10 years of experience (standard deviation (SD) = 5.23, range = 0–31 years). Education was coded as (a) basic (e.g. short Attestation programme of 1 year; 18/94 = 19.1%), (b) intermediate (e.g. 2- or 3-year college/CEGEP (Collège d’enseignement général et professionnel) programme, 62/94 = 66.0%) and (c) advanced (e.g. university, 14/94 = 14.9%). The parents of 261 children (mothers = 222 (85.1%), fathers = 37, guardians = 2) were interviewed (Montreal = 79, Winnipeg = 97, Halifax = 85). Most parents were married (72.4%), and, in general, both spouses were employed (78.1% of families). Parental education indicated the following: 18.4% (n = 48) had some high school education or completed high school; 21.1% (n = 55) had some college education or completed college/CEGEP; 39.8% (n = 104) had some university education or completed university; 15.7% (n = 41) had some postgraduate education or completed postgraduate education and 5.0% (n = 13) had another form of education (e.g. correspondence courses). Families included one (32.2%), two (45.5%), three (18%) and four or more children (3.9%); average number of children per family = 1.93.

Site selection

Legislation and regulations for day care are provincial responsibilities (Friendly et al., 2006; Jacobs et al., 2007); the three sites were selected for regulation differences for qualification levels for
teacher education (see Table 1). Although research indicates associations between teacher education and quality of care (e.g. Ackerman, 2006), given limited evidence regarding the impact of site, this variable was included only for exploratory purposes.

**Procedure**

The ECERS-R (Harms et al., 2005) was used to rate quality of each classroom. A research assistant in Montreal conducted parent phone interviews for the three sites. The parent who signed the consent form was interviewed on the assumption that this parent had the most contact with the centre.

**Measures**

**Parent interview.** The 19-question interview assessed demographic information (e.g. marital status) and knowledge about their child’s day-care experiences. Parents were asked why they were using day care, how the centre was selected, their knowledge about the centre’s philosophy and the educator’s level of training. Finally, parents responded to 10 open-ended statements (e.g. ‘The things I like about the day care centre are …’; ‘It is important for my child to learn …’). Interviews lasted 15–20 minutes and were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Using a grounded theory approach for qualitative interview data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), the first three authors developed a coding scheme based on parents’ responses to the open-ended questions. Grounded theory is a systematic method of analysing qualitative data; common concepts or

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Regulations concerning teacher training</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ECE II: Approved diploma from a recognized community college or completion or competency based assessment programme</td>
<td>Attestation: 12-month programme (1200 hours of training)</td>
<td>ECE college diploma (2 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College diploma: 3-year ECE specialization programme</td>
<td>Equivalent = Grade 12 education plus 2 years of experience in day care, a 2-semester course in human growth and development and curriculum development</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ECE III: Approved degree from university or an approved ECE II plus recognized certificate</td>
<td>University degree: 3-year BA or 4-year Early Childhood and Elementary Education Specialization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/3 ECE II or ECE III</td>
<td>2/3 college diploma or degree in ECE or Attestation</td>
<td>2/3 ECE training programme or equivalent</td>
</tr>
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</table>

BA: Bachelor of Arts; ECE: early childhood education. This information was derived from Friendly et al. (2006).
categories are developed from a careful and independent reading of the interviews by several persons. First, the three authors independently identified themes in the responses to each question. Next, the authors compared lists and identified common themes for each question; the decision about which themes to include as codes was based on the list of common, mutually exclusive themes identified by all three readers. The number of codes derived from this approach varied by question. Finally, the research assistants were trained to identify the codes for each question and noted the presence or absence of each possible code for each question. Codes were mutually exclusive and exhaustive; each occurrence of each code for each question was tallied. For example, a parent might mention three codes in response to the question about ‘why parent was using day care’ and all three received a tally. Complete lists of codes for each question are reported in the section ‘Results’.

**Reliability.** The independent coding of the two assistants (naive to the study’s goals) was compared to determine whether they agreed on the assignment of codes; disagreements were resolved by discussion. Specifically, each assistant separately coded the same 20 per cent of the interviews (n = 52/261), and their coding was compared. Their agreement on assignment of codes was calculated as agreement/agreements + disagreements = 93 per cent.

**ECERS-R.** This 43-item scale measures classroom quality on seven subscales (e.g. space and furnishings) with each item rated on a 7-point scale: 1 = inadequate to 7 = excellent. Average centre scores of 5 or higher are considered good quality. The ECERS-R has well-established reliability and validity (Harms et al., 2005). Cassidy et al. (2005) reported a two-factor model for the ECERS-R (Activities/Materials, 9 items; Interactions/Language, 7 items). Based on scale item analysis, we added three items to the Activities scale (music, sand/water and diversity) and two items to the Interactions scale (greeting/departures and child communication). We employed Cronbach’s alphas to assess the internal consistency of each subscale (i.e. whether the set of items seemed to be measuring the same underlying factor). This analysis suggested that overall the Activities and Interactions scales showed high internal consistency based on recognized conventions for these statistics (Activities = .83; Interactions = .86).

**Reliability.** Each site had two ECERS-R observers, who were trained in Montreal. In each site, the degree that the two raters independently agreed on (interrater reliability) was established prior to data collection (70% for agreement within one point on the 7-point scale). Following training, reliability observations were collected on 20 per cent (n = 3/15 per site or 9/44 classrooms), and disagreements were resolved by discussion. Agreement between raters indicated Montreal = 86 per cent, Winnipeg = 99 per cent and Halifax = 85 per cent.

**Results**

First, we report the descriptive analyses that address the parental selection factors, satisfaction and their knowledge about their child’s centre and teacher education. Second, the analyses examined the predictors of parents’ knowledge about the centre’s philosophy.

**Parent interview**

**Selection factors.** Overwhelmingly, parents reported placing their children in care because they worked and needed care (see Table 2), while a third also mentioned benefits of care for their child. Most centres were selected because of convenience or reputation rather than cost, availability, programme content, or recommendations.
Parental knowledge about the centre philosophy. Approximately 75 per cent of the parents were able to list some features regarding the centre’s philosophy, whereas 25 per cent reported having no knowledge (see Table 3). Of the parents with knowledge, many mentioned child development or educational aspects, while others discussed goals for behaviour management, and fewer stated that activities were part of the centre’s philosophy. Family inclusion and providing quality care were mentioned less frequently. Parents reported receiving this information by written centre communiqués (51.5%), rather than from educators (28.4%) or directors (19.1%).

Parental knowledge about level of teacher education. Parents were asked about the teacher’s level of education. Of the 39.8 per cent of parents who reported knowing this information, 3.8 per cent indicated a basic level, 57.7 per cent an intermediate level and 38.5 per cent an advanced level (see Table 4). We compared these figures to the actual figures for teacher education for the total sample \((n = 94)\). Findings indicated that parents generally underestimated the percentage of teachers with a basic level and overestimated the percentage with an advanced level. However, given that many classrooms included multiple teachers, this analysis did not reveal whether parents were accurately reporting the education level of the most educated classroom teacher. Therefore, we compared parent-reported figures to the classroom teacher with the highest level of education (see Table 4). This deliberately conservative comparison also revealed that parents tended to overestimate the teacher’s education level. When they reported knowing the teacher’s education level, parents said it was the result of communication with the educator (46.2%) or it was posted at the centre (38.5%), rather than via communication with the director (8.7%).

Parental satisfaction. What did parents like most about the centre (see Table 5)? The most frequent responses were the staff’s personal characteristics, programme features and child-related aspects of the centre. Parents also mentioned custodial features (e.g. nutrition, cleanliness) and centre atmosphere quite frequently. In response to a second question (‘I am pleased when the day care centre …’), parents’ responses focused on communiqués about their child (59.8%), learning experiences (13.1%) and activities such as field trips (10.8%).

Parents were also asked what they liked least about the centre (see Table 5); 30 per cent indicated that there was nothing they disliked. The most frequent criticisms focused on the facility (e.g. small classrooms) and disagreements between day care and parental practices (e.g. nap schedules).

Table 2. Parental reasons for using day care and selection factors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for using day care</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent unavailable during the day</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>86.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits for child</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection factors for child’s current centre</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>39.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme content</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme recommended</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Percentages refer to the proportions of the total number of parents who endorsed a particular category.

Table 2. Parental reasons for using day care and selection factors.
In response to a second question about what did not please them, more than a third of parents wanted more attention to school readiness (37.5%); others were displeased with a focus only on custodial issues (10.0%).

Next, parents were asked how they believed the centre should help their child; many mentioned promoting children’s growth and development (76.4%), preparation for school (36.3%), whereas only a few indicated providing custodial care (11.6%). When asked what was important for their child to learn, parents said social skills (68.0%) and preparation for school (29.3%). In terms of knowledge about their child’s daily life, parents stated their children spent most of their time involved in activities (61.4%), playing (52.1%) and socializing (35.1%). Overwhelmingly, parents were satisfied with how their children spent their time (93.1%).

Predictors of parents’ knowledge about day care

Parent education and knowledge. A logistic regression was employed to examine whether parent education was related to whether parents reported knowledge of the centre philosophy. Parent education was placed on a scale from 1 (some high school) to 8 (completed graduate degree); parents whose education was rated as ‘other’ were excluded. There was a positive association between parental education and reports of centre philosophy knowledge (odds ratio = 1.41, p < .001). In other words, parents with higher levels of education (university or postgraduate degrees) were more likely to report knowledge of centre philosophy than parents with less education (high school diploma or less).

Parent knowledge in the three sites. To determine whether parent knowledge regarding the centre philosophy varied across the three sites, a chi-square analysis was conducted. This analysis tests...
whether one categorical variable (i.e. whether parents report having knowledge or not) is related to another categorical variable (i.e. Montreal, Winnipeg or Halifax site). Findings indicated an effect for site, \( \chi^2(2) = 17.74, p < .001; \) in Montreal, parents (92%) overwhelmingly said they knew about centre philosophy, whereas Winnipeg parents were less likely to claim that they knew (66%). Halifax fell between the other two sites (69% of parents).

Centre quality and parent knowledge. Using multiple regression analyses, we first examined whether the quality of the centre (ECERS-R Activities and Interactions scores) predicted whether parents had knowledge of the centre’s philosophy. This analysis revealed that Interactions ratings were uniquely related to parents’ knowledge of centre philosophy (\( \beta = .40, p < .05 \)), but not Activities ratings. In other words, when ECERS-R Interactions scores were higher, more parents in that centre indicated that they knew about the centre’s philosophy. However, when we did a second analysis controlling for site (i.e. accounting for whether parents were from Montreal, Halifax or Winnipeg), the unique association between the ECERS-R Interactions score and parents’ knowledge of centre philosophy was only a trend (\( \beta = .34, p = .07 \)). We also examined teacher education and years of experience as predictors of parent knowledge of philosophy; with site controlled, these two variables were not significantly related to parents’ knowledge of centre philosophy.

**Discussion**

Our study generated new information about parental perceptions of the quality of their child’s day-care experience, the value of care as an important context for children’s development and knowledge of teacher education. Given the increasing number of children in day care, it is important to

<table>
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<th>Table 5. Parents’ reports of what they liked the most and least about the day care centre.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What parents liked the most</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal characteristics of staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Program aspects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child-related aspects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Centre atmosphere</td>
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<tr>
<td>Custodial aspects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qualifications of staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What parents like the least</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement between day-care and parental practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of communication from centre about child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-funded</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of flexibility about attendance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff turnover</td>
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Percentages refer to the proportions of the total number of parents who endorsed a particular category.
investigate how this context interacts with parental knowledge about their child’s experiences. As Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) remind us, children live in many contexts, and the bidirectional links between families and the day-care environment may have a critical impact on children’s development. Thus, our study contributes important and relevant information to the literature regarding how families interact with contexts outside of the home.

**Parental selection factors**

Most parents were employed and required day care, which reflects historic changes in the number of Canadian women with young children in the workforce. However, about 33 per cent of the parents also mentioned the benefits of care (e.g. socialization experience, school readiness skills). Gamble et al. (2009) also reported that parents valued day-care’s child-centred and school readiness features. Our Canadian parents stated that convenience and reputation were the two major reasons for selecting the particular centre, which is in line with literature indicating that American parents rate convenience as the primary selection factor (Peyton et al., 2001) while considering other factors (e.g. philosophy or programme) to a lesser extent. Our findings suggest that the practical considerations for selecting day care may be paramount (i.e. availability of day-care spaces, reduced travel time), perhaps to the exclusion of other factors (e.g. programme) that may be less of a priority for parents.

**Parental knowledge about the centre philosophy**

Many parents (75%) reported knowledge about the centre’s philosophy, which they gleaned from written (not verbal) communiqués with the educator. The knowledge included reference to children’s development and educational experiences, which one would expect to be linked in a developmentally focused programme. Parents also reported that an important feature of the philosophy was to assist children with behaviour guidance issues as they become socialized to group experiences, while others noted that providing activities was a key element. Considering this pattern of findings, parents may be sensitive to the notion that educators were implementing an educationally oriented philosophy rather than providing custodial care. Since all three provincial regulations require that parents receive written philosophy statements (Jacobs et al., 2007), it is not clear why Montreal parents, in particular, reported higher rates of knowledge, a finding requiring further investigation. We did not determine whether parental perceptions were consistent with the written statements, but based on the responses, it seems that to a large degree the centre philosophy was a salient issue for parents.

**Parental knowledge about teacher education**

Parents reported that their knowledge of the teacher’s education was based on teacher communications or from visible postings, but the extent and accuracy of this information was rather low; similar findings were also reported by Shpancer et al. (2002). Only 40 per cent of the Canadian parents were able to report the teacher’s education; of this group, most parents stated that teachers had intermediate levels of education (e.g. community college), which was generally accurate. Yet, parents overestimated the percentage of educators with an advanced (BA) degree by a fairly large proportion, while underestimating the percentage with basic qualifications.

What does this say about parents’ knowledge? First, although provincial regulations in two of three provinces (Manitoba, Nova Scotia) require that the teacher’s qualifications be prominently
posted, many parents could not report this information. Second, among those parents who answered the question, a fair percentage held inaccurate perceptions, in particular at the high end of the educational scale. Third, given the many well-educated parents in our sample, this may reflect their personal values about education and the belief that their child was enrolled in a high-quality environment that encouraged learning and development provided by a well-educated teacher. Along this line, Canadian parents reported that day-care educators should have at least a college, if not a university, degree (Tough et al., 2011). Given that teachers with more education provide higher quality care (e.g. Ackerman, 2006), our findings raise additional questions about parents’ understanding of day-care quality (e.g. how do parents’ definitions of quality care align with educator practices?).

**Parental satisfaction with the centre**

Parental likes and dislikes about the day-care centre were ascertained to provide a picture of parents’ definition of important elements. Parents had clear preferences for the teachers’ personal characteristics (e.g. warmth), curriculum (e.g. activities) and child-related aspects (e.g. happiness), whereas custodial features, centre atmosphere (e.g. friendly place) and teacher qualifications were mentioned less frequently. Parents’ strong preference for the staff’s personal characteristics suggests that the quality of parent–educator and educator–child relationships is a key element in parents’ positive attitudes about day care (Lamb and Ahnert, 2006).

About one-third of the parents had no complaints about the day-care centre (i.e. 30 per cent reported there was nothing they ‘liked the least’). This would suggest that many parents were highly satisfied with the care provided, a point we return to below. Except for two issues (i.e. physical aspects such as size, disagreements between centre and home practices), the remaining issues were raised by fewer than 5 per cent of the parents. However, in response to another question, a few parents also reported being displeased with a focus on custodial issues indicating that they expected more than basic care (e.g. care related only to health, safety, nutrition, sleep, toileting issues). When asked how they believe the centre should help their child, over 75 per cent of the parents viewed the centre as a partner in promoting their child’s development with about one-third citing preparation for school. These findings are in line with research indicating that parents desire day-care settings that will stimulate their children’s cognitive and social development (Johansen et al., 1996; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1997).

**Parental knowledge of their child’s daily experiences and satisfaction**

Parents reported that their child spent most of the day engaged in structured activities (e.g. circle time), play and socializing, which indicated a general understanding of the child’s daily experiences. Overwhelmingly, parents were satisfied with how their child spent his or her time suggesting general comfort with out-of-home care. Others (e.g. Cryer and Burchinal, 1997) also reported that parents rate the centre quality highly even when trained observers do not. It is unclear whether parents have different priorities regarding quality of care than trained observers or are not present in the classroom frequently enough to assess quality in the same way as observers. Also, parents’ generally positive views about the centre may possibly override any negative feelings (Cryer et al., 2002). Perhaps, the high levels of satisfaction and ratings of quality may reflect parents’ needs to overcome or alleviate concerns about placing their child in a less-than-optimal setting (Lamb and Ahnert, 2006). Certainly, further research is required.
**Predictors of parent knowledge regarding centre philosophy**

These analyses provided information regarding which factors were related to parents’ knowledge about the centre’s philosophy. Our prediction that teacher education would be related to parent knowledge was not supported; all the educators had formal training, and the restricted range may account for the lack of findings in this regard. Replication with a larger sample and a wider range of teacher qualifications (none to advanced) may be required to answer this question. In contrast, parent education was related to parental knowledge of the centre’s philosophy, suggesting that more highly educated parents may seek such information, and perhaps are more active consumers. This finding has relevance for social policy initiatives regarding educating parents to become well-informed consumers of day care.

There was a trend for ECERS-R Interactions (but not Activities) scores to be uniquely related to parent knowledge of the centre’s philosophy, after accounting for site. The Interaction scale includes items about teacher–child communication (e.g. greeting/departure, encouraging communication). Perhaps, educators who value and encourage communication with children also engage in both formal and informal communication with parents regarding their classroom goals, activities and how they translate their philosophy into practice. Alternatively, more highly educated parents may take an active interest in centre philosophy. The importance of regular and open parent–educator communication is often highlighted (Lamb and Ahnert, 2006) and has been linked with more sensitive and supportive educator–child interactions, positive child outcomes and higher quality care (Ghazvini and Readdick, 1994; Jeon et al., 2011; Owen et al., 2000). In sum, this literature demonstrates the importance of educator–parent communication as one aspect of quality care.

**Conclusions**

The study has some limitations that warrant caution in interpreting the findings. The non-experimental design at one time point does not permit an examination of cause–effect relationships or change over time. Furthermore, the data were collected in non-profit centres, all teachers had formal education and parents were relatively middle class, thus limiting the generalizability of findings. However, a large sample of parents in three Canadian cities was interviewed, providing rich information from a geographically diverse population. The range of educational qualifications reflected provincial regulations and were generally representative of non-profit Canadian day-care settings (Jacobs et al., 2007). The accuracy of parental knowledge of centre philosophy was not assessed; thus, it is not clear whether parents held reliable information. Nevertheless, our findings added insights to the literature, specifically factors that predict parental perceptions regarding their knowledge.

In conclusion, while many parents report having knowledge about the philosophy of their child’s day-care centre, other parents do not. These findings have direct relevance for early childhood educators and highlight the need for teachers to assume greater professional responsibility for helping parents to understand the important factors of the day-care environment (e.g. philosophy, curriculum). Our findings also have direct relevance for the kinds of questions that parents should raise in assessing the quality of their child’s centre (e.g. What kind of activities are provided? What are the opportunities for independent and social play? What are children learning during different activities?). Furthermore, our findings reveal the need for a public awareness campaign in cooperation with early childhood professional associations to inform parents about critical factors. Establishing a home–day care partnership is crucial for the well-being of children and families.
(e.g. Owen et al., 2000), thus educators should become proficient at opening the lines of communication with parents so as to convey relevant and meaningful information about their child and the classroom philosophy and programme. In turn, parents will also be more inclined to share information with the educator. Such collaboration can only work to the benefit of the children, parents and educators.

Acknowledgements

We thank the centres, parents and educators who participated; the research assistants (Jane Green, Toni Hakem, Elin Ibrahim, Crystal James, Emma McLaren, Carrie Timgren and Maria Sarria) and Allyson Funamoto, Joanna Rosciszwksa and Ana Howe-Bukowski for editorial assistance.

Funding

This study was funded by a grant from Human Resources Development Canada, Social Partnerships Program to the first two authors (N.H. and E.J.).

Notes

1. The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development is a longitudinal research programme and network supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) at the US government supported National Institute of Health. This research group has published numerous empirical studies on the project. For further information see the website www.nichd.nih.gov.
2. In Quebec, Attestation programmes are offered through the CEGEPs (see Note 3) but are shorter Early Childhood Education programmes (12 months) that provide an alternative route to the 3-year programme. The number of courses (41 vs 17) and the number of field placements (4 vs 2) are reduced in the Attestation programme.
3. The CEGEP (Collège d’enseignement général et professionnel) system is unique to Quebec. High school ends at grade 11 (secondary 5) and then students attend CEGEP programmes that provide technical or applied training or university preparation. The applied programmes, such as Early Childhood Education, are intensive 3-year programmes.

References


