

EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE FOR IMMIGRANT FAMILIES AND CHILDREN: A PAN-CANADIAN JURISDICTIONAL SCAN OF SETTLEMENT AGENCIES

Nahal Fakhari, Milena Pimental, and Jessie-Lee D. McIsaac

Abstract: High-quality early learning and child care programs are in a position to support immigrant family settlement, reduce socioeconomic inequities, and enhance children’s overall development. In Canada, these can be delivered either as provincially or territorially licensed programs or through settlement agencies. The goal of this research was to understand what factors influence the implementation of child care in settlement agencies across Canada. We conducted an environmental scan of settlement agencies and invited key informants to participate in interviews and surveys. Overall, the 38 participating organizations identified factors influencing the successful implementation of child care delivery at settlement agencies at both the system level (licensing and regulation, funding, workforce changes) and operational level (enhanced access to child care, cultural and linguistic diversity of educators). The findings also suggest a need to continue to emphasize broader purposes for early learning and child care programs, such as providing support to the whole family by allowing parents to access other services such as language training and information classes. Strategic connections between settlement agencies and provincially or territorially licensed programs will contribute to the professionalization of the field and to greater access to child care for immigrant families across the country.

Keywords: early childhood, immigration, child care, family supports, settlement

Nahal Fakhari MA is a research coordinator at the Early Childhood Collaborative Research Centre, Mount Saint Vincent University, 166 Bedford Highway, Halifax NS B3M 2J6. Email: Nahal.Fakhari@dal.ca

Milena Pimental BA is a research assistant at the Early Childhood Collaborative Research Centre, Mount Saint Vincent University, 166 Bedford Highway, Halifax NS B3M 2J6. Email: milena.pimentel@msvu.ca

Jessie-Lee D. McIsaac PhD (corresponding author) is the Director at the Early Childhood Collaborative Research Centre and an Associate Professor and Tier II Canada Research Chair Principal Investigator at Mount Saint Vincent University, 166 Bedford Highway, Halifax NS B3M 2J6. Email: jessie-lee.mcisaac@msvu.ca

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Immigration is “a complex, multifaceted, ongoing process that has profound effects on the inner and interpersonal worlds” of the child (Bonovitz, 2004, p. 130). Such effects are driven by the changes and challenges of migration, which can in turn impact children’s well-being (Onchwari et al., 2008). Immigrants come to Canada for a myriad of reasons and from many different countries, bringing with them the cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage and traditions of their homelands (Statistics Canada, 2022). In Canadian law, an “immigrant” is defined as a permanent resident (also called “landed immigrant”) — one who has been granted the right to live in Canada permanently by immigration authorities (Statistics Canada, 2023a). There are three main categories of immigrants with permanent residency in Canada: economic immigrants, immigrants sponsored by a family, and refugees; however, some immigrants who are granted permanent residency don’t fit into any of these categories (Statistics Canada, 2016). In 2022, Canada experienced record population growth, with international migration accounting for 96% of the growth (Statistics Canada, 2023b).

Immigration targets and policies are often focused on economic growth, and decisions are based on a principal applicant, rather than taking into account the needs of the whole family, especially dependent children (Costigan et al., 2016). In particular, Costigan and colleagues (2016) argued that immigrant children have unique linguistic and cultural needs that are often overlooked by Canadian immigration policies and programs. Research has also found that immigrant families experience systemic barriers that obstruct access to programs and services for their young children (Fakhari et al., 2023b). Considering the increase in migration rates and in ongoing targets for immigration in Canada (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2023), there is an essential need to focus attention on current services for immigrant families, specifically children, and identify the necessary improvements to support transitions for immigrant children after migration.

Most immigrants in Canada receive a range of services funded by the provincial, territorial, and federal governments to support initial settlement and enable participation in social, cultural, civic, and economic life (Ashton et al., 2016). These settlement services are critical to the success of provincial and national immigration policies (Ashton et al., 2016) and include such support and assistance as language-training classes and information about community services, employment, housing, and school enrolment processes (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2010). To enable immigrant parents to participate in available programs, many settlement agencies also offer child care services. These child care programs are crucial to enabling the transition of immigrants in Canada, especially women. Research has shown that most immigrant women with young children stay home to take care them, often because of family separation (e.g., grandparents are not there to help) and financial barriers (Leung et al., 2019; Morantz et al., 2013; Price et al., 2020). For example, in a study conducted by Morantz et al. (2013), refugee mothers in Montreal stated that they could not register their children at formal child care programs due to financial barriers, including ineligibility to access reduced fees due to their migration status. These mothers

believed that this lack of child care hampered their language acquisition and social integration, and thus reduced their contributions to family income (Morantz et al., 2013).

Child care has been identified as a critical social infrastructure and is considered foundational for Canada's economy and essential for supporting the growth, development, and prosperity of young children (Macdonald & Friendly, 2023). The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreements between the federal and provincial/territorial governments have highlighted the importance of accessible, high-quality, and inclusive child care for families with young children (DFC, 2021). The further emphasis on culturally responsive child care within CWELCC is especially critical for the well-being of immigrant young children and their families as they navigate their settlement in a new country (Brown et al., 2020). As such, high-quality early learning and child care (ELCC) programs that are responsive to the unique needs of immigrant families can be positioned to support children's adjustment and their social and emotional development (Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Magnuson & Shager, 2010). Healthy development nurtured through ELCC environments can support transitions and success in school and promote long-term well-being (De Feyter & Winsler, 2009; Gelatt et al., 2014; Hernandez et al., 2009; Magnuson & Shager, 2010; Turney & Kao, 2009).

Child care programs that are delivered through settlement agencies are often organized, funded, and implemented differently and separately from provincially or territorially licensed ELCC programs. The CMAS: Supporting the Care and Settlement of Young Immigrant Children organization is funded through the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), which has responsibility for matters regarding immigration to Canada, refugees, and Canadian citizenship. CMAS, which previously employed a childminding¹ model, has shifted to a Care for Newcomer Children (CNC; CMAS, 2016) model and directly supports the provision and monitoring of child care programs offered through settlement service providers. Immigrant families with young children are typically able to access CNC programs while they are participating in settlement programs such as language classes and workshops (CMAS, n.d.). The goals of CNC programs include:

To support the delivery of settlement services by making it possible for SPOs [service providers] in all provinces to offer safe and healthy CNC programs within a comprehensive and flexible system; to meet the needs of parents; and provide effective and efficient standards that manage risks and support immigrant child development.

To move towards more efficient allocation of resources to ensure better uptake of settlement services while controlling costs. (CMAS, 2013, para. 5–6)

¹ A term previously used to refer to child care services. However, given the ongoing efforts to professionalize the field of early childhood education, and the importance of language, this term is no longer used. Early childhood education moves beyond meeting the child's basic needs, as implied in the term childminding. Rather, it is about fostering ethical spaces for and with children and families.

Through the CNC model, CMAS provides a unique and inclusive program for immigrant children that focuses on language learning and addressing cultural needs of children (CMAS, n.d., 2016). However, while CNC plays a critical role in the transition of immigrant families and children in Canada, there is limited literature describing how child care is being delivered and exploring the improvements necessary to meet the needs of immigrant families. As provinces and territories across Canada continue to roll out agreements with the federal government to enhance access to inclusive and high-quality ELCC programs, it is also important to understand the interactions of these programs with the child care delivered by settlement organizations. Settlement organizations, which face increasing demand when there are higher levels of immigration to Canada, play a vital role in the settlement journey of immigrant families and in the development and well-being of their children. To better understand what supports these organizations might need, we explore their experiences in delivering child care as we seek the answer to the following research question: What factors influence the delivery of child care across settlement agencies in Canada?

Method

In order to identify what factors influence the delivery of child care across settlement agencies in Canada, we conducted a two-part study. First, we conducted a jurisdictional scan to identify all eligible settlement organizations across Canada and learn more about them (Godin et al., 2015). Second, we invited organizations to take part in an interview and a survey to solicit thoughts and experiences that influence the delivery of child care.

A jurisdictional website scan is a process that can be used for reviewing grey literature. Grey literature refers to all publications from governments, organizations, academics, business, and other sources in either print or electronic format that are not controlled by any commercial publisher (Farace & Frantzen, 2004). In the absence of an established process to systematically review grey literature, Godin et al. (2015) developed four strategies, incorporating: searches of grey literature databases, use of customized Google search engines, searching targeted websites, and consultation with contact experts (para. 2). The structure provided by this methodological plan ensures a comprehensive scan of the available information, which reduces bias during data collection. The plan provides for effective time management through setting boundaries for the number of search terms and screening the results (Godin et al., 2015). In our work, we incorporated three of the four strategies: using customized Google search engines, searching targeted websites, and consulting with contact experts (“key informants”). The research was conducted in partnership with Immigrant Settlement Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS)², who assisted with defining the scope and process of the jurisdictional scan, which was also externally verified by the evidence synthesis coordinator at the Maritime SPOR Support Unit³.

² See <https://isans.ca>.

³ See <https://mssu.ca>.

Jurisdictional Website Scan

The focus of this jurisdictional scan was on settlement agencies that provide the CNC programs which are funded by IRCC. With the support of a representative from CMAS, we requested a list of English and Francophone agencies delivering CNC programs across Canada ($N = 218$).

To search the grey literature, the research team used a process that included a customized Google search, a targeted website search, and key informant interviews or surveys (Godin et al., 2015). The research team reviewed the list received from CMAS and removed duplicates, leaving 192 organizations (173 English, 19 French); the websites of these agencies were then added to the roster of sites to be searched. Nine search terms ('childcare', 'child care', 'day care', 'daycare', 'early childhood education', 'ECE', 'childminding', and 'child-minding') were selected. These reflected the variability of terms used to describe the delivery of child care.

Agencies' Website Scan

The first step in collecting information on each settlement agency's child care program was to search the agency's website with the nine selected search terms using the Google Advanced Search feature. In the primary screening, the title and the short description underneath it were reviewed for the first 10 pages of the search (100 hits) to see if they met the inclusion/exclusion criteria (see Table 1). The sites that passed the primary screening were charted and then explored for a secondary screening.

In the secondary screening, each page returned by the primary search was read through to see if it contained any information related to the delivery of child care. We recorded the total number of relevant results from the secondary screening, and the URLs were gathered for use in the next step. This process was repeated for each organization, and all steps and findings were recorded in an MS Excel sheet (the "summary sheet"). For Francophone organizations, a similar process was carried out in French with the support of a Francophone research assistant.

Table 1. *Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria for Scan of Agency Websites*

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Any pages with factual information on how child care programs are delivered.	Any information that does not provide factual information about child care delivery (e.g., job postings, advertisements/marketplace, client testimonials or stories of success, applications).
Any downloadable materials (like reports in PDF format) or other information on child care delivery (2017–2022 only; nothing prior to 2017).	Hits that link to the organization's main homepage.
Language classes in the hit's title and child care in the description.	Information on parenting programs, parenting education, or family events that does not provide specific information on how child care is delivered.
Short/long term child care; part/full time; before/after school.	Information relating to youth programs or youth services.
Age group: 0 to 12.	Presence of images/photos.
Any information on pertinent child care characteristics (see Table 2).	Programs designed for children only.

In the last step, the research team opened each saved URL to extract information relevant to the key characteristics (e.g., licensing, children’s age group, eligibility) found in Table 2. The extracted information was saved in a table in an Excel sheet for each organization (the “characteristic table”). In the next phase, the research team evaluated the extent of found information for each agency to decide whether to reach them through a survey or invite them to participate in a virtual interview.

Interviews and Surveys With Key Informants

Our final strategy for collecting information on settlement agencies consisted of conducting conversations with key informants through interviews or gathering their responses in a survey. Before contacting programs for recruitment, we did pilot testing with ISANS to refine the interview process. A total of 192 of 218 agencies were contacted through emails sent to their director/coordinator/manager. For 44 agencies, information related to the CNC program (eligibility criteria for registration, age of children, funding arrangements, cost to families, and hours of operation) had been found on their websites and an online interview of about 45 to 60 minutes through Microsoft Teams was requested. In 148 cases, the information related to the CNC program was not sufficient to warrant an extended interview; instead, a survey was suggested, with the option of also participating in a 15 to 20 minute interview to expand upon details. It was the director/coordinator/manager’s decision to either provide the information themselves or nominate someone from their agency who had more information on child care delivery to participate in this research.

Interviews: A total of 44 organizations were invited to take part in an interview (see Table 2 for interview content). Prior to their interview, each participant provided consent, and the research team shared the prefilled characteristic table with them. All interviews were held virtually, at a time convenient to the participant. Using the Microsoft Teams software allowed us to build rapport with participants and to support them in recalling information about their program by screensharing the characteristic table with them. At the beginning of the interview, the participant had the opportunity to review the table shared with them, and add any information that the research team did not find during the website search. The research team updated the table after the interview session. Additionally, participants responded to several open-ended questions about successes, challenges, and opportunities for improvement in implementing their program.

Surveys: A total of 148 agencies were invited to take part in the survey (see Table 2 for survey content). We emailed those organizations whose websites did not provide information about their child care program, inviting them to complete a survey capturing the characteristic information that we were interested in. The organizations also had the option to complete the survey with the support of a research member through Microsoft Teams. In the survey, we asked the participants if they wish to be contacted for a virtual interview to elaborate on their ELCC programs or share further details. The research team contacted the interested participants to schedule a 20- to 30-minute interview. Four ($n = 4$) took part. In these interviews, participants had the opportunity to

review their characteristic table, which had been prefilled based on the survey information they had provided. Open-ended questions allowed them to elaborate on their challenges, successes, and opportunities for improvement in implementing their child care programs.

Participants: A total of 38 programs (20%) of the 192 recruited organizations from the list we received ($N = 218$) provided complete information, either in an interview ($n = 8$) or a survey ($n = 30$). The participants had spent an average of 5 years working in their positions. They identified themselves variously as manager, coordinator, supervisor, team lead, or officer ($n = 27$); director or operator ($n = 6$); executive director ($n = 3$); health promoter ($n = 1$); and designated staff ($n = 1$). The research team received 45 survey responses (43 in English and 2 in French), and decided to exclude the survey information from both Francophone organizations and from 13 English organizations as duplicates or incomplete. Figure 1 provides more detail about the recruitment and the participating organizations. The four organizations that had completed both the survey and a 20-minute interview are not counted in the interview column in Figure 1, having already been counted for their survey responses. A summary of agencies’ child care characteristics can be found in Table 2; some information does not add up to 38 programs due to missing information.

Figure 1. *Data Collection Process Flowchart*

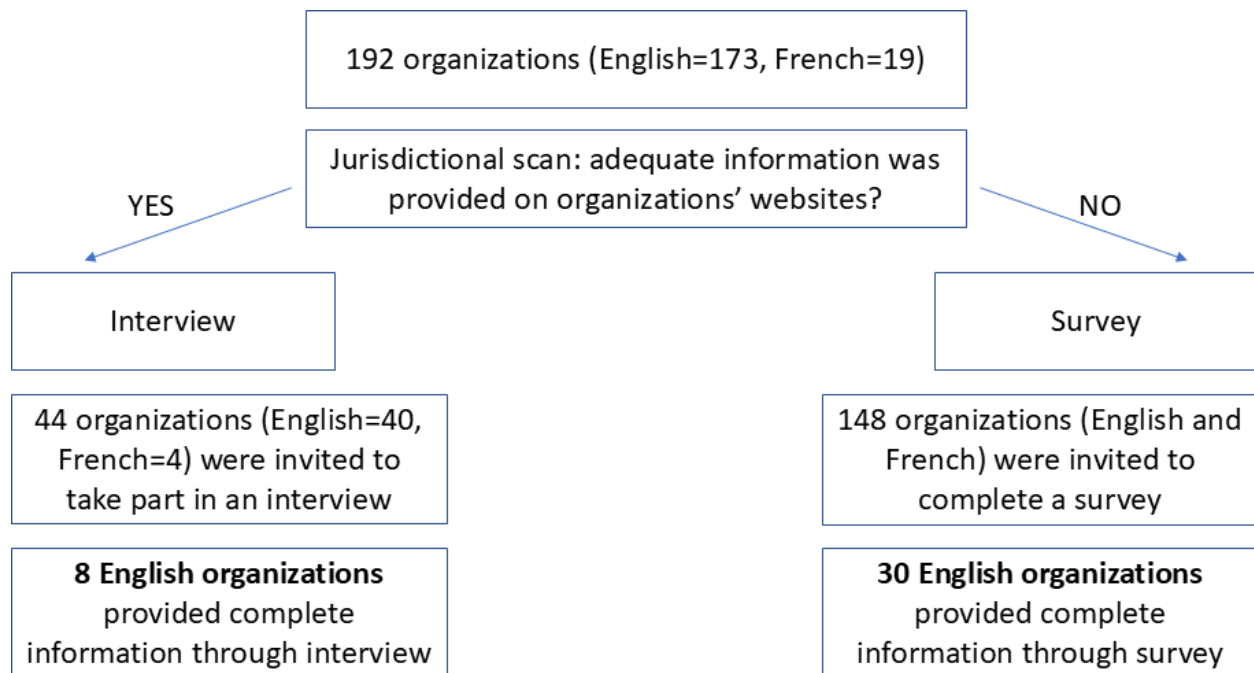


Table 2. *Child Care Programs' Characteristics as Reported in Interviews and Surveys (n = 38)*

Characteristic	Definition	Summary characteristics of program
Licensing	If the program is provincially regulated, complies with the respective ELCC Act and Regulations, and is inspected and monitored regularly; or if it adheres to CNC requirements	26 not provincially licensed 9 provincially licensed 29 followed CNC requirements 2 some services followed CNC requirements 3 did not follow CNC requirements
Eligibility	Criteria that families need to meet to be able to access the program for their children	33 were dependent on children and parents' eligibility criteria (e.g., immigration status, enrolment in settlement programs, age of child) 2 with child eligibility characteristics (e.g., age group) 3 did not have eligibility criteria in place
Age of children	The specific age group that the program is offered to	19 offered care to children from the age of 6 months to 12 years 18 offered care to children from the age of 18 months to 12 years
Staff training	The education requirement for staff who work directly with children	38 required their staff to have training in early childhood education (e.g., diploma, certificate, degree)
Funding arrangement	The funding that programs receive to deliver services	23 received IRCC funding only 12 received a combination of IRCC and other funding (e.g., provincial, municipal, community) 2 indicated they are not in receipt of IRCC funding
Cost to families	Partial or complete fees that caregivers pay to access the child care program	35 did not charge parent fees 3 charged parent fees
Number of available spaces	Number of children using the part/full time or short/long term spaces	15 had space for 1–15 children 19 had space for more than 15 children
Gross motor space ^a	Indoor/outdoor space that allows children to engage in physical activities	19 had indoor space 11 had access to outdoor space 6 had access to both indoor and outdoor spaces
Length of care	Child care offered part-time, full-time, short-term, or long-term	18 offered long-term/full-time care (5 days/week) 9 offered part-time/short-term (mornings/afternoons; 2–3 days/week; occasional drop-in) 7 offered both full-time/long-term and part-time/short-term 4 chose “other” types of child care delivery (four days/week, outsourcing child care, flexible scheduling based on clients' needs, etc.)

Characteristic	Definition	Summary characteristics of program
Number of spaces in the program	Number of children using the part/full time or short/long term spaces	15 had an enrolment capacity of 1–15 children 19 had an enrolment capacity of more than 15 children
Early childhood curriculum or framework	The program follows a specific early childhood curriculum or framework	CMAS/CNC Play-based curriculum Provincial early years framework Emergent or child-led curriculum
Reference to trauma-informed practices ^b	Program refers to trauma-informed approaches in their work with families and children	22 referred to trauma-informed practices 15 indicated that they did not refer to trauma-informed approaches
Collaboration with other programs, services, or agencies	The program has other partners and collaborators to support families and their children	Collaboration occurred within organizations and externally. Collaborators included: Settlement support services and programs (e.g., Language) Instructions for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes, employment training, workshops, settlement workers in schools (SWIS), etc. Other child care and schools Other organizations through informational sessions (parental education, safety education, health education, etc.) Services such as intervention programs, public health, libraries, resource centres Other organizations providing indoor or outdoor space Indigenous communities
Online programming	Refers to information regarding online programming offered by programs	19 offered online programming ^c during COVID or continued the use of a hybrid model 17 did not have online programming

^aNot all programs responded to this question. ^bDefinitions of trauma-informed practices included: recognition of the importance of being attentive to and aware of family and children’s needs; and being conscious and intentional in regard to children’s past experiences. ^cSome of the activities offered online were: educational learning, dance classes, arts & crafts, music and songs, yoga, learning videos, and reading books.

Informed Consent

Because the interviews were conducted virtually, participants were asked to provide their oral consent. Participants were informed about the research, including its risks and benefits, and the informed consent process through an information letter that was emailed by the researcher before the interview session. A research team member also explained the informed consent process at the beginning of the interview, including discussing possible security limitations related to Microsoft Teams (e.g., data storage on Teams and institutional Microsoft OneDrive, including recordings and chat history). Once all risks and benefits were communicated to the participants, the

researchers documented their oral consent on a prepared tracking table. For the survey, the informed consent process was incorporated into the online survey itself: the participants could not complete the survey without first providing consent.

Data Analysis

Interviews were video-recorded with Microsoft Teams and transcribed verbatim by the research team. The research team used the transcript feature on Teams to assist with transcription and to improve accessibility for all participants. The research team reviewed the transcripts, de-identified them, and updated the characteristic table with any pertinent information. The transcripts were then imported into qualitative data analysis software (MAX QDA) for deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify the perceived strengths and challenges of child care delivery for each agency, and to identify any innovative approaches designed to achieve accessible, inclusive, and high-quality child care programs. Survey responses were used to update the characteristic table; the open-ended questions were then deductively analyzed in MAX QDA.

Results

Overview of Program Characteristics

Through survey responses and interviews with settlement agencies, we identified common characteristics across programs, which we briefly describe below (also see Table 2). In regard to the settlement agencies, it is important to note that, while there are some commonalities, their delivery of child care is more varied than is found in provincially or territorially licensed ELCC programs, due to differences in migration trends, available funding, and varying need across provinces. Further, although our intention had been to include eligible settlement agencies in all provinces and territories, not all jurisdictions appeared to have an agency with such a program due to the variability in funding arrangements.

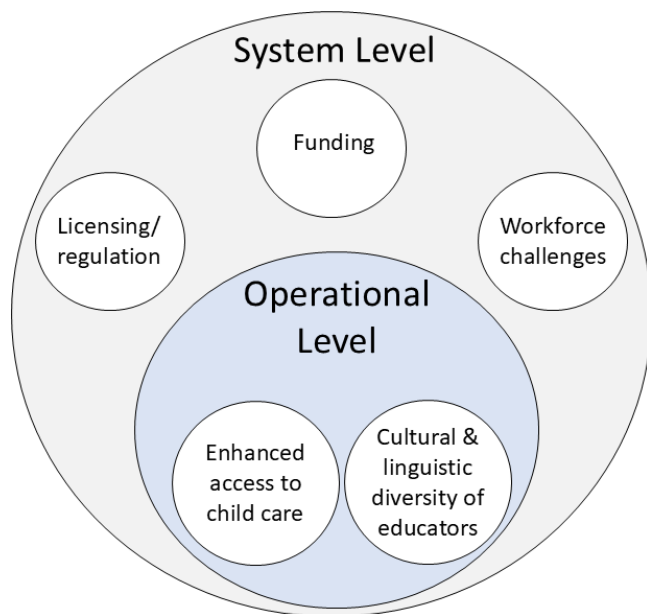
Most of the participants that we talked to were from settlement agencies that offered free child care (CNC or otherwise) to immigrant families who were permanent residents and had a child between the ages of 6 months and 12 years. If space was available, caregivers could access the child care program when attending Language Instruction for Newcomers (LINC) classes, workshops, and employment training. In many cases, these child care programs were funded by IRCC, were located in the same building as the settlement agency, and followed the CNC requirements. Finally, these programs could be either short term or long term, meaning that families could access the program for a few days a week to a full week depending on availability and other services they accessed. In some cases, programs also offered morning or afternoon child care to support the needs of families. Further, the majority of child care programs were delivered by trained early childhood educators (ECEs) and early childhood assistants who often held a diploma or degree in early childhood education. While CNC has its own requirements for professional development hours (5 hours/year), some agencies had their own requirements. For

example, some agencies followed provincial requirements to maintain their certifications (e.g., 40 hours/year).

System Level Influences

Themes describing the factors that influence implementation of child care by settlement agencies at the system and organizational levels are depicted in Figure 2, which shows the inter-relatedness of the themes. These factors, such as funding and licensing, are typically outside the control of the agencies providing and the individuals working in child care programs. Each of these elements is explained below.

Figure 2. *Themes and Subthemes*



Licensing and Regulation

As noted above, settlement agencies delivering child care are most often licensed and regulated by the CNC. A few participants discussed the ongoing support that they receive from CMAS and stated that they were able to reach out for support as needed. One participant explained:

CMAS was great because they would come in, they would spend time in your programs, they would get to know your program [and] get to know your educators. Then they provided the conferences and workshops [too].

This participant felt supported when a CMAS officer visited their programs and offered resources. However, a few participants reflected on ways that some of the CNC regulations and requirements limited the ability of the program to flexibly address the needs of immigrant families. For example, some participants talked about a CNC requirement that insists on parents' presence while children

access child care. One noted: “Due to the fact that we are not licensed, we have to monitor parents all the time to ensure that they are in the building.” Another participant mentioned that it was difficult to explain to parents that they could not leave the site when their children were in child care: “It’s hard to explain to families that they can’t drop their kids off and go shopping ... we can only provide care if they stay on site.”

Some participants elaborated on their program’s lack of access to outdoor space, which they felt was important as it limited the children’s opportunities to exercise their gross motor skills. Some programs did not have access to outdoor spaces; others felt that CNC regulations prevented them from accessing spaces that would otherwise be available. Our team noted that there appeared to be some discrepancies in participants’ understanding of the CNC regulations regarding outdoor time for children. Some participants mentioned that their program sometimes went outside, while others noted that CNC regulations did not enable them to go outside as children are required to stay in the same building as their parents. One participant stated: “We’re all indoor, we’re not permitted to take the children outside without the parents alongside them.” Another said: “We do have space available at an adjacent location right next to us, but because it’s literally a trail away, [and] hosts a different address, we’re not allowed to use it.” Overall, when participants discussed the importance of CNC programs for immigrant families and their children, they also discussed possible adaptations in CNC regulations that might help enhance the quality and accessibility of this program for immigrant families.

Funding

Funding was one of the most common factors discussed by participants, who felt that it influenced many facets of child care delivery within their agencies. The participants highly valued the critical support their agencies provided to immigrant families and children; however, they pointed out that insufficient funding was the cause of many barriers and challenges in child care delivery, such as turnover of educators and burn-out, and a lack of the organizational capacity to support families needing child care services.

Participants felt that insufficient funding prevented agencies from providing fair compensation to their educators, and impacted their ability to access costly professional development workshops (e.g., on trauma-informed care). Most participants indicated they were often not able to access provincial funding for child care; 26 of the programs were not provincially licensed. Additionally, the lack of provincial licensing created challenges for programs when attempting to access inclusion support and child development/intervention services. For example, one service provider said: “We need more funding for specialized support and things [like] that. You know, having the opportunity to work with these children before they get to school is kind of critical.”

Workforce Challenges

Participants discussed their challenges with hiring and retaining qualified staff for their child care programs. As noted above, all 38 programs required their staff to be certified and trained

ECEs. However, some pointed out that they were often at a disadvantage when competing with other ELCC programs (e.g., provincially licensed child care, school boards) for staff because their lack of access to government subsidy programs meant that they were unable to provide competitive ECE wages. For example, one participant shared their concern regarding ECE retention: “So having, you know, the registered early childhood educators, that’s hard when you’re competing with the school boards, you’re competing with licensed child care centres, you’re competing with wages.” Some participants felt this challenge was exacerbated by CWELCC initiatives that were increasing funding to provincially licensed programs, which had led to increased ECE wages in those programs.

Additionally, since child care programs situated in settlement agencies are meant to support access to other services, ECEs usually only worked part-time. One participant explained: “I think retaining qualified staff when you have a 30 hour a week program and they can go somewhere else and work 37.5 or 40 hours, that’s tough.” Overall, participants regarded hiring and retaining qualified ECEs as a significant challenge.

Operational Level

At the operational level, enhanced access to child care and cultural and linguistic diversity of educators are factors influencing the operations of child care programs delivered by settlement agencies. They are discussed below.

Enhanced access to child care: Participants discussed aspects of the physical spaces where child care was provided, in some instances referring to the accessibility of their programs. One participant elaborated: “We recognize that clients cannot access services without child care and have put forth effort to create and maintain a great program.” An additional concern was the proximity of the program to where parents’ programs and other services offered by the agencies were held. One participant stated:

I think one of our strengths is it’s on site. We’re here, our classrooms are in the office [and] all our staff are in this office ... we’re on a site where it’s easy to access so people [who] want to work on a resume or employment, their kids can come and they can have child care.

To these participants, the proximity of child care to other essential services was key to supporting immigrant families’ transition into Canada. The availability of child care through settlement agencies enabled families access to services without the stress of being on waitlists for provincially licensed programs. One participant noted: “Being able to take your child with you and have care is huge. You know, I know families that are local that are waiting two years for a spot in a child care. So availability is huge.”

Although families would typically have access to child care through settlement agencies, the migration trends in certain provinces meant that sometimes settlement child care programs had

limited capacity to meet the child care needs of families. Participants discussed the lack of physical space that hindered programs' capacity to take on more families. For example, one participant shared: "It's breaking my heart that I have to say no to the family, for example, when the child care is full. There is limited space [for] them." According to these participants, accessible child care was an enormous relief for immigrant families, who face many challenges upon arriving to settle in Canada.

Cultural and linguistic diversity of educators: The participants felt that their team of educators was a great strength in the implementation of child care programs at their settlement agencies. The educator teams were mostly comprised of immigrants and thus tend to be culturally and linguistically diverse. All service providers agreed that having cultural and linguistic representation among their team members enhanced the experiences of immigrant families and their children when accessing child care programs. For example, one participant stated:

It's been hugely beneficial to have people that can speak the first language of the child and the family. ... I think it can be very challenging for them to be left in care for the first time so we benefit enormously by having immigrants directly involved in the care for the children.

Another participant referred to their program as being "respectful" of the language and culture of families because they provided "multiple language delivery" for their clients. These participants identify value in having linguistic and cultural representation among their staff.

The broad cultural and linguistic representation among educators also enabled the team to have a deeper awareness of the needs of families and children. For example, one participant called their program delivery "passionate" because it was delivered by immigrants who had themselves had similar post-migration experiences as immigrant clients. This participant said: "Our program runs by the people who immigrated themselves, so they are familiar with the [clients'] past or what they are going through." Cultural and linguistic diversity among educators provided a culturally responsive, inclusive environment.

Even though study participants appreciated the cultural and linguistic diversity among their team members, they still acknowledged that the variety of languages and cultures among their clients imposed some challenges when delivering child care. For example, one participant said: "If there is a family whose language is not spoken by any staff member, it is a bit challenging." Another participant identified the language variety among their clients as the "biggest challenge". Study participants believed that the involvement of culturally diverse, experienced educators was a critical support in navigating these challenges.

Supporting the Whole Family

According to study participants, one of the strengths of their programs was the ability to provide "holistic support" to immigrant families through partnerships and collaborations with

other programs, both within the agencies and with outside organizations. For example, being able to access child care allowed immigrant caregivers to attend employment workshops or language classes. This gave both caregivers and children a chance to practice English, be gradually exposed to the new environment in a safe space, and connect with others from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds. One participant said:

Our greatest strength in running a CNC program is the holistic support which we offer to newcomer children and parents in the LINC program. We have a family literacy program that runs in collaboration with CNC to foster learning in and outside of the classrooms to promote and strengthen the reading and literacy among children.

While pointing out that their program’s flexibility allowed them to “engage holistically with families and children as needs [arise]”, a participant stated that they valued the child care available to immigrant families attending language classes. Another felt that strong collaboration between their settlement agency’s LINC department, child care program, and interpretation services allowed them to understand the whole needs of immigrant families, saying, “The collaborative model of programming across departments helps clients to understand and experience the breadth of services we can provide as well as fosters the ability to make meaningful connections to the community.”

Finally, participants discussed how their unique partnerships with outside organizations like schools, child care programs, licensing entities, and intervention services enhanced the capacity of their programs to support immigrant families and their children holistically. One participant shared how they support immigrant families through their collaboration with a provincially licensed child care program:

[In a provincially licenced child care], we’ll reserve a couple of spaces and they will be paid for by [settlement agency]. And you know we might have a child take that space for 12 weeks because the parents are doing a program and then it might stay empty for two weeks and then we’ll get a different child for another 12 weeks or 14 weeks but that space is paid for by the [settlement agency].

These participants believed that such collaborations created additional opportunities for them to support the unique needs of immigrant children and their families through their child care programs.

Discussion

This research is timely given the ongoing targets for immigration and the CWELCC agreements that focus on accessible, inclusive, high-quality, and culturally responsive ELCC programs. This study aids in understanding what factors influence the delivery of child care across settlement agencies in Canada, and in identifying a disconnect between settlement-delivered child

care and the provincially regulated system. Findings show that factors such as licensing, funding, workforce challenges, space availability, educators' cultural and linguistic diversity, and the desire to provide support for the whole family influence the delivery of child care across settlement agencies in Canada. Broader system changes in ELCC were also identified that influenced local delivery of child care through settlement agencies nationwide; some of these again relate to funding and to workforce challenges. These broader early childhood policy contexts need to be further explored for their overall impact on immigrant families, particularly as immigration targets are contributing to increased population in Canada and thereby increased demand on the country's child care system.

ECEs play a key role in supporting the adjustment of immigrant children to their new environment and social context (Valencia, 2015). This study corroborates past research (Gide et al., 2022; Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2016) that has found that the cultural and linguistic diversity of educators is a key asset to child care. This finding corroborates and adds further national scope to a photovoice study in one Canadian province showing that the immigrant identity of ECEs contributed to an in-depth understanding of families' post-migration priorities (Fakhari et al., 2023a). Most immigrants regard it as important to uphold cultural values post-migration; this influences the services and the type of care they choose for their families. This accords with Wise and Sanson (2000), who noted that immigrants may prefer child care services that align with their cultural values and that have cultural similarities. However, our findings show that the diversity of child care offered through settlement agencies may be threatened by the identified challenge of recruiting and retaining staff given recent announcements of wage increases for ECEs working in provincially licensed child care (Government of Canada, 2022, Compensation of early childhood educators section). While it is necessary that ECEs receive fair compensation (Saulnier & Frank, 2019), the two parallel systems of child care (CNC programs versus those that are provincially licensed) might result in competition for a qualified workforce, as noted in our findings.

The critical role that accessible and culturally responsive child care has on adaptation and integration of immigrant families in the host country has also been discussed by other researchers (Massing et al., 2020, 2023). For example, immigrant caregivers in Saskatchewan, who had no access to child care due to either financial barriers or insensitivity of child care programs to children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds, believed that their lack of access to child care led to difficulty in finding and retaining employment, kept them from active participation in language classes, and played a part in their children's isolation and delay in learning the new language (Massing et al., 2023). Our study provides further insight into the valuable service that settlement agencies provide to immigrant families through free and culturally responsive child care programs that contribute to supporting the whole family in their adjustment to Canadian life.

Strengths and Limitations

This research study addresses a gap in the literature by being the first, to our knowledge, to seek to understand what factors influence the delivery of child care in settlement agencies across

Canada. Our jurisdictional scan approach provides an initial understanding within a national context of the landscape of child care in settlement agencies. However, it is important to note that our list of settlement agencies was not exhaustive and represented only a small sample of the programs across the country; therefore, it is likely that some perspectives were missed and that our findings are thus not generalizable. Further, the findings of this study could be limited due to the differing perceptions and understandings of the settlement agency representatives who participated. Nevertheless, our research fills an important gap in the literature on the implementation of child care from the perspective of settlement agencies and can be used to inform future research that captures a more comprehensive sample of child care agencies.

Implications

Through this research, we learned that child care programs within settlement agencies applied a range of practices to meet the needs of immigrant families and their children. Although these agencies were all delivering the same type of support to immigrant families and children, they sometimes felt isolated and disconnected from each other. The participants were therefore eager to learn how other programs deliver child care to immigrant families to better inform the practices of their own agencies. In response to the identified strengths and challenges, we suggest following through on the implications of our study would support settlement agencies across Canada in meeting the unique needs of immigrant families and their children.

First, we learned that there have been shifts across the country, including within CMAS, toward a broader focus on early learning, which is essential to support ongoing programs and contribute to the professionalization of ELCC. We nonetheless recommend continuing to emphasize the critical role of child care as an essential settlement program, which will also enhance access to broader services for children and families. Some of the challenges that impact access to funding could be addressed by child care delivery models in which settlement agencies collaborate with provincial, territorial, and municipal governments to deliver the programs. With the ongoing growth in quality affordable child care spaces across the country, there is currently an opportunity to include settlement agencies in such investments. Considering the critical role of child care in supporting immigrant families and their children, we believe that ECEs working in child care programs within settlement agencies should have equitable and meaningful support through both professional learning and fair compensation.

Further, we learned that programs highly valued diversity among their ECEs. They believed that cultural representation among educators enhanced the experiences of immigrant families and their children when accessing ELCC programs. Even so, the participants expressed concern regarding the high rate of ECE turnover, attributing it to the fact that educators working in child care programs within settlement agencies generally receive less compensation than those working for other child care programs in their respective regions. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that immigrants require and receive support across multiple programs and agencies. It is essential

to foster partnerships within systems and across organizations to support the settlement of immigrants by enabling access to high-quality, inclusive, and culturally responsive child care.

Conclusion

Access to culturally responsive child care can play a key role in the settlement journey for immigrant families with young children. While previous research has looked at the experiences of immigrant children and their families in child care, the present study is the first to describe the specific factors influencing the implementation of child care among settlement agencies in Canada. Broader system-level factors such as licensing and regulation, funding, and workforce issues were identified, particularly as they related to changes underway through CWELCC agreements across the country. Our findings suggest that only settlement agencies that were provincially licensed were able to access CWELCC funding to support workforce development and increased wages for ECEs; this resulted in two parallel, and sometimes competing, systems. Irrespective of these system challenges, the results of this study suggest that there are key operational-level influences that enhance implementation, including the cultural and linguistic diversity of educators and the comprehensive support provided by settlement agencies, which takes into account the needs of the whole family. Future research should continue to identify the possible strategic connections between settlement agencies and provincially/territorially licensed child care, with the goal of supporting the settlement and well-being of young children and their families.

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