

Defining Quality in Early Learning and Childcare among Visible Cultural Minority
Families in Edmonton, Alberta

by

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Abstract

Immigration is a key part of Canada’s strategy for population growth, and in recent years the number of visible minority immigrant families have seen a significant increase. However, they face significant settlement challenges that can lead to chronic poverty. For those with children, poverty can adversely impact a child’s growth and development as learning, behaviour, and wellbeing are largely shaped by early childhood experiences. On the contrary, quality early learning and childcare (ELCC) can promote holistic growth and child development outcomes. However, quality in ELCC is poorly defined, although there is some consensus that it is contextual; hence it is important to get the perspectives of different stakeholders. A qualitative descriptive methodology and a community-based participatory approach to research were used in this study to explore visible minority families’ experiences in ELCC and how these shape their definition of quality ELCC. Focus groups and interviews with 30 parents from six visible minority communities were conducted—the responses from which were analyzed using thematic analysis. The arising themes described the multidimensionality of ELCC: how each of its components such as the curriculum or staff is a salient predictor of quality ELCC. More importantly, ELCC is also a system comprised of those interconnected components and cannot be reduced to the sum of each of its components because the quality of ELCC is also determined by the *interactions*, *integrations*, and *synergies* that exist or do not exist between and among its components. ELCC in Edmonton needs to be more responsive to the needs of diverse families in terms of its components, their relationships, and as a fully integrated system grounded in equity, diversity, and inclusion principles. The insights that emerged from this study contribute to a better understanding of how the local ELCC system in Edmonton can best respond to diverse families’ ELCC needs.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Primitivo Ilumin. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board. Project Name “Journeys through Early Learning and Child Care - The Experiences of Cultural Minority Families in Edmonton”, Pro00110481, July 21, 2021.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Learning, behaviour, and physical and mental health are largely shaped by early childhood experiences (Al-Shawi & Lafta, 2015; Clarkson Freeman, 2014; Jones et al., 2018; National Research Council, 2001). An environment that promotes growth, through proper housing and nutrition, supportive caregiving, early learning and exposure to socio-emotionally appropriate experiences, can help establish healthy and holistic development throughout the lifespan (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016). The importance of ‘quality’ early learning and childcare (ELCC) systems as contributing environments that promote growth and child developmental outcomes is widely recognized. At the same time, the notion of quality is not clearly defined. For example, the Government of Canada (2017a) created the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework to enhance ELCC through investments to increase quality, accessibility, affordability, flexibility, and inclusivity. This Framework is guided by a set of principles with corresponding indicators, with high quality ELCC receiving emphasis. Despite this, the Framework fails to provide a concrete definition for high quality ELCC and merely gives details on some of its characteristics. This could be purposeful, as the document presents a disclaimer that “[g]overnments recognize that each jurisdiction has the responsibility to develop systems that best respond to the needs and priorities of their communities” (Government of Canada, 2017a, p. 2), implying that quality in ELCC is contextual.

Several attempts have been made to investigate and/or discuss quality ELCC in greater depth, but the outcomes have been equally ambiguous and have led back to the importance of context (Buschmann & Partridge, 2019; Van Horn et al., 2001). This was aligned with Peeters and Vandekerckhove’s (2015) position that “quality in [ELCC] cannot be limited to structure and process” (p.335), but that attention should also be given to *access quality*, or better known as

‘accessibility’—with some of its defining characteristics being affordability, availability, and usefulness. It is the bottleneck of the ELCC system and reveals the capacity of ELCC services to accommodate the needs of vulnerable groups who encounter too many barriers in accessing the system. Hence, to better understand quality in ELCC, parents and children should be involved in defining it.

In spring 2020, MacEwan University and the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (Council) worked on a collaborative research project that investigated the experiences of newcomer families and their children in childcare. One of the main goals of the study was to uncover what newcomer families identified as the indicators of quality in ELCC that would best meet their cultural needs (Mardhani-Bayne et al., 2021a). They used scoping review methodology to examine existing literature on childcare centres in Canada and around the world. They identified and reviewed articles for alignment with their two research questions: (1) For newcomer families, what are indicators of quality in early learning and childcare? (2) What are the essential dispositions childcare workers must demonstrate to meet the cultural needs of newcomer children and families? Their scoping review uncovered eight quality indicators: School Readiness/Academics, Language Supports for Parents, Language Supports for Children, Smaller Group Sizes, Cultural Match, Family Partnerships, Environment and Space, and Educator Qualifications. The Government of Canada’s Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework has built the general foundations for recognizing quality in ELCC, and the findings of Mardhani-Bayne et al.’s (2021a) study have made this broad framework more concrete. However, while scoping reviews are a first step in understanding emerging evidence on a topic (Peterson et al., 2017), Peeters and Vandekerchove (2015) emphasized the importance of listening to the voices of various stakeholders toward understanding what quality in ELCC is—a

common theme that has been underscored in several studies on the topic (Adair & Barraza, 2014; Beach, 2020; Buschmann & Partridge, 2019; Harrist et al., 2007; Peeters & Vandekerckhove, 2015; Van Horn et al., 2001). Mardhani-Bayne et al. (2021a) recognized the limitations of their study and emphasized the need to explore various stakeholders' definitions of quality ELCC to support their findings. In 2021, they complemented the scoping review with focus groups to capture the perspectives of educators who work with newcomer parents and their children (Mardhani-Bayne et al., 2021b). While this is an important first step to understanding quality in ELCC for immigrant families, the families' perspective on quality in ELCC remains a gap and demands to be uncovered.

To address this knowledge gap, a collaborative research project was launched in 2021 by the Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative (MCHB), the Evaluation Capacity Network (ECN), and the Council. The project entitled, "Journeys Through Early Learning and Childcare – The Experiences of Cultural Minority Families in Edmonton" builds on the findings of previous studies (Mardhani-Bayne et al., 2021a; Mardhani-Bayne et al., 2021b; Sumaru-Jurf & Felix-Mah, 2019) to explore what quality ELCC is from the perspective of cultural minority families.

I supported the Journeys Project as a research assistant. Also, my thesis research is nested within this project and probes into the quality dimension of family experience. An overview of the Journey's Project is described in more detail below, followed by how my research is situated within this larger project.

The Journeys Project

The Journeys Project is exploring the needs, experiences, and aspirations of cultural minority families with young children birth to five years old in community-based ELCC in Edmonton. The project aims to provide rich information on the lived experiences of families and

to provide a space for them to voice their hopes and struggles—and to shape solutions. A community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach (Janzen et al., 2016; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008), which is an approach to research where partners come together equitably based on a shared issue and desire to contribute to collective action. A CBPR approach was used throughout all phases of this project from the design to data collection and analysis, interpretation, and mobilization of research findings. The intention is to produce useful results to inform decision-making and collective action.

Key research questions included: (1) What are the lived experiences of cultural minority families as they access and receive ELCC in Edmonton? (2) What assets, cultural resources, and ways of knowing can be harnessed to improve the system? (3) What opportunities exist to bridge the gap between cultural minorities and mainstream systems to shift approaches and practices? (4) What opportunities exist to catalyze positive change in ELCC policies and practices to better meet the needs of cultural minority families? To answer these research questions, the Journeys Project team partnered with the MCHB, ECN and the Council and designed a community-based process, which included a discussion around ethics and the ethics of collecting stories, developed an interview guide including specific questions about quality in ELCC, and organized focus groups and interviews with visible cultural minority families to collect the data needed in the study.

The project was facilitated by the MCHB in partnership with the ECN and the Council. The MCHB was formed over 25 years ago to support Edmonton's immigrant, newcomer and ethnocultural communities. The organization works with 27 cultural communities and reaches 2,500 families in Edmonton per year. The cultural brokers are from immigrant communities and know firsthand the social, economic, and language difficulties that immigrants and refugees face.

This places them in a unique position to bridge the gap between cultural minority families and Canadian society. The brokers play vital roles as guides, liaisons, translators, and catalysts for change. Cultural brokering has been defined as “bridging, linking or mediating between groups or persons of different cultural backgrounds to affect change” (Jezewski, 1990, p. 497).

Because of the strong connections, rapport, and trust that the MCHB has built with cultural minority families in Edmonton, the brokers were the project’s main asset in participant recruitment, selection, engagement, and data gathering. Through the brokers, individuals of all language backgrounds were invited to participate in the study. The brokers also facilitated the interviews and focus groups, which ensured that the participants were able to best articulate their ideas and experiences in their native tongue.

A Steering Committee representing members from the ECN, MCHB and the Council guided the research process. The research was envisioned as a “change process” that involves three strands of interwoven activities:

1. Engaging and Convening: This strand facilitates dialogue, deliberation and intercultural encounters with key partners and potential allies. The purpose is to build and deepen relationships, clarify shared aspirations, and increase mutual understanding and collaboration.
2. Listening and Learning: This strand draws on participatory methodologies to develop rich case studies of lived experiences and descriptions of strengths and assets along with systemic barriers.
3. Reflecting and Sense Making: This strand of activity uses theme-weaving, journey-mapping, and other forms of co-analysis to identify potential leverage points for change.

These three strands of activity were supported by orientation and capacity-building sessions where appropriate.

Thesis Research

My thesis research is nested within the Journeys Project. Since the quality of ELCC is naturally part of family experience but was not the exclusive focus of the Journeys Project, I aimed my attention on how quality in ELCC is experienced and defined by cultural minority families in Edmonton, Alberta. The focus group and interview questions that support this thesis research were seamlessly embedded in the data collection that had been planned by the brokers and the Steering Committee. While the focus group and interview data were originally collected to answer the questions in the larger Journeys Project, I explored those data specifically to answer my research question: *What is quality ELCC for cultural minority families in Edmonton?* using a participatory approach and qualitative descriptive methodology. The specific methodology employed in my thesis research will be discussed in greater detail under the Data Analysis and Representation subsection of Methodology. A summary of the arising themes and sub-themes from the findings and a sample coding table was also put together in Appendix A.

Through my thesis research, I aimed to provide rich information on what visible minority families in Edmonton define as quality ELCC. The findings have the potential to fill the gap that exists around the definition of quality ELCC for parents. More importantly, the results will aid in the development of a more holistic definition for quality ELCC in Edmonton outside a program-centric perspective, especially since in this thesis ELCC was found to be multidimensional, and each of its components is a salient predictor of quality ELCC. On the other hand, the process itself will empower newcomer cultural minority families by creating opportunities for them to imagine, describe, and design how ELCC in Edmonton could better meet their needs. While the

insights generated are specific to the context of ELCC in Edmonton, they can help inform our broader understanding of quality and equity in childcare.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

When reviewing the literature on immigrants and their experiences in ELCC particularly in North America, I examined immigration trends in Canada including immigrant populations, barriers that immigrants face in settlement and in accessing and receiving ELCC, and the concepts of quality in ELCC.

Immigration in Canada

Immigrant intake has been a consistent component of Canada's strategy to address the impacts of an aging population and low birthrates—ultimately, to achieve economic and social prosperity (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2021a). In recent years immigration itself has accounted for 100% of the increase in Canada's labour force (IRCC, 2021b). Apart from adding to the workforce numbers, immigrants can make significant contributions to the host country's economic growth (Borjas, 1994). However, the receiving country is just one of the two variables in immigration; the other one is the immigrant candidate. A host country's economy and immigration policies must also be attractive enough to its ideal migrants to influence their decision to move (Duvnjak et al., 2017). Canada has ranked as one of the world's top immigration destinations—despite the country's deteriorating labor market outcomes in the past decades (Ferrer et al., 2014). Thousands of people in every corner of the world looking for greener pastures, reuniting with family members, and/or seeking protection as resettled refugees, make Canada their new home every year. Whether immigrating to Canada as a permanent resident, a temporary foreign worker, a refugee, or an international student temporary resident, the culture, skills, resources, and talent they bring with them support the growth, prosperity, diversity, and multiculturalism of Canada.

In Canada in 2019, permanent and non-permanent immigration accounted for more than 80% of Canada's population growth (IRCC, 2020). Under the temporary foreign worker and international mobility programs, 404,369 temporary work permits were released. In the same year, 341,180 permanent residents were admitted to Canada while 74,586 temporary workers transitioned to permanent residents. A total of 30,087 refugees also resettled in Canada in 2019.

In 2016, 48.1% of the foreign-born population of the country was born in Asia (including the Middle East), while 27.7% was born in Europe (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Those born in the Caribbean, Bermuda, and Central and South America made up 11.6% of the foreign-born population, followed by African-born, which comprised 8.5%. This painted a totally different picture from the 1986 census where 62.6% of the foreign-born population was born in Europe (including the British Isles), while only 17.5% was born in Asia. In the projected distribution (in percentage) of the foreign-born population in 2026, majority will be Asians at 53.8%. The influx of non-European and non-American immigrants in Canada, including their children and grandchildren born in the country, has contributed to the growth of the visible minority population in Canada.

'Visible Minorities' is defined by the Employment Equity Act as "persons, other Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour" (Statistics Canada, 2021a, par. 1). This includes South Asians, Blacks, Filipinxs and Pacific Islanders, to name a few. In 2016, there were 7,674,580 visible minorities in Canada, which comprised 22.3% of the entire population of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017b). The number of visible minorities will continue to grow, and it is projected to reach 15,069,000 or 34.4% of the population in 2036. The province of British Columbia is home to most of the visible minorities in Canada (30.3%),

followed by Ontario (29.3%). Alberta has the third highest proportion of visible minorities in Canada (23.5%), with the highest proportion living in the city of Edmonton followed by Calgary.

Challenges Immigrants Face

According to Mwarigha (2002), there are three overlapping stages in the settlement of newcomer immigrants. The settlement starts with newcomers' urgent needs for assistance and reception services. These include things like food, shelter, language interpretation and instruction, and even orientation about the new country. In the intermediate stage, newcomers require assistance on how to access different local or municipal systems and institutions such as legal services, long-term housing, health services, and employment-specific language instruction, to develop skills and connect cultural and lifestyle differences. During this stage, it becomes critical for newcomers to have equitable access to the labour market. Then, in the final stage of settlement, newcomers strive to become equal participants in the country's economic, social, cultural, and political life. Here, newcomers realize their diverse and individual needs as they learn how to overcome systemic barriers towards equal participation in the Canadian society. Newcomer outcomes in this final stage become the indicator of un/successful immigrant settlement (Janzen et al., 2020).

A problem that exists in immigrants' settlement process is that most federal and provincial newcomer settlement programs are focused on addressing the needs of the first stage, when the biggest barriers that they face are most palpable in the intermediate stage (Mwarigha, 2002; Wayland, 2006). Additionally, apart from settlement issues, newcomers—particularly visible minorities—face other challenges like language barriers that have been found to be correlated to their high levels of unemployment or increased vulnerability to low income (Employment and Social Development Canada [ESDC], 2021). Clearly, the settlement challenges that new

immigrants face are not independent from each other, but interrelated and systemic in nature (Simich et al., 2005). For example, Canada's general non-recognition of newcomer foreign credentials leads to newcomer unemployment, deskilling, or underemployment (Guo & Andersson, 2005; Wayland, 2006). Even in the instance that immigrants' foreign credentials are recognized, race differences (Wilkinson et al., 2016) and skin color (Li & Li, 2013; Lightman & Good-Gingrich, 2018) create variations in income disparities and access to equal labor market opportunity. This influences the financial aspect of immigrants', and their family's well-being (El-Assal & Fields, 2018), which is especially true in the early years of their children's lives (Ruhm & Waldfogel, 2012). Pourslami et al. (2010) studied the relationship between professional immigrant parents' underemployment status and their children's emotional health and behavioural patterns using a cross-sectional, qualitative and quantitative study design. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 110 participants and two focus groups with six and fifteen participants, respectively, in the Greater Vancouver Area of British Columbia, Canada. They also supplemented the interview instrument and gathered information on children's emotional health and behavioural patterns using behavioural questions that were adapted from the Achenbach scales. Additionally, they used the Canada Low-Income Cut-Off (LICO) scales to collect family income data. They discovered that underemployed professional immigrants and their families experience low levels of life satisfaction and health status. They have poor family relationships, and their children experience challenges in social and emotional behaviour. In these types of situations, children become at risk of physical, social, emotional and academic difficulties, as well as mental health issues (Tienda & Haskins, 2011). Poverty in childhood can have irreversible negative consequences for cognitive, social and emotional development, academic achievement and behavioural adjustment (Leseman & Slot, 2014).

Beiser et al. (2002) examined the differential effects of poverty on the mental health of foreign-born children, Canadian-born children of immigrant parents, and children of non-immigrant parents in Canada. They discovered that foreign-born children were more than twice as likely to live in poor families compared to their receiving-society counterparts. Some researchers point out that poverty may be a transient phenomenon (lasting only three years or less during immigrants' first five years) among immigrants (Reitz & Somerville, 2004). However, chronic low-income and poverty has been more prevalent among immigrants than those born in Canada (Picot & Lu, 2017). This is especially critical in the context of Canada where second-generation immigrants are expected to outperform their parents, but have been found to have higher poverty rates (Kazemipur & Halli, 2001). Beiser et al. (2002) posited that poverty among immigrants may not merely be a part of the resettlement process, but “the nadir of a cycle of disadvantage” (p. 220). However, the silver lining is that quality ELCC is one of the most effective means to break the cycle of poverty (Leseman & Slot, 2014).

Early Learning and Childcare and the Experiences of Immigrant Families

In the case where families are in poverty and therefore their children are at elevated risk for educational difficulties, children of first-generation immigrants have been found more susceptible to early developmental risks in the areas of cognition and language as compared to their domestic born counterparts (De Feyter & Winsler, 2009). However, research has shown that ELCC, parental or care by a relative in the home (Beijers et al., 2013; Lahaie, 2008) or non-parental care such as centre-based care (Beijers et al., 2013; Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011), can offset such risks and problems that immigrants face (Tienda & Haskins, 2011). Beijers et al. (2013) distinguished nine types of non-parental childcare arrangements: centre-based childcare, care in the child's home by a non-relative, care by a non-relative elsewhere (i.e., a child care

home), four types of care by grandparents (care by maternal grandparents in the child's home, care by maternal grandparents elsewhere, care by paternal grandparents in the child's home, care by paternal grandparents elsewhere), and two types of care by a relative other than the grandparents (care by relative in the child's home, care by relative elsewhere).

Friendly et al. (2006) defined ELCC in Canada as “learning and care services provided outside the child’s home for children [up to] age six that support both young children’s well-being and development and their parents’ activities in and out of the paid labour force” (p. 1). This definition includes child care centres, family child care homes, kindergartens, preschools/nursery schools and early intervention programs or pre-kindergarten programs for children defined as high risk. In the province of Alberta in Canada, childcare is categorized differently and the two types¹ of ELCC are unlicensed (informal) and licensed (formal) childcare (Government of Alberta, 2021). However, it does not mean that unlicensed childcare is exclusive to parental care, as other non-parental childcare models like care by a non-relative in a private day home also fall under this category. Nevertheless, ELCC has been found effective at counterbalancing the problems that can contribute to poor short-term and long-term developmental outcomes in the children of immigrants by promoting their development (Tienda & Haskins, 2011). This is critical considering that children of first-generation immigrant families also exhibit unique strengths at a very young age (De Feyter & Winsler, 2009). These strengths

¹ Unlicensed (or informal) childcare includes family members, nannies, private day homes and informal arrangements with friends or neighbours, which can provide childcare for up to 6 children, not including their own, at any given time. Licensed (or formal) childcare is further divided into two: facility-based and home-based. Facility-based includes daycare centres, out-of-school care, and pre-school. Home-based, also known as approved family childcare, provides childcare in private homes with a maximum number of 6 children not including their own.

can be built upon to encourage their later success, and access to culturally relevant ELCC can act as facilitator and/or protective factor in supporting their early development.

Unfortunately, immigrant parents experience intensified household and caregiving workloads which are fuelled by under/unemployment (Premji & Shakya, 2017). These lead to exhaustion and affect their capacity to provide consistent care for their children. Yet, immigrant children participation rates in care of any type other than by the parents themselves or their relatives are lower compared to children born in Canada (Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Turney & Kao, 2009). Immigrant parents do not access nonparental care for various reasons such as their preference for relatives as childcare providers (Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012), which is not always available in the new host country if they are isolated from family. In the absence of family, immigrant parents often turn to their ethnocultural communities but lack access to informal nonrelative childcare due to lack of social networks (Morantz et al., 2013).

Barriers to Accessing ELCC

When it comes to accessing ELCC new immigrants face structural² barriers like affordability (Chai et al., 2018; Stewart et al., 2011), availability, and language (Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Obeng, 2007; Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012). With respect to affordability, immigrant parents may be challenged to participate equally in the labour market, such as being able to find a permanent job with reasonable rates (or at least fair rates) and benefits (ESDC, 2021). Thus, accessing childcare becomes another financial burden for them. This is further

² This should not be confused with the same adjective used to describe the type of quality in ELCC, specifically *structural quality*. *Structural* in the context of *barriers* pertains to the structures of care such as cost, location/supply, and medium of delivery, whereas in the context of *quality* it pertains to the things that shape structure of the ELCC environment such as group composition, staff qualification, working conditions, and the space and physical environment.

exacerbated by the fact that Canada's childcare fees are among the highest in all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Japel & Friendly, 2020). Because of the costs associated with childcare in Canada, immigrants, particularly women, may struggle to join the labour market and prefer to stay home and care for their children, which ultimately limits their family's combined income potential. This is particularly challenging for single mothers. Mason (2003) described the two key time periods mothers contemplate paid work and single motherhood:

The first occurs prior to employment and involves contemplating paid work, deciding to become an employee, and absorbing a shift in thinking about what it means to be a mother.

The second occurs within the first year of paid work and involves a reconsideration of those issues and either a recommitment to employment or a temporary withdrawal from the labor force. (p. 41)

Availability of ELCC is another barrier that new immigrants face (Young et al., 2020), based on the geographical location of the childcare (Matthew & Jang, 2007) or the hours of operation and how that aligns with their work schedule (Enchautegui et al., 2015; Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2014). Therefore, affordability and availability do not necessarily equate to accessibility (Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2014). For example, in terms of proximity, transportation difficulties may deter their access to available ELCC (Matthew & Jang, 2007). In terms of underserved areas, in extreme cases families may be living in a childcare desert (Young et al., 2020). The term refers to “neighborhoods where there are more than 50 non-school-aged children with less than one space for every three children of that same age” and across Canada, “approximately 44 percent of “non-school-aged children live in childcare deserts” (p. 551). This means that there may not be enough spaces to accommodate the high demands for childcare—

leading to long waitlists such as in Toronto where children who move up the waitlist may not need childcare anymore by the time a spot becomes available for them. On the other hand, when it comes to hours of operation and how that aligns with a family's needs, immigrant families are often employed in low-skilled, low-paid jobs with irregular hours (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). Furthermore, parents who work nonstandard hours are more likely to rely on multiple types of childcare arrangements than standard-schedule parents (Enchautegui et al., 2015). This means that they would also naturally need non-traditional childcare hours to fill their childcare needs—making available ELCC inaccessible under their circumstances.

The third structural barrier and one of the major obstacles that new immigrants face in accessing ELCC is language proficiency in the host country, which is recognized as one of the critical factors to successful integration among new immigrants (Watkins et al., 2012). In the short run, it allows newcomers to efficiently go through the immigration settlement process and resolve related pertinent needs such as finding affordable housing, identifying ELCC centres or schools for their children, and accessing relevant social or new immigrant services (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2018). However, many immigrant families struggle in navigating the intricate systems due to language-related barriers, and all the paperwork requirements and complex enrollment processes involved make it even more cumbersome for them (Matthews & Jang, 2007). For example, immigrant families find it difficult to understand enrollment procedures when trying to access information on ELCC (Buriel & Hurtado-Ortiz 2000; Leseman, 2002; Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2014). Therefore, even where ELCC is available, new immigrant families may not be aware of it or are unable to access it.

Despite the reservations that immigrant parents have about formal care, many end up procuring licensed ELCC services even if they are costly because their limited familial networks

and/or their very busy schedules do not give them other options (Obeng, 2007). However, just as availability of ELCC does not ensure accessibility, access to ELCC also does not completely eliminate the structural barriers that have been discussed. On the contrary, immigrant parents experience another layer of barriers (Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Obeng, 2007; Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012), such as relating to their particular culture in terms of beliefs, practices, and language.

Cultural distance exists between the host country and immigrant families. This is particularly pronounced among those who immigrate from more traditional or religious societies, and/or who come from the working class urban or agrarian backgrounds. In such cases, immigrant parents may be apprehensive about a child educators' ability to understand their culture or parts of it (Adair & Barraza, 2014) and become hesitant about placing their children in formal childcare, especially when educators tend to "fix" immigrant children. In a particular case, an ELCC educator corrected a child's use of the word "chanclas" to refer to flipflops or sandals by telling the child that the appropriate term to use is "sandals" (Adair, 2015). In such instances, the way the educator responds to the child's use of a different language conveys a message to children and their parents about the value of their mother tongue. Additionally, immigrant parents may worry about educators' tendency to become impatient with their children if they cannot fully convey their thoughts in English.

Tobin et al. (2013) found that the majority of the 150 immigrant parents in their study from different states in the US did not necessarily agree with the educator's perspective on curricula or on the best ways to support language and cultural identities. This finding also emerged from Pourslami et al. (2013)'s study on ethno-cultural communities (Farsi-speaking, Chinese-speaking and Korean-speaking communities) in the Tri-Cities region of British Columbia,

Canada. More specifically, Farsi-speaking parents highlighted that the Canadian way of child-rearing, which according to them is too lenient, is not acceptable. Korean-speaking parents also recognized the more liberated communication dynamics between parents and children in Canada, but emphasized that there should still be some boundaries between parents and children in the context of respect for authority. On the other hand, although the Chinese-speaking parents stated their willingness to understand the Canadian educational system, they also expressed their confusion on matters concerning child development due to cultural differences between the Chinese and the Canadian approach.

The linguistic environment is also one of the key differentiating factors between host country and migrant cultures (Pot et al., 2020). Hence, immigrants' lack of proficiency in the host country's language may mediate their access to and utilization of services. The depth of this language barrier is very much apparent among the previously mentioned ethno-cultural communities in the Tri-Cities region of British Columbia, Canada (Poureslami et al., 2013) where messages in intercultural communication got lost in translation. At the level of knowledge, each cultural group's understanding about ELCC was limited in the sense that their concepts potentially differed from mainstream Canadian perspectives. For these two reasons, they could not fully comprehend the different aspects of ELCC in the English language. For example, the Farsi-speaking community perceived ELCC as an outside-the-home program offered by the society. Many Chinese- and some Korean-speaking parents on the other hand understood that ELCC was just a different education program for kids. At the level of interaction, language differences diminished relationship-building and parental involvement. For instance, Farsi-speaking parents felt that ELCC staff and the services delivered in the English language were not able to connect well with their cultural group. The Chinese- and Korean-speaking groups had

similar sentiments; Chinese parents struggled to communicate their parenting issues with staff who knew only English. Korean parents on the other hand found it difficult to understand, access, and use ELCC services that were delivered purely in English. Parents' active participation and parent-teacher interactions are vital in early learning environments (Tobin, 2007), but language barriers inhibit parents from conveying their suggestions and thoughts to the educators (Matthews & Jang, 2007). As a result, immigrant parents' inactive engagement with schools and centres becomes prevalent in ELCC through third grade, which is also mistakenly assumed by educators as parents' lack of care about their children's education (Adair, 2015). This is critical because "research indicates that family involvement in school has the greatest impact for children at greatest risk, with the literacy achievement of children from low-income and low-educated families showing the highest achievement rewards from high levels of family involvement" (Park & McHugh, 2014, p. 14). Children raised in a multilingual environment particularly reap cognitive and social benefits such as greater executive control and improved literacy skills, especially when parents are actively engaged in their children's early learning in the home. On the contrary, in the absence of parental engagement children lose out on these opportunities. For immigrant families where at least one parent does not speak English well and where there is a shortage of bilingual early childhood professionals in the ELCC that they access, Park and McHugh (2014) highlighted that "immigrant parents must gain literacy, language proficiency, and systems knowledge and navigation skills in order to meaningfully access engagement opportunities" (p. 14).

ELCC and Quality

Quality ELCC as a set of characteristics

Provincial governments in Canada are responsible for developing early learning and childcare systems that best respond to the needs and priorities of their communities (Government of Canada, 2017a). At the federal level the Government of Canada created the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework to set “the foundation for governments to work toward a shared long-term vision where all children can experience the enriching environment of quality early learning and child care that supports children’s development to reach their full potential” (Government of Canada, 2017a, p. 1). This description seems to encapsulate the ideal ELCC, or ‘quality ELCC.’ Interestingly however, the Framework identifies *high quality* as just one of the components of quality ELCC, along with *accessible, affordable and flexible*, and *inclusive*.

Alberta hinges on the federal government’s Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework (Government of Canada, 2017b). On November 15, 2021, the Government of Alberta and the Federal Government announced the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement for 2021 to 2026, which aims to increase accessible, affordable, high-quality and inclusive childcare in the province (Government of Alberta, 2021b). In this Agreement, both Canada and Alberta committed to improving the quality, accessibility, affordability, inclusivity, and transparency of ELCC system in the province through increased federal funding. The agreement highlighted that funding will be targeted toward licensed programs and activities that will have an impact on families such as Indigenous families, families of children with disabilities, and families in underserved communities such as Black and racialized families. To increase affordability, the provincial government aims to provide up to 50% reduction in the average parent fees for licensed child care spaces by the end of 2022.

Through this, an average of ten dollars (\$10) a day out-of-pocket parent fee is set to be attained by 2026. To expand accessibility, the province commits to using federal funding to increase the number of licensed childcare spaces. At least 42,500 new licensed childcare spaces are targeted to be created over the next 5 years. And to ensure inclusivity, the province commits that new spaces will be created to serve diverse and/or vulnerable children and families, in proportion to their presence in the population of Alberta. Moreover, the government also aims to ensure flexibility for families needing drop-in and overnight childcare, as well as support to children with specific learning, linguistic, cultural and other needs. To increase quality of childcare, the province commits to using funds to train and improve the certification levels of the early learning childhood educator workforce.

The Agreement puts emphasis on *high quality* early learning and childcare, especially concerning child developmental outcomes. According to Annex 2 of the Agreement, “Alberta values the emphasis on safeguarding quality in licensed and regulated child care, and believes this can be achieved by investing in, expanding and developing the child care workforce” (Government of Canada, 2017b, par. 32). This explains why the number of certified early childhood educators and the certification levels of this workforce are among the Agreement’s identified indicators of high-quality, and why specific incentives are in place. The strategy is to use federal funding to develop and implement standards, top-up educators’ salaries, and increase the number of childcare workers that meet Alberta’s regulated childcare certification requirements. Since getting certified is only required if early childhood educators want to work in a *licensed* daycare, out-of-school care, or preschool program (Government of Canada, 2017b), the Framework and Agreement put the emphasis on certification as the primary pathway to increasing quality in ELCC.

To meet its target number of certified educators, the Agreement set wage top-ups for those who are certified and the top up amount increases based on certification level (Government of Canada, 2017b). Through this incentive, the system aims to recruit and retain the “best” educators. There are three levels of certifications for early childhood educators (Government of Alberta, 2022). Level 1 requires the completion of one or more courses in childcare and development. Levels 2 and 3 require the completion of a one-year early learning and childcare certificate program and a two-year early learning and childcare diploma program (offered by an approved institution), respectively.

In February 2021, the new *Early Learning and Child Care Act* (together with the *Early Learning and Child Care Regulation*) was introduced (Government of Canada, 2017b). This had a more holistic take on quality ELCC than the Framework and the Agreement, focusing on health, safety, quality and flexibility. The Act set “a strong legislative foundation for high-quality early learning child care through the *Principles and Matters to be Considered*, which establish the overall direction for child care licensing in Alberta” (par. 41). Central to the Act were the following principles: ELCC should support and preserve the safety, security, and well-being of the child; offer families flexibility in childcare to support their choices and accessibility; and, engage parents, guardians, and community members to participate in the provision of childcare that supports the child’s optimal development (Early Learning and Child Care Act, 2007). The Act also outlined a list of relevant matters that licensed providers of childcare services should consider. This includes ensuring that the child: has care and play experiences that support learning and development; is protected from physical, verbal and emotional harm; is respected and valued for their diversity; and, receives holistically appropriate care. Moreover, the Act says that centres should place the child’s familial and cultural, social, linguistic and spiritual heritage

at the center of the child’s wellbeing and development, and should involve the child’s parents and guardians in ensuring the quality of childcare programs.

Still, the Framework, Agreement, and the Act only gave some characteristics of high quality ELCC, not a concrete definition. As highlighted by Edwards (2021), ‘quality’ in early childhood education and care is a disputed idea with a “history of research and development regarding both its definition, and deployment in policy and practice” (pg. 7). While the Federal Government tried to define “quality” ELCC in their report entitled, *Defining and measuring the quality of Early Learning and Child Care: A literature review*, they also acknowledged that there is no single universal definition of ELCC quality. In the report, quality was defined through what they coined as structural quality and process quality of ELCC (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018).

Structural quality in ELCC examines the composition of an ELCC centre’s pillars, its systems, as well as how its services are implemented, all of which are believed to promote good quality care and education (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018). According to Wang et al. (2020), structural quality shapes the educational environment where children will participate. The factors that are taken into consideration include group composition, staff qualification, working conditions, and the space and physical environment standards (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018):

- *Group composition.* The benefits of having favorable child-staff ratio of fewer children per practitioner in a group, and group size of less children per group, are recognized. The hypothesis is that these lead to better child outcomes due to more individualized attention and learning opportunities.

- *Staff qualification.* There is some consensus that the level of training (such as a bachelor's degree level) and credentials (such as courses specific to early childhood) of early childhood caregivers/educators affect their ability 'to provide sensitive, responsive, and stimulating care and education' that will ensure high quality ELCC.
- *Working conditions.* Wages and working hours, non-financial benefits, team-work, manager's leadership, and workload are recognized as correlated to attracting and retaining adequate numbers of qualified and experienced staff. It is hypothesized that these can impact the stability and quality of staff-to-child interactions.
- *Space and physical environment standards.* It is widely recognized that the quality of childcare space and infrastructure is a primary factor in promoting child well-being and development. It is posited that a centre's size must sufficiently accommodate children's spatial needs; resources must be accessible to stimulate child engagement in learning; and, curricula and environment should match each stage of the child's development.

While structural quality is highly amenable to regulation since it is measurable and quantifiable, it does not address nor does it measure the interactions between children and educators (Wang et al., 2017).

Process quality in ELCC on the other hand, looks at the relationship and interaction between and among the children, their educators and their peers, as well as the tools, space and activities available to them (OECD, 2020; Phillips et al., 2000). It is recognized as the primary driver of benefits in the development of children (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018). Process quality reflects a particular value on children's interaction and overall experience within their ELCC setting such as the emotional care and support that they receive from the

centre. Moreover, process quality is primarily concerned with “the mediational aspects of young children’s learning and development in relationship with others and the cultural environment” (Edwards, 2021, pg. 10). The factors that are taken into consideration include ELCC staff-to-child interactions and development-focused curricula (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018):

- *ELCC staff-to-child interactions.* There are three dimensions to ELCC staff-to-child interactions: emotional support (where educators develop a positive relationship with children and are sensitive to their needs), instructional support (where educators sustain higher order thinking skills and ensure cognitive development), and classroom organization (where educators proactively manage behavior and attention among children)—and these are backed by both theories and empirical evidence. Such interactions are recognized as critical to the child’s academic, social, and self-regulatory functioning outcomes, especially if structural quality is factored in, such as staff qualifications which impact the quality of provided interactions.
- *Development-focused curricula.* Curricula that provide opportunities for children to engage in age-appropriate activities are considered paramount to facilitating cognitive development and ensuring school readiness. Similar to ELCC staff-to-child interactions, the quality of curricula delivery and implementation is also linked closely to the training and qualifications of the educator.

Regarding having a development-focused curricula, in Alberta, *Flight: Alberta’s Early Learning and Care Framework* (formerly *Play, Participation and Possibilities: An Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Alberta*) is used as the foundation for ELCC by numerous centres across the Province (Government of Canada, 2017b; Makovichuk et al., 2014)

even though it is not mandatory (flightframework.ca, n.d.). It is “available free of charge to any educator who wants to voluntarily engage with the ideas and concepts as a way to support their evolving practices, planning and provisions for young children’s learning” (flightframework.ca, n.d., par. 6). However, there are also other programs that adopt comparable curricula which according to the Agreement “provides parents with choice and operators flexibility to offer unique learning opportunities” (Government of Canada, 2017b, par. 43).

According to Flight, curriculum is “the whole range of experiences, planned and unplanned, direct and indirect, that occurs within an environment designed to foster learning. It was the product of a multi-year action research project involving frontline early childhood educators” (p. 142). It is “evidence-based and designed to increase child development outcomes and the quality of early learning and child care programs by enabling educators to maximize learning and development opportunities using children’s play and care experiences” (Government of Canada, 2017b, par. 43). It describes a curriculum framework, which establishes “the value base and programme standards on which early childhood services ... are to be founded” and that it “may include principles, values, and goals of the program, as well as program standards and guidelines through which educators support children’s learning” (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 143).

The Flight curriculum framework is not prescriptive and does not provide specifics on curricular content (Makovichuk et al., 2014). It mostly gives guidance on how ELCC educators should think, act, and perform in their practice. It also identifies things that educators are advised to focus on to facilitate child development. For example, Flight discusses having holistic play-based goals in order to have a meaningful curriculum, among which is ensuring the wellbeing of the child. The document also mentions the three facets of this goal, namely: emotional health and

positive identities, belonging, and physical health. It says that the child should be given the opportunity to: pursue their interests, passions, and strengths; increase “bodily awareness, control, strength, agility ... large motor coordination ... and fine motor capacities” in children (p. 95); and, release and restore energy in outdoor places. Furthermore, Flight has a lot of discussions about language, but mostly as it relates to communication and expression, or multicultural awareness. For example, it does not define how educators should incorporate multicultural children’s heritage languages in the curriculum, but invites educators to reflect about other cultures’ language

Evidently, structural quality factors are catalysts of process quality and tangentially—of child outcomes, but separately they provide two different perspectives when thinking about the quality of ELCC. While numerous evidence points to the viability of the factors described above for judging the quality of ELCC, some studies also indicate positive but statistically insignificant associations between variables. Research in this area is also “observational in nature and subject to the inherent biases of that research design” (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018, p. 9). Additionally, various factors such as contextual issues make it challenging to accurately estimate the impacts of one variable on the other. However, childcare studies that have looked at the relationships between staff qualifications and training, and ELCC program quality, were conclusive about how the former impacts the latter through “the ability of staff to provide sensitive, responsive, and stimulating care and education” (p. 10).

Quality ELCC as a relative concept

The previous sections described how efforts to explain what quality ELCC looks like have had unclear results. One study found that parents use the structural features of care, child safety, and childcare provider credentials as their criteria for choosing the right ELCC for their children (Van Horn et al., 2001). However, the criteria were not clear determinants of what mothers consider as high-quality childcare as the study did not investigate quality per se, but only highlighted the importance of mothers' choices for determining their perceived characteristics of quality childcare. Another study talked about quality ELCC in terms of structural quality and process quality (Buschmann & Partridge, 2019). However, the researchers noted that they used these two concepts of quality because those have also been the city's basis for assessing quality in ELCC for many years. The researchers further emphasized how quality in ELCC can be highly contextual especially among different cultural groups.

Even the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework reflects the ambiguity of quality in ELCC (Government of Canada, 2017a). The document presents a disclaimer that “governments recognize that each jurisdiction has the responsibility to develop systems that best respond to the needs and priorities of their communities”—implicating that [high] quality is highly contextual, which has been supported by several other studies. In an article about the most relevant issues in ELCC especially among low-income and migrant families, Peeters and Vandekerckhove (2015) discussed that the participants in the research “agreed that quality in [ELCC] cannot be limited to structure and process” (p. 335). Furthermore, they concluded that researchers or professionals should not be the only ones that define “quality” in ELCC, but that parents of different backgrounds and children themselves should be the most important resource. These findings align with Adair and Barraza (2014)'s conclusion that it will be important to get

immigrant parents' stories and views on ELCC toward arriving at the most holistic definition and understanding of quality in ELCC.

Quality of childcare should be defined through an “ongoing process of negotiation and cooperation between researchers, professionals, parents of different backgrounds and children themselves” (pg. 335). As Moss (2016) emphasized, quality in ELCC is a relative concept based on an individual's values and beliefs and should not just be defined by a particular concept. Quality is neither neutral nor self-evident; it is “saturated with values and assumptions” (pg.10). This was also echoed by Beach (2020) who highlighted that there is no single definition of quality and its meaning depends on whose perspective is being asked.

For example, for immigrant parents the cultural sensitivity or responsiveness of an ELCC influences their choice of childcare provider, and whether they would enroll their child in formal ELCC at all (Matthews & Jang, 2007). This means that simply removing other barriers such as cost- or process-related will not guarantee families that their children will have access to high-quality experiences. ELCC programs must be culturally sensitive to serve immigrants families from a diverse set of countries and circumstances. Obeng (2007) recognized this as a quality-related concern and explained that “the difficulty in getting quality care that takes into account such cultural differences as the kind of food to serve the child or how children and adults should interact with one another, among others, can sometimes be a difficult task for parents and caregivers” (p. 259). Turney and Kao (2009) highlighted that immigrant parents may even “forego formal care to provide cultural and linguistic support they deem valuable to their children” (p. 443). The concept of economic utility might be able to explain this. In business, the significant predictors of a customer's intention to purchase a product (or service) include their perceived quality of, and their satisfaction with, the said product (or service) (Saleem et al., 2015). While

the noun phrase *intention to purchase* explicitly refers to the act of buying, by logical tautology the alternative is also implied (Von Wright, 2017). The implication is that people make decisions on whether to buy (or not to buy) a good or service based on the perceived quality (or lack of quality) of that good or service. This can be seen in the behaviour of new immigrant families on early learning and childcare (ELCC) as a service, particularly their willingness or reluctance to access it for their children.

For instance, in one study immigrant parents were apprehensive that child educators may not understand all aspects of their culture—regardless of the perceived educational benefits that their children will receive from a licensed ELCC (Adair & Barraza, 2014). This comes from their experiences around derogatory and discriminatory comments and attitudes toward immigration and immigrants, as well as misinformation acquired from public policies or majority-culture prejudices (Adair, 2015). These things can influence educators to develop negative suppositions towards immigrants. When this happens, teachers may generalize children’s needs based on assumptions, which is a “colorblind” approach. A colorblind approach discourages educators from enhancing their students’ cultural background and or responding to concerns about their migration, integration, and discrimination experiences. Moreover, even when educators learn about the discrimination, poverty, and racism the children of immigrants are facing, they may be at a loss for what to do and instead fall back on their prior knowledge about what is best for the children and fail to provide what they truly need (Adair & Tobin, 2012). However, a study by Kirova and Paradis (2010) invited immigrant parents to learn about and observe the delivery of formal ELCC to their children. The parents only felt comfortable and satisfied about formal ELCC when they were able to witness and understand that it was “an intercultural early learning program that is supportive of children’s first language” wherein the facilitation of English

language learning was “culturally sensitive and inclusive of the newcomer families’ perspectives,” and involved cultural brokers and first language facilitators (Kirova & Paradis, 2010, p. 5).

Because of the contextual nature of cultural preferences (Kirova & Paradis, 2010) and how the concept of quality in childcare “can mean very different things to different groups of people” (Buschmann & Partridge, 2019, p. 45), it is critical to take multiple cultural perspectives in discussions about how quality in ELCC should be defined. This is supported by several other studies. For example, Van Horn et al. (2001) studied the reasons for childcare choice and appraisal among low-income mothers, and concluded that parents base their decisions on the structural characteristics of care (e.g., such as cost, location, and medium of delivery), child safety, and caregiver characteristics. The study did not assess quality per se, but it underscored how critical mothers’ choices are in identifying what constitutes quality childcare for them, and points this out as a future area of research. Similarly, Buschmann and Partridge (2019), in their report on the profile of childcare in Edmonton, discussed quality in ELCC in terms of structural quality and process quality. However, they pointed out that quality is really a relative concept but such standards for quality have been used solely because those have been the municipality’s commonly accepted aspects of quality for many years. Beach (2020), in her discussion paper examining the regulatory measures that support quality in ELCC in Alberta, shared the same sentiments. She said that while quality at the program level is usually conceptualized by structural and process elements, it is a relative concept that is often developed from a shared understanding among multiple stakeholders.

All of the aforementioned align with Adair and Barraza’s (2014) conclusion that in ELCC, it is critical to listen to parents because they are the experts on their own children and their needs,

and that their inputs will help early childcare educators to best serve their community. For example, an independent study commissioned by the Council in 2019 looked into the lived experiences of immigrant families accessing ELCC in Edmonton. They discovered that culturally unresponsive systems and ELCC environments that hold worldviews and biases of a dominant culture, can create spaces that are not considered safe (Sumaru-Jurf & Felix-Mah, 2019). Programs with these characteristics discourage newcomer families from accessing and having their children participate in ELCC. This could be suggestive of a quality-related concern arising from either a top-down or a lack of diverse consultative approach to the design, implementation and practice of ELCC. Moreover, immigrant and refugee parents' concept of ELCC may differ from the mainstream Canadian conceptualizations of ELCC (Poureslami et al., 2013). All the aforementioned findings in previous studies demonstrate that each stakeholder brings their own unique perspective to the table; hence, hearing and understanding the perspectives of various stakeholders—especially underrepresented groups—is critical to arriving at a more holistic understanding of quality in ELCC (Harrist et al., 2007).

Quality ELCC as a System

Another perspective on quality in ELCC sees quality as a system of linked elements, and not as distinct components (Government of Canada, 2017a) like characteristics or human preferences described earlier. This concept ideates that instead of having fragmented governance, services need to be strongly integrated into a coordinated leadership structure for children to gain the most benefits from ELCC. The hypothesis is that integrations will “support quality improvement of services, promote stability in children’s learning environment, and smooth transitions from preschool to the early grades” (para. 38). This integration must be further supplemented by an adequate level of funding and the efficient and equitable use of funds, as

they will impact staff training and infrastructure development and maintenance and ultimately, quality programming. Similarly, Friendly et al. (2006) emphasized that the conditions or elements associated with quality ELCC “need to be considered together—as a system” (p.16) and that they not only need to be addressed, but their linkages also have to be established. Otherwise, if each is taken separately and without reference to the other, then they will lose their impact.

While at present there have been few initiatives made on measuring quality in ELCC at the system level (Government of Canada, 2017a), in their review of ELCC literature Friendly et al. (2006) outlined the specific conditions that are essential at the system level “to ensure that high quality at the program level is the norm rather than the exception” (p. 15) in ELCC in Canada. These conditions provide the framework for quality ELCC at the system level and are summarized in Table 1 below (p. 17):

Table 1

The elements of a high quality early learning and child care system

Element	Includes
Ideas: A conceptual framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clear statement of the values that underpin the program • System-level goals for children and families • Educational philosophy related to the values and goals • Curriculum defined as a short general framework
Governance: Roles and responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clear definition of roles and responsibilities of government at different levels, parents and the community set out in legislation and policy

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public management at system level Not-for-profit operation • Program delivery managed at local level • Appropriate involvement of community, researchers, parents and children
Infrastructure: Coordinated program administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy, planning and program delivery organized in one lead department • Legislation as a basis for the system • Regulation defining minimum basic standards • Monitoring to ensure standards are met • Mechanisms for ongoing quality improvement • Ongoing consultation and program assessment • Public education about early learning and child care
Planning and policy development: A strategy for implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System-wide planning with targets and timetables • Use of the best available knowledge re: policy and practice • Mandated involvement of experts and stakeholders in policy processes at all levels • Local service planning
Financing: Substantial well-directed public investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financing to cover capital development • Sustained financing sufficient to support ongoing program operation • Core or base funding that covers the majority of program operation costs • Financing for infrastructure and training • Affordable parent fees
Human resources: Qualified personnel and support at all levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership at all levels (policy, supervisory, educational and program) • A critical mass of knowledgeable policy makers, post-secondary early childhood instructors and researchers • Post-secondary level training early childhood, with lead staff at degree levels • Human services management training for program supervisory staff • Pre-service and in-service training • Good wages

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working conditions that encourage good morale and low turnover • System support for program level staff • Support, respect and recognition for the value of the work
Physical environment: The program setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sufficient well-designed indoor and outdoor space • First-rate equipment and program resources • Amenities such as staff room, outside play space, kitchen, windows for natural light • Connections to surrounding community
Data, research and evaluation: Collection and analysis of information for evaluating effective practice and ensuring accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strategy for collecting and analyzing basic data to monitor effects of policy and financing and ensure accountability • Research to address key policy and program issues • Evaluation of various approaches and innovations • Review of progress towards goals

The conditions mentioned in the table are all determined by public policy, which means that a strong public policy is fundamental to a high quality ELCC system.

Studies that analyzed policies, such as the OECD’s twenty-nation comparative study, have identified the characteristics of an ELCC system that are related to higher quality as far public policy is concerned (Friendly & Prentice, 2009). Eight policy lessons particularly emerged as predictors of a high quality ELCC system:

- 1) a systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation;
- 2) a strong and equal partnership with the education system;
- 3) a universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support;
- 4) substantial public investment in services and infrastructure;

- 5) a participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance;
- 6) appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision;
- 7) systematic attention to monitoring and data collection;
- 8) a stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation (p. 57)

Against this backdrop, ELCC systems in Canada have been found to not be overly strong (Friendly et al., 2006; Friendly & Prentice, 2009).

Chapter 3: Methodology

A Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach (Janzen et al., 2017; Wallerstein et al., 2017) and qualitative descriptive methodology (Sandelowski, 2000) were used in this study for secondary analysis of qualitative data. CBPR is “a research methodology and approach that facilitates the genuine participation of research participants in the knowledge acquisition, translation, and dissemination process” (Dudgeon, et al., 2017, pg. 2). Qualitative description is a form of data collection that describes and summarizes a phenomenon (Sandelowski, 2000). It was an appropriate method to apply to the research questions posed in this study because a focus on narratives was important in this study. It provides a deeper understanding of people’s lived experiences and, in the case of this study, has the potential to produce a description of quality in ELCC based on the lived experiences, values, and preferences of cultural minority families.

The Journeys Project recognizes that visible cultural minority families, to date, have not been included in shaping quality ELCC. In the final report entitled, *Newcomer Consultations on the Context of Early Learning and Care in Edmonton*, Sumaru-Jurf and Felix-Mah (2019) highlighted that it is critical for visible cultural minority families and those who work with them to be engaged in the design and implementation at the policy, regulation, and practice levels of the centralized ELCC system. They also pointed out that the engagement must be facilitated in a participatory manner wherein the participants who have been traditionally excluded in the process will be instrumental in understanding the systems that exist, and will be supported to develop their own thinking and ideas.

This thesis research is part of the larger Journeys Project, which received approval from the University of Alberta’s Research Ethics Board (PRO 00110481). Below, I will discuss the CBPR

approach followed by the Qualitative Descriptive Methodology. Then, I will talk about the participants and recruitment process, the data collection/generation process, and finally the data analysis and representation.

Community-Based Participatory Research

A CBPR approach is rooted in three values: “all people have the capacity to think and work together for a better life; current and future knowledge, skills, and resources are to be shared in equitable ways that deliberately support fair distributions and structures; and authentic commitment is required from external and internal participants” (Smith et al., 1997; pg. 176). CBPR enables relatively underrepresented groups to undertake research into their own situations and has an explicit focus on who defines the research and problems, and who generates and analyzes the information sought (Hecker, 1997). CBPR also removes the passiveness of the subjects of research by involving participants as co-researchers. It is a responsive and flexible approach, which proceeds in cycles of planning, action, reflection, and evaluation. It is believed that participation in research aims to restore the ability of the ‘oppressed’ to create knowledge and practice in their own interests, concomitantly engaging them in consciousness-raising and action (Freire, 1970). Typically, participatory research involves creating spaces in which participants engage together in cycles of critical reflection and action (Aziz et al., 2011). The CBPR approach genuinely values and prioritizes the views and experiences of research participants toward acquiring, translating, and disseminating knowledge, especially in the pursuit of social change processes such as in policy.

This project wanted to ensure the active participation of those with lived experiences to identify and create solutions to the issues they identified. Hence, CBPR was used to create an environment where participants are supported by concerned professionals who will listen to their

stories, experiences, hopes and aspirations. This approach is empowering to visible cultural minority families as it gives them a voice in shaping quality in ELCC. Within this approach, the starting point was the concerns of the people involved, and the process focused on action and changing situations during the research process, rather than just interpreting them. Ultimately, CBPR was used to develop a process that was relevant and appropriate to the participants, participating organizations and communities, and that would produce useful results to inform decision-making and collective action.

Qualitative Descriptive Methodology

The qualitative descriptive methodology aims to build a comprehensive, easy-to-understand summarization of specific events experienced by individuals or groups of individuals (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). Compared to phenomenology or grounded theory, the qualitative descriptive approach is not encumbered by a pre-existing theoretical or philosophical commitment—although it may have some overtones of the other approaches (Sandelowski, 2000). The goal of qualitative descriptive methodology is to understand “something in its natural state to the extent that is possible within the context of the research arena” (Lambert & Lambert, 2012, p. 255). The qualitative descriptive methodology was appropriate to use in this study because of the need for straightforward descriptions of the phenomena under inquiry. Within this approach, naturalistic inquiry was used to get the critical information about the who, what, when, where, how and why of the events relevant to the study.

Positionality

In research, positionality pertains to how an individual creates meaning and interprets information based on unique and overlapping aspects of their identity (Bourke, 2014).

I am a research assistant in the larger Journeys Project, and this has opened me up to the diversity of cultural backgrounds and experiences of those leading the research and the families participating in the research. This has made me more aware of the reality of their circumstances and has influenced me to reflect on my own experiences as a visible cultural minority immigrant myself. Furthermore, my role as a research assistant, my affiliation with the different entities working together on the larger Journeys Project, and my involvement in my own thesis research come with some associations of power and privilege, which may have impacted how my participants perceived me and the extent of my influence.

As a visible cultural minority immigrant belonging to the Filipinx community, I acknowledge my position as somewhat similar to those of my participants. However, I also recognize that despite this, my Canadian Permanent Resident status, post-secondary education, professional background, and my undertaking of graduate studies at a Canadian university place me in a position of privilege at both the societal and individual levels. Participants from the Filipinx community may have shared some of the same identities, but likely did not hold identical markers of privilege. Furthermore, as the researcher in my study, a degree of authority is automatically conferred to me; a position of power with the backing of various trusted organizations and a credible educational institution inherently convey privilege (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). Therefore, there exists a gap in degree of privilege between myself as the researcher and the visible cultural minority communities who are being researched. Due to this privilege differential, I likely “studied down” groups who were below me in power structures in society, in sociological research terms (Plesner, 2011). This means I studied a less privileged and more vulnerable demographic, and therefore the lens of my experiences as an individual with a

certain degree of privilege could have been woven into this study and impacted how I made sense of the data.

Lastly, because of my ethnicity and my overlapping researcher roles in the study, I held both insider and outsider status—fluctuating between the two, depending on the needs and/or circumstances. Thus, it was important for me to be aware of and reflect on my positionality throughout the entire course of my study, especially in data analysis. However, while I share the identity of a visible minority immigrant, I am not a parent, nor do I have experience or have had to access ELCC. My experiences with this phenomenon were new and I learned as part of the Journeys Project and as I heard the lived experiences of families. This means that I had no preconceived notion of what quality in ELCC is beyond what I have read in the literature.

Participants and Recruitment

The MCHB played a major role in the selection and recruitment of participants for the research, as well as in the focus group and interview process. The MCHB is a community-based organization in Edmonton, Alberta that serves immigrant families and provides services to 25 linguistic and ethnic groups in Edmonton and surrounding areas. It is comprised of more than 90 cultural brokers who share the language and/or culture of the families/communities they serve. The brokers are trained and continuously engage in ongoing training and supervision to ensure quality in their practice. Moreover, the brokers are context-holders because they themselves are immigrants and parents. This, along with their linguistic and cultural associations with the participants, enable them to “bridge between systems and communities to increase understanding, reduce tensions that can arise from socio-cultural misunderstandings, and address invisible power disparities” (Yohani et al., 2019, p. 1187).

In this section, I describe the participants and recruitment for the larger Journey’s project of which I conducted secondary analysis on the data for this thesis. The Journeys Project used purposive sampling and recruited a total of 30 participants (24 participants for six focus groups and six participants for semi-structured interviews). The participants were from six visible minority immigrant communities, namely: Arabic/Kurdish-speaking, Eritrean/Ethiopian, Bhutanese, Filipinx, Spanish-speaking, and Chinese-speaking, particularly parents with children birth to five years old in Edmonton. They were selected because they are among the communities that MCHB serves, and to represent three different contexts: 1) refugees of various sizes and length of time in Canada, 2) dynamic communities growing with multiple streams of migration, and 3) a large community with primarily economic migration. MCHB organized and conducted the focus groups and interviews, which I supported. The sample sizes were sufficient to achieve data saturation, which is the process of collecting data until new findings no longer emerge (Sandelowski, 1995).

The participants were recruited from three overarching visible cultural minority communities, which comprised the following focus groups and interviews as summarized in the Table 2 below.

Table 2

Research Participants in the Journeys Project

Community	Focus Group	Interview
I. Communities of various sizes with the context of refugee experiences and of various lengths of stay in Canada		
1. Kurdish-speaking parents from the	Four participants	One participant

Kurdish region of Iraq and Arabic-speaking parents from Iraq and Syria		
2. Eritrean and Ethiopian	Four participants	One participant
3. Bhutanese	Four participants	One participant
II. Dynamic, growing communities with multiple streams of migration (economic migration, temporary foreign workers, and refugees for Central and South America)		
4. Filipinx	Four participants	One participant
5. Spanish-speaking	Four participants	One participant
III. Large communities with primarily economic migration (and international students)		
6. Chinese-speaking	Four participants	One participant

Some of the communities were referred to in terms of the language that they speak, while others in terms of their ethnicity. For example, ‘Kurdish-speaking,’ ‘Arabic-speaking,’ ‘Spanish-speaking,’ and ‘Chinese-speaking’ versus ‘Eritrean and Ethiopian,’ ‘Bhutanese,’ and ‘Filipinx.’ This was consistent with how they were identified in the larger Journeys Project.

Participants were selected based on their capacity to give their consent to participate, and to effectively express themselves verbally. They were either a permanent resident, temporary resident, refugee, or citizen of Canada, but current legal status to remain in Canada was not queried.

Data Collection/Generation

Data for the Journeys Project was collected using two methods: focus groups and interviews. Each method will be described below.

Focus Groups

Data was collected using focus groups, which are collective conversations or group interviews comprised of a “group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” (Sreejesh et al., 2014, p. 51). Krueger (2014) emphasized that a focus group must involve a generally homogenous mix of people but with enough diversity of perspectives to provide the qualitative data that the researcher needs. He also highlighted that to obtain this data and help the researcher better understand the topic of interest, a focused discussion driven by predetermined and open-ended questions are critical components.

Focus group was an ideal method for data collection because of several advantages identified by Kellmerein (2015). First, participants can be given a safe, no-pressure space for examining their thoughts, their thinking process, and the reasons behind the way they think about the issue of importance. The researcher can freely and directly interact with the participants and ask for clarifications, if needed, and facial expressions and gestures that can supplement or contradict verbal responses can be observed. The open discourse format of a focus group can provide opportunities for the researcher to uncover deeper levels of meanings in the responses. The group setting creates synergistic effects in that participants can build on the responses of others, which is not possible in a one-on-one interview format. Finally, in a relatively homogenous sample—be it in demographics or experiences—the homogeneity can create an atmosphere that encourages more openness among participants.

To facilitate rich discussions that could give rise to distinct themes among participants’ experiences and perspectives on quality in ELCC, we created focus groups that were small enough to allow everyone to share their insights, but large enough to have variations in

standpoints (Kellmerit, 2015). We organized six focus groups representing the six communities under the three overarching communities identified in Table 2. According to Birks et al. (2007), when interviewing people from a different cultural background particularly when English is their second language, it is possible for the essence of what they are saying when not speaking in their first language to be lost and inaccurately captured. For this reason, we conducted focus group interviews in the participants' first language, with the exception of the Eritrean and Ethiopian community focus groups, which were conducted in a mixture of English and their first language.

Five of the focus groups were facilitated by a multicultural health broker, whereas the Eritrean and Ethiopian community was facilitated by two—as an interviewer and as a note-taker, respectively. I, being a multilingual Filipinx, also co-facilitated the Filipinx community focus group together with the Filipinx broker and conducted the translation and transcription of the interview. The Arabic-Kurdish-speaking and the Bhutanese-speaking communities had their respective notetakers do both their interview translation and transcription, while the Spanish-speaking community used a bilingual graduate student at the University of Alberta for the same service. For the Eritrean and Ethiopian community, the brokers translated and transcribed the parts of the interview that were in their first language, into English. Additionally, they sent me the Zoom recording and I used Otter.ai to transcribe the English parts of the audio into text. I put together all of the transcriptions into one final document.

Although we used pre-determined questions to guide the focus group discussions, we facilitated them in a semi-structured manner so that we could elicit and discuss deeper and more meaningful responses related to the research questions. We hosted the focus groups on Zoom because of COVID-19 restrictions, and each ran for about 90 to 120 minutes. We also used Zoom's video recording function to record each focus group.

Interviews

The multicultural health brokers conducted semi-structured interviews with six parents different from the focus group participants but also representing the same aforementioned visible cultural minority immigrant communities (see Table 2). I specifically joined the interview with the Filipinx community as a co-interviewer. Adams (2015) explained that a semi-structured interview is conducted conversationally with one respondent at a time. It uses a combination of closed- and open-ended questions, which can be accompanied by follow-up why or how questions based on the topics being discussed. Furthermore, he pointed out that a semi-structured interview is advantageous if there is a need to ask probing questions to dig deeper into the thoughts or experiences of an individual. Interviews are also useful to explore emerging themes or gaps from focus group findings.

The same process that was used in the focus groups was used for one-on-one interview facilitation, note-taking, translation, and transcription in each participating visible minority community. This involved brokers as interviewers and bilingual University of Alberta graduate students as note-takers. The brokers verbally translated the recordings into English, while the transcriber put the broker's English translations into writing, verbatim, while indicating which individual is speaking. This was done for each of the focus groups and interviews.

The focus groups and interviews were completed between October 2021 and January 2022, while the transcriptions and translations were completed in May 2022. This was because the brokers had fulltime jobs and they had to find common times with the note-takers. Each broker worked with their respective bilingual note-taker over Zoom to validate their transcriptions' and translations' accuracy. If the note-taker disagreed with some translations, the note-taker recommended revisions to the broker and amended them into what they both agreed on. This is

called forward-backward translation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). I used the resulting translated transcriptions as my data for the succeeding section.

Data Analysis and Representation

The Journeys Project explored the needs, experiences, and aspirations of cultural minority families with young children birth to five years old in community-based ELCC in Edmonton through one-on-one interviews and focus groups. Since my thesis research is nested within this project, I used secondary data analysis to probe into one dimension of family experience in ELCC which the project did not exclusively focus on—namely *quality*.

For the purposes of my thesis research, I stratified the translated data by community, for a total of six categories (Kurdish/Arabic-speaking, Eritrean/Ethiopian, Bhutanese, Filipinx, Spanish-speaking, and Chinese-speaking). Then, I collapsed each community's respective focus group and semi-structured interview data into one, since the most important thing to know was from which community a particular response came, and not whether it was from a focus group or one-on-one interview. I used thematic analysis, which aims to examine narrative materials from life stories “by breaking the text into relatively small units of content and submitting them to descriptive treatment” (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 400) and is “suitable for researchers who wish to employ a relatively low level of interpretation” (p. 399). Thematic analysis is “an independent and reliable qualitative approach to analysis” (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 400) and can help researchers to identify, analyze and report patterns within data.

Hence, for my data analysis process, I first reviewed the content of the translated transcriptions and coded a total of 222 responses. Then, I used thematic analysis to look for repeated or similar words and/or phrases in these responses, determine relationships, and categorize the patterns into themes and sub-themes (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). I tabulated the

data on Microsoft Excel and generated a pivot table to create a summary of the findings. I scheduled a meeting with each community's brokers and shared my findings with them, to validate if the themes and/or categorization were indeed what the participants had conveyed. Moreover, I presented my findings to the brokers. I discussed the findings in light of the literature and talked about the implications specifically on policy.

Rigour

To ensure the rigour of this study, I used the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure credibility, the brokers and bilingual note-takers utilized forward-backward translation (CDC, 2006) to ensure that the English translations of the data were accurate. To address the criteria of transferability, I kept a detailed record of the data collection process. This ensured that critical aspects of the study can be duplicated and applied to other relevant settings. To meet the dependability criteria, I kept detailed notes especially about the major decisions that were made throughout the research project, and the reasons behind those decisions. By leaving behind an audit trail, I became confident that the reasons behind each decision were reasonable and clear to external parties. Lastly, to ensure confirmability, I provided my supervisor in the larger Journeys Project as well as my thesis adviser transcripts of the focus group and semi-structured interviews that I contributed to co-facilitating, translating and transcribing, along with my preliminary analyses of data for review. This process ensured that improvements could be made on the categorization and coding process before we analyzed data from the remaining focus groups and interviews.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand what quality in ELCC is for visible minority families in Edmonton, by exploring their experiences, needs, aspirations and notions of ELCC. Through focus groups and semi-structured interviews, 30 participants with children birth to five years from six (6) visible minority communities in Edmonton responded to the question, “*What is your vision for quality in the early learning and child care sector?*” Using thematic analysis, four themes with 12 sub-themes emerged. I will share a brief description of each overarching theme followed by descriptions of their sub-themes using illustrative participant quotes. While I present the themes and subthemes independently, there is significant intersection and overlap among the themes. In cases where I provide statements referring to communities (i.e., “for visible minority families,” “for all communities,” “for the Spanish-speaking community”), they are not to be treated as generalizations on those communities per se, but only on the participants that represented those communities in this study.

ELCC as a system should have integrated and well-governed components

From the responses of the participants, quality ELCC was described both in terms of its different components as well as how these components functioned as a whole system. This system was defined by policies including how centres and programs are guided, operated, and supported, how information is managed, and how families are supported. These are described in greater detail under the four sub-themes below, particularly around equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), information and language barriers, standards, and support systems.

ELCC should be grounded on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) were core policy issues for the study participants, especially around the topics of admission, subsidies, operations, as well as the environment that

centres and their staff create. For the participants, a major first step to achieving EDI is understanding context, particularly the lived experiences, especially the pre- and post-migration experiences, of visible minority families. As one Arabic/Kurdish-speaking parent had put it: “It is hard for other[s] who [have] never been in our life to understand what we went through and what we are going through.” With that understanding, stakeholders can and should strive to build an ELCC system that works to support not only children, but ultimately their parents and families, to help them integrate and navigate the system—if ELCC were to achieve its intended goals. A mother from the Filipinx community explained that the people who support visible minority families will only be able to best serve the families if they have a full understanding of the background of the refugees and immigrants. She also highlighted how it is critical to first support parents and their wellbeing so that they can do the same for their families:

...It should start from the parents. Not from the kids right away. Like what I said, even if we give tools to the parents and deep inside, they are not healthy? They can't ... You know, their core is ... they are not healthy, because they are too busy and no one is helping them, no resources, no food, can't pay the rent ... If we were able to address that, the wellbeing of the mother, and the father, how can we give them hope in the middle of challenges, like no sleep... that is already a challenge because you can't think properly.

One parent from the Spanish-speaking community talked about the overall impact of having a less inclusive ELCC system on her family's life. She described how it limited her family's choices and opportunities and made them feel more excluded from society:

...[There is no institution] that supports us in Spanish ... giving the fact that, in this country, about 50 years ago, they accepted immigrants who speak Spanish, Latinos, who should be more by now, because we are already talking about 50 or 60 years ago and there

are second and third generations that speak the Spanish language, but was simply lost, why? Due to the lack of transfer of information, due to the lack of us as a culture trying to achieve something else, which is what we are trying to do today, to integrate. For them to look at us as equals, that we can enroll our children where we want, not where they impose on us. Or that we can acquire the possibility to put our children somewhere while we as mothers have 2 or 3 hours to breathe... because we already have the problem that we deal with the papers, of the lack of work, since my husband just works during the summer season. In winter we still need to eat, to dress, to pay and continue living and we don't have enough money because the construction work goes down during winter season. In other words, we deal with so many economic problems, not having anyone around and being alone in this country.

Participants in the study also emphasized how the admission process in ELCC centres should be barrier-free and non-discriminatory. One Bhutanese parent expressed that centres should be indifferent to religion when it comes to admission: “During admission at [centres], I myself have witnessed that parents are often asked, “Are you catholic?” which I believe is culturally [in]sensitive and inappropriate, which must be avoided.”

The study participants also shared that government subsidy eligibility criteria should be just as equitable as ELCC centre admission criteria. One Bhutanese parent talked about this in terms of the income bracket requirements. She said that just because her family income was a little over the \$75k bracket, they no longer qualify for subsidies—given that they have two kids in daycare and half of their income goes to daycare fees. Similarly, a Chinese mother talked about her struggles in qualifying for daycare subsidy given the shared custody setup that she and her ex-husband are in:

I understand the government provides childcare subsidies. However, it has minimal care time in order to be eligible for the full subsidies. For example, the child needs to attend daycare for a certain number of hours per month at 100 hours. For myself, I am a single parent and have a shared custody with my ex-husband. When my ex-husband doesn't send my son to the same daycare when my son is under his care, the attending hours for my son are not enough for me to get full childcare subsidies. Therefore, I have to pay for the portion of daycare fee myself, which adds financial pressure on me.

The Bhutanese participants also talked about inclusion in terms of how centres should be considerate about families' differing schedules and capacity to pay. They said that centres should offer flexible childcare service hours, primarily so that both instead of just one of the parents can work—also since childcare is expensive. One Bhutanese parent shared: “If daycares have hourly provision, we could manage our timings and both parents can work.” Another Bhutanese parent shared similar thoughts:

I wish even the pre-K is a full time program so that both parents can do shift work ...

[Name of pre-K centre] charges monthly fees for their services that are not affordable for many families. Because of expensive cost, we had to keep our daughter at home for a year ... [However, for non-pre-K ELCC] most daycares don't allow admission for partial day, only allow fulltime. It would be better if there would be provision for hourly rate services.

Last but among the top EDI concerns of the study participants was about the ELCC environment that is created by centres and their staff, whether intentionally or not, through the policies that exist or do not exist. Families want their children to be in an environment that is diverse, sensitive, and accepting.

Majority of the participants in this study flagged that ELCC should not discriminate against children who are immigrants, from another culture, or with a disability. Instead, centres should practice integration rather than segregation, and provide children support based on their individual needs. For the Arabic/Kurdish-speaking participants, this meant that the ELCC environment must be culturally sensitive in terms of the language and needs of immigrants and must make children from multicultural backgrounds feel accepted. A parent from the Spanish-speaking community described how that kind of environment could look in an ELCC centre:

That our children would be the same as Canadian children, that they look at us as... that they look at us and that they respect our culture. That the multicultural culture that we call be integrated in that venue, that it be part of our life, that they hand over our roots that we bring from our country. That it be something beyond an educational center.

Another parent from the same community shared how ELCC centres in Edmonton lacked multicultural inclusivity, which she explained made it difficult for her to find a centre that would accommodate her children who only spoke Spanish. An Arabic/Kurdish-speaking parent shared a similar struggle but in the context of her child who had a disability. She found it challenging to find an ELCC centre for her child because according to her, centres “only [cater to] regular children and [are] not equipped to take care [of] children with [a] disability.” A Bhutanese parent envisioned how having specialized ELCC centres that are specifically mandated to support children with a disability can ensure that this vulnerable population will receive equal ELCC opportunities:

Every disabled child must have the right to specialized services/programs that can turn them into an independent citizen as they grow and contribute to the greater community. It

would be nice to have culturally appropriate such kind of centers or institution specialized to support disabled children to improve their developmental challenges.

On the contrary, a Spanish-speaking parent believed that children with a disability should be integrated in a regular ELCC centre, but be provided specialized support, to ensure their proper development and ability to function in society:

Well, I would like that, in the future, well, I have a child who is autistic, and I would like that in the future there could be more opportunities for him. Of course, there is help here, but sometimes, maybe in the schools that everyone is like my son, not that they leave him aside, I mean, if one has a child with these problems, that they treat him in the same way, right? Not? So, there may be special people who can work with him, but in a regular school. Not like going to a special school, right?

Information and language barriers must be strategically managed

Participants in the study believed that the language barrier they face when navigating ELCC in Canada is just part of a larger systemic, information and communications related problem. As early as when these families first immigrate to Canada—and in this study's case, Edmonton, Alberta—and start looking for information on ELCC, the language barrier immediately presents itself to those with little to no English (or French) proficiency. A parent from the Arabic/Kurdish-speaking community shared their experience:

Language and fear from a mainstream daycare made me to put my baby into a community member daycare, in the hope the language [will] make it easy for me to communicate and get a good service for my baby. It was just a big disappointment. I don't want to name the disappointment but [that just] made me [...] quit my school and to stay with my baby. It is just not easy to be a parent in a place when you have no language, not understand the

system, cannot communicate systemically with a system that has so much power and strong foundation. It is a long path for a parent like us.

The Spanish-speaking participants in this study pointed out that translation mechanisms should be in place to bridge communications between ELCC centres and visible minority families—especially those who struggle with English. This could be system-related protocols or human resource-based solutions. For example, one mother shared that she appreciated how the ELCC centre her child went to—in the absence of an interpreter—constantly communicated with her through text messaging or email so that she can have ample time to use an online translator to understand what the centre wanted to tell her, and then respond accordingly. On the contrary, another mother expressed her frustration about having to translate correspondences herself because it takes too much of her time, and that she would prefer if the school had someone who could communicate with her in her native language. Spanish-speaking families in this study believed that interpreters or at least multilingual staff should be an essential component of ELCC centres and become a standard.

The language barrier is further exacerbated by the flaws in how information in ELCC is organized and disseminated, which impacts how visible minority families access critical information on and navigate the ELCC system. For example, an Arabic/Kurdish-speaking parent said that apart from the language barrier, they were also not provided information on ELCC during the settlement process, which showed that the system did not understand the challenges that the refugee population faces. Similarly, the Bhutanese participants identified “language issues, including reading letters” and “navigation of systems and services” as some of their challenges. One particular Bhutanese parent said:

As an immigrant parent with a disabled child, it was very difficult accessing services, including daycare, school systems and other assistance programs. Firstly, you do not know if there are any services that exist and if they exist you do not know how to access them. Lack of knowledge about community resources is another issue. Accessibility is the biggest problem overall.

A Spanish-speaking parent thought the same and said that “there is a lack of information ... Sometimes you don't know where to look, where to go.” This was echoed by a Bhutanese parent, who shared how their community had relied heavily on a broker from the MCHB for ELCC-related information and services. A parent from the Eritrean/Ethiopian community shared a similar experience wherein she only learned about an ELCC program when she stumbled upon it at the library:

And then I was also thinking about services provided in the library. Like I know every time I go to the library, there is an activity happening for new parents like, they could bring their kids to activities as early as six months, eight months, one year, you know. They have different programs that parents don't even know about it. You know, how do we make sure that that information is available for families because that's where you start learning about your child and child development?

Centralization was one solution that the study participants thought of to address the challenges of visible minority families in accessing information on ELCC and navigating the system. For example, the Bhutanese participants thought that having a centralized system would make it easier for families to access information. On the other hand, the Spanish-speaking participants proposed that ELCC centres can perform the function of a centralized information centre. One such parent said:

...That [ELCC centres] be information centres, that they help you, that they be a “family far from your family”. That I would like it to be achieved, that it be a second family. That you be able to have the ability to send your children with peace of mind, that they give them education, as well as the culture of our countries. Make it all in one. Give parents the information they need. That if our children have some type of disability, that they give you the information, show you where to seek for help, that they be information centers. I need that.

ELCC should have standards to harmonize services and ensure quality

When it comes to the system, the policies that are (and are not) in place were among the study participants’ most prominent concerns. These were policies that encompassed organizational culture and ELCC admission, standards, programs and services, and processes. Families idealized having policies that made ELCC more holistically inclusive: diversity and inclusion should drive the management and operations of centres and there should be flexibility and equity in the eligibility criteria for centre admission and government subsidies. However, while the study participants spoke strongly about flexibility they also highlighted the importance of having strict across-the-board standards and/or regulations when it comes to programs, curricula, pricing and rules including safety in ELCC centres. This sub-theme is centred on two primary areas, namely: improving consistency across centres, and setting standard safety protocols.

Participants described standardization as having more homogeneity across ELCC centres. For example, a Bhutanese parent pointed out how different centres charged different amounts for the same ELCC services:

There is no uniformity in price for daycares. For instance, a daycare in Southside of Edmonton would cost me about \$900/month and a daycare in another location would cost higher than \$1000/month. As such, some daycares are expensive than others and if we question the daycare's founder, they would have their own reasons why they charge higher or lesser than the others.

To achieve uniformity or standardization in ELCC, one Chinese-speaking participant suggested that ELCC should be run by the government:

I feel like maybe in other areas of Canada, and in Edmonton, daycare system is chaotic. It does not seem to value early childhood education. Maybe it should be standardized and operated by government. ... I think that daycares should be operated by public school system where there is a standardized programs or curriculum, potentially government owned. Within the standardized management, there could be some specialized programs such as bilingual programs. It could be more similar to public school systems where different schools may emphasize different teaching principles such as languages or different academic programs.

Another area of focus for standardization was safety and security. Families pointed out that the ELCC system must have standardized safety and security policies that ensure centres: 1) operate in a safe location, 2) have a safe environment and space—both physically and atmospherically, and 3) implement and follow safety measures and protocols. Participants valued the safety and security of their children and wanted them to be protected or placed away from harm, danger, or risk.

The Chinese-speaking participants particularly highlighted the importance of ELCC centres being in a safe area to keep children as far away from any risk as possible. For example,

they described one facility that was in an area where homelessness was prevalent and expressed their concern that because “you can smell weed and see people who face homelessness using substance...” then “these people who use substance... [might] throw the remains of marijuana onto the playground of the daycare or that the children... [might] accidentally pick it up... [and] potentially [cause them] harm.” Furthermore, they described the safe physical environment of the ELCC centre in five ways: 1) “[there is] food safety;” 2) it is “spacious enough for children to play and run around without being in close proximity to potentially dangerous equipment like knives”; 3) things like sharp objects and cutlery are stored away from children’s reach; 4) rooms have security locks; and 5) staff constantly check “children’s attendance throughout the days.” In terms of atmosphere, they pointed out that a safe ELCC environment is one that is accepting—where educators have a positive attitude and there is no discrimination towards children of any background.

For the Spanish-speaking participants, the ELCC system should have safety standards that ensure the safety of the area or space around which the child operates while receiving early learning and childcare, the atmosphere in the centre, and also the commute to and from the centre. One parent said, “Look, I think that the fact that the child is picked up, taken to school, and brought back home from a safe establishment is fantastic. That, I approve 100%, that leaves me calm...” The parent also said that children have to be in an environment where they will be able “to express themselves, to be able to speak, to be able to become a human being, is what is fundamental” so that they will be “strong, super self-assured, [they] can speak, explain [themselves] without fear, without that being an overwhelming task.” Similarly, a Bhutanese parent—referring to security and safety standards—said, “Even Pre-K [centres] don’t have

uniform rules – some are flexible and some are strict. Nobody cares when your child arrives and when they leave. I wish all schools have same rules.”

ELCC should have adequate support systems in place

Participants expressed that visible minority families need an ELCC system that is held together by a network of support mechanisms. Some of their inputs on standardization, such as what human resource standards should be in place (for example, having interpreters or multilingual staff as a human resource standard), naturally flows into this sub-theme; for example, requiring centres to have a certain number of multilingual staff. They argued that having certain human resource standards would enable centres to provide wider and better services.

The Eritrean/Ethiopian and Spanish-speaking communities emphasized that ELCC centres should have rehabilitation professionals like social workers, speech pathologists and occupational therapists. One Eritrean/Ethiopian parent shared how the speech pathologist and social worker from her child’s centre taught her strategies to better support her child’s growth and development. Similarly, a Spanish-speaking parent talked about how the therapists at her child’s ELCC centre has helped parents like her who had a child with a disability, to better work with their children and their condition. Another Eritrean/Ethiopian parent shared how her child was able to receive an early diagnosis of a special need and receive appropriate interventions, because the centre had a speech pathologist and an occupational therapist:

There are speech pathologists, occupational therapists, everything in that [centre] ...

Likewise, [our daughter is] developing where she's not doing the things that the others was doing, and why she's not like, you know, I was trying to find out the diagnosis. And they helped me to fast those things. And I had a meeting with the speech pathologist and the

occupational therapist and they found out the diagnosis right away. They refer me to [name of specialized centre] in the next month or the third month I believe. She was already diagnosis and the service started in just a month ... So it was so good experience for me. And they had the best opportunity either they had the best learning opportunity ... She started expressing herself. She start getting happy and be herself. And yeah, it was very good moments and we got the treatment were like the therapy for [her] even though it's overloaded work for me.

The Spanish-speaking participants described the support system that visible minority families needed in terms of social capital and integration. They needed to feel that they were accepted and that they belonged to the Canadian community. The Spanish-speaking participants hoped that ELCC centres would provide them “a little more brotherhood [and] love.” They hoped that centres would initiate sharing knowledge, advice and support with them, such as pointing them in the right direction for their needs or connecting them with other families. One parent from the community shared how the MCHB has been one such helpful support system to them in their immigration and ELCC journey:

...and I met you [cultural brokers], right, and it has been very important for me personally and for my family. I went through very difficult processes of having our family far away, and those things happen to them, for example deaths of family members and one not being able to receive support here, right? To have support in our language. Because the government wants us to stay here and contribute, right? To work, that our children grow up and be a contribution to Canada as well. Canada wants to grow, they need to populate Canada, and we're helping with that, but, hey, they're not delivering much, right? So, one must seek and find. So, finding you [cultural brokers] has been an important support. That

you speak our language, that you can understand, and that you help us to go through some processes and things that we need...

The challenges associated with having no social capital upon moving to a foreign land also resonated with the Arabic/Kurdish-speaking community. One parent emphasized that “the government [should] give support to the parents, too,” such as emotional support to prevent or counter depression.

The Spanish-speaking participants suggested that support systems that would help new immigrant families navigate the ELCC system should be in place—especially for those who do not speak English. One parent highlighted how the language barrier alone makes everything complicated for them—even something as seemingly simple as going to a daycare and enrolling their child. She said that having an institution that has interpreters and which helps visible minority families to learn English can be one such support system to address this:

So, I started looking for centers that could help me, that had interpreters in my language so I could express myself, uh, easily. Look for schools, because of studying, yes, you can study, but where? So, I had to investigate and search and find, and it allowed me to join a corporation and a school where I could acquire a basic English command ... it has helped me to adapt better and to improve my family and my children... I invite other families to come forward, to grow, to be educated, not to be limited by not speaking English, not to be afraid, not to be timid, not to feel diminished, to look for places to learn the language.

The Spanish-speaking participants also identified that social capital can be a powerful fundamental support system for families; hence, the ELCC system should help create communities and support groups of parents. For example, those from the same culture or same situation, like parents with a child with a disability or parents who have been in newcomers’

shoes, could help families get the information that they need and teach them the ropes. Or, centres could build similar internal communities comprised of educators and ELCC staff that would support visible minority families. A parent from the Eritrean/Ethiopian community echoed this sentiment and alluded to having policies that would mandate learning institutions to initiate such endeavors. She said: "...let's say for example, if Edmonton Public School [and] Edmonton Catholic School Boards worked with Ethiopian Eritrean community associations. Imagine how information can be accessed. Imagine how rich their experience is going to be."

ELCC should be accessible

Accessibility was a theme across all communities of participants in this study except the Filipinx community. Participants described accessibility as the intersecting factors that enable them to efficiently access early learning and childcare. Four sub-themes described accessibility and included affordability, capacity, proximity, and ease of transportation.

ELCC should be affordable

Affordability was described as reducing the cost of ELCC to an inexpensive or zero amount, either through service price cuts or government subsidies. Participants in this study were unanimous when sharing how expensive daycare is in Edmonton, even though the term 'expensive' was relative. For example, one Chinese parent said:

...daycares are so expensive. The one my son went to, caring for my 10-month child, cost \$1450 a month. It included breakfast, lunch, and snacks. It provided care for 12 hours. The other daycare was even more expensive at \$1600/month... Basically, my part-time job wage goes directly to daycare and sometimes, it may not even balance.

Another Chinese parent said that her "part time job does not earn that much and with grandparents at home, it is not worth it to send the children to daycare."

Similarly, a Bhutanese parent said:

...a daycare in southside of Edmonton would cost me about \$900 a month and a daycare in another location would cost higher than \$1000 a month. ...[And] [b]ecause we have 2 kids in daycare, our half of the income goes to daycare fees.

A Spanish-speaking also parent said:

...rents are very expensive, that to be able to put your son to study you have to pay \$500... \$700... a daycare that is very expensive... Most Canadian moms or Canadian dads both go out to work because the status of life is high. It's expensive; it's all much more expensive.

One Bhutanese parent emphasized how having expensive childcare can force parents to make tough decisions, such as forgoing opportunities to earn more money or build a career. This can happen when the cost of childcare becomes higher than, or at best only equal to, the additional income that the family would have earned if both parents instead of only one, worked.

For example, one Bhutanese parent pointed out how a specific pre-K centre “charges monthly fees for their services that are not affordable for many families” and that because of the expensive cost, they had to keep their daughter at home for a year. Another Bhutanese parent described that when one parent works and the other becomes the dedicated caregiver to their children, the family's household income becomes limited, which impacts their ability to meet their financial needs. Another Bhutanese parent shared their family's experience on this:

There was a time when we had to compromise foods (nutrition) for our family of four with \$200 to \$300 monthly... I am the only person working full time to manage our family of four. Whenever there are any appointments, I had to take leave from work to attend appointments for all family members. My disabled child has more appointments. ...when

he was in daycare and pre-K, parenting was very stressful – balancing family and work was hard.

Participants in this study identified subsidies as an important factor in solving this financial barrier. These could be in the form of tangentially related financial or equivalent aid that would offset their aggregate costs and make them more able to afford sending their children to ELCC centres. One Bhutanese parent mentioned “government housing provision” and “rent subsidy programs for low-income families with disabled child” as examples. Another possible form is a childcare-targeted government subsidy. One Bhutanese parent referred to a particular program and said: “We have heard about federal government’s \$10-a-day program for daycare. It would be awesome to have that program implemented as soon as possible. Or I would even envision having a completely free early childhood learning program.”

ELCC programs should have sufficient capacity

Capacity was described by participants as the ELCC centre’s ability to accommodate as many children as possible relative to its space and staff. The Bhutanese and Eritrean/Ethiopian participants noted that shortcomings in centre capacity meant that their children had to be put on the waitlist for an indefinite period; hence, ELCC centres must have sufficient capacity to meet public demand. For example, one of the Eritrean/Ethiopian participants shared her experience trying to access the MacEwan University Demonstration Child Care Centre and stated “the waiting list was more than one year.” A Chinese-speaking participant echoed a similar experience:

I want to talk about the difficulties of searching for a daycare. I have experienced this since we used to live in downtown where the daycares are very popular, often taken, and very expensive. All the daycares were full and had waiting lists. I also heard the same things

from other mothers about the fact that daycares had waiting lists, some with waiting lists up to 2 years especially for those close to university.

ELCC services must be within proximity and/or supplemented by efficient transportation options

Proximity was described as the convenience of the ELCC centre's geographic location relative to their place of residence. Transportation was described by participants as having access to or being provided an efficient, safe, reliable and affordable mode of transportation to and from the ELCC centre, especially as it related to challenges associated with proximity. For example, some parents had to worry about spending additional money on bus tickets or gas, to get their children to and from centres that were far from where they lived. One Spanish-speaking parent said that "there are places that may be far from your home, and that implies paying for transportation to get there ... so yes, the economic issue may be something important." Others had to compromise time that they could have used to earn money by working, for the long commute. One Bhutanese parent shared their sentiments about this opportunity cost:

My child started from pre-K. His centre was very far from my neighborhood and we had to take a public bus to drop and pick him up. It would be more convenient if daycare is within the reach of neighbourhood so that parents like me can at least work part time. Because we are low-income family, we can't afford to pay the fees of daycares as they are ridiculously expensive. The minimum amount we have to pay for daycare in my neighbourhood is around \$1000 a month which is beyond my reach.

Responses from the participants in other communities resonated with comparable concerns related to costs and location. Two Spanish-speaking parents talked about how they wanted to enroll their children at a daycare, but were discouraged by the anticipated transportation costs

associated with the locations being far from their home. One Chinese parent noted how the inconvenient locations of ELCC centres made “transportation to the daycare... a hassle.”

Participants in this study identified that *Transportation* solutions could address *Location* and/or *Transportation* barriers in the short- or medium-term. They described this as having access to or being provided an efficient, safe, reliable, and affordable mode of transportation to and from the ELCC centre—such as a neighborhood school bus. One Bhutanese parent shared how a dedicated ELCC bus service has made life more manageable for their family, and recommended that there should be free transportation services like school buses in all neighbourhoods, especially for low-income families.

Participants in this study described that in the long-term, proximity and transportation barriers can be resolved by strategically distributing ELCC centres across the city. For the Chinese participants, this meant having several ELCC options across the city instead of the centres being concentrated only in certain areas, so that families can access ELCC easily wherever they may be living. One parent specifically stated that there are “more Chinese daycares in South Edmonton; however, living in West End, there are very limited options.” However, for the Spanish-speaking participants, this meant more than just the geographic convenience and equal distribution of centres across the city. Instead, they emphasized that centres should be able to cater to as many cultures as possible. For example, they found it challenging to find a centre to enroll their child in, particularly one where Spanish was understood or spoken. On this note, one parent pointed out how the schools and daycares paid “a lot of attention to Mandarin Chinese” when “there are many cultures, many languages” and suggested for the government to do an analysis of the situation, to identify what kinds of programs should be offered and how they should and could be equally distributed across the city.

ELCC should have a holistic curriculum

Participants in this study defined curriculum as the general content and design of the program, which is supposed to foster the child's growth and development across different stages and encompassing physical, academic, and socio-emotional aspects of learning. They also shared that the curriculum should have specific foci on preserving the languages and cultures of diverse groups, which was a common sub-theme across all communities. Values formation was a sub-theme that was primarily unique to the Filipinx and to a small extent, the Spanish-speaking communities.

The curriculum should foster children's growth and development

ELCC curriculum should encompass the foundational knowledge and skills that children are expected to be taught—such as fine motor and social skills, or activities that children are believed to benefit from—including arts and crafts, special events and performances, and physical/sports activities. Broader ideas like overall wellbeing also fell under this sub-theme. This theme resonated more strongly with the Chinese and Spanish-speaking participants.

For the Chinese-speaking participants, the overall wellbeing of the child, which was described as the physical and psychological health, was more important than academic excellence. Hence, the curriculum must promote 'fun in learning' rather than 'pressure in academic excellence.' One of the parents said that this can be done through play activities that capitalize on children's strengths and interests:

I have 3 children. My aspirations for my children are for them to be physically healthy and more importantly, psychologically healthy. I also hope for them to have good personalities. I don't wish them to go to prestigious schools or universities. I hope to nurture their interests. I aim to develop their interests based on their own strengths. For example, my

oldest child likes art. My second child is more introverted and likes investigating robots, construction and mechanics which I am okay with as well. For my third child, he is still young and I am still discovering his interests except like eating. I don't focus on developmental milestones such as language goals or memorization. I feel like as a child at their early ages... their most important activity is to play. As their mother, I should arrange those age-appropriate activities based on their unique strengths. ...I do not think we have to push our children.

Another parent added that while "there may be lots of free play during daycare... there could be more structured or organized play" so that play is purposely designed to achieve particular learning goals.

In relation to play, the Chinese-speaking participants emphasized how the child's physical health is very important to their psychological wellbeing; hence, daycare curricula should involve arts and crafts, outdoor activities, and physical exercises. They said that these would contribute to the child's motor development, particularly fine and gross motor skills like hand-eye coordination and running, which are critical components of the child's growth and development especially in the early stages. Two Chinese-speaking parents particularly believed in the benefits of having a curriculum that valued children's wellbeing more than their academic excellence. One of them said that "besides academic or career success, the most important thing is to have a good mental health and enjoy life. When there are high expectations, you may experience greater disappointment." The other parent shared how her perspective on early learning became more wellbeing-focused than academic-focused since her children were diagnosed with health conditions:

For [name of first child], he's is now 5. From birth, I had lots of expectations for him and wanted him to be academically advanced including identifying written language. This summer, [name of first child] got sick and the doctor diagnosed him with spinal issues. The doctor asked if [name of first child] only wanted to stay in bed and lie down instead of moving around, which I didn't even notice as his mother. Therefore, I realized that the physical wellbeing of a child should be prioritized over academic pressure. My daughter [name of second child] is now three and when she was born she was sent to ICU owing to asphyxiation. Since then, I didn't wish her for academic success but instead, I want her to be healthy and happy. Most important thing is the child's physical and psychological health.

The Spanish-speaking participants also identified sports or physical activities that helped develop motor skills as a must-have in the ELCC curriculum. One parent expressed that she liked how her child's program had a sports academy, while another parent shared that her favorite thing about the centre was that it had swimming and skating activities. On the flipside, an ELCC centre's lack of structured play and physical activities in its curriculum became the deciding factor for one parent to not send their child to daycare. The parent said:

I have decided to have my daughter in her first stages at home. Not send her to a daycare or day home because I think that... that base for love is not delivered in those places, they only dedicate themselves to ask... "oh, is she going to pay monthly or annually?" and that's it. They do not tell me that they are going to try to teach him crafts, but rather, they say something like "look, all the toys are outside in the patio, all the children come out to play"; "We take them to the patio while I am looking at the children play, and that's it". They don't teach them a physical activity, nothing. There is no such integration. It depends

on the characteristics of every child; they do not intervene. If the child is sociable, he's fine, and if he is not, then he'll stay alone playing. It doesn't matter to them. They're just sitting around watching, the time is up, and they're brought back home, and that's it. So as a parent, I opted, arriving here in Canada, and having my children here, that I was going to educate them at home. For that, my mother, who has traveled from Chile has been very supportive.

There were also other parents that shared that they chose to be the fulltime educator and caregiver for some of their children during their early years because they saw the benefits to being able to choose what they wanted their children to have as their early learning foundations.

The ELCC curriculum should preserve the heritage language and culture of visible minorities

Participants indicated that children should be provided an avenue to learn and use their ethnic language to preserve their culture, such as through the incorporation of cultural minority languages in the ELCC curriculum. Furthermore, the ELCC curriculum should have culturally adaptive programs with inclusive and diverse activities that celebrate and preserve children's ethnic cultures, identities and language, and expose children to different cultures.

One Arabic/Kurdish-speaking parent was worried that her children might be unable to retain their culture and language, which would be detrimental to their identity and well-being. She shared that the ELCC centre will not prioritize nor teach their children's culture, and that they have to rely on the parenting groups that were organized by the MCHB. Similarly, a Bhutanese family expressed their concern about language and cultural retention vis-à-vis their assimilation into the Canadian community, as they did not want their children to forget their origins:

As our child adapts and learns mainstream Canadian culture and language, we have encountered challenges to introduce our own cultural language and heritage. We as a parent are worried about this cultural disconnection. This has also created a generational gap between children and grandparents. Loss of language and culture can lead to loss of roots.

The Chinese-speaking participants were unanimous in stating how crucially important language is in maintaining culture; they make it a point that their children speak their language at home. One parent said that it is through speaking Chinese at home that “cultural knowledge will be incrementally developed.” Another Chinese-speaking parent had the same belief and said: “In terms of keeping culture, first of all, children need to be able to speak Chinese. Then as mentioned by the previous two parents, the other aspects of culture will be instilled gradually.” The Bhutanese and Filipinx parents likewise noted how retaining their community’s ethnic language should be a fundamental goal of ELCC. One Bhutanese parent said: “It is our responsibility to teach our mother-tongue Nepali to our kids.” Similarly, a Filipinx parent shared: “My kids are still speaking Tagalog, so I am keeping the culture of speaking the language and they are still saying ‘po’ and ‘opo’³.”

However, participants believed that efforts to preserve language and culture must not be solely on parents’ shoulders, but should be formalized in the ELCC curriculum. One Chinese-speaking parent whose eldest daughter attends a bilingual Mandarin school stated that, “exposure

³ ‘Po’ and ‘Opo’ are honorific markers in the *Tagalog* language typically used to denote politeness, but may also function as a stance in their own way. Generally, ‘opo’ is a respectful way of saying ‘yes’, while ‘po’ is an expression of respect added at the end of a statement—traditionally used when speaking to an older person or someone in a position of power, as it is Filipinx culture to show courtesy to elders. See Keh Jr et al. (2020) and Fontillas (2015).

to targeted language environment is very important for language learning,” which the Filipinx community described more concretely. Where visible minority cultures’ language, for example, *Tagalog* should also be incorporated or taught as a subject, much like how Mandarin Chinese is commonly taught in a number of institutions. One Filipinx parent said:

I think ... some [centres], they still have their subjects like Chinese ... it would be better if ... [our language] can be incorporated, if the kids would like to join or enroll in a Filipinx language ... So they could still learn.

Parents in this study also identified how constantly immersing their children in their traditions and celebrations, on top of retaining their mother tongue, would help to further inculcate their culture into their children. A parent from the Eritrean/Ethiopian community explicitly said that “speaking their first language at home” and “exposing them to different cultures and practices” would help develop their child’s cultural wealth. Similarly, a Chinese-speaking parent said that apart from speaking Chinese at home she “purposefully added traditions and cultural events to [her] children’s lives despite not celebrating these events prior to having children.” A Spanish-speaking parent shared how she and her husband would tell their children stories about where they grew up and how they were raised, and would involve their children in various celebrations in their country such as their cultural dances to ensure that they retain their culture. However, just like participants in this study felt that ethnic language preservation should be a core component of the ELCC curriculum rather than being solely the parents’ responsibility, they felt similarly about exposure to cultural experiences. Families expressed that centres should purposely conduct events like celebrations of traditions and festivals of various cultures; assign days where children can talk about their culture; incorporate knowledge of ethnic cultures in course content; and, ultimately integrate minority cultures’ methods, practices and/or traditions

in ELCC instead of imposing the ‘Canadian way.’ For example, a Bhutanese parent suggested that including other cultural celebrations or festivities (for example, the Diwali) instead of only western events like Christmas or Halloween, in the ELCC centre calendar and especially in the curriculum, could be a good first step to addressing the lack of ethnocultural education in the school/ELCC centre. Another Bhutanese parent shared similar thoughts:

In the same way our kids are introduced to western celebrations such as Halloween or Christmas, can we also have our celebrations such as Diwali or Dashain taught or observed in school? Let our cultural celebrations be recognized and equally celebrated. We want to see some feasible strategy developed starting from Pre-K including daycare’s curriculum to address generational gap due to conflict of culture and language.

One Chinese-speaking parent shared how the daycare centre her child went to particularly implemented this: “The multicultural aspect of the daycare [name of child] went to was very positive. It emphasized on celebrating different cultures and disparate festivals. This may differ from other daycares that are more Western centric.”

A parent from the Spanish-speaking community suggested that apart from celebrations of various countries’ festivals, ELCC programs should have activities that would make children share and become proud of their heritage. She said: “I think I would put a little more of our culture in ... For example, that they have one day, or that it be something natural for them to talk about our countries.” Another parent from the Eritrean/Ethiopian community had a similar suggestion:

Because usually when they start preschool kindergarten where they start being ashamed of their language, food, everything that they know and they're proud of before they come to preschool. It won't take time when they kind of be embarrassed about it once they start

preschool. So, some kind of cultural activity once a year to bring their food and show cultural show, that's not enough. It has to be something in regular basis that we have to do cultural activities and encourage the kids to speak their language and have some kind of... uhmm... awareness... not only awareness activity, where other cultures—how do they mean, what does it mean when they do certain things in different way. All that kind of thing has to be kind of practiced and early learning especially... especially in early learning because the momentum has to go. It has to continue and they should be proud of their language and culture and not ashamed when they as soon as they get there.

A Spanish-speaking parent shared a frustrating experience with a curriculum that did not seem to value or respect her culture, and how that impacted her child's attitude towards their culture. She talked about how she would teach her child the core values of their culture, but then the ELCC curriculum somehow disputed the teachings at home that she believes should not be lost. She shared:

I have noticed that, with [my oldest child], that they go to [the ELCC centre] and later at home they say “that is not the way they do things at [the centre];” “Why do I have to do X? They don't tell us that at [the centre];” “That the teachers say X Y or Z...” Then, of course, we become perplex[ed] about that. So, that home teaching is what should not be lost. And the children arrive completely dominant and with an attitude, saying things like "I don't care what you tell me, because I can do this and that, and if you don't let me, I'll go to a psychologist..." and in a certain way, they bend things when they are adolescents. Because when they are little, they still don't understand, but if that base is lost, in fact, when they are little, the children become much more individualistic...

She added:

...there are certain things from the Canadian culture, that I do not agree. And I have to tolerate that, but they don't tolerate my culture integrated with theirs. So, I think that this is not right because they call themselves a multicultural country, where people are supposed to adapt, that everyone integrates, but it is only said and not practiced, they do not integrate.

The ELCC curriculum should inculcate good values and morals in children

The Filipinx and Spanish-speaking participants described how they thought the ELCC curriculum should have a values formation component where children are taught and reared to have good morals and the right conduct. A Filipinx parent explicitly said that good values should be taught and integrated in the curriculum. A Spanish-speaking parent shared the same view and said that good principles and values are the foundation that children need in order to be capable adults; hence, they must be reinforced throughout their lives especially outside the home.

Moreover, to some extent this sub-theme resonated with a religious influence, particularly Catholicism/Christianity. According to one Filipinx parent:

Really, the religion. It must be instilled in the children—how to pray, who is God...

Although we are teaching our son to pray, stories in the bible and the like. But I think it would be better if it goes with the kids, I mean in a kid way. Not just about preaching or something.

On the other hand, the Spanish-speaking participants expressed their appreciation of activities in ELCC centres that are guided by religious values. According to one Spanish-speaking parent:

“...and they have activities based on religion, so... that the children do not go down bad paths.

And I think that's pretty good.”

ELCC should have competent staff

The participants in this study strongly believed that the skillsets of ELCC staff, from support staff to administrators to educators, are critical components of quality ELCC. They identified specific skills that people who work in this sector should fundamentally possess. These were grouped under critical technical and interpersonal skills.

ELCC staff should have critical technical skills

Critical technical skills are comprised of staff's knowledge and skills in early learning and childcare; for example, the ability to make the curriculum adaptive to the needs of children. A parent from the Spanish-speaking community said that "educators should be able to cater to children's individual needs." Another example that the study participants gave was specialized skills, such as managing special needs. An Eritrean/Ethiopian mother highlighted that it is important for an educator to be knowledgeable about and understand a child's disability, and to utilize that knowledge to provide appropriate care. This was echoed by a Spanish-speaking mother who said: "It is important for the educators to possess ability and experience in teaching children with disability."

A mother from the Arabic/Kurdish-speaking community shared her experience with an ELCC centre where she had enrolled her two children—one of which had a disability: "The challenge was that the center only caters [to] regular children and [are] not equipped to take care [of] children with [a] disability. The educator didn't know how to take care [of] a child with [a] disability." Similarly, a mother of three children from the Spanish-speaking community shared her personal experience in battling against depression as she worried about the early learning and development of her youngest son who had autism. She explained how it was frustrating enough

that she does not know how to handle and manage her son's condition and behaviour, but that even the educator at the ELCC centre was just as incapable:

Well, sometimes they had some activities where [my son] was feeling very sensitive or didn't want to be engaged in. So I didn't know how to act and unfortunately, as I say, there were good things, but also was the issue that there wasn't someone, a person who had the experience of working with these children and teaching them to skate, because that day my son was very scared and there was only one instructor who took the children but I did not know how to do it, how to deal with it, how to help him lose his fear of skating, to this day, we have not overcome that, we have not achieved it yet.

Another important technical skill that ELCC staff should have according to the study participants is multilingualism—wherein centres should at least have a multilingual or bilingual staff. They said that apart from being able to teach children a different language and being able to understand children who speak another language besides English, multilingual staff can help parents who do not speak English to collaborate in the early learning and childcare of their children. Furthermore, they said that multilingual staff particularly administrative or support staff, can help bridge the language and communication gaps between parents and the Canadian ELCC system; for example, when non-English-speaking parents have concerns about childcare fees and subsidies. A Chinese-parent shared her hopes about having more bilingual centres: “There is no bilingual school/center in southwest of the city. Parents are struggling to find a bilingual school in that area.”

ELCC staff should have critical interpersonal skills

Critical interpersonal skills are character traits and interpersonal skills that characterize how a person relates with other people. The participants in this study particularly emphasized that ELCC staff should be collaborative, conscientious, and empathetic.

The study participants emphasized the importance of collaboration in ELCC. For the Spanish-speaking participants, this meant open communication between parents and educators. One mother said that there “should be more frequent communication between teachers/school and parents regarding child's progress.” For the Eritrean/Ethiopian participants, this meant collaboration between the government and the community that it serves. One parent imagined this to be where school boards proactively engage and collaborate with ethnic communities to design the education system.

The study participants also highlighted that ELCC educators should be conscientious. They said that the educator must inculcate good morals and values, as well as respect and love, in children and ensure that those things become their foundations. One Spanish-speaking parent said that educators in ELCC centres should not just throw children into a playpen to play on their own, but should deliberately teach them to be sensitive to the feelings of others and to “[not] make another human being feel bad.” Another parent from the same community pointed out how the lack of this soft skill among educators can negatively impact the child’s wellbeing. She shared how, when her daughter caught a cold and still had mild cough when she went back to the ELCC centre five days later, she was bullied by her classmates and the educator did not do anything about it until the parent brought the issue to the school’s attention:

...Then she went back to school, but she still had a little bit of a cough. After that she didn't want to go to school because the children told her that she had COVID ... When I asked her what the [educator did], [she] said, “nothing.” So, I called the [centre] and asked

if something was going on, so they told me, “Well, let's see. Let's go to class and ask.”

And only then did they take action ... Let's train our children [to] respect ... the teachers should have explained to them that this is not okay ... We give training at home, but the school must also make their contribution. Not just educate on content.

Another aspect of being conscientious that visible minority families in this study highlighted was cultural sensitivity, which families described as embracing different cultures by creating a safe environment for the children to express their culture. For example, one Filipinx parent said that the “ELCC environment must be [a] safe and nurturing place to be oneself.” Similarly, one parent from the Eritrean-Ethiopian community said that the “ELCC environment is where every child from different races can be who they are.” Creating this kind of space and environment relies on a dedicated ELCC staff.

Empathy was deemed critical for all ELCC staff to possess as shared by the Arabic/Kurdish, Eritrean/Ethiopian, and Spanish-speaking communities. The participants emphasized that ELCC staff must be understanding and kind to children. For the Spanish-speaking participants, this meant that the staff should be loving and make children feel like they belong in the community and that the ELCC centre is their second family. For one Arabic/Kurdish-speaking participant, if the staff are empathetic, they must find ways to solve the challenges that children experience. For example, when a child starts to exhibit unpleasant behaviour or show frustrations, the centre should not simply call the parents to pick the child up, especially during winter or when the parents are at work. The participant said that the centre should instead “create ways on how to solve these challenges.” Another mother from the same community shared her experience with an educator who lacked empathy:

We registered my son in pre-school, at the moment the teacher was aggressive not easy with us and the child, I could feel, then every morning my child was refusing to go to school, the teacher was calling landlord or a translator would contact me to pick my son either not behaving or sick or got into a fight with someone, I was so sad that my child life is not different than what I had, it broke my heart, even this young child could feel he is not accepted, emotionally it was hard on us and him.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Quality in ELCC has often been discussed in terms of structure and process primarily because it has been the practice for many years (Buschmann & Partridge, 2019; McLean et al., 2022). However, Peeters and Vandekerckhove (2015) challenged this and like other researchers such as Moss (2016) and Beach (2020), they believed that the definition of quality ELCC, in addition to structure and process, depends on the collective values and assumptions of its beneficiaries. This only underscores the importance of listening to the perspectives of various stakeholders to get a more holistic understanding of quality ELCC (Adair & Barraza, 2014; Beach, 2020; Buschmann & Partridge, 2019; Harrist et al., 2007; Peeters & Vandekerckhove, 2015; Van Horn et al., 2001), which was the purpose of this thesis research. This qualitative study aimed to understand how visible minority families in Edmonton define quality ELCC. The findings illustrated many key components of quality including the system, access, curriculum, and educator as defined by participants, and when taken together four key learnings emerged. The key learnings include: (1) ELCC as a system should be responsive to the needs of diverse families; (2) ELCC should be accessible in terms of cost, capacity, location and transportation; (3) Inter/Multiculturalism and EDI should be deeply embedded in all aspects of the ELCC curriculum; and (4) Teaching and non-teaching staff should have critical technical and interpersonal skills. These key learnings will be discussed below in light of the literature.

ELCC as a system should be responsive to the needs of diverse families

System refers to the network of interacting, interrelated yet independent components that make up and run ELCC (Government of Canada, 2017a). These include standards, processes, structures, policies, people, culture, services and supports. As was described in the findings chapter of this thesis, participants in this study identified a number of these components and

described them in light of their vision of quality ELCC, which were summarized into the themes and sub-themes.

The Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework emphasizes that it is critical for the ELCC system's components to be strongly integrated, held together by a solid governance structure, and properly funded (Government of Canada, 2017a). According to Friendly and Prentice (2009), such an ideal system as discussed in the review of literature would have eight characteristics. It should have: a systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation; a strong and equal partnership with the education system; a universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support; substantial public investment in services and infrastructure; a participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance; appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision; systematic attention to monitoring and data collection; and, a stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation (Friendly & Prentice, 2009). A system with these interwoven characteristics will enhance the quality of ELCC services and likewise, the lifelong benefits of ELCC for the child. However, the findings in this thesis research revealed that the ELCC system in Edmonton is made up of an uncoordinated array of components, which consequently means that deficits in one or more of the aforementioned characteristics also exist. These components include the information management system, language, EDI, policies, cost, capacity, location, transportation, curriculum, and human resources. Some of these components operate in silos, considering that others such as concepts like EDI, inevitably cut across other components. For example, it could be that information on ELCC is readily available and accessible but incomprehensible to visible minority cultures who have little to no English language proficiency. Or, the curriculum could be robustly designed but favors the dominant

culture without regard for Edmonton's diverse cultures. Apart from this, each component was also found to have its own distinct issues. The system, both as a whole and as its individual components, should be more responsive to the needs of the diverse communities it serves.

It is not a surprise then that the participants in my thesis research saw quality ELCC as an overlapping concept, which were illustrated across many of the themes and sub-themes. For example, language was shared by the participants as a critical feature of quality in making ELCC accessible, cultivating and retaining children's heritage, and also an important function that the ELCC system needs to consider as it continues to evolve. As I discuss each component of the ELCC system and how it translates into quality in this section, it should be noted that these are not mutually exclusive and they do cut across or impact one another.

Information Management and Language

Parents want and need information to support their parenting and childcare decision making, and often they lack knowledge and awareness of the appropriate programs and services that exist (Devolin et al., 2013). The findings in this thesis research elucidated that organized and well-disseminated information on ELCC should be provided to families. If it is not provided, families are at a loss of where to access the information, where to start, and what to do to move forward. However, access to information goes beyond just knowing where to find it, it also includes the capacity to understand the information as it is presented (e.g., is the language accessible and straightforward, is the information translated into first language) (Buriel & Hurtado-Ortiz 2000; Leseman, 2002; Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2014). Several researchers (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2018; Matthews & Jang, 2007; Watkins et al., 2012) have found that language proficiency in the host country especially for immigrants is critical to successfully navigating systems (e.g., social, childcare, education). It can be assumed that this would also

hold true for navigating the ELCC system. Sentiments around not knowing where to look for ELCC in Edmonton and struggling in the English language were well-represented by all participants in my thesis research. The Arabic/Kurdish-speaking participants in my study all came from a refugee background and did not know English when they first arrived in Canada with their family. Years of struggling to escape war or discrimination in their home countries had not given them and especially their child the opportunity to know what structured childcare was. However, there was also no mechanism in place to introduce them to the Canadian ELCC system. Moreover, Stewart et al. (2015) emphasized that “language services should be integrated within ... systems to facilitate provision of information, affirmation and emotional support to refugee ... parents (par. 1)” but many of my study participants felt that there was also no mechanism to effectively bridge the language gap. The system was not accessible to these families because they did not speak the language of the system. They were oblivious to their childcare options, which the language barrier further exacerbated.

On the contrary, some of my study participants shared that having individuals who spoke their language (i.e., cultural brokers), non-profit organizations, or online communities was pivotal for them to gain knowledge on ELCC amidst the challenges posed by language barriers and unfamiliarity in new territory. These people taught them English and helped them navigate the ELCC system. They provided advice and guided them to the right information, which participants described as fundamentally critical for them to advance in society. Similarly, participants envisioned that the ELCC system could bridge the information and language gap by having culturally and linguistically competent staff embedded in childcare centres. Even though some participants managed to learn where to look for information, such as by going directly to the ELCC centres, they reported being underserved because nobody knew how to speak their

language. Literature supports how the cultural competence of ELCC personnel makes it easier for parents to express their cultural identities and receive the support they need (Lastikka & Lipponen, 2016).

Support systems like the aforementioned can fall within the gamut of information and language services that can be integrated within the ELCC system to make it more responsive to the needs of diverse families. This is because extant research has consistently shown that parents want information to support their parenting (Devolin et al., 2013) but lack of knowledge and awareness of information on ELCC, such as because of but not limited to the language barrier, limits their ability to assess their childcare options (Davidson et al., 2020; Devolin et al., 2013). Parents across lower and higher income groups regardless of access to subsidies reported trouble finding information. *Family and community* ranked as parents' primary sources of information, followed by *government*, and the *Internet* last (Davidson et al., 2020). Interestingly, in terms of the preferred source of ELCC information and supports parents preferred *mail outs/flyers*, followed by *e-mail*, and then *websites* (Devolin et al., 2013). In terms of location parents preferred to access ELCC information and support from community health centres or public health units. Additional research on the social support needs and preferences of refugees in western and central Canada, found that participants had difficulties navigating the childcare system and that they hesitated to approach ELCC providers because of the language barrier and their unfamiliarity with the service (Makwarimba et al., 2013). They identified their preference to be supported by peers from the same country of origin and professionals through group-level support supplemented by one-to-one support.

What we can elicit from this vis-a-vis the findings of my thesis research are that visible minority families mainly get information on ELCC from family and community because they

speak their language. Parents also prefer to be provided with information on ELCC by people from the same culture and through a more targeted approach where they are a passive recipient rather than a proactive searcher of information, potentially because it is difficult to search for information or approach centres when they are not proficient with the language. Stewart et al. (2015) pointed out that language services that are integrated within health systems like childcare could be a culturally relevant social support intervention that could “facilitate provision of information, affirmation, and emotional support” to visible minority parents (p. 1146).

Language and Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

Stewart et al. (2015) also reinforced the need to have “culturally appropriate services that mobilize and sustain support in health and health related (e.g., education, employment, immigration) policies” (par. 1). However, my study participants’ experiences reflect a deeper problem within the system, particularly around equity, diversity and inclusion and ultimately policy, which is the backbone of the system. There were participants from the Spanish-speaking community who, despite the language barrier, managed to navigate the system and learn where to go, but they were turned down by the ELCC centres because they and/or their child only spoke Spanish. Yet, language was only one aspect of a larger concern related to EDI. There were families that were denied admission to the centres because of their religion or their child’s disability. Existing literature describes how children with a disability are often denied service by ELCC providers for many reasons like lack of trained staff, attitude and bias, inaccessible spaces, and lack of other professionals such as speech therapists and physiotherapists (Mayer, 2009). Some families particularly parents who work unconventional hours such as in retail, leisure, or hospitality industries struggled to find a centre that accepted partial day or non-traditional hours of care, which has been found in other studies (Enchautegui et al., 2015;

Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). For example, in Enchautegui et al.'s (2015) study majority of parents used multiple childcare arrangements. These included using the other parent, nonparent relatives, and group childcare such as an ELCC centre. The latter is particularly more difficult to access because it is expensive and likely operates only during standard work hours, whereas family childcare may be available in the evenings. On the contrary, other parents chose jobs with a nonstandard schedule to “tag-team” childcare around the clock, accommodate their schooling, accompany their child in the day, or fulfil other personal preferences. Nevertheless, nonstandard-schedule jobs typically have lower pay and benefits which adds another layer of challenge to parents in such occupations. Similarly, my thesis participants and/or their spouses who worked nonstandard hours hoped that the system would be more flexible to their circumstances. It is concerning that this continues to happen despite the incentives given to ELCC centres to provide flexible arrangements such as irregular hours, weekends, or emergency services as part of the Canada-Alberta Agreement's commitment to provide inclusive and flexible childcare (Government of Canada, 2017b).

Participants believed that EDI should permeate all aspects of ELCC, be it admission, programming, operations, or governance. The majority of the participants in this study that had enrolled their child in an ELCC centre, shared that ELCC should be delivered in a culturally sensitive manner that takes visible minority families' perspectives into consideration (Kirova & Paradis, 2010), and creates a warm and accepting environment. Participants expressed that they want inter/multiculturalism to be part of the curriculum and for centres and educators to be diverse, sensitive, and accepting of children of all cultural and language backgrounds. This resonated with what literature says about the “Canadian way” of child-rearing, which is not applicable to all cultures (Poureslami et al., 2013) and should not be imposed; quality ELCC

should consider cultural differences (Obeng, 2007). However, for the participants inter/multiculturalism meant more than fostering respect and understanding for other cultures. They hoped that educators will treat, educate and care for children according to each child's individual heritage cultural beliefs and values, up to the extent that educators can. This could bridge the cultural distance barrier, which revolves around differences in beliefs, practices and language between the host country and immigrant families, that makes parents apprehensive about sending their child to an ELCC centre as discussed in Chapter 3 (Tobin & Kurban, 2010).

There were also participants in this study who thought about EDI from the lens of a parent with a child with a disability. They saw plenty of opportunities for the system to improve on how it can ensure that this vulnerable population receives equal ELCC opportunities. Preferences ranged from specialized care to full integration into mainstream ELCC but with specialized support. Nevertheless, the idealized outcome was similar: for children with a disability to be supported in ways that enable them to fully participate in ELCC. In Halfon and Friendly's (2013) snapshot of regulated childcare for children with disabilities in Canada, they identified this population as a key underserved group. They concluded that the barriers these children face in receiving the proper amount and quality of an inclusive ELCC experience are due to "the lack of robust policy; limited planning; poorly directed, too-little sustained public funding; and the absence of coherent, systemic development of regulated child care services across Canada" (p. 43).

Davidson et al. (2020) made an important point about the issue of policy and EDI, which also resonated strongly with how visible minority families in Edmonton experienced the interactions among information management, language, and access to ELCC. They said that the way policies are designed determines who benefits or suffers from the process of accessing

programs or services. Those who suffer incur learning, compliance and psychological costs, since people need to expend resources to search for information about services, follow certain rules and procedures to access services, and deal with government administration. They further added:

Policy burdens are rarely experienced equally by society. Racialization is the process by which groups of people are defined by their race, and in which policies, social structures, and institutional systems create and embed hierarchy and access based on race. Policies often distribute public resources unevenly and inequitably across racial groups, shaping how racialized groups experience the state and its responsiveness to citizen interests. (pp. 1-2)

The policies that make up the ELCC system in Edmonton favours primarily English (and/or French) speaking, middle to upper class, Christian, non-visible minority Canadian working standard hours, and whose child does not have a disability. From the participants' experiences, policies, social structures and institutional systems do not only create inequities based on race but other dimensions of identity too like language, culture, religion, ability, social/immigration status, and work schedule, among others.

EDI and Standards

This brings to light another concern of the participants, which is the lack of EDI-grounded standardization in ELCC. We have seen this in the absence of standard processes for effectively managing and disseminating information/communication to various language groups, and in the differences in admission criteria and programming across centres. The government leaves these things and more, such as pricing, to the centres, especially unlicensed centres. However, a number of the participants perceived that ELCC in Edmonton would be better off if it was a

centralized system run by the government. For example, some parents shared how having rehabilitation professionals like social workers, speech pathologists and occupational therapists in the centres where their children went has helped tremendously in supporting their child's growth and development. However, not all centres had the capability to provide these services. A significant number of participants also pointed out how the service fees that centres charged were different from one centre to another. For parents who had limited income, they had to look elsewhere or one parent had to drop their career plans and become a fulltime caregiver when their choice of care provider charged an amount that they could not afford.

Davidson et al. (2020) explained this phenomenon when they said that “governance arrangements related to a policy or program can profoundly affect the cost, availability, and overall quality of those policies and programs” and that “this is particularly acute when policy delivery is delegated to private or quasi-public entities and can shape the preferences of the users of those services” (p.1). Prentice and White (2019) concluded that the decentralised Canadian federal system encourages a disorganized private and market-based ELCC and “militates against coordinated policy-making” (p. 59) as provincial childcare policies rely on the not-for-profit and commercial sectors to deliver ELCC services. They added that while governments have tried to broaden services, their interventions have only been limited to *financing* but not *provision*. Perhaps the government believes that the integration among the different components of ELCC must be supplemented by appropriate funding to support staff upskilling, infrastructure development and quality programming (Government of Canada, 2017a). In Alberta, the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement's strategy towards achieving its commitments to make ELCC more affordable, accessible, high-quality, inclusive and transparent is by increasing funding in various areas of ELCC (Government of Canada, 2017b). Moreover,

how program effectiveness vis-à-vis the commitments is evaluated is mostly only in terms of outputs. For example: number of children provided with subsidies for affordability, number of licensed and regulated childcare spaces created for accessibility, number of certified childcare staff employed or number of certified childcare staff receiving wage top up for quality, and number of vulnerable or diverse children supported for inclusivity—to name a few. Numbers alone cannot capture the actual experience of families and children. Moreover, favorable numbers do not necessarily equate to good quality; for instance, having a high number of educators trained on cultural sensitivity will not guarantee that the educators are culturally responsive in their practice.

ELCC should be accessible in terms of cost, capacity, location and transportation

In this study, participants perceived accessibility as a critical component of ELCC. As described above, systemic problems such as lack of or mismanagement of information or discriminatory policies can indirectly limit families' access to ELCC. However, there were also other aspects of access that the study participants explicitly raised as directly impacting their ability to access ELCC, namely cost, capacity, location and transportation.

A prevailing barrier to accessing ELCC across various literature (Chai et al., 2018; Japel & Friendly, 2018; Japel & Friendly, 2020; Stewart et al., 2011) and found in this study, was the *financial cost* associated with the service. Canada's childcare fees are among the highest in all OECD countries (Japel & Friendly, 2020). In a previous study by the same researchers (Japel & Friendly, 2018), Canada was identified as an outlier, a 'policy laggard,' among 28 countries in terms of their family policy provisions because it is a wealthy country but only a minority of young children have access to ELCC. This was attributed to the regionalized structure of the country's ELCC system and limited funding, which leads to high parent costs as a percentage of

income. Because of the high costs of childcare in Canada, many parents and especially new immigrants cannot afford it, and the mother often decides to become the fulltime caregiver for their child (Japel & Friendly, 2020). As the mother struggles to join the labor force, the family's combined income potential is impacted, which makes it difficult for them to afford ELCC in the succeeding years. This was very apparent among the participants in this study wherein mothers opted to stay-at-home for their child when earnings from a job would barely offset expenditures on daycare fees. With the high cost of living in Canada, the high fees that ELCC centres charge for their services have placed the participants at a tipping point, as they have to compromise their careers or even their family's other basic needs just to give their child ELCC opportunities. Many of the participants in this study did not find it worth their time and money to work just to send their child to ELCC and then only break-even or even go into debt. One potential unintended consequence of this is that they could lose out on opportunities to learn Canada's culture and language, and to integrate faster, if they were not to join the Canadian workforce.

Further exacerbating the cost-related barriers that visible minority families face were issues associated with the distance between their neighborhood and the ELCC centres. Ajay and Wang (2020) found that the commute times of individuals are affected by their wage and their spouse's wage and having children, and that for immigrants their commute times are 10-20% longer than those of non-immigrants. Women have also been found to take longer commute times than men, which suggests the influence of gender roles; mothers may invest more time bringing children to and from ELCC centres (Holt, 2018; Shirgaokar & Lanyi-Bennett, 2020). These findings are aligned with what participants in this study shared; their concern about the time and resources that it takes to bring their children to and from centres that are far from their homes. For example, the long commute takes productive time away from parents, which they could

otherwise spend on working to earn money. Furthermore, transportation such as a personal vehicle or public transport comes at a price, and in the case of the former lower-income households usually just share one vehicle. This can add additional constraints to the standard time-cost trade-off considerations (Miller et al., 2015). Therefore, these concerns add an extra layer of costs, direct or indirect, to the already expensive ELCC rates that make ELCC difficult to access. This in turn disincentivizes parents from sending their children to ELCC centres.

Additionally, ELCC centres within the proximity of the participant's homes did not have sufficient space to take in more children so new enrollees were put on a long waitlist. Moreover, specialized ELCC centres like those that cater to Mandarin Chinese-speaking families are in limited supply in certain parts of the city. Therefore, families that would prefer to send their child to these centres would need to go the extra mile to do so. Vandebroek and Lazzari (2014) were correct in their claim that just because ELCC is available, it does not mean it is accessible. Furthermore, the fact that specialized centres exist but only in certain areas is a contradiction to the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework's (Government of Canada, 2017a) goal. The framework's goal is that high-quality ELCC should be accessible and flexible enough to respond to the diverse needs of children and families, especially harder-to-serve populations.

Since ELCC service fees in Edmonton are already expensive, costs associated with commutes can pile up and make ELCC even more difficult to access. Participants recognize the importance of subsidies in making paid childcare more affordable, which in turn will make it more accessible. Even for the issues of capacity, location and transportation, they see subsidies, such as a subsidized ELCC bus service, as a viable medium-term solution. However, despite the Government of Alberta's operating grants and childcare subsidy program to reduce fees universally across all centres (Government of Canada, 2017b), the participants in this study

continued to experience challenges in affording childcare. One reason could be that the participants may have enrolled their children in unlicensed centres for convenience while the grants prioritize licensed and not-for-profit centres. Moreover, it is possible that the participants in this study struggled financially in accessing ELCC because they belonged to the visible minority immigrant population. As Davidson et al. (2020) stated “policies often distribute public resources unevenly and inequitably across racial groups” (p. 2). This is complemented by other researchers that have highlighted how race (Wilkinson et al., 2016) and skin color (Li & Li, 2013; Lightman & Good-Gingrich, 2018) have been found to be detrimental to the visible minority population’s chance for equal labor market and income opportunities.

Inter/Multiculturalism and EDI should be deeply embedded in all aspects of the ELCC curriculum

While there are several barriers that hinder visible minority families from accessing ELCC, the removal of these barriers does not suggest that families will immediately choose to access ELCC (Matthews & Jang, 2007). Parents want childcare services to be culturally sensitive and responsive. Sumaru-Jurf and Felix-Mah (2019) said that ELCC systems that are built upon the worldviews and biases of a dominant culture become culturally unresponsive, which can discourage visible minority families from placing their children in ELCC centres. Some parents choose to be their child’s fulltime care provider and educator in the early years because they want to make sure their child gets the cultural and linguistic foundations of their heritage culture (Turney & Kao, 2009). This was seen in a number of participants in my thesis research who decided to be hands-on in caring for and educating their child during the child’s early years. Those parents shared that it allowed them to have more control over the values and principles

they wanted their child to grow up with. It also allowed them to strengthen their child's connection with their culture and language.

The importance of EDI was as evident in parents' aversion to ELCC centres as it was in their recommendation for what should be taught in centres. It is appropriate for the ELCC program to be culturally responsive to the needs of Edmonton's diverse communities, since ELCC is about early childhood development and care (Stewart et al., 2015) and the mix of cultures especially in cities is a defining feature of Canada (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2005). The participants felt strongly about having an ELCC curriculum that considers visible minority families' cultures and perspectives (Harrist et al., 2007; Kirova & Paradis, 2010), one that is grounded on inter/multiculturalism and the understanding of context. The ELCC curriculum—from teachings to practices—should not only work on the child's learning and development, but in doing so: integrate minority cultures' ways with the Canadian culture; allow children to be familiar with and appreciate a variety of cultures; preserve and enrich diverse children's heritage cultures and languages; and celebrate the traditions and festivals of different countries, to name a few. Participants believed that such a curriculum will ensure and nurture their child's growth, development, and wellbeing and also promote interaction, understanding and respect between and among children of different cultural backgrounds.

In this study, we discovered that the problem is, similar to the previous ELCC components discussed in this chapter, largely systemic. According to Pacini-Ketchabaw and Pence (2005) the ELCC curriculum in Canada is largely held by the enduring influence of “developmentally appropriate practice” (DAP), which is a rational teaching perspective in early childhood education based on child development theories and definitions of quality “that assume universal laws and norms” and a construct of a “true child” (p. 7). Over the years though, DAP has

changed from failing to recognize context, such as how things like culture play a significant role in the teaching-learning experiences of young children (Janmohamed, 2010; Jipson, 1991), to a more progressive concept that emphasizes inclusivity and being responsive to all children and their diverse needs (Sanders & Farago, 2018). This is demonstrated in how *Flight's* curriculum framework, which is a framework that is “evidence-based and designed to increase child development outcomes and the quality of early learning and child care programs by enabling educators to maximize learning and development opportunities using children’s play and care experiences” (Government of Canada, 2017b, par. 43). *Flight* is founded not only on the developmental perspective of learning, but also the socio-cultural and post-foundational perspectives (Makovichuk et al., 2014). The post-foundational perspectives of learning “examine issues of power, equity, equality, and fairness as critical influences on how and what children learn within relationship with others in the social, cultural, historical, economic, and political contexts of everyday living” (p. 38). Even the Agreement (Government of Canada, 2017b), outlines its commitment to creating ELCC programming and spaces that are inclusive and accommodating to diverse and/or vulnerable children and families. The caveat is that DAP remains “heavily reliant upon a developmental approach that stems from the Western, middle-class, white, and industrialized perspective” (Sanders & Farago, 2018, p. 1396). This aligns with previous findings on ELCC policies in Edmonton discussed earlier in this chapter, particularly how they generally favor a non-visible minority Canadian archetype. This was especially pronounced in the experience of one participant from the Spanish-speaking community whose child often went home challenging parents’ teachings because what they were learning in the centre was different. In this specific example, the participant described how their child has become more individualistic. This was a big concern for them because family and community

and not individuality were supposed to be the defining characteristics of their culture. Furthermore, despite having become more progressive the DAP currently abounds with contradictions on the topic of culture, as it specifies “appropriate practices that are devoid of context” while insisting that “context and cultural expectations should drive decisions regarding appropriate practices for children” (p. 1396). This, along with the lack of standardization in ELCC in Edmonton, may explain the disparate experiences of participants across centres.

What participants wanted to get out of a multicultural curriculum was mostly language and cultural preservation. These two are interconnected because “language embodies culture and transmits culture from one generation to the next” (Amery, 2019, p. 4). Amery goes on to share that culture is key to identity, embodies a specific worldview, and cannot completely be captured when translated into another language; hence, maintaining culture has implications for the development of cultural pride and overall wellbeing. This aligned with how participants wanted their child to remember their origins through keeping their heritage language alongside learning the English language. Mouw and Xie (1999) said that it is important “to maintain the beneficial aspects of their ethnic culture while accommodating to the linguistic demands of an English-speaking society” (p. 232). To this end many participants spoke to their children at home in their heritage language, but hoped that minority languages could also be formally incorporated or taught in ELCC programming.

When it comes to cultural preservation independent of language, many participants pointed out that centres should celebrate different cultures’ festivals instead of only Western events. This is supported by studies on culturally responsive pedagogies that talked about achieving more equitable outcomes for children of diverse backgrounds through celebration of festivals of minority cultures (Phull, 2016; Rana & Culbreath, 2019). However, Barnes (2001) warned how

putting these festivals in light of values and practices of a dominant culture, with the latter being presented as the norm, would emphasize the exotic aspects of the festival. This approach to multiculturalism will decontextualize cultures, create stereotypes, and become “a token of gesture rather than an authentic representation of diversity” (p. 162), and should be avoided.

Filler and Xu (2006) said that it is not enough that the DAP recognizes other cultures as it deviates from its formerly pluralistic approach to content and methods of instruction. They emphasized that the current student population is not only multicultural and multi-ethnic, but also multi-ability that “demands a unique and nontraditional approach, characterized by individualization and sensitivity to unique expressions of group identity” (p. 92). They pointed out that current attempts to adapt the curriculum to diversity have been based on sociocultural differences, or ability differences falling within the “normal variation” range. However, not all children reach developmental milestones at similar points. The curriculum has to be responsive to the needs of children with disabilities, not only different cultures. This was apparent in the responses of the participants who had a child with a disability. It has been mentioned a few times how some centres only catered to ‘regular children’ and thus could not take some participants’ children in. Participants believed that a truly inclusive curriculum does not discriminate against a disability and that standards should be in place to ensure that all centres are flexible to meet different children’s ability needs.

Teaching and non-teaching staff should have critical technical and interpersonal skills

Policies are the backbone of ELCC; policies define the system, its components, standards and processes. However, ELCC does not function on its own; it is the personnel who operationalize ELCC and bring it to life. This includes both teaching and non-teaching staff: support staff, administrative staff, owners and operators, directors, and educators. People enact

policies, execute frameworks, interact with children and families, and deliver content. All of these ultimately impact how families access and experience ELCC. For example, even if the ELCC curriculum could be culturally responsive to diverse children's needs, ultimately it rests upon the hands of the educator. Ball and Penn (2000) articulated why this is critical. They said that children mirror the culture of their primary caregivers whom they interact with in their early years. Conversely, caregivers and educators constantly project and perpetuate their cultures of origin through the ways they teach, interact with, and respond to the children they serve.

Therefore, training curricula for early childhood educators are far from being culturally neutral and:

...are cultural constructions grounded in the world views, beliefs, and norms of those who conceptualise and teach the curricula. Training experiences that shape caregiving practices may influence which culture and what aspects of culture are reproduced through subsequent design and delivery of programs for children. In turn, training curricula may significantly shape the cultural identity, competence, and allegiance of the children. (p. 21)

The researchers described a model called the 'Generative Curriculum Model' where cultural communities were involved in developing a program that successfully equipped educators to deliver culturally responsive ELCC. This model was used in seven Canadian Indigenous communities to bridge mainstream ELCC research and theory with Indigenous experiences and culturally-valued knowledge. The intention was for the educators to deliver the curriculum that was grounded on the recipient community's own cultural constructions of effective ELCC. This model was nationally recognized as a "uniquely effective approach to increasing the community's capacities to deliver relevant services to children" (p. 22). While the study focused on enabling educators to appropriately teach Indigenous communities based on their cultures, the main premise is generalizable: *educators need to be competent to effectively deliver an inclusive curricula to a diverse population*. This means educators must value and understand cultural,

ethnic and racial diversities (Hasslen & Bacharach, 2007; Lehman, 2017; Schoorman, 2011) as well as the different range of dis/abilities including cognitive, motor, emotional, and behavioural (Filler & Xu, 2006), to be truly equitable and inclusive.

The Provincial Government of Alberta is aligned with the belief that quality in ELCC particularly in licensed and regulated childcare depends on the competence of ELCC educators (Government of Canada, 2017b). Hence, through the *Canada-Alberta Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement* the provincial government has made extensive efforts to expand and develop the province's ELCC workforce through targeted investments. More specifically, the Agreement set a target number of certified educators to recruit and established wage top-ups for certified educators (with an amount that increases based on their certification level as described in Chapter 3). This aims to recruit and retain the "best" early childhood educators, given that certification is not required to practice the profession per se, but it is considered a regulated occupation in a licensed daycare, out-of-school care, or preschool program setting. However, the participants in this study believed that this need for competence should apply to all ELCC personnel and not just educators. They also identified two types of competencies, namely technical and interpersonal skills. Technical skills are knowledge and hard skills, such as but not limited to speaking different languages, appropriately using behavioural strategies, and making the curriculum adaptive to the specific needs of diverse children. One participant's example was that an educator should understand different children's disabilities and use specialized strategies to manage the child's challenges and provide appropriate education and care. On the other hand, interpersonal skills are soft skills or traits that describe ways of relating or communicating with others as well as attitude and manners, like empathetic behaviour or problem-solving skills. For example, if client-facing administrative staff are not multilingual,

they should at least be proactive problem-solvers so that parents with limited English who walk into centres to inquire about ELCC could be properly accommodated. In relation to this, one participant in my study who did not know English shared her experience with a staff at an ELCC centre. The participant said that the staff used an online translation website to communicate with non-English-speaking parents, compared to other centres who simply turned non-English speaking parents away.

Urban et al. (2012), in the joint research project between the University of East London and the University of Ghent, explored the conceptualizations of ‘competence’ and professionalism in ELCC and agreed that ELCC needs to have competent staff beyond just educators. They highlighted that “there is a broad consensus among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers that the quality of early childhood services [and ELCC]—and ultimately the outcomes for children and families—depends on well-educated, experienced and competent staff” (p. 7). However, they also pointed out that associating the term ‘competence’ with professional qualities that can be acquired through training and preparation reduces the fully human attribute of ‘being competent’ down to ‘competencies’—or a series of skills and knowledge needed to perform a task. They concluded that ‘competence’ should “be understood as a characteristic of the entire early childhood system” (p. 21). This means that the competence of ELCC staff forms the competence of the system *and* the competence of the system forms the competence of the staff. Hence, as much as intricate codependences exist; for example, an ELCC program’s accessibility is as much dependent on the responsiveness of policies to diverse needs as an ELCC curriculum’s inclusivity is on the ability of staff to create an accepting and respectful learning environment—these components are also part of the larger ELCC system which they define and which likewise defines them. Case in point, should we deem an ELCC

centre that has top talent competent, even if it lacks rehabilitation professionals that a child with a disability needs?

In summary, this thesis uncovered that the ELCC system in Edmonton is made up of an uncoordinated array of components. Among these components include the cost, capacity, location and transportation options which impact the abilities of visible minority families to access ELCC. Furthermore, ELCC in Edmonton favors the dominant western culture, which can make it culturally unresponsive given Edmonton's diversity. Clearly, EDI is a core concern that needs to be inculcated in each ELCC component. However, even if policies that ensure equity, diversity and inclusion are put in place, competent staff are needed to execute and operationalize these policies. A summary of the arising themes and sub-themes from the findings and a sample coding table can be found in Appendix A, and the implications of the findings are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Implications, Limitations, and Conclusion

Implications

In this qualitative study, I sought to understand what quality ELCC looks like for visible minority families in Edmonton by exploring their experiences, needs, aspirations and notions of ELCC. From my focus group and one-on-one interviews, four themes and 12 sub-themes on quality ELCC emerged, which also aligned with seven out of eight ELCC quality indicators in Mardhani-Bayne et al.'s (2021a) scoping review. In both studies, central to the indicators of quality was the concept of EDI.

The arising themes describe the multidimensionality of ELCC, as each of its components is a salient predictor of quality ELCC. However, ELCC is also a system comprised of these interconnected components. The findings from this study suggest that quality ELCC cannot be reduced to the sum of each of its components because the quality of ELCC is also determined by the *interactions, integrations, and synergies* that exist or do not exist between and among its components. What has been learned so far is that ELCC in Edmonton needs to be more responsive to the needs of diverse families in terms of ELCC's individual components, their relationships, and as a fully integrated system. It is necessary then for each component of ELCC, their interactions, and the ELCC system itself, to be grounded on the concept of EDI, to make this happen.

For example, it has become apparent how the ELCC system in Edmonton favors the English-speaking Canadian archetype. Families that are not proficient in English struggle to navigate the system or access ELCC. The abundance or availability of this information will be immaterial if it is incomprehensible. An ELCC system that is grounded on EDI will take into consideration the diversity of cultures to design more inclusive ways to disseminate information

or accommodate different languages. Stewart et al. (2015) suggested using integrated language services to break the language barrier. Participants in my thesis research identified cultural brokers who spoke their language and advised them, multilingual ELCC staff, as well as translation mechanisms like online translators which were utilized by solution-oriented and culturally sensitive ELCC staff, as examples. If these were to be formalized into culturally relevant social support interventions, this could mean community partnerships with cultural brokers where they could be present in and support all layers of the system, especially when multilingual staffing is scarce. Or, ELCC websites and information materials could be designed in a way that accommodates multiple languages through translations. In this situation, communications initiatives, human resources, and support services would be streamlined, given that the findings in this research depict an ELCC system whose components operate in silos instead of working seamlessly together to achieve its early learning and development outcomes in children. This suggests that the government may have to re-think how the ELCC system and its components should be structured, run, managed, and ultimately streamlined. Thus, opportunities exist for fellow scholars to examine different governance and service delivery models with integrated EDI that the ELCC system can adopt, and the impact that each can have on the quality of ELCC in Edmonton.

But then again, it is people that operationalize policies and run the system. Hence, it is in people that EDI must first be strongly inculcated. This was a resonant theme across the key learnings in this thesis, that ELCC teaching and non-teaching staff must value and understand cultural, ethnic and racial diversities as well as the different range of dis/abilities including cognitive, motor, emotional, and behavioural for ELCC to be truly equitable. The Agreement is relevant here because it emphasizes increasing the quality of ELCC by making significant

investments in expanding and developing the ELCC workforce, particularly educators (Government of Alberta, 2021b). The wage top-up incentives are currently designed to align with the three certification levels, to encourage educators to get certified or for those who are already certified to upgrade.

However, there are no solid curricular standards for certification, particularly on developing educators to become champions of EDI. The Government of Alberta (n.d.) website outlines what an individual needs to have successfully completed to get certified. For Level 1, the options include an online orientation course, five specific Alberta high school courses, 45 hours of post-secondary coursework related to child development, an approved Family Child Care Training Program, or a Children’s Services-approved ELCC coursework on diversity and Indigenous learnings. For Levels 2 and 3, it is a 1-year certificate or 2-year diploma program in early learning and childcare, respectively, offered by an Alberta public college or university. Similarly, Appendix B of the certification guide for early childhood educators (Government of Alberta, 2022) lists the education equivalencies that are recognized for certification in Levels 2 and 3. Some non-exhaustive examples are a Bachelor of Kinesiology degree or Disability Studies diploma for Level 2, and a Bachelor of Education 4-year degree or Early Learning and Child Care diploma for Level 3. Critical interpersonal skills like cultural sensitivity were a top EDI concern among participants but are not a standard component across certification curricula. Furthermore, while the Government of Alberta talks about “investing in, expanding and developing the child care workforce” (Government of Canada, 2017b, par. 32) and uses certification to assess “the education and abilities of child care staff” (Government of Alberta, 2022, p.1) to ensure quality ELCC, it only focuses on educators and excludes non-teaching staff. Only educators are regulated and incentivized, which implies undermining the importance of

having competent non-teaching staff. Participants in my thesis research have emphasized the importance of having culturally sensitive and competent ELCC staff, both teaching and non-teaching, in centres. Additionally, it has been mentioned that the competence of ELCC staff forms the competence of the system *and* the competence of the system forms the competence of the staff. Policies should work on upskilling all ELCC staff not only in terms of technical but also interpersonal skills, just as they should work on bettering the system's different components as much as the system as a whole.

On a related matter, the Generative Curriculum Model has been recognized as an effective framework for preparing upskilling, and equipping educators to deliver ELCC that is grounded on Indigenous communities' own cultural constructs of childcare, thereby making it culturally responsive to their needs (Ball & Penn, 2000). However, similar to what has been discussed previously the upskilling was focused only on ELCC educators, and the recipients of the ELCC service were limited to Indigenous communities. It will be a valuable future area of research to look into upskilling both teaching and non-teaching staff on culturally appropriate ELCC services to parents and children of visible minority communities. Therefore, the findings from this thesis can inform government and especially educational and training institutions about the role of curricular content in ELCC staff competence and quality ELCC. This study suggests that apart from technical skills, there are critical interpersonal skills that all ELCC staff should have for ELCC to be more responsive to the needs of diverse families. Government could use these findings to increase its standards or expectations from ELCC non-teaching staff as much as it does from teaching staff, to elevate the quality of ELCC as per the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework and the Agreement. Furthermore, curricular development conventions could leverage these insights in redesigning their ELCC staff training curriculum to

make it more practical and impactful, just as the Generative Curriculum Model has been to educators and families in Indigenous communities in Canada.

This is important because the competence of ELCC staff is critical to quality as seen in how it drives parents' early learning and care decisions. Participants in my study, particularly the Chinese- and Spanish-speaking, emphasized that they would rather take care of their children, so that they can teach them their language and culture. As highlighted by Turney & Kao (2009) and Tobin & Kurban (2010), some parents are apprehensive about sending their child to ELCC centres and opt to be their fulltime care provider and educator so that they get the cultural and linguistic foundations of their heritage culture. Hence, even if certain barriers like financial or centre capacity constraints are removed to make ELCC accessible to families (such as through the Agreement's lowering of out-of-pocket fees of parents to only \$10 a day, and creating a total of 42,500 new childcare spaces to match the rate of enrolment (Government of Alberta, 2021b)), it will not guarantee that visible minority families will access licensed ELCC centres. Paramount to majority of the participants was that children are treated in a culturally sensitive manner and taught according to their heritage cultural values to the extent that ELCC staff can. ELCC personnel, from decision makers to administrative staff to educators, can have the highest level of certification. Yet, if they do not value and respect cultural, ethnic and racial diversities as well as the different range of dis/abilities, quality ELCC cannot be achieved and children and families will be unable to get the most out of ELCC. The ELCC system must prioritize forming, capacitating and enabling its people to live out the concept and value of EDI through formal programs and standardizations not only for educators but all ELCC personnel.

Study Limitations and Future Research

Additional Questions and Topics of Study

This thesis research provides insight on the experiences of visible minority families in Edmonton with children birth to five years old as they access ELCC, and how these encounters impact their vision of the quality ELCC. Its findings contribute to the body of literature on the experiences of visible minority families, immigrants, and refugees on ELCC in Canada, particularly Edmonton. They also provide additional context to understanding the multidimensionality of quality in ELCC as described by previous studies (Buschmann & Partridge, 2019; Mardhani-Bayne et al., 2021a; Peeters & Vandekerckhove, 2015; Van Horn et al., 2001) and my study participants. Owing to the limitations of my study, there are certain areas where further research could be conducted, such as to better understand or validate phenomena that impact how visible minority families experience ELCC.

Since my thesis research is nested within the Journeys Project, it has methodological limitations related to the characteristics and sample sizes of the communities and participants that were recruited for the Journeys Project, the process of conducting the focus groups and interviews, and the quality of translations and transcriptions. The MCHB selected the communities and participants in the study from their network; hence, the homo- or heterogeneity of the sample populations could not be controlled. This may have minimized or stretched the differences among the demographics within each sample. Moreover, given that the sample size for each represented visible minority community was small (only enough to achieve data saturation for the purposes of my study), there was little diversity in each, which made it difficult to identify distinctions pertaining to gender or region of origin. Therefore, the findings were limited to the characteristics of the visible minority communities in the study, and of the

participants that represented each community. This also means the responses were not diverse enough to holistically represent the visible minority population, and each ethnic community. It was also not possible to examine the intersectionalities that affect how participants experience ELCC; for example, being a person of color, refugee woman, as compared to a fair-skinned, landed immigrant man.

However, future research on this topic could be expanded in scale and the selection of participants could be more controlled and homo/heterogenized as needed through setting particular recruitment criteria. For example, more ethnocultural communities could be included in the study to arrive at a more accurate representation of the visible minority population. Exploring the same research questions with more visible minority communities would provide another layer of context to the findings of this study by expanding cultural understanding. Having more visible minority communities would also provide valuable insight on how other cultures experience and define quality ELCC in Edmonton. Furthermore, more participants across multiple demographic categories could be recruited for the focus groups and interviews to get more diverse responses. It may be helpful to conduct the same study with a larger group of participants that will reflect the diversity of their community; for example, having 17 unique Filipinx participants from each of the Philippines' 17 regions. Future research could also look at the intersectionality factor and how the different aspects of a visible minority person's identity impact their ELCC experiences. For example, it may be worthwhile to explore perspectives and experiences on accessing ELCC based on gender, such as differences between mothers and fathers, and in relation to their ethnic origin. Or, the impact of being a first generation or second generation immigrant.

The Journeys Project had a system in place for conducting the focus groups and one-on-one interviews and I just had to embed my research questions into the Journeys Project's own set of questions. I also only joined the focus group and one-on-one interviews with the Filipinx community, hence, I had no control how my research questions were asked by the interviewers in other communities, or whether they asked follow-up questions to get richer data. The focus group and interview sessions were also in the ethnic languages of the participants. Thus, except for the Filipinx community I relied on the quality of the individual translations and transcriptions for the rest of my data. It is possible that misrepresentation occurred, which may have affected the validity of my findings. Future independent research that would follow this thesis' methodology could gather more controlled, accurate and reliable data if the researcher would be involved in each of the focus groups and interviews, and would be the one to steer the conversations instead of the translator (i.e. the broker). The researcher would lead the interviews and ask follow-up questions while the translator would translate back and forth to bridge the communications between the researcher and focus group/one-on-one interviewees in real-time.

This thesis research also found that similar to what other studies uncovered, visible minority families experience challenges in accessing ELCC because of the costs associated with it (Chai et al., 2018; Stewart et al., 2011), especially with Canada's childcare fees being among the highest in all OECD countries (Japel & Friendly, 2020). However, literature also identified that they struggle to participate equally in the labor market where the pay and benefits are reasonable (ESDC, 2021). In retrospect, it is possible that the participants in this study struggled financially in accessing ELCC because they belonged to the visible minority immigrant population. Guo and Andersson (2005) and Wayland (2006) talked about how Canada's general non-recognition of foreign credentials leads to unemployment, deskilling, or underemployment.

Other scholars highlighted how race (Wilkinson et al., 2016) and skin color (Li & Li, 2013; Lightman & Good-Gingrich, 2018) have been found detrimental to the visible minority population's chance for equal labor market and income opportunities. However, due to the scope of this thesis research, these issues were not explored. This creates an opportunity for future research to be conducted on the impact of visible minority families' ethnic origins on their economic performance and consequently, on their experiences in accessing ELCC.

Lastly, various researchers emphasized the importance of taking the perspectives of different stakeholders to fully understand what quality ELCC means (Adair & Barraza, 2014; Beach, 2020; Harrist et al., 2007; Mardhani-Bayne et al., 2021a; Peeters & Vandekerckhove, 2015; Van Horn et al., 2001). This is because quality can mean different things to different people (Buschmann & Partridge, 2019), especially considering the contextual nature of cultural preferences (Kirova & Paradis, 2010). Underrepresented groups could particularly give valuable insights because their voices are hardly heard (Harrist et al., 2007). It would be useful to conduct a similar study that takes children's perspectives, as Peeters and Vandekerckhove (2015) had said that children, and not only parents, should be involved in defining quality ELCC. This would also provide an understanding of how children who have more innocence and limited experiences receive ELCC. The findings from this approach could contribute to a more holistic understanding of how ELCC could better serve children Edmonton.

Conclusion

Immigration is a strong driving force of Canada's economy (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2021a), and in recent years the number of visible minority immigrants have seen a significant increase (Statistics Canada, 2017b; Statistics Canada, 2021a). The foreign-born immigrants scale has particularly tipped against those born in Europe, which

recently accounted for only 27.7% compared to 62.2% in 1986 (Statistics Canada, 2017a). A significant portion of visible minorities, specifically 23.5%, live in Alberta, with majority of them living in the city of Edmonton.

While many visible minority families move to Canada in search of greener pastures (Ferrer et al., 2014), data shows that they often face settlement challenges (Mwarigha, 2002; Wayland, 2006) and become at risk of chronic poverty (Picot & Lu, 2017). As a result, their children become vulnerable to poor health and family relationships (Poureslami et al., 2010), which can impact their learning, behaviour, and physical and mental health since these are largely shaped by early childhood experiences (Al-Shawi & Lafta, 2015; Clarkson Freeman, 2014; Jones et al., 2018; National Research Council, 2001). Unfavorable early learning and care circumstances can have irreversible damages to children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Leseman & Slot, 2014; Tienda & Haskins, 2011) and lead back to poverty (Beiser et al., 2002). On the contrary, having a positive care and learning environment through quality ELCC can promote holistic growth and child development outcomes (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016) and effectively break the cycle of poverty (Leseman & Slot, 2014). However, the definition of quality ELCC has been ambiguous and various researchers have emphasized that it is highly contextual; hence, the importance of taking the perspectives of different stakeholders for a holistic understanding.

A qualitative descriptive methodology and a community-based participatory approach to research were used in this study to explore visible minority families' experiences in ELCC and how these shape their definition of quality ELCC. Focus groups with four participants each, and one-on-one interviews with one participant each, were conducted with six visible minority communities who were also participants in the Journeys Project. The focus groups and

interviews were done in the participants' heritage language, which were later translated and transcribed in English. Thematic analysis was used to interpret and categorize the data into findings. This study found that for visible minority families in Edmonton: quality ELCC is multidimensional, as each component is a salient predictor of quality ELCC; ELCC is also a system comprised of these interconnected dimensions; and, ELCC cannot be reduced to the sum of each of its components because the quality of ELCC is also determined by the *interactions*, *integrations*, and *synergies* that exist or do not exist between and among its components.

Ultimately, ELCC in Edmonton needs to be more responsive to the needs of diverse families in terms of ELCC's individual components, their relationships, and as a fully integrated system, by being grounded on the concept of EDI. These findings, and the study overall, addresses a knowledge gap around what quality ELCC looks like for visible minority families in Edmonton, which provides a new perspective outside the traditional western-centric, dominant culture-focused outlook. The insights that emerged from this study contribute to a better understanding of how the local ELCC system can best respond to diverse families' ELCC needs. They can also influence policy development, programming, and practice in ELCC across accountable institutions. Building on the findings of previous studies on the experiences of visible minority families in ELCC, this study establishes a motivation for future research to examine in more depth the interplays among culture, childcare systems, and EDI.

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Appendix A: Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes

Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes based on Analysis of Open-ended Responses

Theme and sub-theme	Sample focus group/interview coded response
<u>Theme 1: ELCC as a system should have integrated and well-governed components</u>	
1a. ELCC should be grounded on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)	Daycare to be culturally adaptive to child's needs
1b. Information and language barriers must be strategically managed	To be provided information and knowledge about the system and how to navigate it
1c. ELCC should have standards to harmonize services and ensure quality	Uniform ELCC services across ELCC centres
1d. ELCC should have adequate support systems in place	Support systems to be in place to help new immigrants who don't speak English to navigate the system
<u>Theme 2: ELCC should be accessible</u>	
2a. ELCC should be affordable	Reduce costs especially for low-income families sending multiple kids to daycare
2b. ELCC programs should have sufficient capacity	ELCC to have sufficient capacity to avoid long waitlists
2c. ELCC services must be within proximity and/or supplemented by efficient transportation options	ELCC to be accessible in terms of location or transportation
<u>Theme 3: ELCC should have a holistic curriculum</u>	
3a. The ELCC curriculum should foster children's growth and development	ELCC centre to teach kids physical activities
3b. The ELCC curriculum should preserve the language and culture of visible minorities	Children to learn their language and culture
3c. The ELCC curriculum should inculcate good values and morals in children	Values-oriented program
<u>Theme 4: ELCC should have competent staff</u>	

4a. ELCC staff should have critical technical Skills

Educator has ability and experience to teach children with disabilities

4b. ELCC staff should have critical interpersonal Skills

Educators are attentive to needs of children

Appendix B: Focus Group Interview Guide

JOURNEY'S FOCUS GROUP GUIDING DOCUMENT PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS OF ETHNOCULTURAL FAMILIES

Hello Everyone. Thank you so much for taking the time to come today and providing us your valuable feedback.

My name is _____ and I am (role). Today I have with me (introduce any Council member/Core Team Member)

Why are we here? (Project Description):

In partnership with the Edmonton Council Early Learning and Care (ELCC Council) and the University of Alberta- Evaluation Capacity Network (ECN), we are exploring the needs, aspirations, and experiences of ethno-cultural families with young children (0 to 5 years) in Edmonton. The aim is to not only gain a deeper understanding of how families experience the Early Learning and Care sector in Edmonton, but to go beyond identifying gaps and barriers to imagine solutions.

Reminders for Focus Groups

- When we begin I will ask you some questions and will have an open discussion regarding your experience with early childhood development and the early learning sector.
- Please state your name prior to speaking. Each participant will be asked to answer the question one at a time. Please feel free to respond to each other's views but do so one at a time so we can record it and transcript it for research purposes.
- This session will be recorded, with your permission, and typed to help capture the various ideas that are presented. Participant names will not be connected to the focus group transcripts or the final results. All identities will remain anonymous in the transcripts and final reports that result from this discussion.
- Please respect each other's opinions and keep all information that is shared within this room confidential.
- Copies of the recordings from this session will be saved onto a password protected computer and erased from any hard devices. Following submission of the typed transcript, the recording will be destroyed.
- Once the focus group session has been completed, you may be contacted again, if necessary, to clarify any responses you gave today.

•

House Keeping

- If you need to attend to your children or any phone call, please feel free to mute yourself/ step out.
- If you need a bio break feel free to stand up and move around
- Please be mindful that this is safe and confidential space and anything shared here, should not leave the premises of this room .

Once the Session Starts

Ask participants:

- Please introduce yourself, tell us how old your child is, and indicate for the recording that you consent to being part of this session today.
- What would you define as characteristics of a successful group discussion?
 - Respect everyone’s opinion
 - Listen when others are speaking
 - Any others?

Remind participants to keep these characteristics in mind as we go through the session today.

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What are your deepest hopes and aspirations for your child?

PROMPTS:

- a. You can name each child and ask each individual parent present in the group. (e.g.” What is your deepest hope for Sarah?”)

2. How has your experience been with the early childhood and care sector?

PROMPTS:

- a. Access to day cares and school system and other assistance programs.
- b. What have been some highlights for the child as they participate and attend ELCC?
- c. What has been the challenging?

3. What has been most helpful for the positive early childhood development and care of your child and your family?

PROMPTS:

- a. Informal early childhood development and care -Is there anyone from the community that has been significant for informal care of child?
- b. Is there anything that has helped you navigate the challenges you face with early learning and care?
- c. What are parent/families doing to develop their child’s early learning-cultural wealth?

4. Given the discussion we just had, are there any final thoughts or recommendations you would like to share that may support parents and children and help ethno-cultural families lives be improved?

PROMPTS:

- a. What is missing?
- b. Vision for Early learning and care sector

That completes the Focus Group session. Thank you for contributing your ideas, expertise and time to support this initiative. It is greatly appreciated. You may be contacted again, if necessary, to clarify any responses you gave today.

Thank you again for your participation!

Once the Session Ends

- Debrief if any participant appears distressed during the session
- To parents: If at any time you feel you require additional support, are feeling stressed or having difficulty coping, please reach out to
- For concerns and questions related to this project, please redirect the question to ...

Focus Group Strategies

- *Program Grievance*: Validate the feeling, I am happy to talk about it after the session (put them in touch with the relevant stakeholder),
- *Redirecting*: For the purpose of today's session
- Redirecting: Let us move on to the next question

OTHER.....

Appendix C: One-on-one Interview Guide

JOURNEY'S ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW GUIDING DOCUMENT

MULTICULTURAL HEALTH BROKERS (MCHB) CULTURAL BROKERS FOR ETHNOCULTURAL FAMILIES

Introduction

Hello _____. Thank you so much for taking the time to come today.

My name is _____ and I am an undergraduate Early Childhood Development Student from the Mount Royal University. Today I have with me (introduce any Council member/Core Team Member/note taker present).

As cultural brokers, you play an important role of bridging and mediating between ethno cultural families in Edmonton and the early learning and care sector. After listening to the stories of parents about their experiences with child care in Edmonton through the focus groups and one-on-one interviews that you recently conducted, we would like to reflect with you on these conversations and hope you can provide us with some in-depth insights about the work you do and the access and experience of the families that you serve

Why are we here? (Project Description)

In partnership with the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ELCC) Council and the University of Alberta- Evaluation Capacity Network (ECN), we are exploring the needs, aspirations, and experiences of ethno-cultural families with young children (0 to 5 years) in Edmonton. The aim is to not only gain a deeper understanding of how families access and experience the Early Learning and Care sector in Edmonton, but to go beyond identifying gaps and barriers to imagine solutions.

Reminders for One-to-One Conversation

- When we begin I will ask you some questions and will have an open discussion regarding your reflections about the families' experience with early childhood development and the early learning and care sector.
- I will ask you to state your name and provide your consent to participate in today's interview.
- This interview will be recorded, with your permission, and typed to help capture the various ideas that are presented. Participant names will not be connected to the transcripts or the final results. All identities will remain anonymous in the transcripts and final reports that result from this discussion.

- Copies of the recordings from this session will be saved onto a password protected and encrypted computer and will only be accessible to members of the research team. Following submission of the typed transcript, the recording will be destroyed.
- Once the interview has been completed, you may be contacted again, if necessary, to clarify any responses you gave today.

House Keeping

- If you need to attend to your children or any urgent client phone call, please feel free to mute yourself/ step out.
- If you need a health break feel free to stand up and move around

Once the Conversation Starts

Ask participant:

- Please state your name, describe the communities you serve and indicate for the recording that you consent to being part of this session today.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please share how you came to Canada, and why do you do the work that you do?
2. Do you see similarities between your own story, and the stories of the families you serve?
3. How did you select the families for the focus groups and the one-to-one interview?
4. Reflecting back on the interviews and your knowledge, what are some of the strengths of the families with young children? What are the most frequent challenges and barriers that many of the families with young children face?

PROMPTS

- a. If there are barriers, have these families overcome these barriers? How?

5. Reflecting back on the interviews and your knowledge, what have you learned about the early learning and care that children in the community receive outside the home?

PROMPTS:

- a. Please describe the spectrum of early learning and care accessed by these parents (formal, informal, licensed, unlicensed, home-based or centre based). *Use chart if needed.*
- b. What role did you as a broker, play to help families access and navigate the early learning and care system?
- c. How did the families find out about the different early learning and care services and how did they decide, and what did they have to do to access the service?
- d. Were they satisfied with their child care arrangement? Why? OR Why not?

- e. What kind of early learning and care services do the ethno cultural community provide for the families and children?

6. Based on your work and experiences, what are some relevant and culturally-honouring best practices that you have encountered in the early learning and care sector?

7. What did you learn about what families' hope for their children?

8. What is the families' vision for an ideal/good early learning and child care (ELCC) sector?

PROMPTS:

a. Reflecting back on the interviews and your knowledge, what kind of improvements do you and the families wish to see in the ELCC sector?

9. How do we continue to engage parents and their voices to enhance the quality of ELCC?

PROMPTS:

What virtual and in-person platforms would be most beneficial?

That completes our one-to-one conversation. Thank you for contributing your ideas, expertise and time to support this initiative. It is greatly appreciated. You may be contacted again, if necessary, to clarify any responses you gave today.

Thank you again for your participation!

Once the Interview Ends

- Debrief if any participant appears distressed during the session
- For concerns and questions related to this project, please redirect the question to Naheed Mukhi (naheed@mchb.org)

Strategies

- *Program Grievance*: Validate the feeling, I am happy to talk about it after the session (put them in touch with the relevant stakeholder),
- *Redirecting*: For the purpose of today's session
- Redirecting: Let us move on to the next question