

Just Waiting: Child Care in Winnipeg

by

Margaret L. R. Nighswander

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University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements of the Degree of

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Abstract

This small sample qualitative study explores the topic of child care within the city of Winnipeg, identifying the experiences of parents who are on waiting lists for licensed child care from a feminist perspective. Fourteen people from eight different family units were involved in the interview process. Results indicate great diversity in parents' child care needs. This research concludes that current child care availability within Winnipeg's licensed and non-licensed sector, is not meeting family needs. Policy implications include the need for more accessible child care options which allow for flexibility in delivery to meet the diversity of needs. A universal child care program providing enhanced availability through longer hours, weekends, and part time care would support the great variety of employment realities of many parents. The results of this research are valuable for those concerned with child care delivery.

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Dedication

For my family.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Child care has been a simmering issue in Canadian politics since the 1970s. During the 2006 federal election campaign, the subject became a major election issue, giving child care and the needs of young children and their parents a heightened level of attention (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.). Yet for families with young children, the practical, daily needs of child care have been a central issue for decades. As women have become increasingly involved in the labour market, the demand for child care outside the home has increased. The topic of child care has been of interest to me for several years as I have observed friends, family and acquaintances looking to obtain child care. Particularly when faced with financial constraints as new parents often are, strategies for meeting these needs can be very creative. The original interest in understanding the nuances of this “underground economy” has slowly evolved. This introduction will outline the rationale for and significance of this study and provide a description of the research.

Rationale for the Study

The majority of research on child care within Canada has been done on regulated child care and funding to support parents. Research suggests that in Winnipeg in 2006 there were over 14,758 names of children on waiting lists for a space in a licensed child care facility (Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, 2006). This raises a question regarding from where or whom children on waiting lists are receiving child care. Currently there is no information about these children or the circumstances of their families. The gap in knowledge is due not to lack of interest, but because the information is not readily available. Whether parents rely on informal or other forms of child care, families are impacted by these experiences in various ways but details of how this

plays out are unclear. Child care which takes place outside the regulated system occurs without a paper trail; it is an “invisible economy” and therefore the effects of this economy on children and parents are largely unknown. This is an area of concern because it likely impacts thousands of families directly and therefore also impacts workplaces as parents struggle to balance work and family. This is a critical issue for further research.

Significance of the Study

This study is important because it provides some information about the current situation of parents with young children in Winnipeg which has been previously unknown. It provides a beginning understanding of the struggles that families face when they are on waiting lists for licensed child care. This information can help parents to understand their situation better, help employers to understand the extent to which child care is an issue for their employees, inform child care centres and providers about parental waiting experiences, and also contribute to policy decisions around child care by enhancing knowledge on this issue. The results are informative for those concerned with child care delivery.

This topic is relevant to social work as the quality of child care and related policies have a direct impact on people’s development and well-being, including the education and development of children and the economic well-being of women, families, and society. As highlighted above, the topic of child care is one of the key issues currently being debated within Canadian policy and social circles (Jimenez, 2007). Child care is a highly practical issue, as families with young children will attest. Therefore, this research may contribute a small piece to the ongoing discourse around child care with the ultimate goal of making waves in policy that have significant societal implications. As the literature review highlights, because child care remains primarily the responsibility of women, any policy changes made regarding child care

will directly impact hundreds of thousands of women and their families. In this way, this topic has the potential to make practical changes that contribute to addressing inequality.

Description of the Study

The original focus of this research study was to learn about the informal child care sector by interviewing families on waiting lists for licensed care. Through the process of developing the research and the sampling approach, it became clear that families on waiting lists were not necessarily utilizing informal child care. Thus, the focus of the study shifted to more broadly understanding the circumstances of families and parents who were on waiting lists for child care. This did not exclude parents who had arranged child care while on a waiting list, regardless of what type of care they had arranged. The research was exploratory in nature because, as outlined above, this is an area where there is an absence of knowledge. By listening to parents discuss their experiences, the issues around child care that are of particular importance to them were able to surface. This helps to improve knowledge in an area where there is currently limited information, and also highlights areas where further research on this topic may be valuable.

The following report includes six major sections: a literature review of the current knowledge on the topic of child care, methodologies used in this research, findings of the research, discussion of the findings, and lastly the implications and conclusion of this research.

The literature review describes current knowledge and gaps in knowledge on the issue of child care. Various roles and functions of child care in the lives of children, their parents and society are explained. The connection between child care research and feminism is emphasized paying particular attention to the impacts on families' economic well-being and women's connection with the labour market. A description of the Québec approach to child care is presented as a reference point for understanding child care within a Canadian context, and a

summary of the child care issues within Manitoba and Winnipeg is provided. Significant federal policies on child care are outlined, and several potential impacts on families are identified. Next is a discussion around finances and families, again highlighting the impacts of child care on women. This chapter concludes with a section on informal child care in Winnipeg, the focus for this research. Relevant statistical information is provided throughout this chapter.

The literature review is followed by a chapter describing methodological decisions for the research. The research design selected was qualitative as this provided an opportunity to engage in exploratory research. The theoretical framework selected for the research was a feminist perspective and rationale for this decision is provided. The data collection method employed was semi-structured interviewing as this allowed for exploratory research on the issues being investigated and related themes. The population under investigation was parents who have children that are on waiting lists for licensed child care. Sampling issues are addressed in this chapter as well, including criteria for selecting the sample and ethical issues. Considerations around analysis and interpretation are addressed and strategies are described. This section ends with a look at the importance of credibility and ethics within qualitative research; steps the researcher took to enhance the quality of the proposed research are outlined.

Chapter four highlights the findings of this research. After providing background information about the participants, this chapter outlines a range of themes that emerged from the interviewing and analysis process. Themes identified in this chapter are factors influencing how parents sought and chose child care. Several additional themes and findings are addressed. All participants experienced a degree of stress in attempting to balance parenting and the rest of their life. The role of child care in moderating various responsibilities is highlighted. Data about parental perceived benefits as well as concerns around child care suggests that the benefits of

child care generally outweighed parental concerns. Financial aspects of child care are also explored. While having greater available finances seemed to give parents more options and more selection around child care, all parents were frustrated and felt that they had very limited control over their options. This reflected an overriding theme that parents voiced of frustrations around having limited control over their concerns with child care and the role this played in their situations.

Chapter five provides a discussion of a number of themes identified in the findings chapter. The data collected reflects great variety in parents' waiting list experiences, yet the common experience of stress and anxiety related to ensuring good child care emerged. This chapter outlines several ways that balancing conflicting demands including how parental preferences regarding child care and external factors of gender-related dilemmas and finances around child care, contribute to this stress. These stress-contributing factors highlight the fact that despite substantial discussion within the public forums on the topic, there remain considerable barriers to obtaining child care which are highlighted by the experiences of the parents who were interviewed. These are complex barriers, and while exceedingly limited space is a key component, this research highlights that there are many other barriers that contribute to this stress. This first part of this discussion explores the themes of balancing work, life and parenting, the role of education in child care, and parental preferences in child care. The role of gender in balancing work, life and parenting, as well as finances and child care are given further attention.

Implications and conclusion, chapter six, provides an overview of this research project, reviews the intent of this project, and summarizes the results. This includes two significant findings. First, the need for child care is extensive and is pronounced. Second, this research has

highlighted that it is the particular needs around the attributes of child care which are quite diverse. This chapter explores the implications of these findings including suggestions for further research and related policy opportunities. Significant attention is also given to the topics of universal child care and the importance of supporting the parent-child relationship. This is followed by a conclusion.

Summary

The purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the issues facing parents who are on waiting lists for licensed child care to better understand the impacts of this experience on the parents and the family unit. Through interviews, primary caregivers were invited to share their experiences shedding light on this matter which has, to date, remained largely invisible. This study focused on understanding the child care arrangements that parents make for their children when they cannot access licensed child care. Interviewing parents who had children on waiting lists for licensed child care drew out some of the issues facing these particular parents. Using a qualitative methodology allowed this research to be exploratory in nature, ultimately seeking to understand *how families who are on waiting lists for licensed child care are experiencing child care*. Related issues pertaining to the social and financial costs and benefits of these arrangements on the family added to the depth of knowledge gained. Ultimately, it is hoped that by making this information available to groups that work to further issues that effect real people's lives, the information collected will contribute towards improving policies that directly effect women and their families.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Child care is currently a leading topic within federal and provincial politics. It is a subject of great importance for young families and women, and while they are most likely unaware of it, for children in particular. The following literature provides understanding of the current child care context within Canada with specific attention to Winnipeg, and an integrative review highlighting what is and is not known on this topic. This literature review begins by looking at the roles and functions of child care in the lives of children, their parents and society. Next, the connection between child care and feminism is described, with an explanation for why this is an appropriate approach to addressing this topic. This is followed by a general description of the Canadian context of child care, specifically with reference to the Québec model of child care and a summary of the Manitoba and Winnipeg situation of child care issues. An overview of current federal policies around child support is followed by information about the financial impacts of raising children on parents. Information and analysis about informal child care particularly within the Winnipeg context is provided, giving an explanation for why this issue is important to explore.

Roles and Functions of Child Care

Within the various circles that address child care issues – including political, research, parental and child care advocacy – there are three general categories of functions regarding the role of early learning and child care: those associated with the child, those associated with the parent, and those associated with society (Friendly, 2006). This section, therefore, looks at the role and functions of quality child care for children, parents and society.

The Benefits for Children of Quality Child Care

Children have a basic right to quality care (Friendly, 2006; Social Planning Council Winnipeg policy statement, 1988). For years people have been aware that the “social and educational development of pre-school children is vitally essential to their future growth” (Williams Hogan, 1974, p.3). Various forms of research, including neurosciences, are now supporting these long-held societal beliefs and observations that the quality of nurturing and stimulation young children receive influences their lifelong abilities and well being (Beach & Bertrand, 2000).

Studies have found that regardless of their circumstances (family status, socioeconomic status, ethnic background), pre-school children’s physical, emotional, social, linguistic and intellectual growth and development are significantly enhanced through quality early childhood development services (Battle & Torjman, 2000; Cleveland & Krashinsky, 1998). Benefits include preparation for life-long learning, and improving readiness for school, as well as opportunities to overcome issues that face at-risk children (Friendly, 2006). For example, researchers found a direct relationship between decreased grade repetition, increased attendance and improved academic performance in later years for children who attend good quality early childhood facilities when compared to those without (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 1998). These long-lasting benefits of improved cognitive performance increase for children from low-income or lone-parent families and as their risk factors increase (Battle & Torjman, 2000; Campbell & Ramey, 1994). This data is congruent with several other studies including the highly respected Perry Preschool Longitudinal Study results (Schweinhart, 2004; Schweinhart, Bares, & Weikart, 1993). In 1962 the Perry Preschool study identified 123 African American children born in poverty who were considered at-risk of school failure. Fifty-eight children were randomly

assigned to a high-quality preschool program and sixty-eight received no preschool. This thorough study has tracked the children and families over forty years and the findings strongly suggest that high-quality preschool programs for children living in poverty appear to have positive, long-term effects, including: greater educational attainment and more likely to have graduated from high school, higher adult earnings, greater employment stability, greater family stability and significantly lower involvement in crime (Schweinhart, 2004).

Empirical evidence demonstrates clearly that the benefits of quality child care can be substantial. Quality child care is not only valuable in ameliorating the negative effects of physical, psychological, social and economic challenges some children experience, but research suggests strongly the value of early childhood programs for all young children before their fifth year (Beach & Bertrand, 2000). Doherty (1996) examined twenty-one studies comparing children who did and did not attend non-parental child care before they entered school. Doherty concludes that children who experience regular, group child care tend to:

- have better ability to get along with other children at the time of school entry and in later elementary school grades;
- be rated by their teacher as having had an easier transition into elementary school and better classroom skills, for example, ability to follow directions and resist distraction, both in the first year of school and subsequent years;
- have a larger vocabulary at the time of school entry and better language skills in subsequent grades;
- have higher levels of cognitive functioning at school entry and as ten-year-olds; and
- perform better in measures of academic readiness in kindergarten and in school subjects in later grades. (Doherty, 1996, p.6)

In short, “our early experiences, for better or worse, shape the way we take in new information and react to stress, influencing how we learn and behave and how healthy we are” (Beach & Bertrand, 2000, p.10). Because these early experiences have life-long effects, it is critical to understand that the *quality* of child care is central to the benefits experienced by children.

High quality child care programs are generally play-based and are designed to support the cognitive growth and development of the child, supporting overall healthy human development (Beach & Bertrand, 2000; Doherty, 1996). The role of adults in these settings is to educate and care for the child by providing rich social and physical environments for children to explore as they both learn and actively live in this setting, including supervised interactive play with other children. Other caregiver variables that affect quality include: the day-to-day relationship between adult and child, caregiver knowledge of child development, number of children the adult is responsible for at any one time, and the size of the group of children (Doherty, 1996). Regulated childcare tends to have regular engagement, frequent and positive interactions, and nurture a higher level of language development when compared with informal care (Doherty, 1996). The small amount of Canadian research that has been done suggests that unregulated child care tends to be of lower quality than regulated care. Not only does this mean children may not experience the benefits of regulated care as outlined above, but evidence also demonstrates that poor quality child care has the potential to impede children's development (Doherty, 1996).

Child Care is Important for Parents

In addition to being important for children, early childhood education and care is important and beneficial for parents, for mothers and single-parents in particular. Child care helps support all parents both in their attempts to balance work and family, and in their role as parents (Beach & Bertrand, 2000).

Most parents, including parents of pre-schoolers and single parents, work in the labour force (Battle & Torjman, 2000; Friendly, 2006; Prentice & McCracken, 2004). Thus, supporting parents as a means to balance family and work is a critical role of child care. Battle and Torjman (2000) suggest that childcare is essential in a modern economy. Data demonstrate that the

tension between balancing work and family causes significant strains on parents; it is estimated that conflicts arising from the work-family tension costs \$2.7 billion annually to Canadian businesses due to the stress of balancing responsibilities for work and family (Prentice & McCracken, 2004). Within Manitoba it is estimated that one in two workers is a parent which means that 50% of the workforce is attempting to find this balance between work and family (Prentice & McCracken, 2004). Access to reliable child care is a substantial part of the solution to addressing this balance. The effects of not having accessible child care are seen in an article in the *Globe and Mail*. This highlights a current trend among Chinese immigrants to Canada of sending their children to their family in China to be raised to school-age, as the parents can neither afford to not work and provide child care at home, or to work and pay for child care (Jimenez, 2007). As immigrants with limited informal networks of support, this population is vulnerable to slipping through cracks within Canadian society and thus provide glaring evidence of where these gaps are. Examples such as this demonstrate how the current situation is not allowing for work/family balance. As well as supporting parents in the paid labour market, child care also allows parents the opportunity to pursue education or training (Child Care Canada, n.d.).

Providing support for parents in their parenting role is an important, though often underemphasized, function of child care. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services can support the parenting role through “parent involvement, parenting, networking, modelling and other parent support resources” (Child Care Canada, n.d., ¶4). Battle and Torjman (2000) have also found that early childhood development services “enhance parents’ child-rearing and coping skills” (Battle & Torjman, 2000, p. 3). The experience outlined above of Chinese

immigrants is an example of the resulting fallout when parents do not have adequate support for their parenting.

These benefits of child care are particularly important for mothers and single-parents. Statistics from 1980 to 2001 suggest several important trends related to this relationship. The number of mothers with young children who are becoming involved in the workplace appears to be increasing (Gabel & Kamerman, 2006; Prentice & McCracken, 2004). The numbers of children in single-parent families and the increased prevalence of single parent families with young children are also a current reality (Friendly, 2006; Gabel & Kamerman, 2006; Prentice & McCracken, 2004). This change in trend has significant implications for how children are cared for. Children in western countries are increasingly likely to live outside the traditional two-biological-parent family. These children and family scenarios mean increased vulnerability to economic, social and emotional instability. Two-earner families have the benefit of increased economic security; the current market place is volatile and decreased access to steady employment means that single-earner families are more vulnerable. Thus, families with young children are more likely to live in poverty. Poor children are disproportionately from lone parent, mother-led families, aboriginal families, or recently-immigrated families (Friendly, 2006). Single mothers tend to be in the most vulnerable employment situations in jobs with low pay and with few benefits which increases their risk of poverty (Friendly, 2006). Finding child care within this context adds additional challenges. Thus, access to reliable child care is critical as it supports employment, women's equality, and balancing work and family, all of which are known to have a direct effect on reducing poverty and improving social integration (Friendly, 2006).

Child Care Provides Long-term Benefits to Society

Society also benefits from children participating in quality child care programs. There is a significant amount of “persuasive evidence that the multiple benefits of good child care are considerably larger than its costs” (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 1998, p.55). The benefits of this critical learning extend from childhood, throughout their youth and adult lives as well-developed children become well-developed, active citizens (Battle & Torjman, 2000; Schweinhart, 2004). From a purely economic perspective, studies demonstrate significant and broad financial benefits from child care for society which are tightly interwoven with the social benefits to children and parents. Among the sources of these benefits are various increased educational and social achievements. The 2004 Perry Preschool Study report demonstrates that approximately 40 years after the initial child care program program , “[i]n constant 2000 dollars discounted at 3%, the economic return to society of the Perry Preschool program was \$258,888 per participant on an investment of \$15,166 per participant—\$17.07 per dollar invested” (Schweinhart, 2004, p.3). These individual benefits can translate at a society level into increased productivity, higher generation of tax revenues, decreased social assistance and health costs, and generally improved citizenship (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 1998; Schweinhart, 2004).

The benefits to parents, such as the ability to increase their connection to the labour force, could translate into increased social benefit through increased collection of tax revenue, decreased poverty, decreased use of social assistance (particularly for women through divorce and widowhood) (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 1998). Other ways that child care can benefit society are through increased employment related to child care provision. According to the Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, each job in childcare within Manitoba “creates or sustains 2.15 jobs in Manitoba” (Prentice & McCracken, 2004, p.13), including enhanced support for parental

employment, jobs providing direct services within the child care sector, and supporting services such as suppliers of goods and services that are used by child care facilities and programs. A direct economic effect of this increased employment is seen through increased purchases of goods and services due to parents' and child care workers' increased spending power through greater employment (Prentice & McCracken, 2004). It is estimated that within Winnipeg alone the childcare sector directly generates over \$101 million each year (Prentice & McCracken, 2004). This number gives a sense of the degree of economic impact child care can have on a community.

Cleveland and Krashinsky's cost-benefit analysis concludes that every dollar spent on high quality child care yields approximately two dollars of benefits (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 1998). According to the Childcare Coalition of Manitoba, conservative estimates suggest every dollar invested in childcare returns \$1.38 to the local economy and \$1.45 to the Canadian economy (Prentice & McCracken, 2004). In 1993 the Perry Preschool study through age 27 suggested the benefits were \$7 for every \$1 spent (Schweinhart, Bares, & Weikart, 1993); in 2004 the Perry Pre-school study through age 40 suggests, as mentioned above, an incredible \$17 benefit in benefits for every \$1 spent (Schweinhart, 2004). Connected to this are the employment opportunities available as a result of child care, including child care staff or support staff, parents available for employment, employment of educators when parents are made available to take training.

There are many angles from which one can answer the question "why does child care matter?" From a developmental perspective, early childhood education can provide many benefits for children and can have positive, long-term impacts for them as individuals, which