

Comparing Child Care Policy in the Canadian Provinces

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Abstract: The ten Canadian provinces offer a rich site for comparative analysis of child care policy. To utilize this, I construct a framework that uses quantitative measures to assess the variation in child care arrangements across the ten provinces. The findings suggest that provincial child care variation is multi-dimensional and often involves trade-offs or compromises. This complexity is not fully captured by existing theories of divergence in social policy within liberal welfare states. I argue that empirical comparative analysis of the kind undertaken here is important for uncovering the complex and nuanced variation apparent in child care policy arrangements.

Key Words: child care policy, provincial politics, comparative social policy

Resumé: Les dix provinces Canadiennes sont une riche source d'information permettant l'analyse comparative des politiques de gardes d'enfants. Nous avons créé un cadre de recherche pour permettre l'analyse quantitative des disparités entre les dix provinces. Les résultats indiquent que la garde d'enfants provinciaux est pluridimensionnelle et nécessite un compromis. Cette complexité n'est pas prise en considération dans les théories de politiques sociales existantes dans un Etat-Providence libéral. J'affirme que l'analyse comparative est importante car elle dévoile les disparités entre les différentes politiques de gardes d'enfants.

Mots-Clés: politiques de gardes d'enfants, politiques provinciaux, politiques sociales comparative

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The ten Canadian provinces offer a rich site for the comparative analysis of child care policy. Most existing studies of Canadian child care focus on the national child care scene, exploring in particular the role that the federal government has played (or not played) in shaping child care policy (for example, Collier, 2010; Collier and Mahon, 2008; Mahon, 2000; Mahon 1997; Prentice and Friendly, 2009; Timpson, 2001; White and Friendly, 2012). This national-level focus makes sense given concerns about the “tattered patchwork of disconnected programs” (Prentice and Friendly, 2009: 5) which make up child care services across Canada, and the conviction of many academics and advocates that federal leadership is necessary to ensure greater consistency in the quality and availability of child care services across the country. However, given continued divergence in provincial child care approaches, including recent innovations in child care and early learning programs in several provinces (McGrane, 2010; White and Friendly, 2012), as well as the potential the ten Canadian provinces offer as a laboratory for comparative research regarding the causes and effects of variation in child care policy, I argue that provincial child care is worthy of more academic attention. This article contributes to comparative provincial child care policy research by constructing a framework that measures variation in child care policy arrangements in the ten Canadian provinces. Drawing on the most recent and comprehensive data available, I use quantitative measures to compare several different characteristics of child care policy arrangements in the ten Canadian provinces.

The measurement framework created in this article is meant to emphasize that there are a number of relevant dimensions of variation in child care policy arrangements. States can intervene, or not intervene, in

child care policy in many different ways: they may choose to provide a public system or leave child care to the markets, subsidize parents or provide operating allowances to centres, establish different standards that affect quality of care, mandate parent fees, or supplement staff wages. I argue that it is necessary, when drawing comparisons between different child care systems, to create a systematic and comprehensive picture of these different dimensions of variation. The specific combination of government interventions and non-interventions in child care varies significantly amongst jurisdictions, and, as my analysis shows, can combine in unexpected ways, making it difficult to draw simplistic comparisons between “good” and “bad” child care systems. Child care arrangements in most cases are governed by a complex set of trade-offs between the quality, affordability, and availability of child care services.

What implications do these trade-offs have for theorizing about variation in child care (and other social policy) arrangements? The most definitive statement on variation in welfare states to date was offered by Esping-Andersen (1990), who suggested that states generally align into three types of welfare regimes: liberal welfare regimes, characterized by limited and often means-tested social assistance; social democratic regimes, which offer generous and universal social benefits and services; and conservative regimes, which provide many comprehensive social programs but often in ways that uphold traditional status distinctions along gender and occupational lines. Canada, along with the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, is generally considered to fall into the “liberal” welfare state category, where public social programs are limited and often means-tested. Child care policy in Canada at the federal level exemplifies this liberal

categorization, given the comparative lack of state involvement in child care services.

Within the overarching liberal framework for child care in Canada, however, there are important inter-provincial differences in child care policy. Recent work has begun to grapple with these differences and to offer novel theoretical interpretations of divergence in child care policy within the liberal context. For example, Prentice (2004) describes child care policy in Manitoba as embodying a form of “social liberalism”; while most child care in Manitoba is privately-provided, the legislation of maximum parent fees and low levels of commercial child care lend Manitoba’s child care regime a social democratic flavour. Expanding the analysis to other provinces, Mahon (2009) and McGrane (2010) use the “varieties of liberalism” framework to discuss different child care arrangements in Canada. In addition to the more familiar concepts of social liberalism (as described above) and neoliberalism, they use a newer concept of “inclusive liberalism” to describe child care arrangements that emphasize government intervention in quality standards and service delivery (distinguishing them from neo-liberal arrangements), while still emphasizing parental choice and a continued role for market-based providers (distinguishing them from social democratic/social liberal arrangements). Inclusive liberalism is closely related to the concept of “social investment,” which has gained traction in the broader welfare state scholarship as a way of describing social policies that emphasize targeted interventions in family, education, and labour market policy to increase human capital and successfully integrate citizens into the labour market (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2003; Jenson, 2009; Morel et al., 2012).

Concepts such as “inclusive liberalism” are extremely important for

drawing attention to variation in social policy within the liberal welfare state category. As O’Connor et al. (1999) point out, “liberalism is too often treated as a residual category” (38) by welfare state scholars who gloss over the significant policy differences in countries like Canada and the United States. However, theoretical discussions of concepts such as “inclusive liberalism” are not always grounded in a clear empirical framework of policy variation. Attempts to systematically analyze divergence within liberal welfare states can be hampered by a lack of clear explication about exactly what kinds of policies and policy outcomes are expected under an “inclusive liberal” or “social investment” regime. My analysis suggests a wide range of complex policy arrangements under the broad heading of liberal social policy that may not be adequately captured by these existing concepts. As White (2012) argues, social policy in liberal welfare states exhibits “so much variation in goals, instruments and settings” (659) that it is difficult to ascribe one label that captures these diverse policy arrangements. The cross-provincial complexity within Canada’s liberal child care regime uncovered in the following analysis highlights this variation.

Scope and Definitions

Most Canadian provinces rely on some variation of a market-based, government-subsidized system of child care delivery. To take this into account, I consider the characteristics of child care policy arrangements that result from both the presence, and the absence, of government policy or regulation. In other words, I am equally as interested in what governments do *not* do in child care policy, as what they do. For instance, the average parent fees charged by child care centres are of interest even in jurisdictions where there is no policy around fees (such as mandating

a maximum amount that child care providers can charge).

At the same time, this article is primarily concerned with regulated child care arrangements for young children (age 0-5), meaning child care arrangements that are subject to government rules or regulations in some form (generally care provided in day care centers or in regulated family day homes). This ignores the important role of informal child care arrangements, including live-in caregivers or care provided by relatives, which combine with formal child care in complex ways to structure broader systems of caregiving. Data on unregulated child care, however, is extremely limited by nature of the fact that no formal rules exist to oversee these informal child care arrangements. Therefore, this paper focuses exclusively on defining and measuring the characteristics of regulated child care arrangements in each province, in order to further understand the variation in these arrangements amongst provinces.

The study of regulated child care is increasingly complicated by early learning programs, such as full-day kindergarten, that are being introduced (or seriously considered) in many jurisdictions across Canada, and that function as at least part-day child care systems for four- and five-year-olds. This necessarily complicates my analysis in some cases; for example, the introduction of full-day kindergarten may result in a decrease in the number of full-day spots offered by child care centres in a province; therefore, looking only at the spaces offered only in child care centres may provide an incomplete picture of the availability of child care in that province. These complications are noted where applicable, but due to a lack of data that incorporates these considerations, I leave the task of a comprehensive study of both child

care and early learning programs in the provinces to future study.

Comparing Provincial Child Care Policy

The Canadian provinces are an interesting and useful laboratory in which to conduct a comparative analysis of child care policy. Broader contextual factors, such as institutional frameworks and federal taxation structure, are held constant across the provinces; yet preliminary evidence supports the existence of persistent, and complex, variation in provincial child care arrangements (McGrane, 2010; Collier, 2006).

Despite this rich comparative potential, few existing academic studies examine in detail the differences in child care policies from province to province.ⁱ The academic studies of child care in the provinces that do exist have tended to be one or two-province case studies (Langford, 2011; Prentice, 2004; Collier, 2006) that, while crucially important for adding depth and nuance to our understanding of provincial child care systems, lack a systematic, big picture overview of the provincial differences in policy. The notable exception to this is McGrane (2010); his study is the first that attempts to compare child care systems in all ten provinces using empirical data (from 2008) to measure four different characteristics of child care policy. His work provides an important basis for this study, although I take a slightly different approach to constructing measures of variation and rely on new data that has become more recently available. In the following sections, I examine the extent of variation in several dimensions of child care policy in order to fully explore the multi-dimensional nature of this variation. This method allows the observer to see both the patterns and the idiosyncrasies of provincial child care systems, and makes it possible to compare provincial child care programs along many different dimensions. For the

purpose of more easily interpreting these comparisons, I score each province as high, medium, or low in each dimension of child care policy. I follow the example of Bettio and Plantenga (2004) and use the mean value for each measure, plus or minus half of the standard deviation, as the boundaries of the “medium” category, while anything that falls outside of this range is labelled “high” or “low”. It should be emphasized that while this method allows for a simplified multi-dimensional comparison of child care policy across the provinces, these categories can only be interpreted within the relatively narrow confines of child care policy in Canada. Therefore, a “high” score in any of these categories will only be “high” relative to the other provinces, not to other jurisdictions or to any other external standards.

The six dimensions of variation in child care arrangements I have chosen to build this framework are staff:child ratios, staff wages, level of non-profit delivery, availability of spaces, government spending, and affordability (which takes into account both parent fees and spending on parental subsidies). The Human Resources and Skill Development Canada publication *Public Investments in Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2010* (Human Resources and Skill Development Canada, 2012) and the Childcare Resource and Research Unit’s (CRRU) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2012* (Friendly et al., 2013) provide the data for most of these categories. The CRRU report draws in turn on data from the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (funded by the Government of Canada) survey *You Bet We Still Care! A Survey of Centre-Based Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada*ⁱⁱ (Flanagan et al., 2013) for some of the reported figures. The measures used here are designed to provide recent, directly comparable, quantitative measures of

various aspects of child care policy systems in the provinces. The following sections detail the construction of these measures and the high-medium-low categorization described above. The final section compiles the results into the final comparative framework and discusses the findings, including the implications of this framework for future comparative studies of child care policy arrangements in the Canadian provinces.

Measures of Variation in Child Care Policy Arrangements

A Note on Measuring Quality: Before proceeding, it is necessary to address the issue of measuring “quality” in child care. Quality of care is an important aspect of child care regimes that is often overlooked in the comparative literature; many scholars of child care policy are primarily concerned with government spending or the availability of spaces, without considering what kinds of experiences children and families are actually having with regulated child care and how quality does, or does not, correlate with these other factors. At the same time, quality in child care centres is not an easy concept to define or measure. As Friendly et al. note, “[i]deas about quality in early learning and child care vary depending on the values, beliefs, and cultural/social context and needs of the individual or group making the judgement” (2006: 5). Consequently, measuring quality can be extremely difficult. Comparisons of the quality of different child care systems are further complicated by the lack of recent, valid, and consistent quantitative data.

For the purposes of this paper, I am most interested in what would be considered “quality” in formal child care arrangements. The concept of “process quality”, defined as the “nature of the child’s daily experience” (Goelman et al., 2000: 4) is of key importance in formal child care, encompassing caregiver-child interactions

and the ability of children to practice play-based learning in an appropriate physical environment.ⁱⁱⁱ Finding direct measures of “process quality” is extremely difficult, especially at the level of provincial comparison. As a result, I include in my framework indicators that have been found to be strong predictors of process quality, without constructing one overall measure of “quality child care.” The indicators I include are staff:child ratios, staff wages and the proportion of non-profit (relative to for-profit) child care centers in each province. These factors are empirically and logically supported predictors of quality (Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2004a; Sosinsky et al., 2007; Goelman et al., 2000), although they

should not be interpreted as direct indicators of child care quality.

Staff:Child Ratios: The first measure of child care policy I examine is staff:child ratios. As noted above, ratios are important because they correlate closely with the quality of child care provided. At the same time, higher staff:child ratios have a significant effect on the cost of providing child care (Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2004b). Even small improvements to staff:child ratios can have a sizeable financial impact on child care centers, due to the labour-intensive nature of providing child care. Therefore, it is a priority that provinces may choose, or not choose, to invest in.

Table 1.1: Average Regulated Staff:child Ratios by Province, 2010

Province	Maximum staff:child ratios (average of three age groups) ^{iv}	Classification (high, medium or low) ¹
British Columbia	1 to 7.3	High
Alberta	1 to 7.3	High
Saskatchewan	1 to 7.7	Medium
Manitoba	1 to 7.3	High
Ontario	1 to 7.8	Medium
Quebec	1 to 11.0	Low
Nova Scotia	1 to 9.0	Low
New Brunswick	1 to 7.3	High
P.E.I.	1 to 8.3	Medium
Newfoundland & Labrador	1 to 6.7	High

Source: (Human Resources and Skill Development Canada, 2012, p. 253 Table 10 and author calculations)

In every province, approved ratios are different depending on the age of the children being cared for. Therefore, the scores in Table 1.1 are an average of the maximum staff:child ratios for children aged 12 months, 36 months, and 60 months. Since

every ratio is standardized as 1 staff to x number of children, the x values are used to find the mean and standard deviation for the ratio scores. The mean value is 8.0 and the standard deviation is 1.2, so any ratio from 1 to 7.4 – 1 to 8.6 falls into the “medium” category. The “high” and “low” categorizations are flipped so that they are more easily interpretable in relationship to the other indicators; “high” scores indicate fewer children per staff member (which should be correlated with higher quality of care), while “low” scores indicate more children per staff member. Quebec and Nova Scotia are the provinces to score “low” by this categorization, while five other provinces are scored as “high.”

Staff Wages: The second measure I examine is staff wages. The amount that child care staff are paid should, to at least some degree, reflect different levels of government intervention in the child care labour market. Policies such as staff wage enhancements have the potential to significantly alter earnings levels in the child care workforce, and subsequently, the quality of child care provided. They are also in many cases in an indicator of government commitment to advancing women’s labour market equality,

since the child care workforce is overwhelmingly female.

To measure staff wages, I draw on the provincial median gross hourly wages reported in *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2012* (Friendly et al., 2013), which are in turn drawn from the *You Bet We Still Care!* survey conducted by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (Flanagan et al., 2013). These results should be interpreted with caution, as the *You Bet We Still Care!* survey is not a fully representative survey of child care programs in every province. Nevertheless, it is the only data available that provides a comparison of child care staff wages in each province, so I present the wages reported in this survey as an approximate indicator. To account for variation in the economic circumstances of each province, wages for child care staff are expressed as a percentage of the average hourly wage of hourly paid employees in each province in 2012. This provides some context for the wages of child care staff in each province. One would expect that a caregiver in New Brunswick would make less than a caregiver in Alberta, but expressed simply as a dollar figure, this would not tell us much about the relative economic positions of child care workers in the two provinces. This measure is used to

calculate levels of high, medium and low staff wages for the purposes of provincial comparison. The mean value in these calculations is 71.9 percent and the standard deviation is 9.8 percent, meaning that any value from 66.9 percent – 76.8 percent falls into the “medium” category, according to Bettio and Plantenga’s classification system (2004).

Proportion of Non-profit Delivery: Next, I look at the auspice (for-profit or non-profit) of delivery of child care services in each province. The relative levels of non-profit child care in the provinces signify differences in the attitudes of provincial governments towards the role of markets and voluntary organizations in the care of children outside the home. There are a number of policies and incentive systems that governments can use to influence the nature of child care delivery towards for-profit or non-profit care. As noted earlier, non-profit status is also correlated with the quality of care, primarily through its positive association with child care staff wages and education levels (Goelman et al., 2000).

Table 1.2: Median gross hourly wages for child care program staff, 2012

Province	Median Gross Hourly Wages for Child Care Program Staff	As Percentage of Average Wage of Hourly Paid Employees	Classification of Wages Relative to Average Hourly Wage (high, medium, low)
British Columbia	\$17.00	77%	High
Alberta	\$15.33	60%	Low
Saskatchewan	\$14.92	63%	Low
Manitoba	\$16.00	77%	High
Ontario	\$17.29	79%	High
Quebec	\$19.13	89%	High
Nova Scotia	\$12.84	64%	Low
New Brunswick	\$13.50	68%	Medium
P.E.I.	\$15.00	81%	High
Newfoundland & Labrador	\$14.00	62%	Low

Source: (Friendly et al., 2013, Table 4 p. 58; Statistics Canada, CANSIM table 281-0030; author calculations).

Table 1.3 displays the percentage of regulated, centre-based spaces in each province that are non-profit. Each province receives the label high, medium, or low levels of non-profit delivery using the mean of 60.3 percent. The standard deviation

(27.6 percent) means that according to my classification method, any province between 46.5 percent and 74.1 percent falls into the “medium” category.

Table 1.3: Proportion of Non-profit Child Care Delivery by Province, 2012

Province	Percent of regulated centre-based spaces that are non-profit	High, medium, or low levels of non-profit delivery
British Columbia	56%	Medium
Alberta	49%	Medium
Saskatchewan	100%	High
Manitoba	95%	High
Ontario	75%	High
Quebec	88%	High
Nova Scotia	47%	Medium
New Brunswick	38%	Low
Prince Edward Island	20%	Low
Newfoundland and Labrador	35%	Low

Source: (Friendly et al., 2013, p. 69 and author calculations)

Availability: Availability refers simply to the number of regulated child care spaces that are available for young children in each province. The availability of child care spots reflects on whether a child care policy regime encourages or discourages the creation of child care spaces so that parents can work or study.

Table 1.4 displays the availability of child care spots in each province, expressed as a percentage of all children aged zero to five in the province for whom there is a regulated, centre-based child care space available. The standard deviation is 10.0 percent and the mean is 25.4 percent, with anything plus or minus half the standard deviation from the mean classified as “medium.”

An important caveat to this measure is the importance of full-day kindergarten

and other early learning programs that significantly affect the demand for child care spaces for children ages 4 and 5. Varying levels of access to these early educational programs may affect the results reported in Table 1.4. For example, British Columbia might score higher on availability if the fact that all five-year-olds in the province can access full-day kindergarten is taken into account. At this stage, given data limitations, it is not possible to fully control for this in our quantitative measure of availability of child care spaces. As interest in full-day kindergarten and the increasing integration of early education and care increases across Canada, however, the impacts on availability of child care spots for children and families will have to be considered in more detail in future research.

Table 1.4: Availability of Regulated Child Care Spaces

Province	Percent of children aged 0-5 for whom there is a regulated centre-based space	High, Medium, or Low levels of availability
British Columbia	24.6%	Medium
Alberta	19.9%	Medium
Saskatchewan	11.5%	Low
Manitoba	20.5%	Medium
Ontario	20.8%	Medium
Quebec	36.3%	High
Nova Scotia	23.9%	Medium
New Brunswick	30.7%	Medium
Prince Edward Island	46.5%	High
Newfoundland and Labrador	18.9%	Low

Source: (Friendly et al., 2013, p. 66, Table 12)

Provincial Government Spending: Perhaps the most straightforward, and often-used, measure of variation in child care policy regimes is the amount that governments spend on child care. Although it is not the only important aspect of child care policy, since money invested in child care can be used in very different ways, spending is an easy way of comparing where child care sits on different governments' priority lists. Higher levels of spending would suggest that governments see child care as an area to invest in (albeit in different ways and for different reasons), while low spending suggests that governments see the financial responsibility for child care better left to families and markets.

Table 1.5 displays provincial government spending on child care per child aged zero to five years in order to capture the relative commitments to child care spending in each province. This table also includes two columns ranking government spending levels per child as high, medium and low: one that includes Quebec in the calculations of mean and standard deviation (which results in a mean of \$1,187.31, standard deviation of \$1,107.84, and medium range

of \$633-\$1,741.24) and one that does not (which results in a mean of \$844.17, standard deviation of \$236.73, and medium range of \$725.80-\$962.53). The exclusion of Quebec in the third column of Table 1.5 is included to demonstrate the more subtle differences in spending levels between the other provinces; Quebec spends so much more on child care that when it is included in the calculations, all of the other provinces fall into the same category.

Affordability: The affordability of child care is a key aspect of child care policy regimes. Governments have the ability to affect the cost of child care through means such as direct funding for child care centers (which should affect how much centers charge), the creation of maximum fee ceilings (as in Manitoba), and the provision of fee subsidies to parents. The affordability of child care is a sign of how individual families and the government share the financial burden of formal child care, and reflects on the accessibility of child care for families, especially those with lower incomes.

Table 1.5: Provincial Government Spending on Child Care per child aged 0-5, 2011/12

Province	Spending on regulated child care per child aged 0-5 (\$)	High, Medium or Low levels of government spending	High, Medium or Low levels of government spending (<i>with Quebec excluded</i>)
British Columbia	751	Medium	Medium
Alberta	682	Medium	Low
Saskatchewan	748	Medium	Medium
Manitoba	1365	Medium	High
Ontario	827	Medium	Medium
Quebec	4276	High	
Nova Scotia	712	Medium	Low
New Brunswick	686	Medium	Low
Prince Edward Island	1113	Medium	High
Newfoundland and Labrador	712	Medium	Low

Source: (Friendly et al., 2013, pg. 65 Table 11 and pg. 61 Table 7; author calculations)

Every provincial government (excluding Quebec) spends a large portion of its child care budget on child care fee subsidies for eligible parents. In order to qualify for fee subsidies, parents must meet certain criteria, most importantly an income that is low enough to qualify for full or partial subsidies. The eligible income levels vary greatly across province, and the rules surrounding subsidy are extremely inconstant. For example, in some provinces subsidy levels change for subsequent children in a family while in others they remain constant; some provinces take into account whether family income is earned by one parent or two, while others do not; and some provinces calculate income levels using net income while others use gross. To complicate things further, in Ontario subsidies are administered by municipalities and take into account the cost of child care, instead of just income levels, and in Saskatchewan, subsidy levels vary according to what region of the province the family lives in.

These provincial differences mean that it would be extremely difficult to come up with one measure of “affordability” to encompass the wide range of variation in what parents pay for child care within a single province. With this in mind, I

separate the broader category of affordability into two sub-categories: parent fees, and spending on subsidies. Together, these categories capture some important information about the affordability of child care in each province, although even they fail to capture all of the distinct variation in the application of subsidies in each province. However, these measurements do highlight some of the distinctive qualities of each provincial government regarding to what degree, and in what ways, they intervene in paying for child care.

Fee Affordability: Fee affordability is a measure of the median monthly fees charged by child care centres as reported in Friendly et al. (2013), which is in turn drawn from the *You Bet We Still Care!* survey (Flanagan et al., 2013). Again, it must be noted that there is an issue with the representativeness of this survey and so the results should be interpreted cautiously. The standard deviation for these figures is \$235.73 and the mean is \$673.13, meaning that anything that falls within the range of \$555.27 and \$791.00 falls into the “medium” category of fee affordability. Provinces with average fees of less than \$555.27 are considered to have “high” affordability, and those higher than \$791.00 score “low” (see Table 1.6).

Obviously, simply looking at the fees charged by centers does not capture the full picture of affordability, since it leaves out entirely the role of fee subsidies. However, it does reflect on the financial capacity of child care centers in each province, and leads back to government policies that influence the

fees charged by centers. For example, child care centers in Manitoba charge very low fees in comparison to other provinces, in part because in that province the government has actually legislated a maximum fee that centers can charge.

Table 1.6: Child Care Parent Fee Affordability

Province	Median monthly fees charged by child care centres (average of infant, toddler and preschool fees)	High, Medium, or Low affordability
British Columbia	\$905.00	Low
Alberta	\$838.33	Low
Saskatchewan	\$582.00	Medium
Manitoba	\$497.67	High
Ontario	\$970.67	Low
Quebec	\$152.00	High
Nova Scotia	\$734.67	Medium
New Brunswick	\$671.00	Medium
Prince Edward Island	\$602.00	Medium
Newfoundland and Labrador	\$778.00	Medium

Source: (Friendly et al. 2013, p. 57 Table 3a and author calculations

Subsidy Structure: As noted above, the rules concerning the allocation of subsidy dollars in each province are extremely complex. I rely on a simplified indicator of subsidy policy by considering the amount of spending on child care subsidy in each province per regulated child care space for children aged 0-12.^v These numbers provide some indication of the degree of financial assistance provided by provincial governments to help parents pay for child

care, although it does not differentiate between the varying eligibility rules used in each province.

Table 1.7 displays these results. The mean level of spending on parental subsidies per regulated child care space is \$1,275.36 per year, and the standard deviation is \$722.72. Provinces that spend between \$914.01 and \$1,636.72 fall within the “medium” category.

Table 1.7: Child care Subsidy Spending, 2012

Province	Spending on subsidies per child care spaces for children age 0-12	High, Medium or Low Subsidy Spending
British Columbia	\$968	Medium
Alberta	\$836	Low
Saskatchewan	\$1329	Medium
Manitoba	\$918	Medium
Ontario	\$2953	High
Quebec	N/A	<i>Universal</i>
Nova Scotia	\$1037	Medium
New Brunswick	\$655	Low
Prince Edward Island	\$904	Low
Newfoundland and Labrador	\$1881	Medium

Source: Subsidy spending data drawn from provincial sections of Friendly et al., 2013; spaces data from Friendly et al., 2013, pg. 55 Table 1; author calculations.

Discussion, Implications and Conclusion

Table 1.8 provides a summary of the scores for each of the provinces in the seven categories discussed above.

This comparative design provides a simplified method for understanding child care policy variation by creating a series of quantifiable and directly comparable measures. These measures, while leaving out much of the context and detail around different child care policy arrangements, are

intended to act as a starting point for a common discussion about how exactly provincial child care systems are different from one another. Before we can theorize the causes and effects of child care policy variation, it is important to have an empirical framework for understanding the nature and extent of this variation (Jæger, 2006).

Table 1.8: Characteristics of Child Care Policy Arrangements in Canada

	Correlated with Quality			Availability of spaces	Provincial government spending per child (excluding Quebec)	Affordability	
	Staff: child Ratios	Staff Wages	Non-profit delivery			Parent Fee affordability	Subsidy spending (per regulated space)
British Columbia	High	High	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium
Alberta	High	Low	Medium	Medium	Low	Low	Low
Saskatchewan	Medium	Low	High	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium
Manitoba	High	High	High	Medium	High	High	Medium
Ontario	Medium	High	High	Medium	Medium	Low	High
Quebec	Low	High	High	High	(High)	High	<i>Universal</i>
Nova Scotia	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium
New Brunswick	High	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	Low
PEI	Medium	High	Low	High	High	Medium	Low
Nfld. and Labrador	High	Low	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium

Table 1.8 shows that this variation is complex and multi-dimensional; considered in relation to one another, provincial child care systems are characterized by many nuances and trade-offs. For example, Saskatchewan scores high on non-profit delivery, but low on staff wages and availability; British Columbia has higher staff:child ratios and staff wages, but scores low on parent fee affordability. The fluctuation in scores across these categories provides some basic insight into the complexity of government choices around child care in Canada. While Canadian provincial governments have mostly taken a liberal approach to child care, providing only limited funding and oversight, not all of these child care regimes look liberal in quite the same way. As Table 1.8 shows, policy arrangements do not always fit together in ways that make it easy to draw clear distinctions between different types of child care systems. These differences require more research and explanation.

As noted earlier, this complexity in provincial child care has broader theoretical implications. It is not entirely clear how concepts developed by scholars to explore differences in social policy arrangements in liberal welfare states, such as “inclusive,” can be used to categorize or explain the variation displayed in Table 1.8. Recall that inclusive liberalism is a term used to describe social policy arrangements that rely on targeted interventions to invest in human capital and increase economic performance. How might such a system map onto the empirical framework developed here? It is not obvious, for example, what kinds of outcomes in terms of auspice of care or availability of spaces would indicate the existence of an inclusive liberal child care regime. More work remains to be done to operationalize concepts in ways that help to make sense of the different trade-offs in child care policy in the Canadian provinces.

This analysis is also intended to emphasize the many interesting questions and areas of interest for future comparative provincial child care research that remain to be explored. The complexity of the variation from province to province suggests the need to deepen and contextualize the analysis of divergence in child care, using a variety of different methods to understand the complex array of policy arrangements in each province and the factors that have led to the unique characteristics of each child care policy system. For example, what explains the interesting situation in PEI, where staff wages and availability of spaces are high, but levels of non-profit delivery and parental subsidies are low? The comparative measures provided in this article provide a starting point in which to frame this kind of research, ensuring that provincial case studies are linked to the broader Canadian context. More in-depth research that addresses these kinds of questions can be used to identify new concepts and theories of divergence in child care policy arrangements.

It is easy to find similarities in child care policy arrangements within Canada: in general, provincial governments are content to leave the provision of services to the market and the voluntary sector, providing only limited interventions in the form of regulations and targeted financial assistance. Upon closer inspection, however, variation in provincial child care arrangements is quite persistent and complex, highlighting the fact that there are many different versions of liberal social policy. My hope is that this article provides a starting point for more research and theory-building into the causes and effects of this variation.

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around provincial child care systems, but mainly for informational and/or advocacy-related purposes. This article is an attempt to construct an objective framework for child care policy comparison within the context of the academic, comparative child care policy literature, focussing on issues of measurement and explanation for variation in child care policy arrangements.

ⁱⁱ This report draws on a population sample of all licensed full-day child care centres in Canada, all of which were invited to participate in an online survey that took place from July – September of 2012. This sample is not fully representative, due to the on-line sampling method. Caveats on the use of this data are included where appropriate in the following sections. In total, 1,145 employers responded to the survey (for further limitations and description of methodology, see pgs. 5-7 of the report, found at http://www.ccsc-cssge.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/Projects-Pubs-Docs/EN%20Pub%20Chart/YouBetSurveyReport_Final.pdf).

ⁱⁱⁱ Play-based learning is often emphasized in formal early childhood education training programs.

^{iv} In some provinces an age may fall into more than one age range. The ratios in this table represent a choice of the older age range in these cases.

^v Subsidy spending figures include total spending on child care subsidy including full-time regulated child care for younger children and any subsidy for users of school-aged care.

ⁱ Comparisons of provincial child care policy are more common outside of academia. Recent examples include the *Early Years Study 3* (McCain, Mustard and McCuaig, 2011), *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2012* (used as a data source for this article), and other publications and information provided by organizations such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU). These sources provide a wealth of information