

Navigating the Hurdles of the CWELCC System: Centring Ontario Early Childhood Education and Care Operators' Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper investigates how early childhood education and care operators in Ontario navigated the early implementation (2021-2023) of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system. Drawing data from a mixed-methods survey and a political economy of care framework, the findings reveal widespread concern about the sustainability of the funding system, lack of workforce support, and implementation gaps. While affordability goals have largely been met for families, operators reported increased financial strains, staffing shortages, and unclear policy directives. The paper highlights a growing disconnect between federal policy goals and provincial execution, emphasizing the need for frontline-informed childcare reform.

Keywords

Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC); Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC); Funding; Implementation Gaps; Operators; Ontario

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Access to affordable childcare has become a growing concern for many interest groups, including registered early childcare educators (RECEs) (Kupfer, 2022; Wilson, 2022), early learning and childcare operators (Baird, 2022; Kupfer, 2022; Wilson, 2022), and families (Balintec, 2022). Since the 1970s, there has been an increasing demand for high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services (Cleveland, 2022), and since the pandemic, the demand has escalated and become a national priority (Uppal & Savage, 2021). To address challenges in the childcare sector, the Government of Canada launched the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system (Government of Canada, 2022). The initial CWELCC agreement allocated up to \$30 billion over five years (2021-2026) to lower the average costs of childcare to \$10/day by 2026 for all regulated spaces opting into the system (Government of Canada, 2022). The system's objectives are to address critical issues such as the unaffordability of childcare fees, limited access to high-quality and inclusive programming, challenges in workforce retention, the low attractiveness of early childhood education careers, and prolonged waitlists for childcare.

As the CWELCC system was being implemented across Canada, each province and territory had its own implementation process (Government of Canada, 2022). Focusing on Ontario makes it possible to examine how policy goals were implemented across local administrative, workforce, and operational conditions. Ontario is a model for examining the CWELCC implementation on a provincial scale due to its size, mixed delivery structure, regional variation, specific challenges associated with translating national childcare objectives into provincial implementation, and its leadership in introducing public kindergartens (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025; Wloka, 2020). In addition, Ontario's late adoption of the federal agreement and rapid rollout overlooked

the complexities of the childcare sector, resulting in implementation uncertainties, administrative burdens and instability, workforce gaps, and funding shortfalls (Akbari & McCuaig, 2022; Cleveland, 2023, 2024; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025).

Advocacy groups emphasized the importance of collaboration between federal and provincial governments and early childcare operators to ensure that policies effectively support a qualified and competitive workforce, which is essential for expanding childcare access for families across Canada (Bennett, 2021; McLean et al., 2022). While the CWELCC objectives are clearly articulated in the federal-provincial agreements, there is limited empirical evidence on whether those objectives are being realized during the implementation of the system in Ontario, particularly from the perspectives of operators who are responsible for delivering the policy on the ground (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025). When policy implementation is not accompanied by sufficient and stable workforce conditions, funding, and structural supports, operators navigate challenges of increased instability, staffing issues, administrative pressures, and reduced capacity to sustain high-quality childcare programming (Costello, 2026; McCuaig, 2025). Research is necessary to understand the change in federal support for the ECEC sector, and, by capturing front-line experiences, future policy development can better address goals of childcare accessibility, affordability, high quality, and inclusivity and sustainability of early childcare funding. These implementation gaps matter for the ECEC workforce because the workers shape the everyday conditions under which they are able to deliver high-quality, accessible, and inclusive childcare services (Costello, 2026).

This paper examines how Ontario ECEC operators experienced the early stages of implementation of the CWELCC system, and how they interpreted the extent

to which the stated objectives were being realized in practice. Drawing on mixed-methods survey data and the political economy of care framework (England, 2005; Folbre, 2006), this paper explores the tensions between policy intention and the realities of implementation, with particular attention to the role of ECEC operators in the early years sector. In doing so, this paper poses the question, “How do Ontario ECEC operators interpret and experience the tensions between CWELCC policy goals and the early implementation realities, particularly in relation to workforce sustainability?”

This paper begins by situating the CWELCC system within the Ontario ECEC policy context. It then outlines the study’s methodological framing, followed by an analysis of the survey data. The paper concludes by discussing what the findings reveal about the tensions between policy objectives and the operational realities in Ontario’s ECEC sector.

Both authors have worked in the ECEC sector, one as a practitioner and doctoral researcher focused on the CWELCC system and the other as a former educator and academic who navigated the rollout as a parent. These perspectives shaped the questions that were asked and how the data was read; these perspectives are addressed directly in the reflexivity statement in the Methods section.

Policy Implementation Challenges in Early Childhood Education and Care Systems

Research within the ECEC sector in Canada has consistently demonstrated that the success of large-scale public funding initiatives depends not only on policy designs but also on how they are implemented and delivered by those on the frontlines (Akbari et al., 2020; Cleveland, 2022; Farewell et al., 2022; McCuaig et al., 2022; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025). Reports that have examined ECEC policy implementation highlight the recurring challenges related to funding adequacy, workforce capacity and retention, administrative complexities, and alignment between policy objectives and operational realities (McCuaig et al., 2022; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025). When these aspects are misaligned

or overlooked, the implementation gaps undermine policy objectives, even if those objectives are widely supported (Ingriselli & Schempp, 2019).

Within Ontario, longstanding concerns related to workforce shortages, sustainable compensation, training, and retention have created structural vulnerabilities within the ECEC sector (Akbari et al., 2020; Cleveland, 2022; Farewell et al., 2022; McCuaig et al., 2022; McLean et al., 2022). Policy interventions such as the CWELCC system are intended to expand the affordability and accessibility that frequently intersect with pre-existing issues in childcare and place additional pressures on childcare centre operators who are responsible for managing staffing, finances, regulatory compliance, and other operational administrative tasks. Recent reports (Cleveland, 2024; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025) have emphasized how rapid policy rollouts, particularly those introduced with limited communication and instruction, exacerbate uncertainty and administrative burden for childcare operators, further complicating the policy implementation efforts and limiting the capacity of operators to respond effectively.

Ontario’s implementation of the CWELCC system reflects many of the implications and challenges mentioned. The province’s late adoption of the agreement, the over-reliance on a temporary revenue replacement funding model, and evolving administrative requirements have all contributed to sector-wide uncertainty throughout the implementation of the CWELCC system (Cleveland, 2024). Ontario was the last province to opt into the CWELCC agreement and pushed their rollout date to November 1, 2022 (Government of Canada, 2022). The revenue replacement funding model was supposed to replace the portion of frozen fees that families were no longer paying as determined by the Ontario Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2023; Toronto Children’s Services, 2023). By 2023, centres that opted in had to reduce the frozen fees by 52.75% to a minimum of \$12/day (City of Toronto, n.d.). However, with the impacts of inflation and concerns with cost escalations, the supposed temporary funding model left many centres unable to cover their expenses (Cleveland, 2024). While policy analyses and media reporting have documented concerns related to funding formulas and workforce sustainability (e.g., centres declaring bankruptcy, families struggling with long waitlists), there remains limited research

capturing how these implementation dynamics were experienced by ECEC operators themselves.

The paper draws upon a political economy of care framework (England, 2005; Folbre, 2006) that examines how care work is socially organized, valued, and distributed within broader economic and political systems (England, 2005; Folbre, 2006). This framework highlights the ways in which care labour, including ECEC, has been historically undervalued, feminized, and inadequately supported by public policy (Folbre, 2006; Michel & Mahon, 2002). This framework is useful in analyzing the CWELCC system's implementation in Ontario as the stated objectives depend on a care workforce and infrastructure that have historically been underfunded and unevenly supported (Costello, 2026; McCuaig, 2025). Additionally, this framework makes it possible to examine the structural conditions that the CWELCC objectives are being implemented under, including challenges like staffing shortages, financial pressures, and the way in which the early years operators take on the burden of implementation on the frontlines (Costello, 2026; McCuaig 2025). Within this perspective, the challenges faced by ECEC operators can be understood not simply as implementation failures but also as reflections of deeper structural contradictions in how care is positioned within market-based economies. When education and childcare systems are organized through market mechanisms rather than public provisioning, the costs of care are disproportionately absorbed by workers (e.g., through low wages and poor working conditions), families (e.g., through high fees or long waitlists), and operators (e.g., through financial precarity and administrative burden). A political economy of care lens thus situates the findings of this study within a broader critique of how ECEC services have been historically marginalized within Canadian social policy and foregrounds the need for systemic transformation rather than incremental adjustment.

CWELCC Objectives as Policy Constructs

In this paper, *policy constructs* refer to the CWELCC objectives, assumptions, and categories that are interpreted and operationalized. These constructs are not fixed, rather they are interpreted and translated through the implementation process. Treating the CWELCC objectives as policy constructs allows for

a critical examination of how the objectives are understood, prioritized, and enacted during the early implementation of the system. Rather than assuming that the stated objectives are inherently realized through participation in the CWELCC agreement, this paper recognizes that the CWELCC objectives may be unevenly achieved, partially fulfilled, and in tension with one another depending on local conditions and administrative requirements (e.g., affordability for families who are able to obtain a childcare space, but unaffordable for centres to operationally survive).

When the CWELCC system was first introduced, it was structured to address five core objectives: affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, quality, and flexibility. (See Figure 1) This paper includes “flexibility” as one of the objectives as it was listed in the initial CWELCC agreement, although there was confusion over what “flexibility” entailed (Government of Canada, 2022). In 2025, the objective was simplified to “data sharing and reporting” (Government of Canada, 2025) to reflect the definition provided. These objectives are articulated in federal and provincial agreements as interrelated policy goals that are intended to collectively strengthen CWELCC systems.

Policy research and reports suggest that the CWELCC objectives framed at a national level may function differently once implemented within provincial governance structures and funding mechanisms, and further municipal organisation (McGinn, 2026; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025). Since Ontario follows a decentralized, multi-tiered governance model (i.e., federally funded, provincially implemented, municipally organized), the province's structure can lead to issues of miscommunication, inconsistent funding, and disparities in access and quality (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025).

In Ontario, implementation guidelines and funding approaches have shifted since the initial rollout, including changes in how the objective of flexibility has been interpreted and operationalized, the switch to a cost-based funding model in 2025, and the opt-in dates for childcare centres (Moran, 2024; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025). Such changes underscore the importance of examining not only whether the CWELCC objectives are conceptually sound, but whether they are practically attainable within existing system constraints.

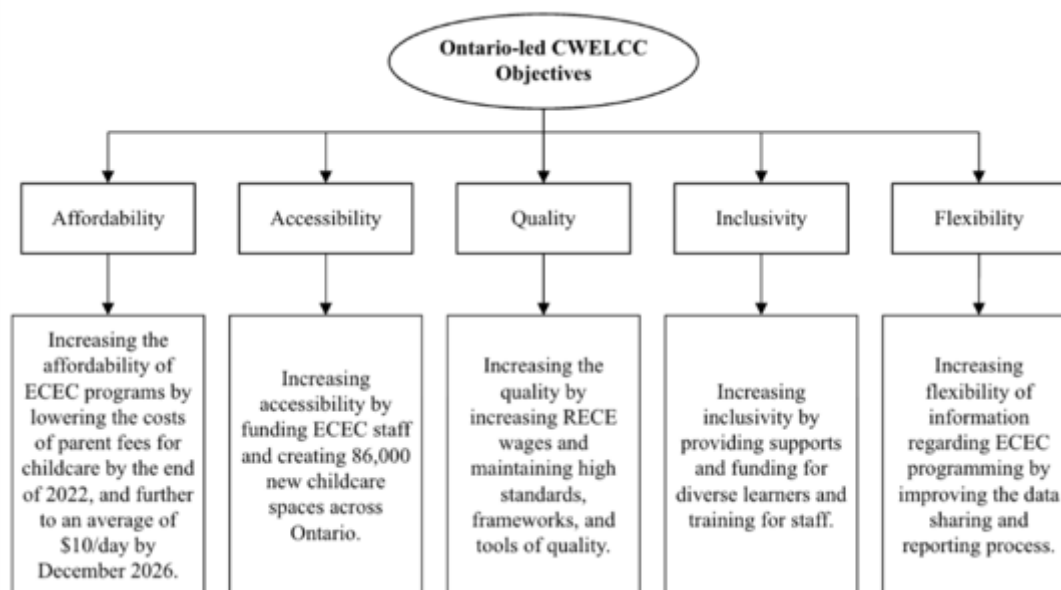


Figure 1: Flowchart of Ontario-led CWELCC objectives

Note: This flowchart was created by the authors to visually represent the CWELCC objectives (Government of Canada, 2022) listed in the Ontario agreement.

The Role of Operators in Translating Policy into Practice

ECEC operators play a crucial role in the decision-making process to opt in/opt out of the CWELCC system. They translate childcare policies into practice. As the decision makers at the childcare centre level, operators are responsible for navigating funding agreements, managing staffing and wages, recruiting and retaining staff, maintaining regulatory compliance, and communicating policy changes to families they serve (Government of Canada, 2022). These responsibilities position them as daily intermediaries between government policy and service delivery, particularly during periods of new policy transitions. Existing research (Cleveland, 2023, 2024; McCuaig et al., 2022) has increasingly recognized the value of capturing operator perspectives to better understand policy implementation processes and outcomes.

Operators are uniquely situated to assess how the policy decisions and actions affect financial sustainability, workforce stability and development, and programme delivery within their centres. Their experiences provide insights into the practical implications of policy design choices and developments, including how funding models, reporting requirements, and multiple communication channels shape their day-to-

day operations (Cleveland, 2023, 2024; McCuaig et al., 2022). Within the context of the CWELCC system in Ontario, operators have been tasked with implementing fee reductions, navigating evolving funding guidelines, maintaining service quality amid workforce shortages, rising operational costs, and quickly growing waitlists for childcare spaces (Government of Canada, 2022).

Despite these operators' central role, their perspectives and voices remain underrepresented in empirical analyses of the CWELCC system's early implementation in Ontario. Examining their experiences will offer a critical lens for evaluating whether the CWELCC objectives are being met as intended and identifying areas where policy adjustments may be necessary as the policy undergoes negotiations for a five-year extension (2026-2031).

Methods

The study used an online mixed-methods survey that included closed-ended items designed to capture demographic data and open-ended questions that invited participants to elaborate on their experiences, interpretations of the objectives, and their concerns with the implementation.

Participants

Participants were recruited from the 47 regions across Ontario (representing 5,776 centres). The term *operators* is used for participants, which included owners, directors, supervisors, and ECEs who had opted into the CWELCC system by Ontario's November 1, 2022, deadline and were responsible for their centre's operations. Recruitment occurred through indirect distribution channels including municipal service system managers and community sector organizations. A total of 105 responses were received. After applying exclusion criteria (i.e., removing incomplete responses, ineligible participants, and respondents who had not opted into the CWELCC system), the remaining 68 responses were used for quantitative analysis. Of these, 53 participants provided qualitative responses to open-ended questions and were included in the qualitative analysis.

Participant demographic information was collected to contextualize the perspectives represented in the data. Information such as organizational roles, program settings, and geographic location situated the capacity in which the participants encountered the CWELCC implementation. Participant characteristics included years of experience, centre types (i.e., not-for-profit, for-profit), and urban or rural contexts across Ontario. (See Table 1) The majority of participants reported over 20 years of experience in their profession, and many were working at their current centres for over 10 years, establishing their familiarity and knowledge of their centre's administrative duties and operational needs. Participants in the study offered a balanced representation of both urban and rural regions, and the majority of respondents worked in not-for-profit centres.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information – total of 68 participants

Baseline Characteristics	n	%
Current Role		
Owner	6	8.8
Director	41	60.3
Supervisor	16	23.5
ECE	5	7.4
Other	6	8.8
Years of Experience		
Less than 5 yrs	2	2.9
5-9 yrs	5	7.4
10-14 yrs	2	2.9
15-19 yrs	9	13.2
20-24 yrs	13	19.1
25-29 yrs	10	14.7
30-34 yrs	13	19.1
35-39 yrs	7	10.3
40+ yrs	7	10.3
Years of Working at Centre		
Less than 1 yr	2	2.9
1-3 yrs	7	10.3
3-5 yrs	5	7.4
5-10 yrs	9	13.2
10-15 yrs	13	19.1
15-20 yrs	10	14.7
20-25 yrs	10	14.7
25+ yrs	12	17.6
Region of Centre		
Rural	34	50.0
Urban	34	50.0
Type of Centre		
Not-for-profit	58	85.3
For-profit	10	14.7

Age groups at Centre *

Infant	48	70.6
Toddler	63	92.6
Preschool	66	97.1
Grade school	23	33.8
Before & After programs	52	76.5

Fee subsidies

Less than 25%	39	57.4
25-50%	13	19.1
50-75%	9	13.2
75-100%	6	8.8
Not sure	1	1.5

Purchase of Service (POS) agreement

Yes	62	91.2
Not Sure	6	8.8

* Participants were able to select multiple age groups

Data Collection Instrument

An online survey was used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data, allowing for descriptive analysis of operator perceptions alongside in-depth elaboration of their experiences. The survey was administered between September and October 2023. The design was well suited to capturing the initial implementation-level insights during the active policy rollout, when the system’s conditions and guidelines were still evolving. The instrument included likert-style items that assessed operators’ perceptions of whether each CWELCC objective (affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, quality, and flexibility) was being met in Ontario. Open-ended questions invited participants to elaborate on their responses and share experiences in relation to the CWELCC system implementation and impacts. The survey was designed to align directly with the CWELCC objectives, allowing for deductive analysis of operator perspectives in relation to stated policy goals.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Vetter, 2017) to give the context of the participant demographic represented. Qualitative

responses were analysed using deductive thematic coding that was informed by Braun and Clark’s six phases of thematic analysis (2008). Leaning on Fife and Gossner’s (2024) deductive qualitative analysis approach, the five CWELCC objectives (affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, quality, and flexibility) were used as predetermined analytic categories. This approach enabled systematic examination of operator experiences in relation to stated policy goals. While the coding process identified recurring perspectives in participants’ responses, the political economy of care framework supported how these perspectives were interpreted. Rather than treating the implementation concerns as isolated issues, the framework allowed the analysis process to reflect how the perspectives were connected to a broader structure of poor workforce conditions, staffing shortages, and uneven administrative and financial responsibilities.

Reflexivity Statement

The researchers navigated this study with a background in education that informed their understanding of educational structures, pedagogical practices, and systemic inequities. Such experiences serve as insight and potential bias in relation to how issues of access, quality, and inclusion are conceptualized throughout the paper. As two researchers with direct ties to the ECEC sector, our positionality shaped this study in ways we want to be clear about. One of us worked in childcare before the CWELCC rollout and is now a doctoral student whose research focuses on the CWELCC system. The other is a former early childhood educator and teacher who now works as an academic in ECEC and had a child in childcare during the implementation period.

These backgrounds meant we came to this data with prior knowledge of how childcare centres operate, what workforce pressures feel like from the inside, and what the policy meant for families navigating the system in real time. That proximity was useful, and it helped us read operator responses contextually. We came with a structural orientation, inclined to read the implementation challenges as systemic rather than as the result of individual decisions or circumstances. The choice to use a political economy of care framework reflected that orientation. We recognized the risks of this: that we might overidentify with certain accounts or that our experiences in the sector would lead us to emphasize patterns that confirmed what we had already seen. We tried to hold that tension honestly throughout the analysis. Rather than attempting to speak for the

ECEC operators (Alcoff, 1991), the decision to foreground operators’ perspectives reflects a commitment to sharing the realities of the operators as they incorporate new policy into their daily practices. The researchers recognize and position the participants as key knowledge holders whose perspectives are essential to understanding the gap between policy intent and practice realities.

Findings

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the Ontario ECEC operators’ perspectives on Ontario’s early implementation of the CWELCC system were organized according to the five objectives (affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, quality, and flexibility). (See Table 2) Quantitative findings provided an overview of operators’ assessments of each objective, while the qualitative findings offered insight into how each objective was experienced in practice. Across each of the objectives, operators described uneven progress with the CWELCC system and highlighted the interconnected nature of the implementation challenges. The findings of this study emphasize how operators experienced the early implementation of the CWELCC objectives as an integrated whole rather than as independent, separate objectives. Although the survey was organized around sections of affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, quality, and flexibility, participants’ responses repeatedly showed how the objectives were experienced as interconnected concepts and were often in tension with one another. Across the data, workforce instability, funding uncertainty, and increased administrative burden emerged as the main conditions that were shaping how policy goals were being interpreted and enacted into practice.

Table 2: *Percentage of each CWELCC objective reported being met/not met*

Objective	Agree that objective is being met (%)	Disagree that objective is being met (%)
Affordable	86	14
Accessible	28	72
Inclusive	29	71
High Quality	35	65
Flexible	40	60

The Affordability Conundrum

The conundrum of affordability was reflected in many of the operators’ responses. As above, 86% of participants indicated that the objective was being met *for families*, with responses frequently acknowledging how reduced parent fees gave families more financially accessible childcare options, and, in some communities, increased the appeal of licensed childcare services. As one participant noted, “Opting in has made childcare more appealing for families requiring care in our community. The rates have become more reasonable for families with more than one child to manage” (Participant 47). These responses suggest that affordability was supported as the most publicly tangible and immediately recognisable success of the CWELCC system from the perspectives of families.

However, operators’ qualitative responses indicated that the gains for families were accompanied by operational pressures that complicated how the objective of affordability was experienced at the centre level. Participants described the difficulties of frozen fees, retroactive refunds, revenue caps, and uncertainty in funding disbursements all as challenges and constraints on financial autonomy and operational sustainability. One operator explained, “So far, we really regret opting in ... it is the right decision for families, but the program has not offered the financial support that our staff deserve and has made meeting our operational budget very challenging” (Participant 29). Another added, “Childcare is not a profitable business, and we were concerned that we would not be able to pay our bills especially our staff or rent if there were governmental delays in deposits” (Participant 2). These comments suggest that affordability was not experienced as a straightforward, ECEC-wide success. Operators were not opposed to lower fees for families, but there remains the challenge that where fees are reduced for families, childcare centres remained responsible for absorbing rising operational risks and inflation costs.

Workforce Sustainability as a Constraint on Objective Success

Quantitatively, the rest of the CWELCC objectives received substantially lower levels of agreement compared to the objective of affordability. Only 28% of participants agreed that accessibility was being met, 29% agreed that inclusivity was being met, and 35% agreed that quality was being met. (See Table 2)

Workforce instability emerged as a major challenge influencing the success of whether the CWELCC objectives could be achieved in practice. Throughout the operators' responses, workforce sustainability did not appear as a single issue, rather it functioned as a bottleneck situation where affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, and quality were all being compromised. This was reflected across the qualitative responses as operators repeatedly connected difficulties in staffing shortages, recruitment challenges, and difficulties retaining qualified ECEs, to the reduced capacity for expansion of space, limits on inclusive practices, and a growing concern about the ability to provide high-quality programming. Operators linked the inability to increase the number of available spaces not only to increased demand but also to staffing shortages that limited centres' capacity to expand. This suggests that accessibility could not be simply represented as a matter of policy intent or family needs, but rather it was contingent on the ability to have a stable workforce to support expansion. Similarly, inclusivity was described as requiring specialized staff, professional development, external supports, and sufficient time for individualized planning and collaboration with families. One participant stated, "Providing inclusive childcare is expensive. There are no provisions or incentives for centres to retrofit spaces to meet needs of individual children or hire additional staff to support children with special needs" (Participant 29). In this case, inclusivity is not framed as a matter of willingness alone but also as dependent on labour and resources that were not available. Participants raised similar concerns regarding quality. They consistently described the workforce instability as central to whether high-quality programming could be maintained. One participant wrote, "Quality childcare is still left up to individual centres to define and manage (again with burnt out staff who aren't able to give quality every single day because they are just surviving the day)" (Participant 40). Another explained, "Without the investment in all staff working in the field we won't have the staff training and those willing to be trained as an ECE to be able to fill the gaps" (Participant 12). Even where operators expressed pride in sustaining strong programming, they often attributed this to staff commitment and resilience instead of the CWELCC system implementation itself, noting, "We are holding our own. Our staff are creative and resourceful. We have a quality daycare thanks to our staff – not CWELCC" (Participant 28).

Operators Taking on the Burden

Rather than navigating the CWELCC system implementation as a stable and coherent system of support, participants described having to deal with budgeting uncertainties, overwhelming reporting requirements, shifting expectations, and increased administrative workloads while still having to maintain staffing, communication with families, and sustainability of the childcare services. Their perspectives suggest that the implementation responsibilities were not distributed evenly among all actors across the system, but rather they became concentrated in the day-to-day responsibilities of operators. These concerns were particularly evident in responses pertaining to funding and budgeting. Operators described delays and uncertainty with reimbursements and revenue restrictions that complicated financial planning. At the same time, operators remained responsible for all previously existing administrative and operational obligations. Administrative burden was also described as increased reporting and implementation workload that diverted time and attention away from leadership, staff support, and pedagogical priorities. One participant shared, "The workload of implementation is huge on admin, the increase in space and increase in needs has created a huge gap" (Participant 12). The responses also suggested that implementation pressures were not only financial but also organizational and relational as more time was being devoted to compliance, reporting, and policy navigation, and less time remained to support educators, plan the programming, and respond to community needs. The findings indicate that operators were expected to bridge the gap between the promise of policy reform and the practical realities of program delivery. In doing so, they became responsible for managing these accumulated pressures.

Flexibility as a Strain

Among the original CWELCC objectives that Ontario agreed to, "flexibility" was the one objective that was most consistently described as unclear, inconsistently interpreted, and difficult to operationalize. Quantitatively, only 40% of respondents indicated that the objective was being met. Qualitatively, operators' responses suggested that flexibility was not simply underachieved, but also conceptually unresolved and misunderstood. Participants frequently indicated that they did not know what the objective meant in practical terms, how it was being interpreted across municipalities, or what forms

of service adaptation it was intended to support. As one operator stated, “Not sure what flexible childcare means. Still same centres, same hours being offered with CWELCC” (Participant 31).

Such ambiguity matters as operators’ ability to describe how “flexibility” was related to program models, fee structures, and service options (i.e., part-time versus full-day programming) was limited. The lack of clear guidance and explanation of the objective appears to have created hesitation and inconsistency in interpretation. In some cases, operators suggested that the funding and waitlist pressures associated with implementation had actually reduced their ability to offer flexible programming arrangements. One participant explained, “If anything, we’ve reduced flexibility to guarantee our spaces are full (maximize income) and this has reduced the amount of families we can now take. We could not afford to continue with the flexible options we’ve had in the past and stay viable” (Participant 35). Responses indicated that the objective was not clearly defined in operational terms, and operators had difficulties assessing, enacting, and aligning their responsibilities with the objective. This is significant because it shows that the implementation challenges not only arise when the objectives are underfunded or unsupported, but also when they are insufficiently specified. The replacement of “flexibility” with “data sharing and reporting” further underscores the degree to which the original objective lacked clarity.

Summary of Findings

Overall, across the objectives, findings indicate that operators experienced uneven progress in meeting the CWELCC goals during the early implementation of the system. While affordability was widely recognized as having been relatively successful for families, other objectives were constrained by workforce shortages, administrative burdens, and funding uncertainties. Many operators expressed their overall support for the core vision of the CWELCC system and were pleased that attention was being brought to the ECEC sector. Their criticisms of the system implementation are not rooted in resistance to change, but rather in a desire to see the policy’s success through realistic, well-supported, and long-term sustainable planning. These findings highlight the interconnected nature of the CWELCC objectives and demonstrate how challenges in one area influence operators’ capacity to meet objectives in another.

Discussion

This study suggests that there is misalignment between the policy and implementation, that is reproduced through the uneven local implementation capacity, inadequate workforce investment, administrative pressures, and continued reliance on undervalued labour. The findings illustrate how Ontario ECEC operators experienced the CWELCC system during its early implementation as a set of unevenly realized policy objectives rather than a cohesive support system.

Operators’ responses pointed to a deeper issue in which the implementation depended on organizational and workforce capacities that are already under immense strain. The patterns observed across all five objectives (affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, quality, flexibility) suggest that challenges in one domain often had a cascading effect on each other, shaping operators’ capacity to implement the policy as intended. What these findings point to is not simply that policy and implementation were misaligned, as this is a recurring feature of public policy reform, but that the misalignment followed a recognizable pattern rooted in how care work has historically been organized and undervalued.

The CWELCC system transferred financial risk downward to the operator level through frozen fees, revenue caps, and delayed reimbursements, without providing the structural supports that would allow operators to absorb that risk sustainably. This reflects a broader tendency in market-based childcare governance where the state articulates public goals while offloading delivery risk onto the private or non-profit sector (Folbre, 2006; Michel & Mahon, 2002). At the same time, the implementation framework proceeded as though a stable and sufficient workforce already existed; no structural provisions for workforce retention or stabilization were built into the rollout. This assumption reflects the historical undervaluation of care work as feminized labour that is expected to continue regardless of whether the material conditions make it possible or sustainable (England, 2005). As operators described navigating unclear guidelines, shifting expectations, and inconsistent communication across municipal and provincial levels, they absorbed the ambiguity of an insufficiently specified policy, becoming responsible for translating into practice what had not been adequately resolved at the governance level. These

dynamics did not emerge from poor provincial planning alone; they reflect structural features of a policy context that continues to treat childcare as a residual social good rather than a foundational public investment.

The findings reflect the broader limitations inherent in childcare reforms that are still governed and operated within market-based funding and implementation systems. Despite the significant public investment, the CWELCC system operates within a broader neoliberal policy context that continues to treat childcare as a market commodity rather than a public good. This market-oriented approach places the burden of implementation on individual operators who must navigate competitive pressures, revenue constraints, and workforce challenges while attempting to deliver publicly articulated objectives of universality and accessibility. The tensions experienced by operators reflect the fundamental contradictions of attempting to achieve universal childcare objectives through funding mechanisms that remain embedded within capitalist logics of efficiency, competition, and cost containment. These contradictions are not new to the ECEC sector, but the CWELCC implementation brought them into sharper relief. The persistent underfunding of workforce wages and professional development in Ontario's childcare sector predates the CWELCC system and has been well-documented across multiple policy reviews (Cleveland, 2022; McCuaig et al., 2022). What the CWELCC implementation added was a new layer of administrative demand and financial constraint on top of already strained conditions, not a structural remedy to them.

The policy deepened existing inequities by raising demand for childcare spaces while not simultaneously addressing the workforce crisis that constrains supply; by lowering fees for families while freezing the revenue available to operators; and by requiring more reporting and accountability from operators while providing less operational support. This goes some way toward explaining why operators who were broadly supportive of the policy's goals were nevertheless experiencing greater strain during implementation. This misalignment is not merely a gap between intention and execution. It is a reproduction of the same structural conditions that have historically made the ECEC sector precarious: care work that is expected to expand in scope without commensurate investment in the workforce and infrastructure that make it possible.

The findings indicated that workforce sustainability functions as a foundational condition of the success of the CWELCC implementation in Ontario. Although the formal objectives of the CWELCC system were outlined in the agreement, operators noted that meeting each of the objectives was dependent on the availability, retention, and support of the early years workforce. The study underscores the importance of examining policy implementation through the perspectives of those responsible for delivering services on the frontlines (e.g., operators, ECEs). ECEC operators are positioned as critical intermediaries between government policy and family experiences within the childcare sector and are responsible for navigating funding structures and administrative processes that continue to prioritize cost control and organizational risk management funding structures. Yet, operators' capacity to enact the public policy objectives of affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, quality, and flexibility is constrained by poor workforce conditions and administrative burdens. Without adequate alignment between policy design and operational realities, even well-intentioned initiatives struggle to achieve their intended outcomes and instead reproduce existing inequities and logistical pressures. Through a political economy of care lens, these findings illustrate how the undervaluation of care work is structurally embedded within current policy frameworks.

The challenges operators described (e.g., funding inadequacy, workforce instability, and administrative overload) are not isolated implementation problems but rather manifestations of a broader system that has historically treated early childhood education as a private responsibility rather than a public good. The political economy of care framework deepens the interpretation and perspectives of the ECEC operators as these challenges reflect broader structural conditions. The CWELCC system, while representing a significant shift toward public investment, continues to operate within market-based structures that distribute the revenue for, and costs of, care unevenly across workers, families, and operators. A sustainable workforce is essential to the success of the CWELCC system, yet the conditions necessary to sustain retention and commitment are insufficient. This analysis emphasizes the need for policy approaches that move beyond incremental funding adjustments toward a fundamental revaluation of care work within Canadian social and economic policy.

The findings are significant for the ECEC sector as they show how misalignment of policy and implementation conditions are felt in staffing shortages, increased workloads, difficulty in maintaining high-quality and inclusive care, and the burden of responding to families when the demand exceeds what childcare centres can provide.

It is worth being direct about what elements the political economy of care framework led us to foreground and what elements the framework led us away from. Framing the analysis around how care work is structurally organized and undervalued meant we read operator responses as evidence of systemic conditions rather than individual or institutional shortcomings. It helped us connect workforce instability and administrative burden to a longer history of care labour being feminized and underfunded rather than treating each challenge as discrete. What we pursued less fully was variation within the data, specifically how different operators in different communities, centre types, and geographic contexts may have navigated the implementation. A framework centred on local governance or organisational capacity would have drawn out those factors. We chose to prioritize the structural over the situational and that choice was shaped by our own histories in the sector and, for one of us, by doctoral research that has followed the CWELCC system closely since its rollout.

The pattern documented in this study is not unique to childcare. Across other feminized public service sectors, including nursing, social work, and teaching, reform efforts have repeatedly expanded service entitlements without resolving the workforce conditions that make those services deliverable (Armstrong & Armstrong, 2000; Neysmith & Aronson, 1997). The gap between what a policy promises and what workers can sustain tends to get absorbed at the frontline, by people who are too committed to the work to walk away and too under-resourced to do it well. What makes the CWELCC case worth examining carefully is that workforce investment was not incidental to the policy. The CWELCC agreement is explicitly committed to increasing RECE wages and addressing workforce retention. That commitment makes the gap between intention and implementation harder to explain as an oversight and raises the question of what it means when a policy simultaneously acknowledges a structural problem and reinforces it. The CWELCC experience shows how the devaluation of care work can persist even when it has been identified, named, and written into a federal agreement as something to be

corrected. For ECEC specifically, this matters because access to care is not only constrained by what families can afford. It is also constrained by whether there are enough supported, retained educators to make care available at all. Policies that address fees without stabilizing the workforce do not fully resolve the problem of unequal access; they simply shift the location of that inequality to where it is most visible.

The findings from this study have major implications for ongoing CWELCC implementation and future policy refinement. Incorporating operator feedback and perspectives into the creation of funding models, clarifying policy expectations, and prioritizing workforce sustainability are all essential to strengthening the early years sector. Continued monitoring of implementation experiences will be critical to ensuring that the CWELCC objectives are not only articulated but also achievable in practice. An effective implementation of the CWELCC system would require centring the voices of those on the frontlines within ongoing policy design and rollout. Their voices provide a critical lens on implementation gaps and practical solutions moving forward.

Recommendations

With the negotiations to extend the CWELCC system for an additional five years (2026-2031) being brought to the table, there are a few policy-relevant recommendations that should be considered. First, there is a need for greater clarity and consistency in implementation guidance. Operators reported uncertainty about how certain objectives were defined and operationalized across municipalities, which limited their ability to adapt their services to local community needs. Clearer policy articulation (to families, communities, and operators), alongside consistent communication across municipal and provincial levels, would support a more effective and cohesive implementation.

Second, findings highlight the necessity of addressing workforce sustainability as a foundational condition to achieving the CWELCC objectives. Recruitment and retention challenges constrain operators' capacity to expand access, maintain quality, and provide inclusive programming. Policy efforts need to prioritize competitive compensations, professional development, and stable staffing structures to strengthen the success of implementation and mitigate any unintended consequences while developing the early years sector.

Third, for better long-term sustainable approaches, funding models should better account for the operational and administrative demands placed on centres. Incorporating operator feedback into funding designs and review processes will help ensure that financial mechanisms align with practice realities.

Limitations

There are limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. First, the study relied on self-reported data from a sample of Ontario ECEC operators who had opted into the CWELCC system; as such, perspectives of operators who did not opt in or who subsequently withdrew are not represented. Future research should consider exploring the experiences of operators who chose not to opt in and/or withdrew from the program (e.g., due to financial constraints, bankruptcy, lack of support). Second, the cross-sectional design captured perspectives at a single point during the early implementation of the CWELCC system in Ontario, and operator experiences may have evolved as the system has matured and been further implemented. Third, recruitment through municipal service managers and sector organizations may have introduced response bias as operators with stronger opinions about the CWELCC system may have been more likely to participate in comparison to those who may not have had strong opinions and/or did not have enough time. Fourth, the sample size, while sufficient for exploratory analysis, limits the generalisability of quantitative findings. This paper used self-reported data from a smaller sample of only Ontario ECEC operators who opted into the CWELCC system. Future research should look to assess a greater demographic of ECEC operators from across Canada, as their experiences may differ based on their provincial/territorial funding allocations and/or varying relationships with their respective education ministries.

Concluding Thoughts

Overall, this paper demonstrates the value of incorporating operator perspectives into evaluation of ECEC policy implementation. As key intermediaries between government policy and childcare programming experiences, operators provide critical insights into how policy objectives are enacted, adapted, or constrained in practice. Ongoing monitoring of the implementation experiences, particularly as a system extension is

negotiated, can support evidence-informed policy refinement and reduce the risk of misalignment between policy goals and system capacity. At present, there is a clear disconnect between policy and practice that highlights a deeper concern that focuses on the lack of consideration of the experiences of the early years workforce. Operators have shown their growing frustration and disillusionment with the CWELCC system as many of them feel overextended and under-supported.

While the CWELCC system represents a significant investment in the ECEC sector, its success not only depends on the stated objectives but also on the conditions under which those objectives are effectively implemented and sustained. Attending to operator experiences, workforce sustainability, and implementation coherence is essential to strengthening and ensuring that the CWELCC objectives are sustainable and responsive to the needs of the ECEC sector and the families they serve. Without stable, well-compensated, and professionally supported educators, even the best-designed policies will fall short. Viewed through a political economy of care framework, the operators' experiences documented in this study reveal how deeply the undervaluation of care work shapes policy outcomes. Meaningful reform requires not only adequate funding but a fundamental shift in how childcare is conceptualized within Canadian society, moving from a market commodity to a public good and from a private family responsibility to a collective social investment. Until such transformation occurs, even well-funded initiatives like the CWELCC system will continue to place disproportionate burdens on the predominately female workforce who provide this essential care.

What this study makes clear is that the CWELCC system is not simply a story of good intentions poorly executed. It is an example of how structural inequities in care work persist when reform efforts expand entitlements without addressing the conditions that make care possible. Ontario ECEC operators are not passive recipients of policy. They are the people who have kept this sector functioning under sustained pressure. Their experiences represent an important source of knowledge about what any future reform will need to be in order to get it right. As negotiations for a five-year extension proceed, centring their perspectives is not just good research practice. It is a precondition for achieving a system that actually works.

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