



CUISR:

Community – University Institute for Social Research

Preschool: As Essential As Food
An Effectiveness Review of the
Saskatoon Preschool Foundation
Tuition Subsidy Program

by A.J. (Jim) Propp



Building Healthy Sustainable Communities

Community-University Institute for Social Research

CUISR is a partnership between a set of community-based organizations (including Saskatoon District Health, the City of Saskatoon, Quint Development Corporation, the Saskatoon Regional Intersectoral Committee on Human Services) and a large number of faculty and graduate students from the University of Saskatchewan. CUISR's mission is "to serve as a focal point for community-based research and to integrate the various social research needs and experiential knowledge of the community-based organizations with the technical expertise available at the University. It promotes, undertakes, and critically evaluates applied social research for community-based organizations, and serves as a data clearinghouse for applied and community-based social research. The overall goal of CUISR is to build the capacity of researchers, community-based organizations and citizenry to enhance community quality of life."

This mission is reflected in the following objectives: (1) to build capacity within CBOs to conduct their own applied social research and write grant proposals; (2) to serve as a conduit for the transfer of experientially-based knowledge from the community to the University classroom, and transfer technical expertise from the University to the community and CBOs; (3) to provide CBOs with assistance in the areas of survey sample design, estimation and data analysis, or, where necessary, to undertake survey research that is timely, accurate and reliable; (4) to serve as a central clearinghouse, or data warehouse, for community-based and applied social research findings; and (5) to allow members of the University and CBOs to access a broad range of data over a long time period.

As a starting point, CUISR has established three focused research modules in the areas of Community Health Determinants and Health Policy, Community Economic Development, and Quality of Life Indicators. The three-pronged research thrust underlying the proposed Institute is, in operational terms, highly integrated. The central questions in the three modules—community quality of life, health, and economy—are so interdependent that many of the projects and partners already span and work in more than one module. All of this research is focused on creating and maintaining healthy, sustainable communities.

Research is the driving force that cements the partnership between universities, CBOs, and government in acquiring, transferring, and applying knowledge in the form of policy and programs. Researchers within each of the modules examine these dimensions from their particular perspective, and the results are integrated at the level of the Institute, thus providing a rich, multi-faceted analysis of the common social and economic issues. The integrated results are then communicated to the Community and the University in a number of ways to ensure that research makes a difference in the development of services, implementation of policy, and lives of the people of Saskatoon and Saskatchewan.

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ABSTRACT

A child's early years—birth to age six—has a profound influence on his/her growth and development. Recent discoveries in brain development research complement previous early years knowledge that originated from developmental psychology. We now know that early experiences and stimulating interactions with adults and other children are far more important to brain development than previously realized (McCain and Mustard, 1999). Unfortunately, many children in Canada, including Saskatchewan, are raised in poverty, and there are predictable consequences for families with less disposable income, including having less money to spend on “educational items” such as books, library memberships, recreation, and preschool (Crowther, 2005).

In 2003, the National Children's Alliance (NCA) identified chronic poverty as perhaps the biggest single obstacle to meeting the needs and protecting and promoting the rights of children in Canada. Thus, to construct a world fit for children, we must put them first and break the cycle of poverty within a single generation. Preschool provides important early learning experiences for children, and the Saskatoon Preschool Foundation (SPF) believes that preschool programs diminish the impact of poverty on children and families in our communities by providing children with opportunities for a better future. The SPF articulates these beliefs by advocating for and supporting access to quality preschool programs for Saskatoon children. Since 2001, the SPF has advocated for and supported preschool education by offering tuition subsidies to families for whom the payment of the tuition fees presents a financial hardship or impossibility. The SPF tuition subsidy facilitates children's attendance at preschool. Although not formally involved in their operations, the SPF also works in cooperation with approximately ninety preschool-type organizations in Saskatoon and area.

Families experiencing financial difficulties apply for and receive subsidies to cover either the full or partial cost of preschool tuition for one or more children during the 2004-2005 school year. Since 2001, the SPF tuition subsidy has helped approximately 300 children attend preschool in Saskatoon and neighbouring communities. As identified by participants in this research, the “educational advantage” and strengthening of family capacity are the SPF tuition subsidy's two most pronounced impacts on families and children.

INTRODUCTION

According to Friendly and Beach (2005), more than one million children in Canada live in poverty. In Saskatchewan, 26.8% of those aged three to five years live below the Low Income Cut-Off Line (LICO), the highest rate of any Canadian province (Friendly and Beach, 2005). In the early 1990s, teachers noticed that children living in poverty entered kindergarten or grade one without certain social, language, and learning skills. Sometimes their educational opportunities were minimal, their health jeopardized, and their self-esteem low. As a result, these students were already behind in their learning before they even started.

Over the past decade, medical groups and researchers in child development have emphasized that the early years of a child's development are critical to success in all areas of life. Investment in the early years is as important as investing in post-secondary education because early years education pays lifelong dividends. Early brain development sets a base for learning, behaviour, and health throughout life. Preschool provides important early learning experiences for children.

That certain families have difficulty in accessing preschool is evident in all parts of the city of Saskatoon. In 1991, four fully funded Saskatoon preschools were formed at King George, Pleasant Hill, Princess Alexandra, and Westmount Community Schools. Funding came from the province, service clubs, professional associations, churches, and individuals. The Saskatoon Preschool Foundation (SPF), formed in 1994, has further advocated and supported access to quality preschool programs for Saskatoon children during the last decade. This report presents research regarding the impact that the SPF tuition subsidy has had on its recipients during the 2004-2005 school year.

THE EFFECTS OF PRESCHOOL PROGRAMMING ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

McCain and Mustard (1999) have called attention to new evidence in the field of neuroscience that emphasized that the early years of development—from conception to age six years, and especially the first three years—set the foundation for lifelong competencies and skills that affect learning, behaviour, and health. This new evidence expanded understanding of the following:

- (1) the interplay between nature and nurture in brain development;
- (2) the extent of brain development *in utero* and during the first years of life;
- (3) the effect of nutrition, care, and nurturing on the wiring of the pathways of the brain during the early period of child development;
- (4) the nurturing by parents and caregivers in the early years and its decisive and long lasting impact on a child's development, learning capacity, behaviour, and ability to regulate their emotions, and their risks for disease later in life; and

- (5) the decisive and sustained effects of negative experiences in the early years, including severe neglect or absence of appropriate stimulation.

These findings from neuroscience research emphasized the relationship between stimulation of the brain and stimuli that are passed through the sensing pathways. Based on this new evidence, McCain and Mustard (1999) concluded the following:

- (1) New knowledge has changed our understanding of brain development and complements existing knowledge about early years derived from epidemiology, anthropology, sociology, developmental psychology, and pediatrics. This new knowledge emphasizes that the relationship between early experiences and stimulating, positive interactions with adults and other children is more paramount to brain development than previously recognized.
- (2) The effects of early experiences, particularly during the first three years, on the wiring and sculpting of the brain's billions of neurons last a lifetime.
- (3) A child's brain develops through stimulation of the sensing pathways. Consequently, a child who misses positive stimulation or is subject to chronic stress during the first three years is likely to have difficulty overcoming a poor early start.
- (4) Because the brain's development is a seamless continuum, child development and learning should also be a continuum of quality, developmentally attuned interactions with caregivers, and opportunities for play-based problem solving with other children that will provide stimulation for brain development.
- (5) The evidence is clear that quality early childhood development programs that involve parents or other primary caregivers can influence children's relationships with their peers in the home, and can considerably improve behaviour, learning, and health. The earlier that these programs commence, the better it is for the child.
- (6) The importance of early years development is as important as school and post-secondary periods of human development, and so society must give the same level of attention to the early years.

Given the evidence regarding the importance of early childhood development and a child's learning, behaviour, and health, McCain and Mustard argued that our society must take steps to ensure that all children have an equal opportunity for good brain development in the critical early years. In this way, society must champion early learning initiatives that can substantially improve the outcome for all young children, and focus on the provision of quality early childhood development centres that involve parents.

Recognizing that McCain and Mustard's conclusions and recommendations first appeared six years ago in *Reversing the Real Brain Drain: Early Years Final Report*, what is the present state of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Canada? Friendly and Beach (2005) stated that in 2003 and 2004 "there has been unprecedented recognition of early learning and child care in national policy initiative" (1). Resulting from a national review of Canada's ECEC programs in 2003, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) observed that "Canada has fallen far behind international developments in early childhood education," that both "national and provincial policy levels were incoherent and ineffective," and, most regrettably, "ECEC programs are severely underfinanced" and "neither quality nor access are adequate" (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2003: 1).

McCain and Mustard recommended that early learning should receive the same attention as school (i.e. elementary and secondary schooling) and post-secondary periods of human development, but, as reported in 2004, more than one million children in Canada still live in poverty. Even more disturbing is that Saskatchewan has the highest number of children (26.8%) living below the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO). As identified in early years development research and literature, scholars agree about the considerable benefits of early years education and development on children's learning, behaviour, and health, as well as the many positive effects on families, communities, and society (Crosser, 2005; Crowther, 2005; Friendly, Beach, and Turiano, 2002; Friendly and Beach, 2005; Mayfield, 2001; McCain and Mustard, 1999; National Children's Alliance, 2003). Not surprisingly, the importance of access to early learning opportunities and centres has not fundamentally changed since Mustard and McCain's initial call for action.

As identified in their October 2004 fact sheet, the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada (CCAAC) acknowledged that learning begins at birth and early learning has a profound affect on lifelong development and adult well-being. The CCAAC has advocated for early learning and high quality childcare that promotes healthy child development at the same time that it supports families, reduces child poverty, advances women's equality, and deepens social inclusion. The CCAAC continues to advocate for a high quality childcare system that facilitates excellent learning opportunities for all children, thus enabling optimized physical, cognitive, cultural, social, and emotional development. Conversely, children's development suffers when they experience poor quality early childhood education and care. It is unfortunate that in Canada—and Saskatoon in particular—access to high quality, developmentally appropriate ECEC is not available to all children. This limited access occurs partly because of the provincial government's decision to fund only preschools for "at risk" children in targeted communities that meet specified eligibility criteria determined by the school division, such as family and environmental risk, existing delays, behavioural challenges, isolation, low socio-economic status, and high rates of single parents (Friendly and Beach, 2005). Saskatchewan schools that are designated as Community Schools and choose to offer a preschool program, however, receive such provincial funds.¹

According to the early learning literature, concerns remain regarding access for all students when it seems apparent that preschool programs are not accessible to all families and children living at or near the poverty line. As identified by the SPF in their 2004 *Annual Report*, \$34,000 in tuition subsidy assistance was provided to families, which enabled 111 children to attend preschool in Saskatoon (Saskatoon Preschool Foundation, 2004). The need for funding preschool tuition subsidies continues in Saskatoon, but the question is whether, after five years of supporting families and children by helping their children gain access to preschools, the subsidy has helped? What difference has the preschool tuition subsidy made in the lives of recipient families and children? The purpose of this research was to gain a sense of the subsidies' effect from the stories of families who received them.

A REVIEW OF THE SPF TUITION SUBSIDY

The SPF's 2004 *Annual Report* and early childhood education literature indicate that investment in the early years is as important as that in post-secondary education because both periods of human development pay lifelong dividends to individuals and communities. As reported in *Understanding the Early Years: Community Mapping for Children in Saskatoon*, most Saskatoon children do well in social competence, communication skills, and general knowledge, but for the remaining children there is room for improvement (Muhajarine, Delanoy, Hartsook, and Hartsook, 2003). Early learning studies indicate that early brain development sets a base for learning, behaviour, and health throughout life. Preschool provides important such early learning experiences for children. After a decade of working on behalf of preschool education, the SPF has become recognized as a knowledgeable advocate for early childhood learning, the importance of the early years to children's development, and addressing the needs of families of preschool children. Families who are experiencing financial difficulty can apply for a subsidy to pay either the full or partial cost of the preschool tuition for one or more children. In 2005, the SPF received a grant from the Community-University Institute for Social Research (CUISR) to review the effectiveness of its preschool tuition program during the 2004-2005 school year.

METHOD

Data were collected using a background information questionnaire to develop a participant profile and individual taped conversations with twelve participants. These participants were selected based on criteria such as number of children in the family, having a child who attended preschool, and percentage of subsidy received. In order to be representative of the six preschool sites and each geographical sector of the city, the selected participants reflected the diversity of tuition subsidy recipients. Transcripts were generated from audio recordings of the individual conversations, which in turn formed

the data for the study. These conversations were dependent upon participant responses and relied on a conversation guide rather than that of structured questions. The purpose was to motivate participants to speak about the SPF tuition subsidy in ways that were personally relevant rather than framed by the interviewer.

CONVERSATIONAL INTERVIEWING

Postmodernism, which claims that there are a variety of perspectives in the world, none of which are privileged, has changed our society, the way we envision it, how we see ourselves, and how we relate with others (Fontana, 2003). Postmodern epistemology (i.e. ways of obtaining knowledge) have affected our understanding of the interview process, and so the approaches used have also taken on a postmodern tenor (Fontana, 2003; Fontana and Frey, 2000; Reinharz and Chase, 2003), specifically with respect to the questioning of traditional assumptions about “one truth” and “one story.” Postmodern epistemology is oriented towards a choice of many possible stories and seeks to understand and express the various narratives rather than gloss over them. Fontana (2003) identified postmodern interviewing as an approach that allows diverse voices to come through and focus on the dialogue or conversation between the researcher and the participant. Schwandt (1997) observed that

[i]t has become increasingly common in qualitative studies to view the interview as a form of discourse between two or more speakers or as linguistic event in which the meanings of questions and responses are contextually grounded and jointly constructed by interviewer and respondent (79).

In short, Schwandt suggested that a conversational approach to interviewing emphasized researcher and participant becoming equal partners in a negotiated dialogue, thus allowing for conversations about feelings as well as activities. Fontana and Frey (2000) reported that researchers have realized that the results of interviews cannot be taken out of the contexts in which they were gathered and offered as “objective data” without any ramifications. For this reason, it is time to recognize the interview as a practical production where meaning is accomplished in the interaction between researcher and participant (Fontana and Frey, 2000: 664). To borrow from Fontana and Frey (2000), researchers must “decenter,” or move away, from the “ivory tower” and construct participatory, democratic approaches to interviewing. Research for this study used a taped-conversation approach to interviewing in recognition of postmodern features evident in our present society.

THE PARTICIPANTS

SPF tuition subsidy recipients (parents/guardians) were the population of interest in this study, not only because they are expected to be thoughtful about the nature of preschool education, but also because of their significant role in shaping views of education in their children.

Participants in the individual taped conversations for this study were parents/guardians who had formerly received SPF tuition subsidies and whose children completed preschool at one of the six selected sites during the 2004-2005 school year. Participants' taped conversations took place in their homes or, when appropriate, in a neutral location, dependent upon participant choice.

PROCEDURE

The SPF provided a list of 2004-2005 preschool tuition subsidy recipients from which the SPF executive director made initial telephone contact to gauge the interest of particular parents/guardians in participating in this research. From this list of subsidy recipients, letters of invitation were sent asking for participation in the individual taped conversations. This procedure garnered the participation of twelve tuition subsidy recipient parents/guardians of children who completed preschool during the 2004-2005 school year. This list was used only for the purposes of finding potential volunteers for this study and was destroyed following the data collection stage of the study. Parents/guardians on the list received a phone call, which was followed by a letter from the researcher that included the time and location of the individual taped conversation and the consent form. The researcher did not have any prior relationship to the parent/guardians who participated in the individual taped conversation. The participants in this study were representative of the north, south, east, and west sectors of Saskatoon.

Results of the individual taped conversations were reported in aggregate form, not by individual preschool. Every effort was taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of participants, and parents/guardians were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

DATA COLLECTION

This research involved data collection from parent/guardian subsidy recipients in order to understand the impact of the SPF tuition subsidy on their children and families. In individual taped conversations, participants discussed their thoughts on their preschool child with respect to school involvement and participation, student work, and their child's own thoughts about preschool.

DATA ANALYSIS

Upon completion of the taped conversations, initial coding of the transcripts consisted of content coding (e.g. a particular passage about the benefits of preschool would be coded at the node “Benefits”) and text search (searching text for patterns of words and phrases), which resulted in the generation of “tree nodes,” an index for grouping emergent concepts and themes. Participant comments, concepts, and themes were identified that related to the impacts of preschool on children and families.

RESULTS

Analysis of the background information questionnaire provided an overall profile of participants who have received tuition subsidies from the SPF. Most of participants (81%) were mothers, 26-29 years of age, white, single and never married, who had completed some post-secondary education and had worked outside the home in the past twelve months. Participants indicated that they have, on average, two children. In a majority of cases, the youngest child has been the most recent preschooler. A majority of participants (73%) identified a wide variety of employment, including casual labour, stay-at-home parent, self-employed, educator, early learning facilitator, information technologist, and researcher. A slight majority of participants (55%) indicated that they were working part-time, most often in casual and self-employed roles.

Exactly half the participants stated that they received a 50% tuition subsidy, while the other half received a 100% tuition subsidy. Participants were unanimous in commenting that the SPF tuition subsidy provided their child an “educational advantage.” What constituted an “educational advantage” and the impact of preschool on children and families derived from participants’ views of the preschool experiences and their own children’s participation in early learning.

PRESCHOOL'S IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The Child Welfare League (2005) reported that research had found evidence that a healthy start to a child’s life had unparalleled long-lasting benefits. In particular, the experiences of the first days, months, and years of a child’s life have a decisive impact on healthy development. Similarly, participant comments focused predominantly on preschool experiences perceived as establishing a readiness² for learning and the K-12 school system. As one participant pointed out, preschool experiences were quite positive: “When Jamie³ went to school, she’d come back with a little bit more knowledge. She wanted to know more, read more ... and [was] a lot more attentive.”

In speaking of preschool experiences, another participant indicated that her daughter Ashley was “making a lot of new friends” and “learning more about the kids she was interacting with ... and now she is ... taking more of a leadership role and trying to help the other little kids.” In general, participants commented that preschool experiences provided benefits for their children that typically focused on social, emotional, literacy, and communication skills.

CHILDREN’S PRESCHOOL EXPERIENCES: BENEFITS

Participants understood the benefits of preschool as providing children early learning experiences that facilitated a “preschool advantage.” In one sense, participants perceived that the preschool emphasis on social skills development, such as behavioural, social, emotional, and interpersonal skills, was of singular importance to children. For example, Pam observed that

the ones that go to preschool, I find that they can sit still, they’ll listen, and they’ll look around. As for the other kids, they’re running and jumping up and down and they don’t acknowledge anybody when they’re talking to them, not at all. The ones in preschool will sit and talk and you know they listen, and that does help.

Another participant, Shirley, believed that preschool reinforced how “everything is sort of timed and you need to listen and [learn] the transition of things.” Shirley also indicated that preschool children have better abilities to take “direction or sit and focus for periods of time.” This ability for children to focus, listen, and take direction was considered a major benefit of preschool.

Social and behavioural skills development

Most participants shared the view that a significant benefit of preschool was that it presented an advantage for children to learn how to get along with others. Another participant, Linda, stated,

I have a few times been a parent helper so when I get to see it myself, she does work well with the kids. All kids are different ... [and] Kate fits in and shares well ... and she definitely is learning things from preschool and sharing, and, you know, every now and then she’ll say, “Use your inside voice” to me [*laughs*] and sometimes I do. And, yeah, she’s picked up the good manners and good behaviours, and definitely that’s why I wanted her [in preschool]. And I know I’ll be putting her in again for a third year of preschool before she starts school.

In relating her perspectives about social skills development in preschool, Linda explained that social skills and socializing

was the biggest thing why I wanted her [Kate] in [preschool] because I know that ABC's and math comes later, but it was just to make sure she is social with other kids, you know, so that was mostly just ... I needed her to be around more kids

Complementary to Linda's view, Nicole identified a major benefit of preschool:

Other than just the interaction with the other children her age ... [is] the environment of school that she's exposed to, the structure and kind of the routine that they go through. Also just learning how to react or interact in a different social environment without me around is really good.

Nadine shared this sentiment:

[P]reschool was ... a wonderful experience for my son, learning through play ... cooperation, sharing, interaction, and interpersonal social skills and non-verbal skills. A very positive experience.

Emotional and interpersonal skills development

Participant comments about social and behavioural skills development were often followed by an explanation of emotional skills development, another benefit of preschool. Most participants made references to enhanced coping skills. For example, "sometimes there were some scuffles over some dolls ... but for the most part [children] usually worked it out themselves as far as I could tell when I was in the classroom." This usually involved the preschool teacher "intervening but also explaining what they [children] should be doing and how to deal with it when [conflict] happens." Similarly, Stephanie described how "Jamie was very clingy and having her go with other kids [to preschool] was a benefit to her because she became used to the separation [before kindergarten]," and "preschool reduced her stubbornness and she became more willing to sit down and do things, follow instructions, and take direction."

According to participants, preschool also improved children's abilities to resolve conflict in a civil manner. Marianne described children "getting the job done together."

Apparently indicating their awareness and acceptance of the crowded conditions at the preschool sandbox, the children knew “there were limits to, like, how many people could play at this spot, and the kids knew this.” Louise, in relating preschool experiences of her son Greg, mentioned that

he just really learned how to deal with his differences with other kids, and he would come home and say, “Well, he’s not a very nice boy.” And it gave us that chance [to reinforce] about how to deal with people who treat you differently and not to ever behave that way if you don’t like it.

Participants mentioned impulse control as another benefit of developing of emotional and interpersonal skills. In reflecting on her child Adele’s preschool experiences, Sharon related that

she was always, like, demanding, she’d always have to be first, and, you know, it wasn’t like she listened first to see what was done. She’d always go jump into it without realizing what it was. ... [N]ow she [can] wait until you [are] finished talking.

Similarly, Rhonda indicated that her daughter Jennifer

used to be a little pushy at home and [after] she started going to [pre]school she wasn’t as bossy. ... I found when I was in [the classroom that the teacher] was very persistent on how she taught the kids and “this is not acceptable in class,” so when the kids got in trouble, Jennifer would notice and say she’s glad she didn’t do that today. It was nice that the teacher was consistent because there were some kids that were a lot of work for her.

Barb, in describing her son Michael’s preschool experiences, shared the following observation about impulse control:

I remember we went to the preschool for just a visit to check it out, and I remember [Michael] had this alligator toy. But it was supposed to be circle time and the rule is no toys in circle time, and he flipped

out and ended up getting a timeout on our visit. [I]n the beginning [of preschool] he got, you know, a few timeouts, but by the end of the year the teacher said that he had come the furthest and that she believed he'd be ready for kindergarten.

There was consensus among participants that children who attended preschool have an advantage. According to participants, preschool children have a greater readiness to learn, mainly because the preschool has supported children in learning to adjust to the school-like environment of preschool through an emphasis on social, behavioural, and emotional skills development.

Communication and literacy skills development

Preschool children have better developed communication and literacy skills according to participant perspectives. This advantage is mainly attributed to enhanced social, behavioural, and emotional skills developed in preschool. Louise recounted that she noticed of her son Greg that

his social skills really start[ed] to spread where he was talking to more kids and coming home with more stories ... [and was] more independent. ... [He was learning] alphabets and learning things and coming home and showing me what he had learned ... like new words, and I'd look and say, well, I've never heard him say, you know, use that word before, and it was kind of neat to hear him use [new words and] realize that he's learning.

Nicole noticed a connection that her daughter Cindy made between learning new words and stories at preschool and literacy activities at home:

I can tell [Cindy] the letters to write something and she can write them herself. Like, she can write, "Cindy made this picture," if I tell her what letter to write next, and I think that she will be reading very soon. You know, we read books together [and] she's starting to recognize words a little more.

There was unanimity among participants that preschool activities involving shapes, colours, letters, stories, and field trips, combined with children's appropriate social and emotional behaviours, resulted in "huge leaps in literacy skills." Rhonda, in describing her daughter Jennifer's development in literacy and communication skills, reported that

she spoke very well. ... [H]er sentences, her speaking formation, everything is really, really a lot better. ... [W]hat I mean is she was speaking very well and you could understand her, but ... it's like she ... took a dictionary and pulled a word out and started talking about it. ... I found [pre]school helped with that a lot, whereas I don't think she would be doing that otherwise.

In several cases, participants stated that language acquisition was nurtured in preschool and that it fostered enhanced literacy and communication skills among preschool children. One participant reported how the preschool's attention to literacy and communication skills was empowering for her daughter:

[R]ecently [the preschool children] had a new section they were doing ... and she really enjoyed coming home with her figurines and telling me the [proper] names, like brontosaurus, instead of longneck.

This type of intellectual stimulation was also recognized as being related to literacy and communication skills and supported by well-developed social skills. In speaking about her child Arianna, Elaine emphasized the relationship between communication skills and well-developed social skills:

[S]he came out of her shell because she was, like, she was talkative enough at the daycare, but she was really shy being around other people, and once she started preschool, oh man! You couldn't get her to stop talking. And we'd take the bus and she was talking to everybody. Even now she is quite more outgoing than she was before preschool, but she learned to talk an awful lot [*laughs*] ... [and] her vocabulary definitely increased.

In general, the preschool experiences identified by participants were understood as enhancing their child's readiness for kindergarten. This readiness for learning was perceived as an educational advantage, which was further considered an important support for developing preschool children's confidence for managing the intellectual, social, behavioural, interpersonal, and emotional situations commonly found in schools.

As identified by participants, preschool experiences are synonymous with an educational advantage that is associated with a readiness for learning and preparedness for successful learning experiences in the K-12 school system. Participants viewed children

with preschool experience as ready and prepared to learn, and believed that preschool positively affected K-12 learning.

CHILDREN WITH PRESCHOOL AND RELATIONSHIP WITH K-12 SCHOOLING

Participant perspectives about their children's preschool experiences foreshadowed the relationship that participants understood existed between preschool and K-12 schooling. As identified by participants when relating stories about their children's preschool experiences, preschool provided an educational advantage and was responsible for influencing children's success as they proceeded through the K-12 school system. Louise reported that she actually saw the difference in her son's kindergarten class between children who attended preschool and those who had not. In particular, Louise believed that preschool helped her son in the areas of communication, literacy, and social skills.

[H]e's just very well adjusted ... he is very well prepared. I think having that positive experience especially with the staff and how wonderful they were to him, I think that's made it seem like more of a positive thing for him to be able to go to school and, you know, have that trust in his teacher and even look forward to learning with somebody new. And I think that really impacted him—I mean, having that first positive experience—so he really looks forward to going to school.

Participants indicated that preschool experiences provided their children with a solid foundation or base for supporting learning in the K-12 system, and that this base “sticks” with children as they make the transition from preschool to kindergarten and the early grades.

THE EDUCATIONAL ADVANTAGE

Participants were almost unanimous in identifying preschool as providing their children with an educational advantage. From the participants' perspective, preschool fosters and supports children's adjustment to the regular school structures, routines, and expectations.

I think [preschool] is total preparation for school, just like high school is supposed to prepare you for university.

[It is] preparing her to listen to the rules that the teacher gives [her] and the others.

She kind of knows what to expect. There is no nap time or, you know, you only have so much time that you're free to play, you know?

She knows free time is free time and school time is time to learn.

Preschool is perceived as going a long way in supporting and preparing kids for the types of activities and situations that require coping skills, being able to communicate, and being able to resolve conflicts peacefully. As Linda observed with her daughter Kate,

preschool will definitely be a benefit to her and I think she will do really well when it comes to kindergarten ... listening to the teacher ... us[ing] [her] manners, knowing how a classroom would go. ... I know it is a huge benefit to her and ... it will help her because she is socialized that way already.

In short, preschool provided an advantage because children had already learned the skills required for classroom behaviours. Participants understood that preschool experiences provided social, emotional, and interpersonal skills that supported children in their ability to focus on the learning taking place in the classroom.

Another educational advantage expressed by participants was of children learning to manage the transition from both preschool to kindergarten, and kindergarten to grade one, and so on. As Stephanie observed,

I think Jamie is that much further ahead in the respect that that she's already worked on a certain amount of, like I said, the independence, the emotional stability, the focusing, the learning, where if she wouldn't have had that in preschool, she'd have been starting that in kindergarten and maybe she wouldn't have even mastered that in kindergarten. Maybe she'd be that much more stubborn about doing anything else. So I think she's farther ahead because she kind of passed a certain point so that when it came to kindergarten she didn't have to focus as much on that. She was more comfortable with certain things. ... [S]he doesn't put up a fuss at all, but I would think not having the preschool experience, I think it would've made the transition to kindergarten that much harder.

Stephanie also stated that this preschool advantage would continue on through the public school grades because

she's gotta learn to deal with other things ... and, you know, trying to make the elementary years a little bit easier.

Preschool provided experiences and opportunities for children to learn to take direction from adults other than their parents and to get along with others their own age. The interactions that children have in preschool, whether those activities are crafts or games, have learning objectives. These preschool activities provide a base upon which kindergarten will build, and will also help make the transition to kindergarten and subsequent grades smoother.

Barb referred to preschool as providing the "building blocks" for successful K-12 schooling. In preschool, children are

learning all these social skills, they're learning how to act properly in a classroom, and they're learning the things that you would learn in kindergarten. I've heard that lots of times children have failed kindergarten because they were not ready emotionally, they couldn't handle the social part of it. ... [C]hildren fail kindergarten because they're not behaviourally ready, and I think it would be fair to say they didn't go to preschool.

To the participants, children who attended preschool arrived in kindergarten ready to be there. They were used to classroom routines and had developed social, behavioural, and emotional skills. These skills were not only an advantage in kindergarten, but subsequent grades. Preschool provided confidence, readiness to learn, and preparedness for regular school, with all the related routines, rules, and expectations. Barb stated that "[h]onestly, I know from experience that if kids get in over their heads and are not in their comfort zone, they shut down."

PRESCHOOL ADVANTAGE PERPETUATED IN K-12 SCHOOLING

Participants indicated that the advantages that preschool provides for children continues over time and regarded "preparation for K-12 schooling" as one of its greatest benefits. Participants believed that their children learned appropriate social, interpersonal, and coping skills through interaction with other children and adults at preschool. Most par-

ents in this study observed that their children typically demonstrated these social and behavioural skills once they began kindergarten and they perceived that these social, emotional, and interpersonal skills facilitated children's improved abilities to focus on the learning that takes place in the kindergarten classroom.

Having had an opportunity to learn appropriate social, emotional, and interpersonal skills in preschool is considered a "huge advantage" because, according to participants, children begin kindergarten equipped to participate in the routines and expectations of participating in a "regular" classroom with twenty other children. Participants identified that children who begin kindergarten with these skills in place tend to demonstrate improved impulse control and a better ability to maximize learning. Sandra described her child's preschool preparation for regular school in the following manner:

Karen had to, at first [she] had to get used to all these children in the classroom. ... I'm sure that ABC's and the counting would all come in, but Karen was quite well-adjusted in knowing that you had to get used to all these kids and listening to a teacher and not know what is going on. You know, Karen's already got it down pat, [and] she knows ... listening and the structure of a classroom. ... I've seen her around the older kids there and ... I can tell she really feels she's at school and this is her school [and] schooling.

Stephanie indicated that preschool children are further ahead in terms of independence, emotional stability, and ability to focus on learning. To a large extent, participants shared the perception that preschool children are comfortable with school routines and expectations because the preschool child is considered "better adjusted socially" and, as a result, "a lot less hyperactive, more on-task, organized and structured" for learning in the K-12 system. Elaine described preparedness for school in this way:

[P]reschool kids may be a little bit ahead of the kids who didn't go to preschool because I believe they're familiar with such activities and it's the same type of activities and [structure] that they did at preschool.

Janet identified a "huge relationship" between preschool and the K-12 system, which consists of the realization of structure, the opportunity to sharpen skills, the cultivation of the child's sense of autonomy and "the preschool's development of literacy skills, large and small motor skills, and the motivation to satisfy interests and do more digging on topics like the sun."

In summary, it is evident from participant comments in terms of preparation for kindergarten, preschool helps children: build confidence for going into school and interacting appropriately with others in a classroom; prepare the appropriate “mind-set” for functioning in the regular school environment; learn how to transition from grade to grade; and develop literacy skills, all of which because “introduced early on in the child’s learning, the child looks forward to school and learning.” Participants stated that children get considerable “mileage” from positive experiences with preschool staff and learning activities, and emphasized that these positive relationships impact children so that they are enthusiastic about going to school. These preschool experiences, then, are a valuable link between preschool and successful K-12 learning.

THE PARENT’S ROLE IN CHILDREN’S PRESCHOOL EXPERIENCES

Participants were almost unanimous in identifying their commitment to preschools and giving back as much as their jobs and family schedules allowed. Participants also cited the importance of having “your kid see you helping out,” whether the duties were to assist the teacher or “provide snacks, help with lunch, take kids to the washroom and [help with] change of shoes.” As one participant stated, “it is important to role model for my kids. My kids now ‘get’ my involvement with community associations and [working to] make our community safer.” Nicole described her parental involvement with the preschool as

ensuring my child understands the preschool teaching is comfortable and supported, and the learning is practiced and reinforced. Giving back means parents reinforcing teachers and teachers reinforcing parents. This is a two-way commitment between the preschool and parents.

Participants reported that helping the preschool in various capacities is what giving back is about. In addition to volunteering, helping with fundraising and participating in preschool associations or boards were considered other ways of giving back to preschools. Participants believed that preschools work well for children when parents are interested and invest themselves with their child’s preschool.

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SPF

In describing the relationship established with the SPF in the process of applying for funding, participants stated that the “human relationship” created between subsidy recipients and the SPF resonated with them. Participants were almost unanimous in

identifying the SPF executive director as central to establishing a “friendly” or “user friendly” relationship and putting a “human face” to the SPF. Participants regarded the tuition subsidy application process, including a telephone conversation with the SPF executive director, as a positive and supportive experience.

[T]alking to [the SPF executive director] a couple times about getting funded full-time ... we had categorized everything and [this conversation] was very help[ful], I guess. [He was] just really willing to help in figuring out what could be done for me and Greg ... [a] very supportive [relationship].

The relationship with the SPF was considered “very user friendly and basically logical. We filled out some forms and there was a telephone conversation and some basic details that we needed to talk about and as a result [it] was very easy.” Marianne reflected on her relationship with the SPF:

[I] found it very pleasant. ... I’ve done lots of things to ask for money, you know, loans ... and the kinds of things [where] they don’t care whether you have bills for this, that, and the other thing. They don’t care what you pay. They only care what you make. Well, that’s not a good picture because what you make is not what you have, so it was very good that the Preschool Foundation took into account [my] bills when assessing need.

The relationship with the SPF was often referred to as “good” because of the foundation’s mission of helping families by supporting children’s attendance at preschool. Participants often referred to their relationship with the SPF as “non-intrusive” and “non-judgmental.” For example, “once I sat down with [the executive director] it didn’t seem like a lot of red [tape], you know, like really getting into my life or anything like that. ... [I]t wasn’t intrusive at all.” Another participant said, “I didn’t feel uncomfortable at all being asked that information, and, I don’t know, it was just things they had to know, I guess ... to make their decision.” The application process and subsequent relationship with the SPF was described as “very simple, like, it was just uncomplicated.” The interaction and relationship with the SPF was regarded as “friendly” and focused attention and resources on supporting what is best for children.

Learning about the tuition subsidy

Nearly all participants (91%) said that they learned of the SPF tuition subsidy from their respective preschools. Only one participant indicated that she became aware of the SPF tuition subsidy from her child's former daycare provider.

The tuition subsidy and preschool attendance

In discussing the tuition subsidy and their child's attendance at preschool, participants were unambiguous. If it had not been for the SPF tuition subsidy, most (73%) would not have been able to send their child to preschool because of financial hardship. The other participants indicated that their children would have attended preschool without the subsidy even if the costs created financial hardship. As one participant disclosed,

this education was [as] essential as basic needs of the family like food. ... [Not receiving tuition subsidy] would make life kind of difficult for us to balance the budget, [but] because of the importance of this education most probably we would send him to the preschool anyway.

Another participant echoed those sentiments: “[W]e’d have had to move some money around that probably couldn’t be moved around and ... [that might have resulted in] not paying for things we should have been paying [for].”

In summary, participants described the relationship between tuition subsidy applicants/recipients as a positive and supportive relationship where the parent felt like a partner with the SPF rather than a client. In most cases, participants stated that they were “pleasantly surprised” that the SPF executive director did not challenge parents’ choices about how they allocated their monthly income. Moreover, the relationship was about “working with families to get them what they need” in a non-intrusive and non-judgmental manner. Participants said that they were indeed “appreciative” of both the user-friendly application process and the SPF for the financial help that allowed their children to attend preschool.

THE SUBSIDY

Participants believed that the SPF tuition subsidy “levelled the playing field” with respect to their children’s access to preschools. When probed further, “fair access” frequently surfaced as a key feature of the subsidy program and one of the subsidy program’s major strengths. Marianne explained that the SPF tuition subsidy “helps anyone gain access to early childhood education” because the “playing field is level” and there is equity in accessing the SPF support.

The tuition subsidy program is not a program just for Aboriginal kids. There are a lot of ... white, middle class families that struggle, too. I didn't know if we would get it [subsidy] and we got 100%, and I'm like, "Oh my God, that is nice ... nice [that] something out there was in one bowl [i.e. pool of money]."

Participants perceived that the SPF tuition subsidy allows fair access to families "less privileged" financially and is not based on culture or ethnicity. The SPF tuition subsidy is awarded to applicant families on the basis of need and enables children to attend preschool "without any strings attached." From the participants' perspective, fair access is the overarching strength of the SPF tuition subsidy program and that this has a major impact on families and children.

Participants in this research indicated a passion for early learning experiences for their children and a commitment to "doing whatever it takes" to obtain the educational advantage that they perceived the preschool program provided their children. Parents understood access to preschool as providing children from lower income families the same opportunity for a "good start" as more affluent families were able to ensure their own children. In a conversation with Stephanie about the strength of the SPF tuition subsidy, she said that

getting the kids going to preschool [is a strength] because for us it would definitely have been that Jamie most likely would not have had that experience, and I'm sure in cases where families need the 100% subsidy it's even more the case, you know, and [the children] probably have even less exposure to certain things I would imagine in lower income environments.

When asked to clarify, Stephanie confirmed her perspective that the strength of the tuition subsidy is in providing access for lower income families because "I would think, I'm assuming that's the whole foundation or purpose for the foundation is providing [help] for lower income families and making sure kids get a good start."

[The subsidy] enables families that otherwise, you know, couldn't really afford for their children to go to preschool to be able to participate in preschool, and, I think, it would be fair to say that the low income children probably need preschool more than, say, non-low income children because a lot of the time those families are single parents.

In this way, the SPF tuition subsidy provides an invaluable bridge that supports parents sending their children to preschool, and is therefore a key strength of the program.

PARENT PERSPECTIVES: SPF TUITION SUBSIDY AND HOW IT HAS HELPED CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Participants were almost unanimous in stating that the tuition subsidy was a factor that helped them make the decision to have their children attend preschool, “because you know that financial part, the financial pressure was easier to take.” Two general categories were revealed from participant comments about how the subsidy has helped their children and families: (1) enabling access to the educational advantage that preschool offers; and (2) facilitating a “little room” in the family budget to allow for necessities or other opportunities.

In the first case, participants determined the tuition subsidy to be helpful to children and families because it allowed access to preschools, where teachers and staff initiated and supported children’s social, behavioural, and emotional skills development. Participants also perceived that their children’s literacy, communication, and language skills had developed from “connecting with other kids and adults at preschool.” Most participants considered the SPF tuition subsidy as synonymous with “the educational advantage provided by preschool.” Janet’s comment that “[p]reschool provides a huge learning advantage for kids” was representative of the overall participant view of how the subsidy has helped children and families. Sharon explained that her child “was still in her baby talk so you [could not] really figure out what she’s talking about.” However, with access to preschool, enabled by the tuition subsidy, “she’ll be getting speech therapy soon” to address this developmental concern. What resonated in the participant stories was the initial sense of relief that accompanied their subsidy approval and subsequent celebration of “equal access to [preschool’s] educational advantage.”

The second view of how the tuition subsidy helped children and families was revealed in participant stories that equated qualifying for the tuition subsidy with having a “little wiggle room” in the family budget, of not having to endure further financial hardship by “finding a way to send my kid to preschool without subsidy.” In sharing her story, Nicole disclosed that

the tuition subsidy helped us by working out a little extra money for extra-curricular activities [for her children], groceries, or something for the kids, like an extra movie in the month. The subsidy provided options for [my] family with our use of this “surplus” money.

While not representative of most participants' opinions, this view expressed how the tuition subsidy helped children and their families access preschool and enabled options in the family budget for purchase of "educational items" (Crowther, 2005). Participants said that they could more easily explore their choices and make decisions regarding family activities without incurring additional financial hardship. Participants indicated that having options in the family budget and "being like a regular family" demonstrated how the subsidy has helped children and families. A majority of participants were adamant about the importance of the funding available from the SPF for tuition subsidies.

Finally, participants also frequently mentioned that "preschool learning carries over to our home" and that it is a regular occurrence for them to "reinforce preschool learning, and the preschool reinforces our family teaching." According to participants, another impact of the subsidy for children and families was enabling reinforcement of preschool-home learning, thus strengthening child-parent-family interaction and relationship building.

ALTERNATIVES TO THE SPF FUNDING PRESCHOOL TUITION SUBSIDIES

In discussing potential funding alternatives, participants suggested that the SPF fund preschool resources because "preschools out there are having a really hard time pay[ing] their teachers so they can keep them. ... [Preschools] can't pay their teachers well [and] the place isn't supplied all that well." Accordingly, participants thought that the SPF could consider providing "some support for the teachers [such as] teaching materials and training." A second alternative was related to the hardship some families experienced when "[we] feel pressured with the fundraisers for this particular preschool," which feels like "non-stop fundraising" and has the "potential for [creating] awkward moments at home" when fundraising expectations exceed the family budget.

I definitely felt pressured with the fundraisers, and myself and two of the other parents brought it up directly to that particular preschool. I think their goal was to pay off [a considerable debt] and I thought, "Well, that's great, but I have to pay my [debts], you know." Like, I, I would prefer my fundraising money not go directly to [the debt], but go to helping the school, [although] you don't see that as directly, you don't see a direct effect.

The complaint about "non-stop fundraising" was regarded as a burden on families.

[O]ne [mother] mentioned that she added up what they spent on fundraising the same year that [Jamie] went [to] the same preschool, and they spent \$640 in fundraisers throughout the year ... and they didn't do everything, you know. And [this story] just tells you how much was out there. ... [S]he talked to the school and said, "This is ridiculous!" They had no problems with the school and the teaching, but they just felt beyond pressure. I would like to see preschool as a part of the whole public school system.

Participants overwhelmingly supported the continued funding of preschool tuition subsidies and suggested that any other SPF funding alternatives be available in addition to the subsidy.

I think that their [SPF] money should go to helping kids being able to go to school rather than helping the schools ... [by] putting [funding into] schools for field trips or supplies. ... [Y]ou can be taught without having those things and having a child [in preschool] that otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity to be there is more important than having the [extras] and field trips. I think [SPF funds] should be focused more on being able to help getting children [to preschool].

In discussing possible alternatives to funding the SPF preschool tuition subsidy, participants were passionate about early learning and providing access to preschool for all children. Participants emphasized that the best way for the SPF to use their money was continued support of children and families with the preschool tuition subsidy program—"Leave it alone!" When discussing whether the SPF should do something else with their money, Rhonda said, "I actually love that the [SPF] is doing this. I've actually told other people about [the subsidy]. ... [I]t is a big reliever." She recommended that the SPF not change a thing, a sentiment shared among the participants.

WHO HAS OWNERSHIP FOR EDUCATING CHILDREN?

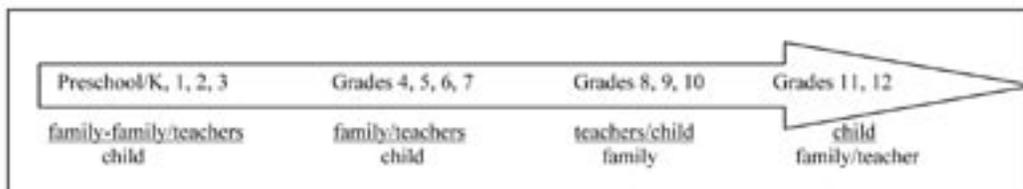
In the course of conversations about preschool experiences, the educational advantage of early learning, the SPF subsidy, and how it helped children and families, participants shared their thinking about who has ownership (or responsibility) for educating children. Not surprisingly, participants identified that ownership as resting principally with parents and families. From their perspective as parents, they believe that families have a duty to encourage learning, support the child's school experiences and activities, and impress

upon their child that as they grow older the responsibility for learning gradually becomes their own. The following comment was representative of participants' perspectives with respect to identifying who has ownership for educating children:

[P]eople without the resources that I have might find it a lot more difficult to put their children in preschool and make their education a high priority considering they might be more thinking about where their money is going or other situations that their family may have. I think it's easy for me to say that her education was a high priority for me and is not going to get in the way of any money issues, but I think that a person in my situation, the family would be in control of her education. ... I'm not sure if people on social assistance or the working poor or families who don't have a lot of opportunity, I think in these situations the community might have to step in making sure students are getting the education that we did and stop the cycle of [parent neglect and children not in school]. ... [I]t is up to the family to provide the resources [necessary] for education, [although support agencies] should be able to help ... with education ... for young children.

As presented in **Figure 1**, the child's individual responsibility for own their education increases as they proceed through the K-12 school system. In addition, participants perceived that it is incumbent upon parents to access supports, financial or otherwise, for their child's learning and, in this way, accept responsibility for their child's education.

Figure 1. Shifting Responsibility and Ownership of Education.



In summary, as a child proceeds through the formal school system, the responsibility for ownership of education shifts from being almost exclusively that of the parents to being shared among parents, teachers, and child. As the child proceeds through late elementary/middle grades and into high school, the child gradually assumes greater responsibility for ownership of their education. As the participants identified, the parent's role evolves to one of support and encouragement as their child proceeds through their twelve years of education after kindergarten.

DISCUSSION

Parents' experience with their children's preschool affirms previous research findings. Two of the main impacts of the preschool tuition subsidy that participants identified were readiness and preparation for school. Participants also indicated an understanding that attention to behavioural, social, and emotional skills, as well as development of literacy and communication skills in preschools, provided an "educational advantage" to preschool children and that this advantage also benefits families. The notion of an educational advantage was consistent with the early childhood education literature and reconfirmed the importance of McCain and Mustard's recommendation that early learning receive the same attention as K-12 school and post-secondary periods of human development.

Participants frequently identified "total preparation for school" as a positive impact of preschool, which they connected to the SPF tuition subsidy. As participants revealed, preschool provided children opportunities to practice behavioural, social, and emotional skills, and simultaneously teach children to manage distractions and maintain their focus while learning in a classroom. As a result, the potential for disruptive behaviours to negatively affect a child's progress in kindergarten was minimized.

Perspectives about the relationship between preschool and the K-12 school system revealed participants' understanding that preschool fosters a lifelong learning advantage for children. Participant views were complementary to early childhood education literature, which emphasized that the establishment of this type of neural pathway during a child's early years facilitated a considerable learning advantage. The SPF tuition subsidy, then, had another considerable impact on children and families.

Participants reported that as parents they have a role with their child's preschool and this involved "giving back" to the preschool by modeling for their children and making social contributions. Giving back involved taking responsibility for educating their own children, which might require accessing supports like the SPF tuition subsidy. When joined together, parents and the SPF are a formidable team working for: (1) enhanced early learning opportunities for children; (2) a better future and success as participants in society; (3) reduced impacts of poverty on children and families in the community; and (4) increased support for children's education as a result of greater participation in preschool programs.

Participants shared the view that early learning such as preschool is "as essential as food," and therefore a major strength of the tuition subsidy is in providing families with "fair access" to early learning opportunities that might otherwise be limited due to low income. If parents' voices are heard, new early learning initiatives will be reflected in our communities and hopefully in provincial and federal educational funding. Until national funding initiatives are in place to help provide universal access to preschool, foundations like the SPF have an important place in our communities by working for universal preschool access.

At the time of this writing, a majority of preschools in Saskatchewan do not receive provincial funding, which further emphasizes the SPF's substantial work in our communities and the impacts that the tuition subsidy is having on children and families. The SPF tuition subsidy "helps anyone gain access to early childhood education" because the "playing field is level" and the SPF program is not targeted to a specific population. Participants perceived that the SPF tuition subsidy allows "less privileged" families fair access to preschool, regardless of culture, ethnicity or gender. The participant perspective is that the SPF tuition subsidy is awarded to applicant families "without any strings attached," and this reinforces the belief that fair access is an overarching strength of the SPF tuition subsidy program.

Participants were clear in their comments that preschool tuition subsidies have an impact on families by providing the funds that families need to send their children to preschool. Participants were unanimous that the SPF is respectful and that the application process is non-judgmental and does not challenge families about how they allocate their monthly budget. Rather, families have the ability and autonomy to access the educational advantage of preschool without worrying about finding money in their monthly budgets to make this happen. Participants were adamant that the SPF maintain the tuition subsidy and emphasized that the best use of its funds was continued support of children and families through the current subsidy program. Participants further believed that the SPF should not change a thing in regards to allocating funds and ensuring the continued availability of preschool tuition subsidies for children and their families.

In the initial planning stages of this research, the SPF expressed concern that the ownership of a child's education may shift from parents to the SPF because the foundation pays for all or part of the preschool tuition. Interestingly enough, participants expressed the opposite position about their child's preschool experiences, the relationship between preschool and K-12, the parents role with preschools, the families relationship with the SPF, and the tuition subsidy. Indeed, they unanimously stated that ownership of the responsibility for education rests firmly with parents, although this responsibility eventually shifts to the child as he/she proceeds through K-12 (see **Figure 1**).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations for the SPF emerged from this study:

1. Continue the tuition subsidy program unchanged.
2. Consider a public awareness campaign of the tuition subsidy program. Many participants in this study indicated that they did not have any knowledge of the tuition subsidy program until after they had contact with their preschool.

3. Explore and raise awareness with influential community members about the feasibility of addressing the difficulty that fundraising places on preschool children and their families, and ensure that the supporters of the SPF are aware of its contributions' positive impacts. A small number of participants indicated that they were surprised that not all preschools receive provincial funding and stated that this policy should be reversed.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

The results of this research support and affirm the academic literature regarding the importance of early childhood education. The positive effects of early childhood education, such as educational advantage, equality and social inclusion, and poverty reduction, are supported by the research. Participants were very clear that the tuition subsidy enabled equity of access and stressed that subsidies supported social inclusion, particularly because application approval is based on need, not membership in a targeted population. The SPF tuition subsidy facilitates access to the educational advantages provided by preschool, which thereby has a substantial impact on children and families. A preschool education, as one participant concluded, is “as essential as food.”

NOTES

- ¹ Saskatchewan Community Schools are centres of learning and hope for communities and incorporate a comprehensive range of best educational practices for meeting diverse learning needs in a responsive, inclusive, culturally affirming, and academically challenging program and environment.
- ² Readiness is a common term that refers to children's preparation for school. However, the term is problematic. Readiness assumes that children need to be ready for school, when it is actually incumbent upon schools to be ready for all children with appropriate programming.
- ³ All names used in this report are pseudonyms.

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