

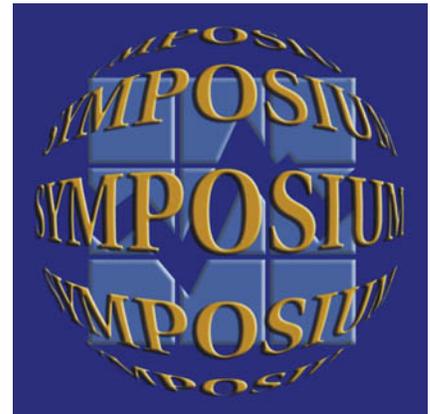


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DATA COLLECTION: SOMETIMES ALL IT TAKES IS A LITTLE PERSUASION ... IN THE FORM OF INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

ISQ's *Grandir en qualité* survey was primarily intended to provide information about the quality of educational child care services and any related factors. Data were collected from 905 commercial and non-profit child care centres between March and June 2003. Data collection involved spending a day observing in a child care operation. The challenges associated with data collection for this survey were as follows: persuading the associations and their members to take part, without their seeing it as a personalized evaluation of their institution; persuading, in particular, the family child care providers who would be observed in their homes; and creating an atmosphere of confidence and discretion among the child care workers through the observers' behaviour.

The results – an overall response rate of 87.8% – are due to an INFORMATION-based collection strategy: providing **information** to obtain the cooperation of child care service associations and managers before conducting the survey; providing the interviewers with detailed **information** about the survey through in-depth training designed for the sensitive context; and providing the observers with the **information** needed to do field observation.

KEYWORDS: Child Care Operation; Informing; Observation; Persuading; Response Rate; Validation.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The *Grandir en qualité* survey

The *Enquête québécoise sur la qualité des services de garde éducatifs* [Quebec survey on the quality of educational child care services], also referred to as the *Grandir en qualité* [growing up in quality surroundings] survey, was intended to measure the quality of educational child care services and the factors associated with that quality (Drouin C.). The survey was conducted by the *Institut de la statistique du Québec* (ISQ), with funding from the *Ministère de l'Emploi, de la Solidarité sociale et de la Famille* (MESSF). Data collection involved spending a day directly observing a randomly selected group of children in a child care operation.

2. BACKGROUND AND GOALS

2.1 Redesigning the child care system

In 1997, the *Ministère de la Famille et de l'Enfance* (MFE), which became the MESSF in 2003, made three changes in the government's family policy (*Ministère du Conseil exécutif*, 1997). One of those changes was to introduce a system of early-childhood educational child care services that would be more advantageous in terms of places and costs. Subsidized non-profit child care facilities and family child care agencies were turned into *Centres de la petite enfance* [early-childhood centres] (CPEs). The second change was the establishment of a program to gradually create more low-cost places (\$5 per child per day) and the addition of a significant number of new places over the following five years. In parallel with the creation of affordable places, the Ministère launched an educational program to ensure the quality of the services provided by regulated facilities that affect child development (MFE, 1997).

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In 1997, there were about 80,000 places in the regulated system. By July 2003, the system had doubled in size to nearly 170,000 places, almost all of them affordable. The creation of affordable places and the rapid increase in the system's capacity led to a huge influx of new child care workers who had to implement the new educational program.

2.2 Information about the quality of educational child care services

There is little information about the quality of educational child care services in Quebec. The MESSF performed inspections, but they were not intended to assess the quality of the services provided to the children. They focused on regulated matters such as the children's health and safety and well-defined criteria such as the number of children per child care worker. In his 1998-1999 annual report, Quebec's auditor general pointed out that the MESSF should be assessing the quality of the services provided to children (Vérificateur général du Québec, 1999).

2.3 Goals of the survey

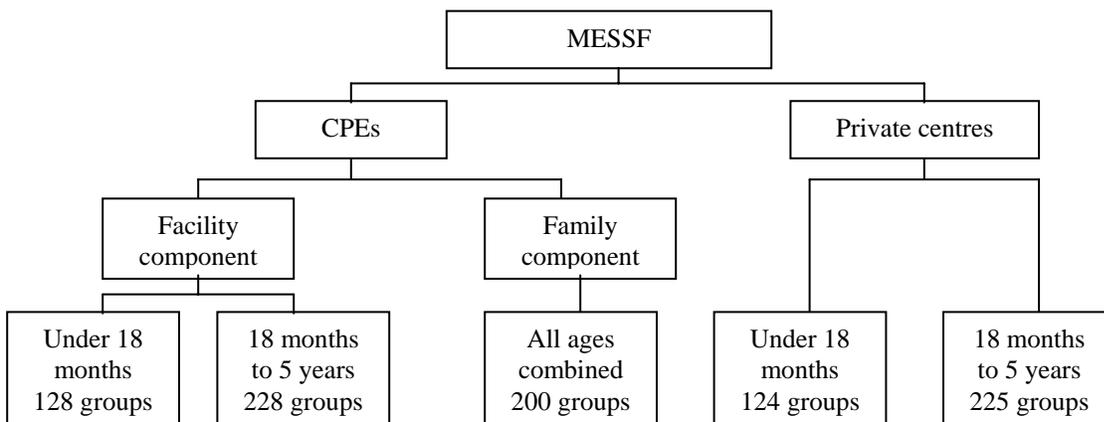
The Ministère's goals were to respond to the auditor general's recommendation and to identify measures to support and improve the quality of regulated child care services in Quebec. The survey's specific objectives were to measure the quality of the children's day-to-day experience in regulated child care services and pinpoint the factors associated with that quality.

3. SAMPLE, COLLECTION METHOD AND INSTRUMENTS

3.1 Sample

The survey's sample was drawn from the population of educational child care services regulated by the Quebec government. There are two main categories of child care services: CPEs and private operations. The CPE is responsible for the facility component and the family operation component. It provides three different types of services: one for children under 18 months (infants), one for children between 18 months and five years old (pre-schoolers) and one for all ages combined, which is specific to family operations. Private operations provide services for children under 18 months and children 18 months or older. The five types of services are shown in Figure 1. For the purposes of the survey, the sample was made up of 905 groups.

Figure 1
Number of operations included in the sample by type of operation



3.2 Collection method and instruments

The collection method used for the *Grandir en qualité* survey was direct observation. This is a commonly used method of assessing the quality of child care services. Data were collected using three observation scales designed for the survey. There was one scale for each of the three types of child care services. In other words, a different scale was used for the infant groups, the pre-school groups and the family services (Bourgon, Lavallée and associates, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). These observation scales were subjected to evaluation and validation such as inter-rater reliability, internal consistency and concurrent validation with the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998). The scales are described in detail in the survey report (Drouin C.).

In the child care operation, the observer would observe a randomly selected group of children. Observation began when the children arrived and ended when they left. The observations were supplemented with an interview with the child care worker and a self-administered questionnaire.

4. SURVEY PROBLEM

4.1 Trigger

The survey was pre-tested in the Montréal area in May 2002. The sample was composed of 30 CPEs, 30 private child care centres and 40 family child care services. The target response rate was 80%. Before data collection began, the leading associations were informed about the survey.

First, an introductory letter was mailed to the managers of the selected child care operations. Then the managers were contacted by a telephone interviewer to obtain their consent and to select the group to be observed. Even at this stage, some associations expressed reluctance to let their members take part in the survey. After training, the observers contacted the operations that had agreed to the survey in order to make an appointment for the observation day. There were a number of refusals at that point, even though the person contacted had agreed during the initial telephone contact.

We realized then that despite their training, the observers, who were early-childhood professionals, not professional interviewers, lacked the experience needed to overcome a refusal to participate in the survey. The pre-test's final response rate was a relatively low 55% (Table 1).

Table 1

Phases and results of the pre-test

	Initial contact by telephone interviewer		Contact by observer to arrange appointment	
	n	Response rate (%)	n	Response rate (%)
CPEs	26/30	86.7	23/30	76.6
Private centres	13/30	43.3	8/30	26.6
Family operations	30/40	75.0	24/40	60.0
Total	69/100	69.0	55/100	55.0

5. COLLECTION STRATEGY: PERSUADE BY INFORMING

5.1 Teamwork

Following the poor results produced by the pre-test, the ISQ working group, composed of the project manager, the methodology expert and the collection team, together with the MESSF, conducted a review of the collection strategies. Changes were recommended in the way the collection operation was prepared and conducted. The winning approach was to **persuade significant parties to take part in the survey by providing information and making them aware of every aspect of the survey project.**

5.2 Whom and how?

The answer to the question “Whom should I persuade?” brings us back to the people who will be directly affected by the observation or a questionnaire. In some surveys, the various decision-making levels that may affect survey participation also have to be identified (or considered). Understandably, the higher the person receiving the information is in the hierarchy, the better the chances of improving response rates.

A number of factors may play a role in the decision to take part or not. In the *Grandir en qualité* survey, the main goal was to measure the quality of the service a child receives in a day at the child care centre. The difficulty here lay in the fact that the survey involved a live evaluation of the day-to-day actions of the people concerned. To overcome that difficulty, it was necessary to seek support from decision-makers. First, each type of child care facility – CPEs, family operations and private child care centres – is represented by one or more associations. The next level is the board of directors and the managers of the operations. The associations and the managers used their power to protect their facilities and their staff from an evaluative approach. The concerns raised by the associations and the managers of CPEs and private child care centres related to the evaluation of one operation in particular and the possibility of comparing one operation with another. For family child care providers, the principal concern was the intrusive nature of the observation in their own space. Those providers care for children in their homes, and their entire personal and family environment was likely to be examined in the observation. In addition, there was reluctance on the part of the people directly concerned by the observation day: the child care workers. They were very suspicious because a stranger would be taking notes on their work for an entire day. In addition, they would have very little verbal contact with the observers, and they would receive no feedback about the observation.

First, the team focused on the largest associations. They were invited to participate in the advisory committee, which consisted of Ministère officials, ISQ employees and researchers. They also took part in developing the instruments, analyzing the data and producing the report. By including the associations in the advisory committee, we guaranteed the ISQ’s neutrality and the transparency of the survey operations and results. The ISQ also ensured confidentiality by means of its legislation, which applied to everyone who worked on the survey. In addition, because of the confidentiality and meticulousness of the ISQ’s statistical analyses, the associations could be sure that none of the published data would identify a particular child care operation or worker. Having received all this INFORMATION, the associations could then meet with or otherwise contact their members and try to persuade them to take part in the survey.

Second, every eligible child care service was INFORMED in writing that the survey would be taking place and that the service might be selected to take part. The operations that were actually selected received documents explaining the survey and the consent process. The materials were intended for the boards and/or managers of the child care operations. Then a telephone interviewer would contact the manager to select the groups of children and make an appointment. In the case of family operations, the provider’s consent was obtained directly on the telephone by the interviewer.

Once the appointment was made, the manager and the child care worker to be observed would receive relevant documentation INFORMING them of the protocol and the procedure for the day. The materials also included leaflets and a poster to INFORM the parents.

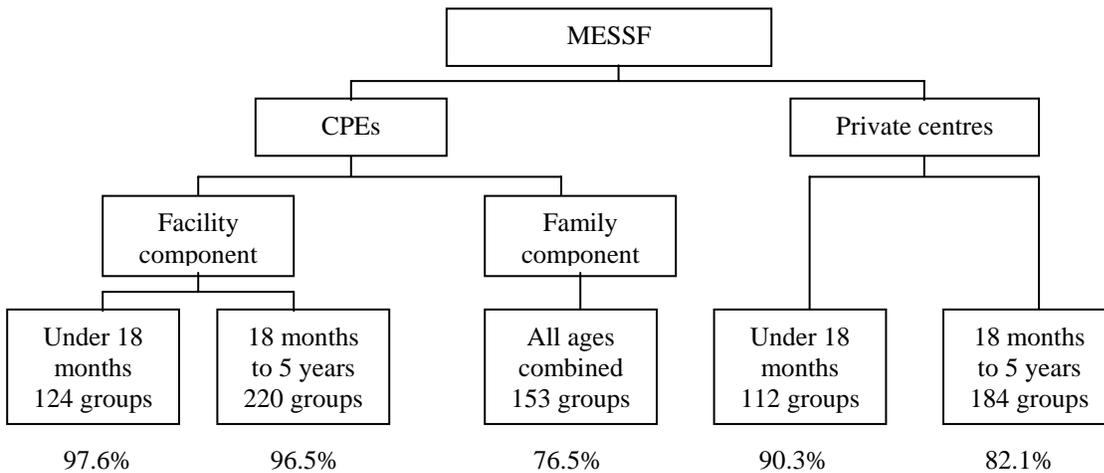
For the telephone portion, the interviewers received very special training because they were to make the initial contact with the managers. They had to obtain official consent on the telephone and make an appointment for the observation day. To that end, they received two days of training, both theoretical and practical. The course covered the organization and evolution of the child care network, the survey's context and goals, the vocabulary and thrust of the most common questions and answers, the data collection structure and protocol, and management of the observers' schedules and travel. Two days before the observation, the interviewer would confirm the observer's appointment. He/she was able to overcome refusals and exercise greater control over the collection schedule. As noted earlier, the observers were early-childhood professionals and so were unaccustomed to presenting arguments to convert a refusal.

The observers received two weeks' training, including one day on the collection and observation protocol. As soon as the observer arrived at the child care operation, she was to try to gain the trust of the manager and the child care worker. Some time was spent INFORMING them about confidentiality and the procedure for the day. Then the observer had to make herself as unobtrusive as possible so that the child care worker could do her job normally. After four weeks of collection, the observers returned for a two-day training session.

6. RESULTS

The survey's overall response rate was 87.8%, well above the target of 80% (Figure 2). The changes made in the survey following the pre-test were successful. For each type of service, the response rate was substantially higher in the survey than in the pre-test.

Figure 2
Survey response rate



OVERALL RESPONSE RATE FOR THE SURVEY: 87.8%

Figure 3

Comparison of the survey and pre-test response rates

	PRE-TEST	SURVEY
CPEs	76.6	96.6
Private centres	26.6	84.8
Family operations	60.0	76.5
Total	55.0	87.8

7. CONCLUSION

The pre-test was the trigger that showed us that we had to interact with a group that was very sensitive to the survey's goals and the collection method (direct observation). The pre-test helped us pinpoint the areas of resistance that significantly affected the response rate. After identifying these difficult groups, we introduced a new collection strategy. That strategy was based on INFORMATION.

In preparing for data collection, we focused our efforts on information. We INFORMED:

- the associations so that they would approve our plan to survey their members;
- the managers of the child care services about the surveys' goals and protocol;
- the child care workers about the observation's purposes and procedures through the manager and with reference materials prepared by the ISQ.

To persuade these difficult groups, we INFORMED in particular:

- the interviewers about the operation of child care centres in Quebec, the survey's goals and all of the collection phases;
- the observers about the surveys' goals and phases.

For the collection operation, we:

- transferred the task of making appointments to the telephone interviewers and provided them with more INFORMATION about the collection protocol;
- Trained the observers so that they would be able to INFORM the managers and child care workers about the schedule for the day and thereby create an atmosphere of trust.

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