



SIAST

SASKATCHEWAN INSTITUTE OF
APPLIED SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

**Early Childhood Care and Education Sector Study:
PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION (PLAR)**

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Executive Summary

September 2003

Introduction

Early childhood educators are employed in Child Care Centres, Family Child Care Homes, Schools, Preschools, Nursery Schools, Early Childhood Special Needs Programs, Head Start Programs and Infant Centres. These employees, in many instances, have pursued learning in their field outside of the formal educational setting. They have *experientially* gained skills, knowledge, and competence through work experience, non-credit courses, industry training, self-study and volunteer activities.

In 2000 the child care industry was notified by the Child Day Care Branch, Department of Community Resources and Employment (formerly the Department of Social Services), of impending changes to the Saskatchewan Child Care Regulations. These regulatory changes, which came into effect on July 5, 2001, outlined the need for the upgrading of credentials for existing provincial child care educators. The Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology's (SIASST) mandate is to provide education, training programs and services that meet the current and future needs of students, industry and the changing labour market. SIASST designed a proactive response to address the anticipated training needs of these workers seeking occupational certification.

Approximately 1100 early childhood educators are currently employed in one of the provinces 139 child care centres or 306 family child care home licensed by Child Day Care Branch. It is not economically feasible for employees in these occupations to quit their jobs to return to school full-time in order to obtain certification. It was projected that a significant percentage of these workers may benefit from participating in a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) process to obtain occupational certification in a timely and cost effective manner.

In addition to regulatory changes, the demand for qualified early childhood educators continues to increase due to changes in traditional family structure. Women's participation in the workforce has substantially increased while extended families no longer live in close proximity to assist with child care. The traditional two-parent family has been replaced by diverse family structures. As the labour force increases and family structures change, child care demands will also increase. Therefore, it is important that adults who comprise the workforce have ready access to competent and well-trained early childhood educators.

The Government of Saskatchewan is cognizant of the need for a qualified child care sector and is ensuring this is met through a change in regulations that require an upgrading of credentials. SIASST can facilitate this move towards certifying child care educators by developing a PLAR implementation

model. To begin this process it was identified that a *gap analysis* of their training needs, in conjunction with the implementation of a *recognition of prior learning process* was required to assess what is needed to top-up their existing knowledge to meet legislated training requirements. It is anticipated that these individuals require diverse training options such as distance education, extension classes, and future online training to gain certification that will allow them to continue working in the child care sector. SIAST, on behalf of the sector, received funding from Saskatchewan Learning through the Job Start/Future Skills Sector Partnership Program to assist in the occupational certification of early childhood educators. Discussions with the Child Day Care Branch, confirmed support and contribution to provide in-kind assistance with respect to the gap analysis survey stage in this proposal.

The process/materials that were developed in this project will benefit the growth and coordination of the early childhood care and education sector. This PLAR implementation model could be adapted for future use by other industry sectors that may be faced with the need for new or enhanced training due to regulatory changes.

A "gap analysis", in conjunction with an implementation of a recognition of the prior learning process, provided the opportunity for industry to assess and identify training that is needed to assist child care educators in meeting legislative training requirements. Strategies were developed to address the diverse training needs of industry, including delivery options such as: distance education, extension classes, and future online training leading to certification. Piloting of PLAR assessment tools, processes and communication materials ensured that a coordinated PLAR process was implemented with efficiencies for the adult learner/employee and the employer.

Methodology

A project coordinator was hired to ensure that the following deliverables were carried out:

- ***Literature Review***
A literature review was conducted to determine how other educational institutions and regulatory bodies have addressed PLAR as an option for early childhood educators to acquire credentials necessary to meet regulatory standards. A variety of colleges across Canada were contacted to obtain this data.

- **"Gap Analysis" Survey**
Under consultation and direction from the Steering Committee a survey was developed and administered to early childhood educators working in licensed child care centres and homes and FSIN affiliated child care centres and Head Start programs throughout the province in the late fall of 2003. Out of approximately 1200 early childhood educators, 382 responded to the survey.
- **Orientation for PLAR Advisors/Assessors/Steering Committee**
The Project Coordinator developed and presented an orientation presentation for PLAR advisors, assessors and steering committee members. Each presentation was specifically directed towards the information necessary for each group along with an overview of the entire project.
- **Pilot and Refine PLAR Assessment Tools and Processes**
Assessment tools and processes were piloted. Assessors and students were asked to provide feedback so that changes could be made to improve the assessment tools and the overall PLAR process.
- **Marketing of the PLAR Process**
Information was distributed through Child Daycare Branch Consultants, information tables at provincial and local conferences and presentations were made to various interested groups including child care centres, Tribal Councils and Regional Colleges. Assistance was given to the SIAST PLAR Department in developing a SIAST PLAR CD(video).

Key Findings

The key findings provide insight for future recommendations and changes that occurred during the project.

- **Project Coordinator**
While working with program heads, steering committee members, advisors, assessors, and candidates it became apparent the following concerns needed to be addressed:
 - ensure clear and consistent communication between all parties; and
 - find effective and economical ways to address PLAR candidates completing a distance challenge.
- **"Gap Analysis" Survey**

The majority of respondents work in licensed child care centres in the larger geographical centres. At the time of the survey only 32.5 % of respondents had an assessment done by Child Daycare Branch identifying the level of qualifications they possess and what additional credentials they require to maintain their employment positions. 13.1% of respondents would prefer to enroll in full time courses while 49.7% indicated they would prefer part time enrollment. Distance education, extension courses and PLAR were identified as the most popular choices for obtaining their credentials. The PLAR process was most popular for Practicums. Financial reasons were cited as the greatest barrier for early childhood educators to obtain their credentials.

- **Orientation for PLAR Advisors/ Assessors**
Any changes or updates need to be forwarded on to Advisors regularly. Assessors found that at times there was a break down of communication between program contacts, students and themselves.
- **Pilot and Refine PLAR Assessment Tools/Processes**
Assessment tools need to be very clear for both candidates and assessors. Flexibility of assessor's schedule to accommodate candidates was crucial. The opportunity to complete PLAR challenges only twice a year is restrictive for many candidates and is seen as a barrier.
- **Marketing of the PLAR Process**
Clear and concise information for all early childhood educators regarding the PLAR process and the difference between a SIAST ECE Certificate or Diploma and the certification awarded by Child Daycare Branch to meet Regulations is necessary.

Recommendations and Next Steps for Future PLAR Implementation

Recommendations:

- Assessment tools need to reflect course revisions well in advance of implementation date. Work with the Program, Research and Development department within SIAST to implement a built-in mechanism to trigger such revisions.
- To maximize response rate for future "Gap Analysis" surveys, consider the following prior to requesting the completion of the survey:
 - Educate the target group about the PLAR process and how it can benefit; and
 - Allow sector time to absorb regulatory changes and the implications of the changes.

- Design a brochure that outlines the PLAR process and training options for mass distribution to target group through:
 - Mail outs by regulatory bodies (e.g. Child Day Care Branch)
 - Postings on supporting association websites (e.g. Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association); and
 - Information tables set up at provincial conferences.
- Assign a centralized coordinator within the education/training institute to coordinate PLAR implementation.
- Design a strategy to promote and market PLAR to all stakeholders:
 - Emphasize benefits that PLAR can provide to overcome barriers to receiving credentials;
 - Identify 'natural' groupings of target audience (conferences, meetings, etc.) and deliver presentations to encourage involvement and support from stakeholders; and
 - market SIAST PLAR CD (video).
- Enhance existing linkages and partnerships throughout regions and among aboriginal and non-aboriginal community partners within the sector to share information, dialogue, problem solve, coordinate initiatives, etc.
- Create flexibility for conducting assessments at various times of the year to accommodate the demand.
- Access to pre-assessment guidance is critical for mapping an appropriate learning/training plan for employee, adult learner, and employer. Align the PLAR assessment intakes to the same timelines for Extension semesters and explore the feasibility of a continuous intake to best accommodate appropriate learning/training plans.
- Develop web-based documents where appropriate. (e.g. Information and Self-Audit Guide). Revisit navigation links to ensure ready access to information on a regular basis.
- When designing a survey instrument provide an expanded, detailed section which identifies barriers to working towards credentials.

Next Steps

- Dissemination of the final report to Steering Committee Members and stakeholders.
- Explore the viability of a centralized coordinator within the education/training institution to coordinate PLAR implementation.

- Design a strategy to promote and market PLAR to all stakeholders:
 - emphasize the benefits that PLAR can provide to overcome barriers to receiving credentials;
 - identify 'natural' groupings of target audience (conferences, meetings, Child Day Care Branch, FSIN, etc.); and
 - market the SIAST PLAR CD (video).
- SIAST should continue to take the lead in facilitating meetings of the Steering Committee to ensure that strategies and recommendations developed in the report are addressed.

