

# The Child as Investment: An Analysis of Manitoba's Discourse on Child Care

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## Abstract

This paper offers a critical analysis of the language employed in the Government of Manitoba's child care policy from 1999 to 2013. Building from prior research undertaken by Susan Prentice, this study employs a textual analysis of provincial public documents, with a view to examining whether it can be maintained that there is an official child care discourse suggestive of the Social Investment State (SIS) model. A total of 34 public documents were analyzed for the frequency of SIS language and terminology, which were also coded by theme. The analysis demonstrates the prevalence of SIS language related to child care within key Manitoba government policy documents, and suggests that non-reflective perpetuation of discourse on the part of policy makers presents risks to effective policy development.

*Keywords:* Manitoba child care policy, Social Investment State model, discourse analysis

## Introduction

*Family Choices: Manitoba's Five-Year Agenda for Early Learning and Child Care* touts the economic benefits of "investing in our children and our future" (Healthy Child Manitoba 2008, 2). The agenda, which outlines 12 commitments designed to expand and improve child care provision, employs language that seems in keeping with the characteristics of the Social Investment State (SIS) model. It has been argued that the SIS or "Third Way" approach is evidence of a demonstrable shift from the social democratic welfare model towards one that equates social spending with labour market integration (Saint-Martin 2007). The SIS model has been criticized for its potential to create generational divides through the redefinition of state functions (293), for its conceptual limitations (Nolan 2013), and for its potential to reinforce stereotypes through policy interventions (Vandenbroeck, et al. 2009). Susan Prentice (2009) offers a feminist critique of the SIS model with respect to child care, arguing that the economic framing of child care displaces the needs of women (mothers). Her paper on the investable child focuses on the SIS tendencies found within advocacy and academic research on child care. She

contends that through the adoption of this economic frame, the conception of child care is shifting from a service to women based on principles of social justice, to one of investment in children designed to yield human capital returns. This, Prentice concludes, has significant implications for the future development of child care systems.

In advancing Prentice's argument from the focus on academia and advocacy, this paper seeks to explore her critique of the SIS model through an examination of the Manitoba government's discourse surrounding child care. Can it be maintained that SIS framing is a feature of the governmental discourse on child care, and if so, what impact might this have on policy development from a public administration perspective? This paper will begin with a brief overview of child care in Manitoba, followed by a discussion of the SIS model. The paper will then present the findings of a discourse analysis of key Manitoba government child care policy documents, from 1999 onwards. The research intention is two-fold: first, to critically analyze the language used in provincial child care policy, and secondly, to posit the argument that the SIS model is a feature of the Manitoba government's child care discourse and that this presents risks to effective policy development.

### **Child care in Manitoba**

Child care services are used by families for a variety of reasons and the rationale for these services have been characterized in a multiplicity of ways. Prentice (2009) states that, beginning in the 1960s, child care formed part of the women's liberation movement and was conceived of as a way in which mothers could participate in the workforce. However, she contends that more recently the rationale for child care provision has also included other aims such as social integration, poverty reduction, child development, employability, school readiness, and the "business case" for child care as a means of prosperity (687).

Publicly funded child care in Manitoba is largely delivered by independent, not-for-profit organizations that offer learning and care for children ages from 12 weeks to 12 years old. In this way, the Manitoba child care system is not public (in the sense of government-operated), but rather is a system made up of family providers and board-run centres that are part of the province's voluntary sector (Prentice 2004, 196). The independent child care centres and family child care homes in Manitoba are overseen by Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care (MELCC), which is a branch of the Department of Family Services. Child care is also a central component of the province's Healthy Child Manitoba strategy (Healthy Child Manitoba 2014b).

MELCC is responsible for the licensing and monitoring of child care facilities, disbursing grant funding to eligible centres and homes, regulating the profession of Early Childhood Educators and providing subsidies to families in need of financial support for child care (Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care 2013). Between 1999/2000 and 2012/2013, Manitoba increased its grant funding for child care by 181 percent, a budget that now totals \$143,388,000

per year (Manitoba 2013a, 90). This funding supports over 31,000 child care spaces across the province (Department of Family Services and Labour 2013, 74). Communication is a significant factor in the delivery of this large, geographically dispersed child care system. The Manitoba government requires an ongoing dialogue with not only the over 1,000 licensed providers (homes and centres), but also has a need to communicate with stakeholders, parents, and the public at large.

### **Unpacking the Social Investment State**

Before delving into the analysis of these communications, it is important to first define our understanding of the SIS model. Denis Saint-Martin (2007) presents the argument that we are witnessing the onset of a paradigmatic shift from the welfare state to a social investment state. The welfare state is broadly understood to encompass an approach to government that provides “citizens with physical, financial, health or other assistance” (MacLean and Wood 2014, 46). Saint-Martin (2007) presents the new SIS paradigm as a contrast to its predecessor: where the welfare state was worker-centric and designed to protect the individual against market forces, the SIS model is child-centric (future worker) and designed to ensure market integration as a means of social inclusion (284).

Other authors, most notably Nathalie Morel, Bruno Palier, and Joakim Palme (2011), present a more evolutionary development of the SIS, tracing its origins to Swedish policy development during the Great Depression. Conceptualized less as a stark contrast to its predecessor, the authors understand the SIS to be part of the ongoing reform of the welfare state, which has developed through periods dominated first by Keynesianism and then neoliberalism (14). Although Morel, Palier, and Palme allow for the notion that there are some features and trends emerging within welfare state policy that may indicate the growing importance of social investment, they are not entirely convinced that the SIS model is yet the new dominant paradigm. Given that this model remains somewhat unconcretized, this paper will borrow both from Saint-Martin (2007), as well as from Morel, Palier, and Palme (2011) in conceptualizing three key features of the SIS model for purposes of the analysis of child care discourse.

#### *Responsiveness to the Knowledge-Based Economy*

Saint-Martin (2007), and Morel, Palier, and Palme (2011) contend that the SIS model is in some way a reflection of, or a reaction to, the new knowledge-based economy that has arisen in Western states. The latter focus their edited book entirely on the OECD and European experience, given the European Union’s Lisbon Agenda in 2000, which had the strategic aim of making Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (European Council 2000, section I). One of the three pillars of that goal was the modernization of the European social model by “investing in people and combating social exclusion.”

This knowledge-based economy, it is argued, requires a workforce that is more flexible and highly skilled. At the same time, Morel, Palier, and Palme (2011) contend that the SIS model aims to address new societal realities, such as the prevalence of single-parent families and the “lack of continuous careers” (1). Reconciling the labour needs of the knowledge-based economy with new societal realities, SIS social policies are generally framed around the development of human capital (education and training) and the improved use of human capital (for example, policies that encourage single parents to participate in the labour market; Morel, Palier, and Palme 2011, 10).

### *Child-Centric (or Future-Worker Centric)*

Related to the emphasis on supporting the knowledge-based economy is the SIS focus on child-centred policies. If social inclusion is equated with participation in the knowledge-based labour market, then investments in preparing individuals to that end are most profitable if directed towards children; early investments and interventions yield higher returns (Saint-Martin 2007). However, the SIS model can also feature later interventions, for example policies designed to promote labour market attachment among “high-school dropouts, welfare recipients, and other disadvantaged workers” (292). These policies are also “future-worker” centric, albeit the economic frame of SIS encourages policies that will earn the greatest returns and therefore tends to direct social spending towards the young.

### *Future-Oriented*

A pivotal feature of the SIS model is its necessarily future-oriented focus. Contrasted with the social safety net concept of the welfare state where support is provided when needed, the SIS model sometimes uses the metaphor of a trampoline, where social investment does not merely catch individuals in dire circumstances, but also propels individuals upward. Saint-Martin (2007) emphasizes this temporal element, stating that it relies on the assumption that “for state spending to be effective, and therefore worthwhile, it must not simply be consumed in the present, to meet current needs: it must be an investment that will pay off and reap rewards in the future” (286).

These three features of the SIS model (responsiveness to the knowledge-based economy, child-centric and future-oriented) are somewhat imperfectly conceived, in that they are all inextricably interrelated. That being said, identification of these themes is helpful, as it will form the basis of the discourse analysis in this study.

## **The Scope of Study**

There are many scholars who have argued that political language is by its very nature biased. John Miller (1965, 178) contends that political ideas cannot be understood independent

of politics itself and William Connolly (1993), in his work on the *Terms of Political Discourse*, and maintains that political language is intersubjective and that politics is essentially a debate over imperfectly shared meanings. In using a particular term (e.g. handicapped) over another term (e.g. differently-abled), the articulator is fundamentally making a judgement and is not merely participating in the act of description. In the public administration literature, this constructivist understanding of language is sometimes captured under policy framing, recognizing the relationship between how issues are framed and the resulting policy outcomes.

As language involves constructed and imperfectly shared meanings, analyzing discourses can offer a unique and critical approach to the study of the SIS model. Discourse analysis is a method through which bodies of textual, oral, and sometimes symbolic language are studied in order to understand social reality (Phillips and Hardy 2002). However, discourse analysis is a contested concept, lacking not only an agreed-upon definition but also conceived of as at once both a method and theory (or as a method that is embedded within a particular theoretical framework). Marianne Jørgenson and Louise Phillips contend that discourse analysis must be understood as a “theoretical and methodological whole - a complete package” (4). At its core, discourse analysis understands that language and discourses construct social realities, that they can create a structure of social meaning and that they are historically contingent (Milliken 1999). It relies on an understanding of social science where language and its use are not neutral.

Although discourse analysis can encompass varying approaches, the methodology employed in this study is a textual analysis of key government policy documents. This paper uses an understanding of policy in the tradition of Thomas Dye, who defines policy as “whatever governments choose to do or not to do” (quoted in Pal 2010, 5). The methodology allows for a substantial body of official government documents to be systematically analyzed, with a view to identifying to what extent SIS language is featured with respect to child care.

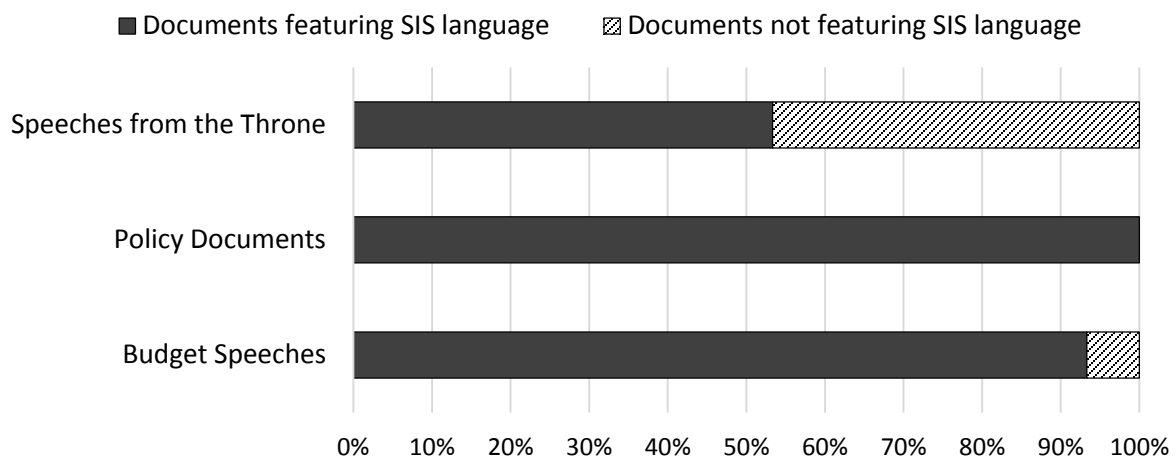
The analysis spans from 1999 until 2013, which reflects an unbroken period of New Democratic Party (NDP) rule. The documents selected fall into three categories: 15 budget speeches (Manitoba Finance 1999-2013), 15 Speeches from the Throne (Manitoba 1999-2013), and 4 other policy documents (Healthy Child Manitoba 2008, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a). These documents were chosen specifically for their importance in terms of articulating government policy and priorities. The Budget Speech is delivered annually by the Minister of Finance, setting out the spending priorities of the government for the fiscal year. The Speech from the Throne is a statement of government priorities and commitments delivered by the Lieutenant-Governor at the opening of a new legislative session. Although read by the Lieutenant-Governor, this document is drafted by the Premier and the government (Manitoba 2013b). While it may be argued that both the Budget Speech and Speech from the Throne are largely symbolic in nature, I would contend that they do elucidate government priorities and policy, while offering a consistent medium for analysis. In her article examining the Province of Manitoba’s approach to

post-secondary education, Andrea Rounce (2013) employs Budget Speeches and Speeches from the Throne, arguing that “[u]nderstanding where a province spends its money, and the language that it uses to describe these expenditures and their rationale, is key to understanding its priorities for public policy” (227). Beyond these two forms of broad government policy, this paper also examines four other key policy documents, in the form of child care-related policy papers from MELCC and Healthy Child Manitoba.

Each document was analyzed and coded along major themes of the SIS model, namely: investment, labour market outcomes of the child, future success of the child, parental workforce participation, and parental participation in education. Each document was also analyzed for the frequency of the following key terms: child, future, economy, skill, and invest.<sup>1</sup> These terms were specifically chosen to reflect the major themes of the SIS model identified earlier in the study, namely that it is responsive to the knowledge-based economy, child-centric, and future-oriented. “Child”, “future”, and “economy” were each selected to represent those themes in a direct fashion, with the addition of “skill” and “invest” in recognition of the overall worker-development thrust of the SIS model.

## Analysis

An analysis of the 34 policy documents reveals that a high proportion include at least one mention of SIS language related to child care (see figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Proportion of 34 documents featuring Social Investment State language related to child care.

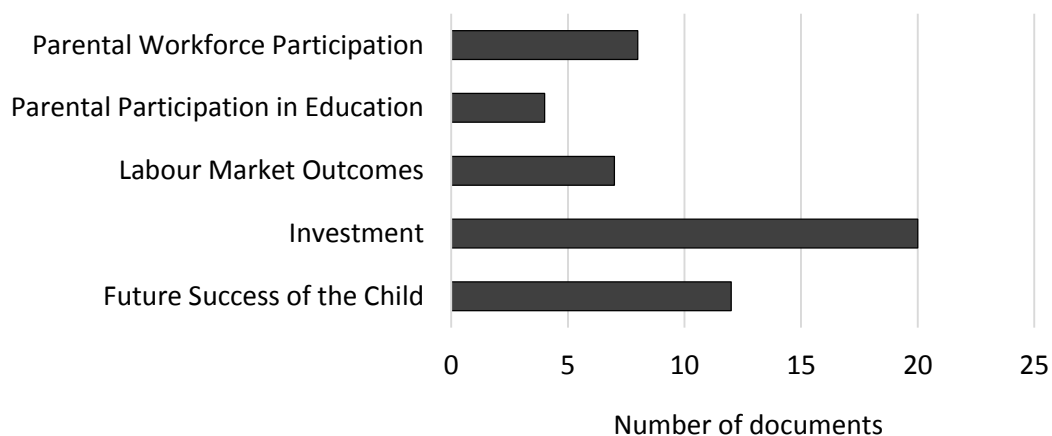
Over 50 percent of Speeches from the Throne and 90 percent of Budget Speeches feature at least one instance of SIS child care-related language, and all four child care policy documents feature at least one instance. It is notable that in all three types of documents analyzed, the

2. The terms child, skill and invest also include counts for words in which the identified term was a root. For example, counts for “child” would also include “children” and “childcare”.

majority included SIS language in relation to child care. Furthermore, in one budget speech and in four throne speeches, the child care content was included under an SIS sub-heading (for example, “Training for the jobs of tomorrow, today” in the 2010 Speech from the Throne).

The 2001 Budget Speech spoke to the link between early years’ investments by stating “studies indicate that children raised in nurturing environments have higher graduation rates, higher incomes, lower crime rates, and less reliance on social services. For these compelling reasons, our Government has been allocating resources to important programs for communities and families” (Manitoba Finance 2001, 7). Similarly, the 2003 Budget Speech bolstered its rationale for early years programming by stating that “in total, Budget 2003 will invest \$115 million in early childhood development. With the continued support of the federal government, we are helping families meet the needs of today to ensure success into the future” (Manitoba Finance 2003, 8).

When broken out by theme, the most frequent theme of SIS language related to child care spoke to an investment in children or in the economy (see figure 2). In a similar vein, 12 of the documents included language equating child care with success or developmental outcomes for the child. Although slightly less prevalent, other important themes found within the documents addressed the need for child care in order for parents to pursue participation in the workforce or in their own education. For example, the 2011 Speech from the Throne indicated that “our government will ensure that Manitoba families have access to safe, convenient child care, which is essential to improving education and employment opportunities for parents” (Province of Manitoba, 3). There was also language related to the eventual positive labour market outcomes for children in the child care system. For example, the 2010 Speech from the Throne included the statement “Early learning is critical to a child's success in school and later in life” (Province of Manitoba, 5).

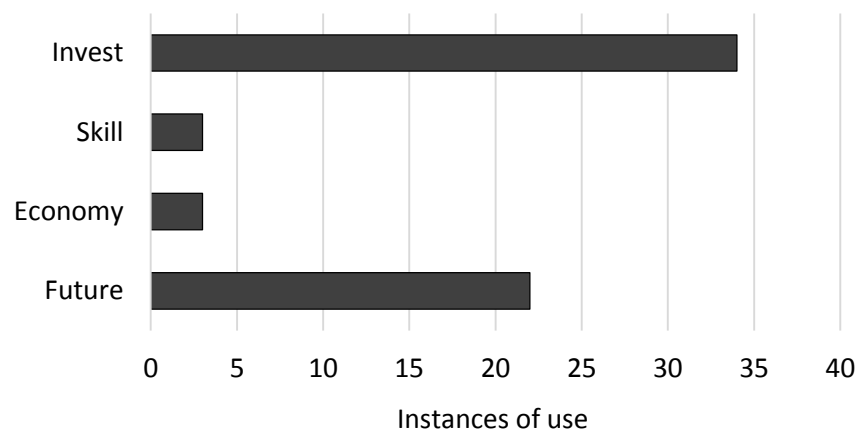


**Figure 2:** Use of Social Investment State language related to child care in 34 documents, by theme.

A pivotal example of this SIS framing is found at the outset of *Family Choices*, Manitoba’s most recent child care platform, where the document sets out the economic case for child care, stating that “every dollar invested in child care leads to a two dollar benefit to the economy” (Healthy Child Manitoba 2008, 2). Additionally, in *Starting Early, Starting Strong*, the document that sets out the early childhood development index, there is a quotation by Dave Angus, the President and CEO of the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce who states:

I can’t think of an investment that would provide a greater return than one at the stage of a child’s life in which their life-long capacity, both intellectual and emotional, is so defined. The employer community must recognize that by supporting early childhood development, they are in fact supporting their future workforce. (Healthy Child Manitoba 2013b, 6)

When analyzing solely the child care policy documents (see figure 3), by far the most frequently employed SIS key term was “invest”. As well, the term “future” was very common within the documents, with “skill” and “economy” featuring to a lesser extent. Overall, all four child care policy documents included frequent use of key SIS terms.



**Figure 3:** Use of Social Investment State key terms in four child care policy documents.

Beyond the aggregate numerical analysis of these 34 documents, there are also other notable instances of SIS-related language applied to child care. One aspect is the use of SIS language within key child care policy titles. In 2011, MELCC introduced a child care curriculum that was titled *Early Returns*, connoting a return on the investment in early childhood education. Also in 2011, Manitoba passed *The Preparing Students for Success Act*<sup>2</sup> which (among other things) featured provisions for including child care centres in newly built public schools. Healthy Child Manitoba has a primary overview document of its various programs, titled “Healthy Child Manitoba: Investing in our Future” (2014a) and another on its early childhood development instrument, which is named *Starting Early, Starting Strong* (2013b). These titles form part of the

3. *The Preparing Students for Success Act, Statutes of Manitoba* 2011, c. 3. <http://web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/statutes/2011/c00311e.php>.



larger discourse and are significant in that they provide the overall frame for some of the government's most significant child care communications.

## **Discussion**

The textual analysis undertaken in this study demonstrates the prevalence of SIS language related to child care within key Manitoba government policy documents. This prevalence exists across multiple authors/speakers (MELCC, Healthy Child Manitoba, the Premier, the Lieutenant-Governor, the Minister of Finance) and the span of time from 1999 until 2013. Taking together the proportion of documents that feature this language, the SIS themes identified therein, and the use of SIS key terms within exclusively child care-focused documents, I contend that the data suggests a governmental child care discourse influenced by and perpetuating the SIS model.

This is not to suggest that all provincial child care policies in Manitoba are in fact designed within the SIS model, but rather that the discourse surrounding these policies, and used to promote these policies, is sometimes demonstrative of SIS framing. I would further suggest that the use of this discourse in and of itself can impact upon policy development. Susan Prentice (2009) identifies some of the risks inherent in adopting the SIS frame and applying it to child care. Discourses “are more than neutral vehicles that simply reflect reality. They also play an active role in shaping how we think” (702). Prentice warns advocates against the wholesale adoption of the business case argument for child care, in that it risks limiting child care development to only those policies that amount to good investments and that this can marginalize already marginalized groups (702-03). In structuring the discourse as an investment yielding future economic returns, we might risk excluding policies that address other social goods, disproportionately impacting certain groups like immigrants, persons with disabilities, or those who are unemployed.

I would also argue that this risk of policy limitation exists not only from an advocacy standpoint, but also from within the civil service. The prevalence of discourses can circumscribe what is considered possible, feasible or even conceivable from a policy development perspective. As SIS discourse is used and perpetuated by the Manitoba government with respect to child care, this risks impacting future child care policy development. This impact is, arguably, more substantive in respect of practitioners within the civil service, in that the discourse is implicitly “official”; it can be perceived as the dominant discourse by virtue of its author, which is the government itself.

A more fundamental concern with the SIS model, as it applies to child care and early years' investments, was highlighted by Morel, Palier, and Palme (2011). They suggest that there is something concerning with the notion that “children have become instrumentalised as ‘citizen-workers’ of the future, rather than ‘citizen-children’ of the present, that is, as ‘becomings’ rather

than ‘beings’ with social rights in their own right, as (non-productive) children” (16). I would agree that a challenge of SIS discourse is of its future-focus; relying on the longer-term outcomes risks neglecting policy development that may serve the more immediate needs of children in child care settings.

Despite the risks identified in employing SIS language as it relates to child care, there are some key advantages in its use. In relying on SIS discourse, governments are able to avoid retrenchment of social spending and advocate for the continuation of such spending by framing it as an economic advantage (Nolan 2013, 460). The future-oriented focus of the SIS model can also provide for extended time horizons and/or justification for increased social spending that may yield higher returns over a longer period of investment. Furthermore, SIS discourse can also be adopted from an advocacy standpoint, as has been done by health and neuroscience experts, who have aligned their issues with that of early childhood programs and services, including child care (Prentice 2009, 688).

## **Conclusion**

Through an analysis of Manitoba government documents from 1999 to 2013, this study has demonstrated a government child care discourse suggestive of the SIS model. This study does not purport to be an all-encompassing survey of Manitoba government policy documents and its scope of study could be expanded to explore whether a larger dataset would yield similar results. Moreover, this paper does not suggest that the SIS discourse within Manitoba’s child care policy must necessarily be an impediment to innovative and effective policy development. In fact, the existence of a particular discourse does not preclude other competing discourses. Rather, this paper aims to serve as a check on the non-reflective perpetuation of SIS discourse by policy practitioners. As Connolly (1993) warns, “to adopt without revision the concepts prevailing in a polity is to accept the terms of discourse loaded in favor of established practices” (1-2). For policy makers, what is important is to recognize the existence of these discourses, in order to understand both their advantages and risks in delimiting policy options.

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