

Canadian study wants ECEC prioritised when planning future pandemic responses ^[1]

Ensuring that early childhood education and care (ECEC) options are available during pandemics, while safeguarding the welfare and wellbeing of those working in the profession must be paramount in future pandemic responses, a Canadian study has found.

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AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Including ECEC in pandemic responses will address gender inequality, quality of care and burnout, according to a Simon Fraser University (SFU) researcher who tracked the lived experiences of ECEC educators during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The work of SFU Health Sciences Research Associate Julia Smith, the new study published in the journal *Gender, Work & Organisation*, paints a “chaotic picture” of childcare educators navigating through fear and anxiety, unclear public health directives and feeling undervalued and more at risk compared to other essential workers, mirroring the Australian experience closely.

“I don’t think that people are really recognising how much we’re putting ourselves at risk,” said one educator participating in the study. “We’re not even allowed to wear masks, because it could scare the children. So even hospital workers, they’re still having protection, but for us in the field, we’re very, very exposed.”

While the province ordered school closures and advised against all non-essential social contact from March to June 2020, ECEC facilities remained open with spots prioritised for children of essential workers.

As in Australia, staff running the facilities felt “ill-prepared to provide quality childcare while questions about the transmission of COVID-19 were at their highest”.

Educators said they often received contradictory public health information from health authorities and various levels of government, and “hardly any advice” on what to do if children and staff became ill.

“There weren’t a lot of directives,” according to one educator. “It was just very vague and you were sort of left hanging.”

This, and other factors cited in the study, led to childcare educators – many who hold diplomas in early childhood education – feeling undervalued compared to other essential workers during the lockdown, again similar to the Australian experience.

“If the wellbeing and working conditions of educators is not prioritised in pandemic recovery efforts, there is a real risk of burnout and decreased quality of childcare,” said Ms Smith.

“For example, further reducing childcare fees would not only improve the accessibility of childcare, but also enable women to rejoin the workforce and ease the financial burden parents are struggling with due to the COVID-19 economic crisis.”

Ms Smith also called on Canada to develop a gender-responsive pandemic preparedness plan to mitigate the unequal secondary effects of future pandemic.

In a Policy Options piece published on 27 October, Ms Smith and co-author Alice Mūrage write that policy measures taken during the pandemic have led to sustained and gendered long-term consequences for millions of Canadians, including loss of employment, increased unpaid care work, deteriorated mental health, and increased cases of gender-based violence.

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