

The educational experiences and anticipated work plans of post-secondary early learning and care students in Alberta ^[1]

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Excerpted from introduction

Researchers, policy makers and service providers agree on the central role early childhood educators play in the delivery of high-quality early learning and care. Formally educated and well-supported early childhood educators provide the foundation for high-quality early learning and care, which, in turn, contributes to positive outcomes for young children and their families. Despite this agreement, early childhood educators across Canada remain modestly prepared for their important work. They further face demanding work environments and are poorly paid by comparison to staff in related fields. The result is longstanding and well-documented shortages of qualified early childhood educators with service providers struggling to recruit and retain well-qualified staff.

Not surprisingly, the majority of provincial governments, including the Government of Alberta, have introduced specific measures to address the workforce challenges facing early learning and care sectors, including incentives to attract qualified staff into the field and improvements in wages to encourage them to stay. The governments in British Columbia and Prince Edward Island have taken more comprehensive approaches and developed workforce strategies to build and strengthen the capacity of their early learning and care workforces. The previous Liberal Government in Ontario similarly developed a workforce strategy that was not implemented, following a change in government.

For its part, the federal Liberal Government included a commitment in its 2019 election platform to support the educational preparation of early childhood educators and followed this up with dedicated funding support for staff recruitment and retention in its 2020 Fall Economic Statement. It further identified the need to invest in early learning and care workforces as part of its Budget 2021 system-building announcements.

If governments across Canada are to succeed in attracting and retaining more and better qualified staff into the field then it will be important for them to better understand the experiences of students completing early learning and care credentials and the various factors that inform their decisions both to consider and pursue work in the field. The current study presents findings from some initial research with students in Alberta completing early learning and care credentials. It explores three related areas of inquiry; first, the reasons students choose to pursue a post-secondary early learning and care credential; second, the nature of their post-secondary educational experiences and how well these prepare and support them for work in the field; and third, their anticipated work plans and career aspirations after graduation. The field research was undertaken prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and so does not take into account the new workforce challenges brought on by this health crisis and the resulting economic and social dislocation.

The most recent national data available on students completing post-secondary early learning and care credentials show that in 2016 30,336 students were enrolled in early learning and child care programs of study (Byrne, 2019). This is a decrease from the 35,784 enrolled in 2014. The majority of these students were female (95 percent) and around half were under 25 years of age. Similar data for the province of Alberta show an estimated 2,100 to 2,200 students studied for early learning credentials in the 2016/17 academic year (Muttart Foundation, 2019).

Nationally, there are around 200,000 early childhood educators and assistants employed in the field as well as a further 86,000 home child care providers. The vast majority of child care workers are female (96 percent) and a significant proportion are younger (37 percent are between the ages of 25 and 34 years of age). In 2016, a third of child care workers were immigrants or non-permanent residents. Four out of five early childhood educators and assistants had an education level above a high school diploma (Uppal and Savage, 2021).

The description of the current study and its main findings are presented in five main sections. The first outlines the profile of the Alberta early learning and child care workforce in spring 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It further presents an overview of the post-secondary programs of study available for students pursuing early learning and care credentials as of fall 2019. Section two summarizes some of the main research findings on the educational preparation of early childhood educators, the challenges of staff recruitment and retention and the educational experiences and work and career aspirations of early learning and care students. Section three describes the research design and includes a description of the data collection methods and analysis. It also provides comment on the challenges of

conducting the research and the resulting study limitations. Section four presents the major research findings. It summarizes the observations and experiences students shared during the research process and identifies the main arguments, ideas and themes that emerged. Where appropriate, it also identifies differences in the experiences students shared. The final section of the report presents the key observations and learnings from the study. These have the potential to inform the work of the Government of Alberta and other sector stakeholders as they work to improve the educational preparation of students, their transition into the workforce, and hopefully their longer-term careers in the field.

Region: Alberta ^[4]

Tags: pre-service ^[5]

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