

Early childhood education has great value but little reward ^[1]

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Source: Globe and Mail ^[2]

Publication Date: 18 Aug 2014

EXCERPTS

British Columbia's skilled work force is expected to undergo a shift in coming years as the pool of younger workers becomes smaller than the number of aging workers who have their eye on retirement. In a 10-part series, The Globe and Mail looks at the 10 jobs expected to be in highest demand in B.C. in the next decade. This is part six.

The rewards of a career as an early childhood educator are not measured by the paycheck, which can only be described as a pittance.

Toni Hoyland has been in the field for more than four decades, and would have abandoned it to pursue a job that would sustain a mortgage, except she managed to switch to teaching the next generation of ECEs.

For Ms. Hoyland, the typically low pay of an ECE is the main frustration of the job. But compensation is measured in other ways.

"Obviously it's not about the money. It's about the incredible importance of what we do. In the field people know, they can see the impact on the children they are working with," she said in an interview. "You watch them grow, and skills build, from the beginning of language to being so curious about every single thing."

And that is the payoff, those moments when a child's development is revealed. "One little boy who was so curious, and I remember him coming to me and saying, 'Toni, what colour am I on the inside?'"

Kumarini Nugawila, who has worked as an ECE for a dozen years, shared the sentiment, recalling the development of a young child with special needs.

"When he joined us, he was three. He did not say a word and it was very difficult to communicate," she recalled. "We kept him involved ... we applauded him every time he did something. By the second year with us, he started talking and was putting letters and sounds together, making words, and even doing numbers. It was amazing."

In another instance, she helped a preschooler, who had experienced serious health problems, overcome her fear of medical settings by making up a play hospital. "She was sometimes compassionate, sometimes brutal with those dolls," Ms. Hoyland recalled. But after six months of role play, the little girl joined a tour of the local hospital without anxiety.

Ms. Hoyland started her career at a time when little was known about the science of developing brains. She bristles when people suggest the work is easy or doesn't require critical thinking.

"For many, many years, we knew it was important but we didn't have the brain research to support what we do. Now we know these early years are a critical period for development ... the exposure of rich sensory experiences build those neural pathways. We understand now the ability of children to reach their potential, and if we are doing a really good job then we are making a real difference."

With a growing demand for ECEs expected in the coming decade - according to current labour market analysis, there will be more than 9,000 job openings in B.C. - Ms. Hoyland hopes that the value of their work will also be better rewarded. Both recruitment and retention are an issue at the current wages.

"The most difficult thing about this job is that it isn't treated as if it has much value. ... People are doing this incredibly meaningful, hard work, and they are making a pittance. That really wears on people in their field; we lose a lot of good people because of that."

Ms. Nugawila noted ECEs have a wide range of responsibilities in taking care of children for the whole day, including diaper changes and lunch preparations.

"There is a lot of work involved and I think for all that they do, they should be paid more," she said.

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