

Early Childhood Education in Nova Scotia - a story of neglect ^[1]

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Source: Halifax Media Co-op

Format: Article

Publication Date: 22 Sep 2014

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS:

Joe Howe Elementary School is a bright and peaceful place, but in the back office, Kathleen Couture, chair of the Nova Scotia Child Care Association, is waging a war on words.

'The word babysitter in a childcare centre needs to be abolished. We are teachers, we are professionals,' says Couture..

In August, Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) around the province marched with parents and supporters as part of the Worthy Wage Campaign, an attempt to raise awareness about how their work is undervalued.

In a fight that goes back several decades, Early Childhood Educators in Nova Scotia are continuing the campaign for fair wages, even as low-income parents struggle to afford adequate care for their children. Despite high standards of professionalism - many ECEs are required to have either four year degrees or two year diplomas, as well as ongoing professional development through mandatory workshops and courses - ECEs in Nova Scotia are the lowest paid in the country, with many earning little more than minimum wage.

'It's like a spider web,' Couture explains, interlocking her fingers over her head. 'The wages is one thing. But if we don't increase the wages we won't keep the trained educators, which means we won't have the high quality programs.'

For Pat Armstrong, Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies at York University in Toronto, not paying child care workers fair wages is part of a broader phenomenon whose roots can be seen as far back as the 19th century.

This, Armstrong says, is rooted in assumptions about women's biology. 'Skills are something we think of as taking a great deal of time to learn and acquire, and since the assumption is that looking after kids or old people is just something that comes naturally to women it's not very much valued'. ECEs insist that the work they do falls firmly in the domain of education. The years that children are in early education programs - that is from ages zero to five, are a crucial period of brain development, and the experience children have in these years have a profound impact on their further lives.

For Kelly Goulden, an educator and Office and Events Coordinator for NSCCA, trained educators are an essential element in children developing the kinds of skills that make them confident adults.

"You're building a foundation of self esteem, self confidence, social skills; all of this is a foundation for when they go to the next level," says Goulden. "In this kind of environment, children are more likely to develop the cognitive, linguistic and numerical capacities that allow them to thrive when they graduate to the school system; for children with disabilities and those from at-risk families, the foundation provided by high-quality early childhood education is particularly essential."

The importance of high quality early childhood education is well documented. A 2012 TD Special Report suggests that good programs not only benefit children individually, but also have a range of social benefits ranging from lower dropout rates and higher labour force productivity, to reducing social and economic inequality and reducing incarceration rates.

In fact, early childhood education offers one of the highest returns on investment for government spending. Nonetheless, Canada lags behind many other developed nations in its spending on childcare, with Nova Scotia faring worse than other provinces.

Couture says that the low wages paid to ECEs are effectively subsidizing childcare, and that even this is not enough for low-income families.

'Right now ECE is not affordable to people on low income, it's become a privilege for the elite and the upper middle class,' says Couture, noting that neither income assistance nor child subsidies cover the full cost of child care for low-income parents.

Though there are free centres for children ages 4 and up, the spots are limited. Families unable to secure these spots sometimes have to resort to desperate measures to secure childcare. 'I've been institutions where the director had to dismiss families because they couldn't afford it,' says Goulden, 'and yet you know that child is better off with you for the day.'

Couture describes a cycle of debt in which families, unable to pay their child care bills after several months, move from centre to centre, leaving their bills unpaid. 'When you call up collections they know them from another day care centre,' she says. 'And it's not because they

want to skip the bills, its because they cant afford it,' Goulden adds. 'You feel for these families, it's such a vicious circle.'

Yet the financial burden of childcare isn't a struggle for low-income families alone. Many early childhood educators themselves find it difficult to make ends meet.

Despite a lifelong passion for early childhood education, Shelley Wyman only recently returned to the field As a single person, she says, her wages simply weren't enough. Only after getting married, Wyman was able to return to the profession. With her own son in childcare, however, she says it is sometimes a struggle even on two incomes. 'My childcare fee is actually a little bit higher than what my husband pays for our mortgage.'

Wyman's experience is far from unique. Val Rafuse has experienced a similar cycle. Having graduated as an ECE in 1983, Rafuse worked as an ECE until a divorce forced her to move to a more lucrative career. 'I had to leave the field to go to the almighty call centre, which had much better benefits and much better pay.'

After a second marriage, Rafuse was able to return to education, and was fortunate to find a job in a government centre, where grants raised her pay to slightly above minimum wage while covering mandatory training and workshops. Nevertheless, she says that with one young child still at home 'the only thing that allows me to go back to the career that I love is a spouse who's also working'.

The effect of low wages on the educators is profound. Rafuse describes a co-worker who, after her spouse lost his job, restricted her diet as a means of cutting costs and paying for childcare and fell ill as a result. Some ECEs have to work two jobs, she says, and the stress interferes with work as well as with personal well being.

Many trained educators leave the province to seek their fortunes elsewhere, or switch to work in other fields of education, in call centres and in supermarkets, leaving untrained workers to take their place.

In late August, the provincial government announced a crack-down on daycare centres that failed to perform Disclosure and Barring Service and Child Abuse Registry checks on their employees. Kathleen Couture says this phenomenon is an extension of an environment in which low pay and its accompanying stresses make the retention of skilled workers nearly impossible.

Couture believes that instituting mandatory training requirements, as PEI has recently done, will increase recognition of the value of the work while ensuring children get the best education possible. But, she stresses, training requirements are only one part of a puzzle in which wages, professional recognition and better childcare subsidies are interlocking pieces. All those pieces need something to hold them up,' Couture says, 'and that's what's missing from the province. 'Ultimately attitudes about education, care work and the nature of social obligation need to change, educators stress. 'It's a wage issue, its an equality issue, it's a gender issue, and it's a poverty issue.' Couture says. 'Investing in the early years continuously reaps benefits. We need to figure out that mentality instead of just saying everyone pays for their own care.'

In the past five years, the NSCCA - whose membership is at an all-time high - has tried to increase awareness through activities like a letter writing campaign, a mock strike, and the recent march.

For Val Rafuse, having an organization like the NSCCA in your corner is essential. As care workers whose work is often a labour of love, she notes, early childhood educators might not always be the most aggressive campaigners on their own behalf. Through organizations like the NSCCA, there is an increased awareness among educators themselves of the importance of their work, and that, she thinks, could change everything.

'I think we need to get fired up and start fighting and realize we're not just fighting for us but for our kids,' she says. 'I think you'll see the flame then.'

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