

Canada's child care workforce

Shani Halfon

This paper summarizes what is known about the child care workforce in Canada, the implications of this for regulated child care, and identifies some considerations and strategies to address the ongoing issues and improve the overall state of ECEC. A summary of the relevant research and data leads to the conclusion that a coordinated and comprehensive strategy is needed to address the multiple and interconnected variables that impact the working conditions of those in the child care workforce.

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PREFACE

When this paper was originally published in 2014, it provided an overview of what was known about the Canadian child care workforce at the time, addressing the implications of workforce issues on regulated child care and considering ways to address the ongoing issues of staff qualifications, wages, working conditions, recognition, recruitment and retention of qualified staff. This analysis of the research and data at that time led to the paper’s conclusion that an overarching transformation of Canadian policy and provision was needed to address the child care workforce issues identified.

The workforce issues identified in this paper persist, and are just as relevant in 2021 as in 2014. However, as the political context and understanding of early learning and child care policy have undergone a seismic shift between then and now, there are new possibilities for addressing child care workforce issues.

The events of the last two years have been instrumental in creating an environment in which the necessity of overarching transformation of child care policy and provision has become widely accepted. When the COVID-19 pandemic first closed down, and dangerously destabilized, most of Canada’s child care services, it became unavoidably evident that a reliable system of quality early learning and child care for all families and children is “a necessity, not a luxury” for Canada’s economic recovery. The foundations for building such a system were outlined in a federal budget in April of 2021, paving the way for the Government of Canada and the provinces/territories to develop bilateral agreements based on common understandings about how quality, universal child care systems can be developed and sustained.

As these child care policy processes have unfolded, it has been recognized that ensuring that there is a critical mass of well qualified early childhood educators to staff the system is central to Canada’s transformation of early learning and child care. That is, child care services cannot expand to deliver the high quality services that are needed and promised unless a sufficient number of qualified educators is available to staff them.

The 2021 federal budget stated that the five year plan for building the foundations for the high quality, universal child care system will include “a growing, qualified workforce—with provincial and territorial partners, the government will work to ensure that early childhood educators are at the heart of the system by valuing their work and providing them with the training and development opportunities needed to support their growth and the growth of a quality system of child care. Over 95% of child care workers are women, many of whom are making low wages, with a median wage of \$19.20 per hour” (pg. 103).

This outcome of the global pandemic that began in 2020 is, of course, not reported in this 2014 paper but Canada’s perpetual difficulty recruiting and retaining early childhood educators appears to have been exacerbated even beyond the description in the paper. But the historic plans for an expanded, strengthened Canadian child care system depend upon our ability to address the long-standing and pervasive child care workforce issues, signalling the importance of new, significant, creative strategies to what has been treated as a “wicked” problem rather than a soluble one.

This paper, which covers the issue of the Canadian child care workforce to 2014, is intended to stimulate and contribute to this process.

Introduction

Broadly considered, human resources in child care can be considered to include “frontline early childhood educators, family child care providers, centre directors, program managers, local, provincial/territorial and federal policymakers, post secondary early childhood instructors, researchers and experts” (Friendly, Doherty & Beach, 2006: 24). Highly skilled, knowledgeable people are required at every level of an early childhood system and, collectively, they have a significant impact on the quality of programs and outcomes for children and families.

Early childhood educators and assistants (ECE/As) are the people who have the most direct impact on child care programs; they are the frontline staff, centre directors and family child care providers who work with children and families on a daily basis. ECE/As mainly work in regulated child care settings which include centre-based full-day programs regulated family or home child care, nursery schools and preschools, as well as other early childhood programs and services for children and families such as family resource programs (FRPs) and early intervention services. In Ontario and Prince Edward Island, ECEs have also begun working within public full-day kindergarten programs following reforms that aim to integrate child care and education.

This paper will summarize what is known about the child care workforce in Canada, the implications of this for regulated child care, and will identify some considerations and strategies to address the ongoing issues and improve the overall state of ECEC. A summary of the relevant research and data leads to the conclusion that a coordinated and comprehensive strategy is needed to address the multiple and interconnected variables that impact the working conditions of those in the child care workforce.

Definition

This paper focuses on the “child care workforce” working in regulated child care. Based on Statistics Canada’s National Occupational Classification (NOC) categorization, the child care workforce was defined by the Childcare Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC) as Early Childhood Educators and Assistants (ECE/As). ECE/As make up the majority of the broader early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce that also includes kindergarten teachers, teaching assistants, and babysitters, nannies and parents’ helpers (CCHRSC, 2009). This definition of the child care workforce includes all staff working in regulated child care settings, who are often referred to as frontline staff or workers.

What we know: Why is the child care workforce important?

There is good agreement from both research and common sense that human resources play a fundamental role in determining whether quality in child care is high, mediocre or poor. At the program level, many of the multiple outcomes that high quality early childhood programs yield are quite dependent on the staff who implement the programs (although quality is also affected by broader human resources support).

An international UNICEF report card noted that:

The available research is consistent in finding that the quality of early childhood education and care depends above all else on the ability of the caregiver to build relationships with children, and to help provide a secure, consistent, sensitive, stimulating, and rewarding environment (2008: 23).

One cross-national review of the determinants of quality in child care concluded that, “the most significant factor affecting quality appears to be caregiver education, qualifications and training” (Huntsman, 2008: iii). Education and training interact with other variables such as wages, group sizes and child-staff ratios that affect quality as experienced by children. As well, these variables impact working conditions, morale and the recruitment and retention of qualified staff. These factors all have significant implications for the quality of care (Huntsman, 2008; Mathers, Eisenstadt, Sylva, Soukakou & Ereky-Stevens, 2014). Whitebook and Darrah concur, finding that “the interdependence of quality early childhood care and education, quality environments, and appropriate compensation for teachers can no longer be denied or refuted” (2013: 21).

You bet I care!, the only Canada-wide study that has studied the links between child care workforce characteristics and “observed”, or process quality, came to the same conclusions, noting that, “it is the child care workforce that serves as the major engine on the road towards achieving quality” (Goelman, Doherty, Lero, LeGrange & Tougas, 2000: 72). However, despite evidence that closely links the quality of child care programs to characteristics of the child care workforce and their working conditions, there is no comprehensive workforce strategy at either the national or provincial/territorial level. Indeed, many would argue that today Canada is even further from such a strategy than we were a decade ago.

Data and research on the child care workforce in Canada

Additionally, there is no formal research program or regularly collected data on the child care workforce in Canada. Back in 1998, Beach, Bertrand & Cleveland observed that, “there is a real shortage of good data to answer many of the most important questions facing the child care sector” and a need for a “coherent strategy to collect data and to coordinate a related research agenda which will use these data in the most effective way” (1998:142). As we note below, the main instrument developed to respond to data and research issues vis-à-vis the child care workforce is no longer in place.

Data and research

Since 1984, four pan-Canadian surveys have collected data to identify the characteristics, working conditions and wages of the child care workforce working in regulated child care settings. Each was initiated and executed by university-based, independent researchers or child care organizations, though all were funded by the federal government.

1 *The bottom line:* Wages and working conditions of workers in the formal daycare market (Schom-Moffatt, 1984), was commissioned in 1984 by the Task Force on Child Care, a federal ministerial task force studying a national child care

program (the “Katie Cooke Task Force”). A national random sample survey was used to gather data through a mailed questionnaire that was completed by 279 employees in 85 child care centres providing full time care to children six years and younger. Data were also collected from telephone interviews with 56 regulated family day care providers. The data collected in this report was limited by the small sample. However, it provided the first empirical evidence concerning the realities for the workforce across Canada.

2 *Caring for a living*: A study on wages and working conditions in Canadian child care, a joint project of the Canadian Day Care Advocacy Association and the Canadian Child Care Federation, was published in 1992. *Caring for a living* was “comprised of two linked surveys, on separate questionnaires, surveying both staff and centre directors in licensed group child care centres providing at least six hours of care per day across Canada” (Cleveland & Hyatt, 2000: 10). The survey was large: 2,441 child care staff responded to survey questions on wages, working conditions, education and other characteristics of individual staff members, staff attitudes and motivations. A total of 501 child care centre directors responded to a questionnaire that collected information about the characteristics of the centre and budgetary information, turnover rates, staff and child characteristics, typical wages and working conditions in each centre (Cleveland & Hyatt, 2000). Concurrently, the Canadian Child Care Federation also sponsored *Providing home child care for a living* (Goss Gilroy Inc., 1998), which issued three reports: *A survey of providers working in the regulated sector*; *A survey of providers working in the unregulated sector in their own home*; and *A survey of providers working in the unregulated sector in the child’s home*. The project was funded by Human Resources Development Canada. Data were collected through phone interviews with 726 unregulated family child care providers, 280 unregulated care providers working in the child’s home and 1,107 regulated family child care providers.

3 The largest and most comprehensive survey project, *You bet I care!* was conducted in 1998. Originally a project of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, it was transferred to an academic team and was published by the Centre for Families Work and Well-Being at the University of Guelph in 2000. *You bet I care!* was made up of four major studies (listed below). *You bet I care!* is the only Canada-wide study that has investigated the relationship between staffing and program characteristics and quality. Its data set is available to researchers through the Canada Data Research Centres.

Study 1 of *You bet I care!*, *A Canada-wide study on wages, working conditions, and practices in child care centers* (Doherty, Lero, Goelman, LaGrange & Tougas, 2000), analyzed 848 centre questionnaires, 848 director questionnaires, and 4,154 staff questionnaires representing all 10 provinces, the Northwest Territories¹ and the Yukon. The study was a “replication of the 1991 *Caring for a living* survey augmented by the collection of some additional data on centre practices” (Doherty et al., 2000: xiii).

Study 2, *Caring and learning environments: Quality in child care centres across Canada* (Goelman, Doherty, Lero, LaGrange & Tougas, 2000) collected information similar to study. Data were collected from a different sample of centres in six provinces and one territory. It reported on results provided by 1,352 teaching staff in 234 centres. Of these, 318 ECEs permitted observations in their rooms and participated in follow-up interviews. This study aimed to identify the main factors that predict and maintain quality in child care centres.

Study 3, *Caring and learning environments: Quality in regulated family child care across Canada* (Doherty, Lero, Goelman, Tougas & LaGrange, 2000) collected data from 231 regulated family child care providers across six provinces and one territory, followed by observations in each provider’s home. Data analysis identified “critical factors that predict the level of quality in a family child care home” (Doherty et al. 2000: p. xi).

¹ Note that Nunavut was not officially created until 1999.

Study 4, *Policies and practices in Canadian family child care agencies* (Doherty, Lero, Tougas, LaGrange & Goelman, 2001) analyzed questionnaires completed by 24 agency directors in eight family child care agencies in each of Alberta, Ontario and Quebec. The questionnaires asked about the children and families served, fees, home visitors and levels of supports available to providers.

4 *You bet we still care!* was published by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council in 2013. It built on previous research to capture a “long-term picture of human resources for the early childhood education and care sector in Canada” (Flanagan, Beach and Varmuza, 2013: 1). *You bet we still care!* surveyed employers and staff working in full-time licensed child care centres serving 0-6 year olds, but did not collect data on process quality needed to connect current workforce issues to quality. Its budget and timeframe were too limited to permit the research design needed to fully capture the range of current issues. *You bet we still care!*, however, provides the most up-to-date data about the Canadian child care workforce. The data set was made available to researchers in 2014.

In addition to the four national projects, some data can be gleaned from the Canadian census. The National Occupational Classifications for Statistics (NOC/NOC-S) and the North American Industry Classifications Systems (NAICS) were available for several years from analyses of the Long-Form Census, (which was discontinued in 2010.) These data yielded approximate numbers of people working as ECE/As and pertinent demographic data such as age, sex, education, income, migration status, and place of work.

In 2009, the Child care Human Resources Sector Council published a statistical overview, *A portrait of Canada’s early childhood education and care workforce*. It used 2006 Census data to examine the characteristics of the broader ECEC workforce, including kindergarten teachers and nannies, as well as a more focused analysis of the education and income of those who work in different types of child care.

Finally, since 1992, the independent, non-governmental Childcare Resource and Research Unit has collected available administrative data on staff wages from each province and territory and documented

changes in regulatory requirements for staff training. These data have been included in multiple editions of *Early childhood education and care in Canada* for each jurisdiction and—in some cases—in summary tables (see, for example, Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu and Forer, 2009).²

National sector studies and the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council

Two pan-Canadian child care sector studies have combined available data with other research and information to inform understanding of the characteristics, strengths and challenges of the child care workforce across the country. This summary is limited to national studies but these national studies draw on and include a number of provincial initiatives and reports.

The report of the first sector study, *Our child care workforce: From recognition to remuneration* (Beach, Bertrand & Cleveland, 1998), was funded by Human Resources Development Canada as part of a series of sector studies examining human resources challenges in various sectors across the Canadian economy. The child care sector study provided a comprehensive overview of the data, issues and surrounding context affecting the child care workforce, as well as made recommendations on a strategy to address issues and advance the profession.

Our child care workforce used multiple sources, including the *Caring for a living survey*, the 1991 Census, the *Canadian National Child Care Study* (Statistics Canada, 1992), and the *National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) – Cycle 1*. Additionally, the authors used information collected from a review of legislation, policies and programs in place in each province and territory, an international literature review, key informant interviews, sector consultations, a survey of training institutions, a review of training curricula and a survey of licensed home day providers. A large representative committee drawn from across Canada oversaw and had input into the research.

² See online at <http://child-carecanada.org/publications/ecec-canada/09/11/early-childhood-education-and-carecanada-2008>

The release of the 1998 sector study report and its recommendations culminated in the establishment of the Child Care Human Resources Round Table in 2000. The Round Table then received federal funding to conduct the 2002 Labour Market Update as a follow-up to the 1998 sector study in 2002. The Roundtable became a formal sector council in the Fall of 2003—the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC).

In 2004, CCHRSC released the Labour Market Update, *Working for change: Canada's child care workforce* (Beach, Bertrand, Forer, Michal & Tougas, 2004). *Working for change* “clearly builds on the 1998 report and recommendations of the child care sector study, *Our child care workforce*” (Beach et al., 2004: 1). The Labour Market Update included an extensive literature review, an environmental scan that included analyses of multiple sources of data and surveys, and direct input from the field, including from governments, focus groups, key informant interviews and ECEC program site visits.

The work of the sector council included extensive literature reviews on the child care workforce and child care more generally. *Our child care workforce* was supplemented by a literature review on professional education and human resources development (Beach & Bertrand, 1999)³, published in a separate report. This review provided a comprehensive picture of the research, policy documents, training opportunities and issues for the child care workforce throughout Canada and internationally. It identified the links between training and quality of care, and quality of care and child development, as well as documenting current training initiatives from the government, training institutions and child care organizations.

A second literature review was conducted for the Labour Market Update *Working for change*, which picked up where the 1998 sector study left off (Bertrand, Beach, Michal & Tougas, 2004)⁴. It summarized a wide range of research on early childhood education and child care, identifying the human resource implications of the research findings. The literature review drew on academic journals

³ Literature review available online at http://www.ccsc-cssge.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/Projects-PubsDocs/Lit%20Rev_Our%20C%20C%20Workforce.pdf

⁴ Literature review available online at http://www.ccsc-cssge.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/Projects-PubsDocs/1.5WorkingforChangeLit_Eng.pdf

and reports; government reports; professional/training/labour/advocacy; social policy organizations; international literature and; books.

The CCHRSC also conducted a number of other important research projects addressing various aspects of the child care workforce. Several of these are summarized below; a complete list of CCHRSC publications is available on its website⁵. However, while the CCHRSC website is being maintained, it has not been updated since the CCHRSC's defunding by the federal government and subsequent closure in 2013.

The Training Strategy Project (TSP) set out to “understand current ECE training processes... identify innovative practices as well as gaps in training, and develop options to meet current and future training needs” (Beach & Flanagan, 2007). The TSP included student and faculty surveys, as well as a follow-up student survey with graduates who participated in the 2003/2004 student survey that was part of the Labour Market Update. Additionally, a literature review, environmental scan and broad sector consultation contributed to the preparation and validation of the training strategy.

The CCHRSC published *Shedding new light on recruitment and retention challenges in child care* (Doherty & Forer, 2004) in which further analysis on the *You bet I care!* data was used to identify factors that predict a number of recruitment and retention issues in child care centres. The CCHRSC also released *Understanding and addressing workforce shortages in ECEC* in 2009. The *Workforce shortages* project was prepared by the Centre for Spatial Economics and included four reports: a literature review of socioeconomic effects and net benefits, a literature review of material on the ECEC labour market, estimates of workforce shortages and, recruitment and retention challenges and strategies.

In 2013, CCHRSC published *Overview of child care wages 2000-2010* prepared by Jane Beach. Beach used 2001 and 2006 Census data, and provincial/territorial administrative data collected by the Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) for *Early childhood education and care in Canada 2006 and 2008* and *Public Investments in early childhood*

⁵ All CCHRSC publications available at <http://www.ccsc-cssge.ca/>

education and care in Canada 2010 (published by HRDC but prepared by CRRU) “to examine changes in income and educational attainment of the child care workforce” (Beach, 2013: 1).

Before its dissolution in 2013, CCHRSC released reports from the unfinished Emerging Issues and Communication Strategy Project. The project aimed to “examine emerging issues in the ECEC sector within the context of their relevance to human resources for the sector” (Beach & Flanagan, 2010:1). A survey, key informant interviews and a literature review were carried out to address the identified emerging issues of family child care, inclusion, school-age care, and integration.

Other Canadian research on the child care workforce

A number of important studies conducted by researchers and organizations other than the CCHRSC have contributed to the national conversation on the child care workforce. Cleveland & Hyatt (2000) used data from the *Caring for a living* survey to analyze several common understandings about remuneration in the child care sector, including the impact of centre auspice, training, and centre-specific job tenure on wages. Similarly, Doherty (2002) used data from *You bet I care!* in Unionization and Quality in Early Childhood Programs to analyze the impact of unionization on wages, working conditions and quality in centre-based care.

Taylor, Dunster & Pollard (1999) conducted a national study on training for family child care providers, including a small sample of unregulated family child care providers. The study was designed to provide an overview of training approaches and opportunities across Canada, and to “deepen our understanding of what caregivers, parents, trainers, and other stakeholders see as the key training issues” (Taylor et al., 1999: 285). The project involved 37 key informant interviews, 17 caregiver focus groups involving 145 caregivers, additional focus groups with parents, trainers and agency staff, and a survey of organizations providing training to family child care providers.

Cox (2005) analyzed regulated family child care providers’ wages and working conditions in *Making family child care work: Strategies for improving the working conditions of family child care providers*. *Making family child care work* was funded and published by Status of Women

Canada. It examined “three provinces representing different delivery models for regulated family child care”, and analyzed the employment status of family child care providers and their eligibility for maternity and parental benefits offered under the Employment Insurance Act, the Canada Pension Plan/Quebec Pension Plan (CPP/QPP), compensation for workplace injuries, employment standards, and pay equity (Cox, 2005: vi).

Finally, Canada’s inclusion and participation in the *OECD’s Thematic Review of early childhood education and care* had a significant impact on our understandings of the structural and ideological issues affecting the child care workforce. This 20 nation international comparative study was the first to include Canada. Canada’s inclusion within this comparative perspective allowed new understandings about workforce and other key child care issues. The OECD Thematic Review of ECEC published more than 50 documents (all available online⁶). For Canada, the most significant of these are the two summary reports, *Starting Strong* (2001) and *Starting Strong 2* (2006), as well as the *Canada Background Report* (2004) and the *Canada Country Note* (2004).

Current state of data and research on the child care workforce in Canada

This overview demonstrates that – while the state of data on the child care workforce has never been stable – recent developments have further limited capacity to collect and analyze data on an ongoing basis and to carry out research.

The Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC), which grew out of the 1998 sector study *Our child care workforce: From recognition to remuneration*, was defunded in 2013; *You bet we still care!* was its last project. The CCHRSC played a tremendous role in fulfilling its mandate, which was to provide data, research and analysis on a wide range of workforce issues.

The Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) has been a primary source of regularly collected data on wages in regulated

⁶ See <http://www.childcarecanada.org/resources/issue-files/oezd-thematic-review-early-childhood-educationand-care>

child care programs and other workforce-related information. CRRU gathered and organized administrative data from the provinces/territories bi-annually since 1992 and produced *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 1993, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2008*, and *Public investments in early childhood education and care 2010* (published by HRSDC). The CRRU publications have documented developments in policy, funding and regulation used to analyze current issues in the field, and provided comparative sectional and longitudinal data and analysis. CRRU received stable funding from the federal government between 1995 and 2007; after 2007, two versions of *ECEC in Canada* were developed by CRRU under project-based federal contracts. Since 2010, CRRU has been able to collect and provide somewhat more limited information due to the absence of federal support. The 2012 version, *Early childhood education and care in Canada 2012*, was not able to include provincial wage data or current developments.

It is important to note that the implications of the cancellation of the Long-Form Census in 2010 and its replacement by the voluntary National Household Survey are still unknown. Both the CCHRSC and CRRU used census data to support their research.

What do the data and research tell us?

While the data are limited, there are a number of things we know about Canada's child care workforce. The available information about the child care workforce shows that the child care workforce in Canada is overwhelmingly female: 96% women (CCHRSC, 2009) or more recently 98.2% for full-day centre-based staff (Flanagan, Beach & Varmuza, 2013) and that wages are persistently low, even when compared to other female dominated professions, all women, or people with similar amounts of training (Cleveland & Hyatt, 2000; CCHRSC, 2009; Beach, 2010).

Three important themes emerge from the data and other information: poor wages and working conditions, training, and challenges in recruitment and retention.

Wages and working conditions

Low wages for child care staff were documented as a key problem in the first national collection of wage data in 1984, in which the author famously wrote that “general labourers and workers who care for animals earn 30% more than day care workers” (Schom-Moffatt, 1984:iv), generating the classic line that “day care workers earn less than zookeepers”.

The most recent survey of centre based child care staff and directors, *You bet we still care!* (Flanagan et al., 2013) revealed increases in provincial average median wages (using adjusted dollars), with higher increases for program staff than directors. Directors' wages were shown to be lower when they worked with children as part of the

child: staff ratio in the centre as well as filling the director role. Despite these increases, respondents identified that “issues of compensation continues to be the aspect of the work that is least satisfying” and one of the main reasons program staff are leaving the field (Flanagan et al., 2013: 24). This is consistent with previous surveys on the workforce that find wages to be one of the main reasons for dissatisfaction working in child care.

Increases in wages were reported in Beach’s 2013 *Overview of child care wages 2000-2010*, which included early childhood educators in all child care settings. Beach found that wages were well below the national average and home-based providers earned significantly less than centre-based providers, \$10,925 vs. \$25,100 respectively.

For frontline staff, low wages interact with difficult and sometimes outright poor working conditions. Beach et al. explained that “the hours of work and level of responsibility for the care and safety of small children create heavy workloads that can be, and often are, overwhelming” (2004: 97).

Access to health benefits, paid vacation and pension plans showed slight increases in the latest survey of centre-based staff but were still low (Flanagan et al., 2013). For example, only 48% of centre staff had additional medical coverage and only 63% had paid sick or personal leave days. Compared to 1998, a lower percentage of staff reported access to paid preparation time and paid professional development (Flanagan et al., 2013).

Regulated family child care providers face specific challenges associated with working alone for long hours with no breaks, as well as very limited access to health benefits and pension plans (Cox, 2005). Since 2010, family child care providers who identify as self-employed may qualify for maternity, parental and sickness benefits through Employment Insurance (EI) (Beach & Flanagan, 2010).

Data has also shown that wages are higher in unionized environments (Doherty, 2002; Beach, Flanagan & Varmuza, 2014) and that higher levels of training are associated with higher wages and higher rates of full-time employment (Beach, 2013; Beach & Costigliola, 2005; Cleveland & Hyatt, 2000).

Additionally, data over the years show consistently that wages and working conditions are worse in for-profit programs (Cleveland & Hyatt, 2000; Cleveland, Forer, Hyatt, Japal & Krashinsky, 2007).

Training

Provincial/territorial legislation and regulation specifies the training requirements for the various forms of regulated care within the province/territory. This, in turn, influences the amount and type of training required for ECE credentials in each jurisdiction. There is considerable variation in the amount and type of required training across Canada. No province requires all staff to have post-secondary ECE training, but recent data show that minimal requirements for both centre-based staff and regulated family child care providers have increased in some provinces (Friendly & Beach, 2013). As well, variations exist within child care programs within jurisdictions, as some individual service providers choose to hire staff with more than the required amount of training (Goelman et al., 2000).

Flanagan et al. reported that 89.6% of program staff across Canada held a post-secondary ECE-related credential and 59.1% had completed a two-year ECE diploma (2013). This was significantly higher than the 48.2% reported in 1998. Flanagan et al. observe that “the increase must be analyzed with consideration of the numerous initiatives introduced in provinces and territories over the last 14 years to support program staff in obtaining a post-secondary credential in ECE” (2013: 8). These findings are consistent with other studies that focused specifically on centre-based staff where ECE/As are more likely to have an ECE-related credential (Beach et al., 2004).

CCHRSC’s statistical overview of the ECEC workforce found that overall, “a higher proportion of people in the ECEC sector have a post-secondary credential (a one-year certificate, a two-year diploma or a three- or four-year university degree) compared to the overall workforce” (2009: 2). However, there are many non-ECE-educated child care staff working in all varieties of child care. Using census data that includes all workers classified as ECE/As working in a variety of regulated and unregulated arrangements, the CCHRSC (2009) found that a majority of child care workers and providers do not possess

a child care related major and that 40% of ECE/As possess a post-secondary degree that is neither child care nor education-related.

In *People, programs and practices: A training strategy for the early childhood education and care sector in Canada*, Beach and Flanagan found that, “all stakeholders agreed that increasing the length of ECE training and the number of people in a centre with ECE credentials would support quality programs” (2007: 28). While basic ECE training was considered adequate to prepare students for work in child care, access to in-service training and on-going professional development to support ECEs with the increasing complexities of their work was identified as an issue for both staff and directors. A decrease in access to professional development was identified in the most recent data from 2012 in *You bet we still care!*

Working in environments with higher proportions of trained staff and having access to in-service training and/or professional development are both associated with higher levels of job satisfaction. ECEs in the *Training strategy* project responded that “their own work was enhanced by the ability to work side-by-side with other trained ECEs” (Beach & Flanagan, 2007:25). Doherty and Forer’s (2004) analysis of *You bet I care!* data found that working in an environment with a low percentage of trained staff and limited access to professional development were both predictors of higher staff turnover in child care centres.

Recruitment and retention

Recruitment and retention are, and have been, ongoing concerns for the child care workforce. Across all national surveys, low wages have been consistently identified as the primary reason for leaving the field.

Flanagan et al. found that “despite high levels of job satisfaction, the number of people intending to leave their employment in the regulated child care sector actually increased slightly when compared to responses to this question in 1998” (2013: 27).

Flanagan et al’s 2013 findings confirmed earlier observations that recruitment and retention of trained ECEs is a challenge. Of the 65.5% of employers who reported that they lost at least one permanent staff

in the past 12 months, 73.4% reported that at least one of these staff was a qualified ECE. Furthermore, 63.3% of employers reported challenges trying to fill a vacant position, with ‘applicants’ lack of skills’ being the most common challenge.

Poor working conditions and limited career opportunities in the regulated child care sector contribute to high turnover, either into jobs in related ECEC settings like full-day kindergarten that have more prestige and better working conditions, or out of the sector altogether (Beach & Flanagan, 2007). In 2009, the CCHRSC reported that most educated ECEs are working outside the ECEC sector.

The authors of the *Understanding and addressing workforce shortages* report argued that, retention is the primary challenge “because recruitment challenges are primarily caused by staff turnover, with close to nine out of ten new recruits being required to replace existing staff” (Centre for Spatial Economics, 2009: 19).

So what? The implications of workforce issues for child care in Canada

The research on the Canadian child care workforce summarized here reveals chronic challenges that have significant negative implications. As Beach et al. explained, “one of child care’s greatest strengths lies in the commitment of skilled caregivers who work under so many daily challenges. Eventually, however, unresolved workforce issues take their toll” (Beach et al., 2004a: 6)

As summarized by Beach et al. (2004), “quality begets quality”; quality programs require highly skilled staff, but highly skilled staff don’t want to, and increasingly won’t, work in low quality programs.

While the most recent data from *You bet we still care!* study showed slight increases in wages and levels of training in centre-based settings, the lower-than average wages compared to other workers and inadequate working conditions that lead to high staff turnover and issues retaining qualified staff still represent considerable challenges.

Workforce issues have an effect on quality

The importance of quality in child care cannot be overstated. We know that child care and early education can be beneficial to children when it is high quality but not if it is poor quality. At the same time, we also know that responsibility for delivering high quality services

lies with frontline staff, centre directors and home-based care providers through their daily work.

Findings from the *You bet I care!* report on quality in child care centres (Goelman et al., 2000) summarized the large and growing body of international research showing that, ‘adult work environment variables’ such as wages and working conditions, and ‘staff variables’ such as the level of ECE specific training and job satisfaction have a predictable and statistically significant impact on program quality and staff-child interactions. The *You bet I care!* report on regulated family child care (Doherty et al., 2000) also found that gross income realized from family child care work, highest level of education, specific training in ECE, and connections to an organized association or providers’ network were correlated with quality provider: child interactions and environments in family child care.

High quality services staffed by high quality people also help to retain staff (Doherty & Forer, 2004). American research by Whitebook & Sakai (2003) found that high rates of turnover negatively impact quality and that more qualified staff are more likely to stay in environments with other trained staff. Similarly, Beach & Flanagan (2007) identified the importance of training on staff morale and job satisfaction and indicated that the majority of new ECE graduates are not planning to stay in the field for more than five years with low quality being one of the main deterrents.

It is, therefore, impossible to build and sustain quality child care programs without a professional workforce that experiences adequate working conditions together with high levels of job stability and satisfaction. As summarized by Beach et al. (2004), “quality begets quality”; quality programs require highly skilled staff, but highly skilled staff don’t want to, and increasingly won’t, work in low quality programs.

Labour market issues reflect and reinforce the devaluation of the child care workforce

The ongoing issues with low wages and poor working conditions represent a lack of recognition and a devaluation of child care work.

Beach et al. argued that, “the child care workforce identifies the lack of recognition for the work that they do to be as much of a problem as the low wages they receive” (Beach et al., 2004: 113).

The devaluation of child care work is a complex issue that is influenced by how we understand child care work in the social, political and economic realms of society. Addressing the root causes of this devaluation can be difficult, as we are dealing with the underlying ideas and values that we ascribe to women and children in society (Whitebook, 2013).

Primarily, this devaluation is perpetuated by the idea that child care work is women’s ‘natural’ work and that child care is a private family responsibility that should ideally be performed by the mother in her home (Teghtsoonian, 1997). Gendered assumptions de-skill the work and implicitly justify the lack of compensation, particularly when this work is replacing the unpaid (and unappreciated) caring labour of women in their private homes.

Child care work is further devalued when it is commodified and offered through a private market. This is in contrast to public primary and secondary education, which is viewed as public goods and offered through public institutions that use collective resources to fairly compensate educators and staff. In the privatized context, the child care workforce actually subsidizes the cost of care (to keep parent fees low enough) through their lost wages (Kagan, Kauerz & Tarrant, 2008), despite the evidence showing the public value and necessity of their work.

As we have noted, research has clearly indicated that frontline staff play a fundamental role in providing high quality child care and early childhood education. The ongoing issues of insufficient respect and inadequate compensation for the child care workforce reflect an unacceptable neglect of the needs and rights of the caregivers and educators performing this work and the needs and rights of children and families to access high quality child care.

Now what? Addressing child care workforce issues in Canada

Resolving workforce challenges is crucial to the success of child care programs across the country. A coordinated and comprehensive strategy is needed to address the multiple and interconnected variables that impact their working conditions and the quality of their work.

Long-time US child care workforce researcher Marcy Whitebook summarized the complexity of tackling child care workforce issues when she stated that, “seeking better pay and status for those who care for young children challenges basic assumptions in our society about the importance of caregiving work, the role of mothers of young children in the workforce, the role of government in the delivery of child care services, and the capacity of the private marketplace to address the broader public welfare. It requires a redistribution of social resources, upon which there are many claims” (Whitebook, 2013:6).

Wages are key

Increasing wages in the child care sector is the key to improving the conditions for the workforce and improving quality and consistency in child care programs. Low wages continue to be the primary factor pushing educators to leave the sector or stopping them from joining it in the first place (Flanagan et al. 2013; Beach & Flanagan, 2007). Better wages attract better people and keep them in the field. Findings from *You bet I care!* showed that, “the most significant predictor variable in the entire study was the level of wages paid to the observed staff member” (Goelman et al., 2000: 80), confirming earlier American research by Whitebook, Howes & Phillips (1998).

In order to address wages, the way child care is funded and delivered needs to be changed. The current market model relies primarily on parent fees to pay for services, while government funding in most provinces and territories for operating grants and fee subsidies for families with low incomes to purchase care in the child care market is generally limited (Friendly, 2019). Within this model, fees that would actually cover the cost of adequate wages and working conditions for trained staff would be unaffordable to the majority of parents. Staff wages make up the largest item in a budget, with the result that wages are usually the first item to be cut when finances become a problem, or increased profits are desired.

How public funding makes a difference

Using public funds for base funding of child care programs, has a positive effect on staff wages and qualifications. Some examples include:

- Doherty et al. (2000) reported that wages are higher in jurisdictions that provide operating funding to centres.
- Quebec and Manitoba have improved wages by implementing “funding programs for early learning and child care that take a system approach. In both cases, government has set a maximum parent fee and developed mechanisms to calculate and provide the operating funds needed to support the delivery of a quality early learning and child care program, including the ability to pay wages at a determined level [through a wage scale]” (CCHRSC, 2006: 7).
- In Alberta, the impact of substantial public funding in municipally supported centres has led to “staff teams with levels of formal education and training that exceed the provincial norms... and both municipalities provide additional resources to support continuous staff development” (Muttart Foundation, 2011: 19).

Increased training requirements are important but are only possible alongside increased wages

More and better training will not only improve quality but will also work to increase the status of and respect for the child care workforce. However, it is evident that, “without corresponding remuneration there is little likelihood of attracting stronger students who are willing to study for three or four years to become early childhood educators” (Beach & Flanagan, 2007: 8). A comprehensive training strategy can only be successful in conjunction with increased compensation and improved working conditions.

A number of provinces and territories have taken steps to promote and facilitate training for the child care workforce (Beach & Flanagan, 2007). While provinces can fund short-term training strategies, they may fear changing regulations to increase training requirements because programs will have difficulty meeting minimum requirements due to recruitment and retention issues. Arguably, increased training is less effective if programs are not required to increase the amount of trained staff in the program.

Training issues also challenge us to find a common understanding of the role and expectations of the child care workforce. Do we want everyone in the child care workforce to have some early childhood training? A two year diploma? Do we want to increase the number of years that a basic child care credential requires? One finding from the *Training Strategy Project* (Beach & Flanagan, 2007) was a broad consensus that increased training requirements for centre managers and directors would be more valuable and easier to implement than increased training for all program staff. And as Friendly, Doherty & Beach have explained, “identifying the optimum content and length of training depends upon how the role of the early childhood worker is conceptualized, which in turn relates back to the purpose(s) of ELCC...Each conceptualization requires different content and the necessary level of training increases with the complexity of the role” (2006: 25).

Professionalization, unionization and advocacy

Market-model provision and limited public funding disadvantage the child care workforce by creating a fragmented and disconnected sector that consists of numerous types of programs, working experiences and roles. This fragmentation limits the capacity for a professional infrastructure needed to support and advocate for the workforce.

Both the 1998 Sector Study and the 2004 Labour Market Update proposed professionalization, unionization and advocacy as three ‘interconnected strategies’ to advance the workforce (Beach et al., 2004: 113).

Professionalization

Attempts at what is called “professionalization” in child care has developed sporadically across the country. Largely, it has involved pressures from within the field to raise the quantity and quality of pre-service training and on-going professional development. At the same time, structures to recognize ECE credentials within and between provinces/territories were established in a number of jurisdictions (Flanagan, Beach, Michal & Cromier, 2009). In 2007 Ontario was the first province to establish a regulatory college for early childhood educators; ECEs are now required to belong to the College and are termed “Registered Early Childhood Educators”.

Findings from *You bet we still care!* show that program staff and directors had more early childhood training compared to 1998, and a large majority had recently participated in professional development. However, the additional finding that only 52.5% of program staff and 73% of directors belong to a child care organization and the percentage of staff who had access to professional development had decreased is cause for concern. Low levels of professional membership and opportunities are a sign that the workforce is still not united under formal structures that can provide consistent resources and representation to raise the status of the workforce as a whole.

Professionalization as it is classically defined may need to be reconsidered for the child care workforce. Typical processes of advancement through increased training, credentialing and the establishment of professionalizing institutions are not necessarily being met with a substantial change in the material conditions of the workforce or the development of a shared professional identity. A greater or equal emphasis on unionization and advocacy may be necessary before professionalization can serve its intended purpose.

Unionization

Unionization has been shown to have a positive impact on wages and other working benefits such as medical coverage, paid sick leave, pension plans, paid time for planning and professional development, access to designated staff rooms, and retention of staff (Doherty, 2002; Beach, Flanagan & Varmuza, 2014; Kass & Costigliola, 2003). As well, unionization allows the workforce to have a collective voice and an impact on their own working conditions. Unions can also promote or contribute to broader advocacy work, which provides another opportunity for the workforce to work collectively for change. But unionization is low, only 21.5% of program staff respondents in *You bet we still care!* reported belonging to a union (Flanagan, Beach & Varmuza, 2013).

While unionization is good for workers, it may be challenging for small community based, volunteer board-run, non-profit child care centres with limited public funding to gain the capacity to bargain with unions or meet their demands. Finding strategies to target governments to meet union demands, such as higher wages or new models of service provision, may be necessary to make unionization work more broadly in the child care sector. The central bargaining that took place between the unions (the CSN and the CSQ), the government and the main child care organizations (representing centres de la petite enfance (CPEs)) in Quebec significantly improved wages, benefits and working conditions across both unionized and non-unionized services in the province (Beach et al., 2004).

Advocacy

Across Canada, most provinces have separate child care advocacy organizations and ECE professional associations that play different roles, although they may work together at some moments (Langford et al., 2013). Child care advocacy organizations have been supportive of increasing wages and working conditions for the workforce but workforce issues are sometimes treated as separate from or in opposition to other demands, such as lower parent fees. Generally, professional associations are more concerned with professional development and support than they are with direct advocacy. A new advocacy focus for professional associations that prioritizes workforce issues may be warranted in the face of continued low wages alongside increasing professionalization and demands on the workforce.

We need more data and research

Finally, the work on the child care workforce has to be—like other policy-related work—supported by data and research. Despite the ongoing efforts within the child care community to collect data and conduct research on workforce issues, it is a struggle to address issues because of the lack of on-going, consistent data and up-to-date research. Indeed, ECEC data issues have grown in Canada in the last decade or so. As Beach, Bertrand & Cleveland wrote, “good data are the foundation of good research, and good research is necessary to adequately diagnose problems, develop potential solutions, and monitor the success and failure of those solutions” (1998: 142). Thus, a comprehensive, publicly funded program of research, data and evaluation must be attached to any workforce strategy moving forward.

Conclusion

This paper has summarized Canadian research on the child care workforce and identified key issues. It has shown the clear links between workforce issues and the challenge of improving child care in Canada more broadly. While it is important to understand and address the issues that continue to impede the progress of the workforce, it is also important to recognize the dedication of the child care workforce to caring for our youngest children as the cornerstone of this field. Many of us would argue that it is no longer acceptable for this workforce to do such important work without the appropriate recognition and compensation.

All the available data and research indicate that if wages and working conditions improve, there are real opportunities to improve and sustain the quality of the child care workforce and, therefore, child care programs.

There are significant challenges for the child care workforce in Canada. However, many of the solutions are quite clear. All the available data and research indicate that if wages and working conditions improve, there are real opportunities to improve and sustain the quality of the child care workforce and, therefore, the quality of child care programs. The evidence has clearly indicated that with enhanced resources and on-going training and support, the child care workforce is fundamental to delivering high quality child care.

A number of jurisdictions in Canada have taken steps to try to remedy workforce challenges. The reality, however, is that workforce issues

are directly tied to how child care is conceptualized and provided in this country and the lack of national leadership makes it more difficult to address them. Consequently, addressing workforce issues fully will require a fundamental and systematic shift in child care overall. Ultimately, a publicly funded, publicly managed system of child care, comparable in a number of ways to our public education system, is what is needed to truly transform the material and personal realities for the child care workforce.

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