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Developing and Supporting a High Quality Child Care Workforce in Canada

What are the barriers to change?

Government inaction in the area of child care human resources is inconsistent with their stated objectives for high quality early childhood education and child care programs. This article focuses on three contributing factors that act as barriers to action: 1) a child care market model; 2) the devaluation of caring work and; 3) increasing professional expectations without sufficient workforce advocacy. What links these three factors is the gender of the child care workforce, which is predominately female, as well as the pernicious reproduction of gender inequities in Canada's approach to child care provision. Addressing these three contributing factors is, therefore, a matter of gender justice.

Introduction

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.¹

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Over the past 10 years there has been a significant shift in the way we talk about early childhood education and child care and a growing consensus that early learning begins in infancy and can be nurtured and supported in early childhood programs. Provincial governments have taken steps to integrate this new understanding of children into public policy by shifting responsibility for regulated child care services into Ministries of Education and producing policies and programs that aim to 'integrate' early education and child care. Although we have seen some substantial progress in this integration, particularly in the area of full-day kindergarten, there is a persistent divide in resourcing programs for young children that are deemed 'educational' and those that are considered 'child care' for working parents.

Despite the popular rhetoric from governments about the importance of the early years and investing in early childhood education, and the substantial body of research that indicates educational qualifications, pay and working conditions of child care program staff as the most important indicators of quality, no province or territory has adequately dealt with these issues. Many provinces have taken steps to increase the quality of early childhood education and child care programs; however, these initiatives have been compromised in the absence of a comprehensive human resources policy built on adequate funding to develop and support the child care workforce.

In many cases, discussions around developing and supporting the child care workforce fail to integrate multiple contributing factors and shift our focus to one without the other. From Andrew and Yarrow's perspective, there are two separate discourses that permeate conversations around the child care workforce:

The more dominant of these is the discourse about quality and professionalism in early childhood, which aims to raise the status and the quality of work at the academic level, amongst governments and bureaucracies, and in early childhood services themselves...A subordinate discourse, sometimes mentioned by academics and in United Nations reports, is about the poor pay and conditions for most early childhood staff.²

This workforce, which provides child care programs for children birth to four years old and before and after school programs for kindergarten and school-aged children, is the focus of this article.

Private market for non-parental care, private problem

Developing and supporting the child care workforce is fundamentally tied to the way we conceptualize and deliver child care services in this country. Unlike public education, including kindergarten for all five year olds and some four year olds, which is viewed as a public responsibility and a universal entitlement, child care as a social program to support working parents is predominantly viewed as a private and individual family responsibility. The most obvious example of this understanding is reflected in the provision of child care services through the private market. Friendly and Prentice explain that, “in a market model, ECEC [child care] is treated as a fee-for-service commodity, not an entitlement for children or a public good that is systematically developed”³. But what are the particular effects the child care market has on the development and support of the child care workforce?

Penn, in questioning whether a child care market can provide high quality, equitable and accessible programs for children and families, writes that in relation to staff labour costs:

Caring cannot be made more productive; the caring capacities of members of staff can be improved but cannot usually be extended to cover more children...The only way in which labour costs can be reduced is by paying staff less, at or below a minimum wage; employing the least qualified workers who can be paid less; covering ratio requirements with temporary or untrained staff or students on placement; minimizing benefits concerning sick leave, in-service training, holidays and pensions; and adopting anti-union policies to minimise resistance to such conditions.⁴

In other words, child care delivered through a market essentially works against supporting trained and skilled professionals. The true cost of a professional workforce is too much for the market to bear, or parents to pay, resulting in a downward pressure on training, wages

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and supports. A recent *Start Strong* Policy Brief questions whether child care is a “business or profession” concluding that child care cannot be a business “suited to a market” and a profession “delivering a public service” at the same time⁵. Oberhuemer further indicates that “the market model [for child care] in particular generates highly differential systems of training, payment and employment conditions”⁶, making it extremely difficult to create universal professional systems and supports. This fragmentation works against developing and supporting the child care workforce, diminishing their collective and professional identity, voice and power.

In Canada we have seen the impact of the market model on the child care workforce. The most recent survey of centre based child care staff and directors, *You Bet We Still Care!*, was consistent with previous surveys in identifying 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 field⁷. Although there were increases in the education levels and participation in professional learning of staff, critical aspects of working conditions including hourly wages, paid time for planning and professional learning, and access to pensions and benefits saw minimal or no improvement. Recruitment and retention of educated staff was also identified as an ongoing issue and a higher percentage of staff (compared to the last survey in 1998) were planning to leave their employment in the regulated child care sector.

Provincial governments have taken steps to address wages for the child care workforce through public funding in the form of specific wage grants and operating funding that goes directly to providers. Unionization has also played a key role in increasing wages and working conditions for parts of the child care workforce. But overall, government wage initiatives are limited and union membership remains low among the workforce. As concerns around recruitment and retention persist, educational requirements in regulations for licensed programs and providers have been kept to a minimum across the country. Both regulated and unregulated home-based child care providers with minimal or no training requirements play a key role in supplementing the child care market and continue to be low cost care settings for governments. Government policies such as the federal live-in caregiver program also explicitly undermine the advancement

of a child care system and the child care workforce (including the caregivers involved in the program) by promoting the exploitation of immigrant women in roles that are reminiscent of domestic servitude but meet the demand for non-parental child care.

Teghtsoonian⁸ describes how Canada's approach to non-parental child care is grounded in social and economic conservative values that prioritize a traditional model of child care in the home by the mother, and when that is not possible the mother seeks a private market solution for the provision of non-parental child care. From an economic perspective, women who want to enter the paid labour market out of necessity or choice have to purchase the service to replace their unpaid labour caring for children in the home. Finding non-parental child care (with limited state support) is therefore a private choice — and a private problem for families.

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The employment conditions of the child care workforce, the majority of whom are women, are also private problems to be negotiated within their isolated contexts. As a fee-for-service commodity, the child care workforce's wages and working conditions are funded by parent fees set by each centre or in some cases, jurisdiction. In her analysis, Teghtsoonian explains that, "as a consequence, providers and parents must negotiate privately their conflicting economic interests in a highly constrained and unpromising context". Ultimately, wages paid to the child care workforce have to remain low to keep fees for families reasonable (although they are still often unaffordable) and any struggle to increase wages on the part of the child care workforce presumes a direct impact on the fees paid by the families that they care for. Andrew & Yarrow argue that, "this antagonism of interests in childcare leads to avoidance of the issue", leaving both parties to struggle privately, with little concern from those citizens not involved in the provision or use of child care.

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The child care market model has been built on a foundation of gender inequalities. The model fails both working mothers who have limited access to high quality care and the women who educate and care for their children. As Teghtsoonian concludes, “there is something amiss when women’s opportunities for employment continue to depend on low wages for the women who care for their children”. Nationally, child care is not regarded as a collective responsibility and a public resource. Instead the child care market model fosters a private struggle for and between women to fulfill the demands of the care of children through the seemingly endless unpaid and under paid labour of women. How the intersection of the gender of those needing and delivering child care and their class and race is increasingly present in this struggle warrants further discussion.

Neither the increasing demand for non-parental child care as the majority of mothers continue to enter and stay in the paid labour market, nor the push for higher quality child care programs has motivated significant changes in the way child care is delivered in Canada. As many researchers indicate, a key solution lies in the development of a publicly-funded system that supports adequate and professional wages for the child care workforce and maintains affordable fees for families. From our perspective, the solution is also about fundamentally shifting gendered attitudes that place such a low value on the care of children and the labour involved in providing that care which results in non-parental child care being thrown to the vicissitudes of the marketplace.

The devaluation of caring work

The devaluation of care work undertaken predominantly by women and increasingly by women from racialized groups is complex and runs through multiple facets of life and society. In most advanced industrial countries, market logic has ultimately masked an understanding of the devaluation of care work with concepts such as freedom and choice in the marketplace⁹. Here we highlight the most relevant aspects of this devaluation as it pertains to developing and supporting the child care workforce.

The early education and child care field has actively worked to manage the devaluation of care work, in part by with a significant shift

towards framing the work and the services of child care as educational. Talking about care work is not always seen as the most appropriate or effective strategy when discussing the child care workforce or pushing for professionalization. And although educators and parents agree that they don't want young infants, toddlers and preschoolers to be in strictly educational settings, we have developed a discourse for the provision of early childhood services that relies heavily on early childhood education and early childhood development so that the devaluation of care work is inadvertently reinforced.

Stereotypes of the (gendered) naturalism of care work also persist. Moss argues that the idea of the female paid child caregiver as the substitute mother "remains deeply entrenched in many societies" and that "the early childhood worker as substitute mother produces an image that is both gendered and assumes that little or no education is necessary to undertake the work"¹⁰. These assumptions allow for ambivalence towards the child care workforce and adequate compensation for their work, reinforced by the devaluation of the skills and emotional labour necessary to care for other people's children and an emphasis on the intrinsic satisfaction of caregiving as a just reward for the work. Like mothering, it is assumed that all women can call upon their natural abilities to do this work. The significant number of women performing paid child care work in private homes with little or no training and significantly lower wages further challenges our collective perception of this work as skilled or professional.

This devaluation of caring work compounds child care workforce issues in multiple ways. The logic of the education and care split in which those who work in education are paid more and receive greater status than those who work with younger children in what are regarded as care services is reinforced. The sector's ability to articulate, and make claims on the value of child care work is challenged. Research from England¹¹ and Australia¹² where the child care workforce operates within similar contexts, identifies how the child care workforce feels they must push aside the importance of care in their work to claim their professional status. This devaluation can be particularly explicit for those working with infants and toddlers when their work — focused on meeting the physical and emotional needs of young children — is not recognized in professional or policy discourses¹³. In one of the most comprehensive reviews of the child care workforce

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in Canada, Beach et al. argue that “the childcare 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”¹⁴.

But in reality, young children *need* to be well-cared for and caring relationships with children are essential. Caring relationships between

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professionals and children are complex, requiring the skills and education to cultivate “an understanding of the values and practices of care—engrossment, sensitivity, trust and reciprocity — and a view of children as capable of full participation in the social and cultural life of the early learning and care setting”¹⁵.

Articulating the value of high quality care in early childhood programs is one of the greatest challenges we face in not only supporting and developing the child care workforce but in achieving the goal of national child care program. Whitebook articulates this challenge poignantly when she writes 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 claims¹⁶.

Doherty, Friendly & Oloman further argue that, “the invisibility of women’s work, and understanding of the complexities involved in providing care has not been incorporated into the design of our social policies or public services”¹⁷. The on-going invisibility and devaluation of care work in our public and professional discourse limits full

recognition and support of the child care workforce, as well as our collective ability to argue for public support for this work.

Increasing professional expectations and decreasing workforce advocacy

Coast to coast to coast, there has been a significant push to professionalize the child care workforce resulting in increasing professional expectations for it. The critical role that staff in early childhood programs play in providing high quality education and care is now acknowledged. The idea that early childhood educators have specialized knowledge and skills is gaining recognition and counters perceptions that child care work is simply an expression of the female caregiver's natural abilities.

Recognizing the importance of higher educational qualifications for child care staff has prompted some provinces and territories in collaboration with professional associations, third-sector foundations, and post-secondary institutions to initiate discussions about policy changes. For instance, to inform the Alberta government's work in this area, "seven areas in which early childhood educators require professional competence" and "form a professional foundation for the field" have been made available¹⁸.

Other professional expectations are evident as well. Over the past decade, Canadian ECEC professional associations have established ethical and professional standards. A number of municipalities have launched early childhood program quality assurance initiatives. Many provinces have recently produced early learning curriculum frameworks which child care staff are expected to use to discuss their values, theories and beliefs about early learning and to guide their pedagogical practices¹⁹. Provinces, municipalities, and post-secondary institutions among other stakeholders have initiated professional learning opportunities to examine the rationale for and use of these curriculum frameworks.

Other professional learning expectations for the workforce have been launched. In Ontario, the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) has developed continuous professional learning requirements for its 45,000 registered early childhood educators. Many Canadian jurisdictions have recognized that supervisors in early childhood pro-

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grams need specialized professional learning in leadership competencies particularly for developing professional cultures within the workplace. Overall, child care staff are increasingly being encouraged to participate in professional learning activities, and engage in inter-professional collaboration and in communities of practice.

Many positive developments have emerged out of this increased attention to the professionalization of the child care workforce. However, in our view, the contradictions between processes of professionalization and the realities of working within a 'compromised' child care system will continue to inhibit the intended results of professional-

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ization. We can keep pursuing additional educational qualifications and new professional expectations but if we don't address the material realities of the work it is unrealistic to expect significant change. Child care staff will not be able to, or even want to achieve the stated demands and goals put on them without the appropriate physical, emotional and monetary support. In regards to in-

creased levels of educational preparation, for example, Beach and Flanagan argue 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"²⁰.

For some, discussing material concerns such as wages and working conditions is seen as a 'downer' or even a distraction from what is considered to be a more important conversation-child care staff professionalism. The child care workforce which is predominantly women also has a reputation of being silent about their own concerns with wages and working conditions, challenged by a culture that views participating in direct advocacy as shameful and unprofessional²¹. Rising professional expectations for child care staff must be coupled with increasing advocacy demands for improvements in professional preparation, compensation and working conditions. We can draw upon the approach successfully taken by other professional groups

such as teachers, nurses and doctors who combine promotion of professional qualifications and standards with strong advocacy for their professions. The creation of professional unions to unite and represent the child care workforce deserves further consideration in this process. In other words, professionalization of a workforce does not need to result in depoliticizing the realities of the professional's day-to-day work.

But this combination of professionalization and advocacy will stagnate unless we address two underlying assumptions examined in early sections: that child care services should function in a market system, and child care work is essentially natural for caregivers. It is useful here to restate that the gender of the workforce is inextricably tied up in these assumptions.

Questions remain about how a child care workforce can become a profession within a market model: Does a market model have the resources to develop, nourish and sustain a professional culture when a major focus of a program as a 'business' is keeping staff costs to a minimum? Does the market model with its focus on 'selling' a service and keeping consumers happy rather than on the public value of the service discourage child care staff from engaging in professional activities, advocating and even striving for greater professionalism? Increasing professional expectations for child care staff particularly if the discourses of early learning, development and schooling underlie this increase may also unintentionally reinforce the devaluation of their care work²². How can we develop and support the child care workforce if we seek to hide and, as a result, devalue the work they do?

Addressing these issues may improve chronic recruitment and retention problems in the ECEC sector. For many years, the call to "make a difference"²³ in the lives of young children has been used to motivate child care staff to join and stay in the workforce. But we know from recruitment and retention levels, that child care staff want to *both* make a difference in children's lives and experience differences in their own working lives. Many recent graduates of post-secondary ECE programs are not prepared to enter precarious employment in which "persistent poverty, ill health, and depression, all conditions that can prevent adults from meeting the needs of young children" are present²⁴. With rising professional expectations for child care staff and growing accountability in the public interest, we ask: is it not also

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in the public's interest to ensure that the well-being of the child-care workforce is addressed?

Moving forward

It is somewhat ironic that child care began and continues to be primarily a women's issue and essential component of gender equality, yet as it is currently organized it actually perpetuates the marginalization of the significant number of women performing this work in a paid capacity. Thus, we cannot ignore the material deprivation of the workforce if we are serious about supporting and sustaining a professional, high quality child care workforce who can provide high quality programs for children and families.

There is a strong body of research to support these claims. But we have suggested that it is the values that we collectively place on women, children, and care that will ultimately drive how we go about developing and supporting the child care workforce. Andrew and Yarrow conclude that "we need a new vision for early childhood services, one that can confront honestly the classed and gendered nature of our field, and work to change, rather than conceal, these inequalities". As a matter of gender justice and equality, for all women and men in Canada, we must join the call for a national child care system and the work of taking care of and educating young children as a public good that deserves our collective attention and resources.

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