

How Early Years Professionals Can Inform an Early Years Policy Framework Prototype

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Abstract

This study outlines the first phase of a co-design approach to construct an Early Years policy framework prototype by focusing on the perspective of Early Years professionals in the London–Middlesex area. Previous information was collected from parents/caregivers and child care providers; this study adds the voice of the Early Years professional. Empowering key stakeholders, including Early Years professionals, in the co-design of a policy provides the opportunity for those most impacted by the policy to provide insights beyond consultations. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated an urgent need for an Early Years policy framework that includes the perspectives of various stakeholders directly impacted by child care.

Key words

Early Years policy framework, Early Years policy design, human-centred policy design, policy co-design, Childhood Educator, teacher, roles, responsibilities

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Much of 2020—dominated by the global COVID-19 pandemic—was like no other time. The pandemic's impact on the social fabric of countries left citizens worldwide questioning their values and beliefs on what basic needs must be filled to feel safe and supported. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the caring professions (e.g., healthcare providers, personal support workers, and early childhood educators) to be vital to the function of societies. The closing of childcare centres in March of 2020 and the subsequent reopening of some centres significantly impacted not only essential workers but also those trying to work from home. In the London–Middlesex area, the closures left families, essential workers, and employers without a safe environment for their children. Some communities were able to open emergency childcare spaces while others struggled to meet reopening expectations months after the shutdown in the spring of 2020 (Friendly, Forer, Vickerson, & Mohamed, 2020).

This study seeks to capture the perspective of Early Years professionals on the issues, challenges, and successes of the current Early Years system in the London–Middlesex area through an online questionnaire. In the London–Middlesex area, these are the front-line Early Years practitioners, namely Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) and childcare assistants who work in childcare centres or in the family centres supporting Early Years programs. This project is part of a multi-phase study that builds on research completed by the City of London and Middlesex County to inform their *London–Middlesex Child Care & Early Years Service System Plan 2019–2023*. This plan was required by the Province of Ontario to demonstrate accountability and ensure continued access to provincial funding to support their Early Years system. While the province is responsible for childcare and Early Years programs, it is important to note that funding is allocated to municipalities based on their service plans to operationalize childcare and family-oriented support programs.

The goal of this study is to add the voices of Early Years professionals to those of parents/caregivers and childcare providers (directors and program supervisors within childcare centres and family centres). This allows for a comparison of the perspectives of the Early Years professionals to those of the parents/caregivers and childcare providers collected by the City of London and Middlesex County. By acknowledging the voices of the major stakeholders, including those of Early Years professionals, this phase of the study will inform the next phase, which is the co-design of an Early Years policy framework prototype. The next phase will feature one-on-one interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders in London–Middlesex, including Early Years professionals, parents/caregivers, childcare providers, and employers.

Literature Review

Setting the Context

For the purpose of this study, *policy framework* refers to a document that communicates a set of goals that reflect the values and beliefs of citizens within a certain area (OECD, 2001). In this case, the goals are linked to areas of concern and challenges that guide specific policies supporting the operation of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system in London–Middlesex and its key elements: childcare and Early Years programs to support children and their families. (These concerns and challenges are what the OECD (2012) refers to as “policy levers.”) Policy frameworks may provide guidance in large or small areas, for example the *Early Learning and Development Framework* (CMEC, 2014) was created by the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) to provide pedagogical guidance for Early Years systems across Canada and support the work of provinces and territories.

Another example of a Canadian Early Years framework is *The Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework* (Government of Canada, 2017), which was co-developed by federal, provincial, and territorial ministers of early learning and childcare. This framework proposes a set of principles to create ECEC systems that are high-quality, accessible, affordable, flexible, and inclusive. The document details how Canada's multicultural society produces diversity, thereby creating unique needs within its communities. This framework acts as a guiding document rather than roadmap or system framework, combining a focus on key principles with the varying needs expressed by communities across the country. Based on the framework's goals and principles, provincial and territorial governments continue to support their Early Years systems, sign bilateral agreements to receive added funding, and provide annual reports to monitor progress around the country.

While the Canadian federal multilateral framework (Government of Canada, 2017) recognizes Canada's diversity and the unique contexts of communities, Indigenous communities and their needs are not emphasized. Co-developed with Indigenous stakeholders, the *Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework* (Government of Canada, 2018) provides guiding principles for Indigenous early learning and childcare (ELCC), which expand on principles identified in the federal multilateral framework. That document explains the distinctions between First Nations, Inuit, and Metis communities and outlines varying principles, goals, priorities, and strategic actions, depending on each community's needs. The authors advocated for collaboration and continuous dialogue with non-Indigenous peoples and governments. Insights gleaned from these principles can inform ECEC systems and programs across Canadian communities. There is no mention of the actual process used to "co-develop" (Government of Canada, 2018, p. 2) the framework within the document beyond acknowledging the representations of the ministers responsible for ECEC in each of the provinces and territories.

Ontario's Renewed Early Years and Child Care Framework (Government of Ontario, 2017) provides four themes or pillars imperative to the Early Years programming within the province: affordability, access,

quality, and responsiveness. Identified in collaboration with families and other Early Years stakeholders such as employers, Indigenous partners, educators, municipal leaders, school boards, academics, and experts, the framework guides the ECEC system in Ontario. Both immediate and long-term actions are defined to guide municipal efforts in operationalizing the framework. It is important to note that this policy framework does share its design process, starting with a discussion paper that anchored engagement sessions across the province and described the stakeholders involved. This latest Ontario document reflects the federal multilateral framework while also reflecting Ontario's areas of focus for the provincial delivery of its ECEC system.

As mandated by the Province of Ontario (Government of Ontario, 2017), the *London–Middlesex Child Care & Early Years Service System Plan 2019–2023* (Corporation of the City of London, 2019) uses the four pillars identified in the province's framework (affordability, access, quality, and responsiveness) for the London–Middlesex context. The service system plan provides an overview of the current ECEC system in London–Middlesex and its delivery. Five engagement reports were incorporated into the service plan; they offer feedback from different communities, including families, Early Years service providers, Francophone individuals, Indigenous peoples, and children's voices. However, one perspective not explored was that of Early Years professionals; this omission provided the rationale for this study. A scan of the latest available Early Years service plans or community plans from Huron County, the City of Hamilton, and the City of Ottawa showed the involvement of Early Years stakeholders similar to those of London–Middlesex; only the plan from Ottawa included the perspective of Early Years professionals (Corporation of the City of Hamilton, 2016; Corporation of the City of Ottawa, 2019; County of Huron, 2019).

Compared to other developed nations, Canada's ECEC system trails behind; mainly, Canada does not have a national plan to address the many and varied system-level issues related to childcare across the country (Akbari & McCuaig, 2017; White, 2017). Even with national ECEC principles captured in bilateral agreements between the provincial, territorial, and federal governments and the *Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Childcare*, families in different

regions still face discrepancies in quality (Akbari & McCuaig, 2017). A lack of cohesiveness and federal standards creates a disjointed national program, with a patchwork approach to a service of growing national importance that was laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic. This research study looks at how a policy framework can be co-designed by key stakeholders, in this case, including the Early Years professionals, to strengthen the intentional connection between policy and practice (Miller, Cameron, Dalli, & Barbour, 2018, pp. 1–15).

Policy Co-design

Evans and Terrey (2016) define co-design as an inclusive process that combines research and reflection to help solve problems with solutions that work for the end user. The authors describe this approach as one where the community members are in a role that allows them to be involved in policymaking by sharing their lived experiences. Research confirms the importance of engaging the educator, parents/caregivers, care providers, and other stakeholders in critical decisions that directly impact the child, the family, and community (Irvine & Price, 2014; Karila, 2012; McMillan & McConnell, 2015; Murray & Rudolph, 2019).

During the co-design process for this policy framework, there is an ongoing connection between the researchers, the practitioners, and community members as they move through three stages: (a) discovery and insight on the subject matter; (b) building a prototype; and (c) evaluation and scaling of the prototype.

Various policy co-design concepts include terms such as *human-centred design*, *deliberative democracy*, *participatory democracy*, *co-production*, and *community engagement* (Blomkamp, 2018). Mintrom and Luetjens (2016) expand on the concept of design thinking related to “solving” social problems and suggest a process that draws on lessons learned from design methodologies. Co-design labs involved in various aspects of community members’ lives have existed in several countries worldwide for some time, adapting concepts originally used in product design, such as IDEO.ORG’s *The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design* (2015). These processes all draw on the

recognition of active participation/citizen engagement and the acknowledgement of people’s own expertise in addressing problems that impact their lives (Evans & Terrey, 2016).

Key benefits to the co-design approach to policymaking include giving voice to marginalized groups, building relationships between citizens and governments, and meeting the specific needs of citizens at the heart of stakeholder engagement and support (Blomkamp, 2018; Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016). Other positives of the co-design process include having a challenge defined by the end users, generating evidence on how the application of the policy will impact citizens, and sharing both the potential successes and failures of the policy (Evans & Terrey, 2016).

Challenges to successfully using a co-design approach may include a government seeming to lack control, a challenge to the current status quo of policymaking, and the inability to meet timely deadlines due to the time-consuming process of building trust and relationships between government and stakeholders. Another challenge is clearly reflecting particular input after encouraging a collaborative process of policymaking; failure to do so could erode trust. Other possible challenges identified by Evans and Terrey (2016) include ensuring the support of politicians and policymakers who feel comfortable with the potential risks of challenging the current status quo of policymaking. Currently, there is minimal research on both the processes and outcomes available on the co-design of policy in social design labs and other strategies used in this process (Blomkamp, 2018).

Early Years experts, policymakers, academics, and researchers have provided much information on key elements of effective Early Years systems since the early 2000s. International documents, such as OECD’s *Starting Strong* documents (OECD, 2001, 2006, 2012, 2015) and UNICEF’s Innocenti report cards, such as *Report Card #8* (2008) focusing on childcare, have provided data and analyses on the evolving state of Early Years systems. Over the years, the social context, quality, governance, funding, and accessibility have been identified as vital elements to successful Early Years systems and are often considered in policymaking to

help build the infrastructure of a system. However, the Early Years professional, who is the direct connection between children and their families in Early Years settings, is not heard or involved in policy consultations that will guide their day-to-day work of caring for and educating young children.

The Early Years professional can bring expertise and experience to the co-design and implementation of the policy framework; they can “translate” the national perspective to a local level that helps meet the needs of the children in their care. In the co-design process, professionals can also be strong advocates for children, families, and themselves. There would be a stronger connection between policy and practice if Early Years professionals were engaged in the policymaking process (Mitchell, 2015). Additionally, when the voices of Early Years professionals are heard and included, and the professional is imagined as “an active learner co-constructing knowledge in relationship with others” (Moss, 2014, p. 89), a more democratic approach to policymaking can be achieved.

Why consider moving to the co-design of an Early Years policy framework prototype now? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for a strong national Early Years policy framework that can help childcare systems to be adaptable to the needs of children, their families, and communities across Canada (Friendly et al., 2020). It is becoming apparent that childcare is crucial to national, provincial, and local economies and the wellbeing of communities. This research study is a step in expanding the key stakeholder strategies for co-design of an Early Years policy framework prototype. While this study involves the lens of only one part of Ontario, it is the beginning of hearing the voices of the Early Years professionals alongside those of parents/caregivers and childcare providers (Corporation of the City of London, 2019). Their inclusion in the co-design process will help inform the importance and benefits of going beyond a traditional consultation approach by empowering Early Years professionals in sharing their perspective on key challenges that need to be addressed when considering an Early Years policy framework prototype (Irvine & Price, 2014; Karila, 2012; McMillan & McConnell, 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Murray & Rudolph, 2019).

Methodology

The research goal was to gain information from Early Years professionals on what important elements to include in a locally derived ECEC policy framework prototype. The research used a mixed-methods approach to help with the comparison of data from parent/caregiver and childcare provider surveys and focus groups already collected from the *London-Middlesex Child Care & Early Years Service System Plan 2019-2023* (Corporation of the City of London, 2019). The student researchers and supervisor developed a questionnaire taking into consideration the questions and points of discussions used within the comparator surveys. As this was a local study, the target respondents were limited to the London-Middlesex area. The questionnaire, which consisted of both open and closed-ended questions designed to gain insight on their perspectives of London-Middlesex’s ECEC system, was distributed to Early Years professionals through an online platform. The data was collected and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively, justifying a mixed methods design (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Three local organizations served as gatekeepers, using their social media platforms and websites to invite Early Years professionals to participate. Over a five-week period of data collection, a total of 82 Early Years professionals responded to the questionnaire. The participants mainly worked within London, with a small number working in the surrounding Middlesex area. The professionals had a range of experiences within the field. The participants were predominantly diploma holders who have worked for 10 years or longer in licensed, non-profit childcare, centre-based programs and were registered with the Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE). A local school board was approached but, due to labour strife at the time, the voices of school-based RECEs was minimal.

Closed-ended questions were interpreted using descriptive statistical analysis assessing trends amongst respondents, while the open-ended questions were analyzed using theme-coding to understand additional perspectives (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This led to the identification of strengths, concerns, and challenges presented by the Early Years professionals that could then be compared to the data collected from

parents/caregivers and Early Years childcare providers. Parent/caregiver and childcare provider data was retrieved from the detailed engagement reports, which included parent/caregiver and childcare provider focus groups and survey results from the *London–Middlesex Child Care & Early Years Service System Plan 2019–2023* (Corporation of the City of London, 2019). The data analysis organized the information using the four pillars: access, affordability, responsiveness, and quality, key areas identified in the service plan. This organization helped with the comparison of data across the three surveyed groups, which will support the first iteration of the policy framework prototype, and the subsequent conversation and co-design during focus groups in the next phase of the research project (currently scheduled for the winter of 2022).

Limitations

Some key limitations to the research involved being bound by the previous questionnaires, conflicting data on the number of practicing Early Years professionals within the London–Middlesex area, and time constraints.

The questionnaire that was used for this study needed to be similar to those used with parents/caregivers and Early Years childcare providers and was edited to be specific to the Early Years professionals and their perspectives. While this allowed the researchers to compare the perspectives of the three participant groups (Early Years professionals, parents/caregivers, and childcare providers), it meant that questions pertaining to the specific development of a national childcare policy framework prototype from the perspective of Early Years professionals could not be incorporated.

Statistics on the number of Early Years professionals currently working in the London–Middlesex area proved to be difficult to confirm. After connecting with the City of London, local Early Years organizations and reaching out to the CECE for the province, a specific number was not available. The final number of Early Years professionals who responded to the questionnaire was 82. It is unknown how much of the population was captured.

Due to time limitations imposed on the student researchers through course completion deadlines, participants' time to access the questionnaire and the ability for the student researchers to analyze the data in greater detail was also limited.

Another important limiting factor was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; by mid-March, all in-person contact between the researchers and the community partners had moved online to comply with provincial restrictions, which limited the students' ability to share their findings within the scope of their academic program.

Findings

The findings of the study are based on data collected from Early Years professionals through an online survey administered by the researchers and findings from parent/caregiver and childcare provider surveys and focus groups, presented in the *London–Middlesex Child Care & Early Years Service Plan 2019–2023* (Corporation of the City of London, 2019). The pillars of affordability, access, quality, and responsiveness were used to organize the data from the responses of the Early Years professionals, parents/caregivers, and Early Years childcare providers.

Affordability

The affordability pillar relates to the cost of services, programming, and licensed childcare within the Early Years community, specifically for families.

a) Early Years Professional Perspective

The “high cost of childcare for parents” was recognized by 35 Early Years professionals (n=82) as a top issue facing childcare in London–Middlesex. Similarly, “cost of services” was ranked by 54 of the 82 Early Years professionals as a top barrier for families in London. Affordability was also mentioned when Early Years professionals described the ideal childcare and Early Years system for families in London; terms such as “publicly funded,” “low cost,” “free,” “low/no cost,” or “cost efficient/effective” were used by 22 of the 73 respondents to questions related to affordability.

b) Early Years Child Care Provider Perspective

The data collected from 73 licensed childcare service providers through online surveys and focus groups addressed the operating costs in supporting a quality program for children and their families. Specifically, the childcare providers' top concerns were about costs for expansions/renovations for added childcare spaces while also trying to provide appropriate wages that would improve recruitment, hiring, and retention of qualified staff. Balancing the operations costs and appropriate wages was seen as difficult when also trying to maintain affordable parent/caregiver fees and dealing with uncertain funding to cover operating costs for quality childcare environments.

c) Parent/Caregiver Perspective

Parents/caregivers shared their perspectives via an online survey (n=1252); a short, postcard questionnaire (n=413); and through ten focus groups (Corporation City of London, 2019). Affordability was viewed as the third-highest reason for choosing the current childcare service; this appeared to be related to the preferred location for care. Overall, the general cost of childcare and the limited access to fee subsidies programs were seen as barriers to affordable childcare.

Access

This pillar refers to families having the opportunity to use high-quality early childhood programs and support services.

a) Early Years Professional Perspective

Early Years professionals were asked to describe what an ideal childcare and Early Years system experience should be for families in London in three words; many participants used terms such as "accessible/accessibility," "available," "easy to find/navigate," and "seamless."

When asked for their perspective on top issues regarding childcare in London, Early Years professionals identified the availability of spaces for various age groups; 17 (n=81) Early Years professionals chose

infants as the age group that lacked access to childcare spaces. Early Years professionals also identified parents' lack of knowledge about and undervaluing of licensed childcare as an issue facing their professional community.

Early Years professionals had a "good" to "excellent" awareness of the EarlyON support programs outcomes; 55 of 81 respondents highlighted that these programs and services were valuable when referring families in need of support. Although Early Years professionals were familiar with London's support programs and services, professionals responded that families were often unaware of them or how to access them. Some barriers such as "waitlists for services" and "geography/transportation" to access other services for young children were also seen as limiting access to Early Years support programs. One professional stated, "families are simply unsure of how to find support programs, or that there are services available if they ask." However, as one respondent said, "I referred a particular family in crisis to a Family Centre with incredible outcomes," which highlights that once families are provided information on how to access support services, successful results can be achieved.

b) Early Years Child Care Provider Perspective

Early Years childcare providers provided a similar view of the challenges to access that families are met with when trying to have the best learning and care environment for their child. Their own inability to add more spaces in current locations, along with long waitlists for subsidies were seen as limiting access to childcare. The waitlist and subsidy processes were viewed as cumbersome and not easy to navigate for parents/caregivers. Similar to the Early Years professionals, the Early Years childcare providers noted the importance of extending the reach of family centres so that there was more connection between these centres and childcare centres. When the two worked together, providers saw the family centre and childcare systems as vital to engaging parents/caregivers early to get to know what is available for their child and how to navigate access to further support.

c) Parent/Caregiver Perspective

Location of childcare was seen as the most important indicator of access by parents/caregivers in the survey data (n=1252); focus group data centred on finding licensed childcare spaces, a lack of spaces for specific age groups (infants and before/after school childcare). Access was seen as a key problem, especially when discussing the waitlist process. A lack of knowledge of where to find information about the system and support services was also seen as a challenge, especially for newcomer families.

Quality

The quality pillar focuses on how programs are developed, how relationships support the caring and learning environment for children, and respect for the experiences of all stakeholders.

a) Early Years Professional Perspective

Early Years professionals voiced concern regarding the recruitment and retention of RECEs, with 43 (n=54) rating the issue as “very significant,” and how this impacts the families they serve. Quality was also seen as connected with well-paid, educated Early Years professionals; 8 of 73 respondents made specific references to “the need for fair pay” in an open-ended question. This was also linked to the retention of qualified educators, as expressed by one participant, “...RECE(s) are also paid differently even though they have the same qualifications. Think RECEs should have a pay scale according to qualifications and years of experience. They are expected to do the same job. Smaller centres often cannot pay as much as larger centres. This is discouraging for educators and they leave the field.”

Early Years professionals recognized the need for committed and qualified educators in London–Middlesex. Four sections in the questionnaire spoke directly to Early Years professionals’ capacity to support the diverse needs of the children and their families. Early Years professionals selected “more education/professional learning” as key to an inclusionary approach to diverse needs; 20 out of 31

respondents work with children with special needs and their families, 29 out of 40 respondents work with Indigenous children and their families, 29 out of 45 respondents work with Francophone children and their families, and 18 out of 28 respondents work with newcomer/immigrant children and their families. One respondent emphasized the need for training for work with diverse communities stating, “as a settler I believe it is my responsibility to research Indigenous history and trauma. I would like to spend more time researching this important information.” Professional learning or training areas of interest also included leadership capacity, pedagogy, self-care/mental health, administration, and building relationships as the key to providing a quality Early Years learning and caring environment.

b) Early Years Child Care Provider Perspective

For this group, key themes related to delivering quality childcare by being able to recruit, hire, and retain qualified educators were among the most frequent themes (n=73). The ability to do long-term strategic planning supported by sustainable funding that would provide better wages and benefits was seen as key to stabilizing the childcare system and ensuring delivery of high-quality programs. Parent/caregiver engagement was also seen to be an important factor; parents/caregivers’ and the Early Years professional’s ability to build strong relationships was viewed as crucial to the overall quality of the care and learning of children in the centre. Professional development was also seen as key to ensure inclusive programming and sound pedagogical practices such as documentation. The Early Years childcare providers also acknowledged the importance of coaching/mentoring relationships between providers and professionals, alongside professional learning and ensuring that professional development was available in multiple formats, including online and on-demand.

c) Parent/Caregiver Perspective

Parents/caregivers appeared pleased with the overall quality of childcare programs in the London–Middlesex area (n=1252), specifically with the quality of care and staff supporting their children. When asked

if they could share anything more about their childcare experience, the focus remained on affordability, waitlist issues, and the subsidy processes that they faced. One respondent shared, “Quality carers deserve better pay, and yet even the current costs are too much for parents/caregivers to pay. The government (federal, provincial, and city) need to subsidize” (Corporation of the City of London, 2019, Appendix 2, p. 48).

Responsiveness

The responsiveness pillar refers to programming and services that are inclusive and culturally appropriate, located in a range of community settings, and can meet families’ diverse needs, including providing services at irregular hours.

a) Early Years Professional Perspective

A central issue identified by Early Years professionals is the need for more support for children with special needs, with 29 respondents (n=36) rating it as “very significant.” Information gleaned from the open-ended questions highlighted the need for support for children and families’ mental health, behaviour management, and for children with special needs. Furthermore, a lack of knowledge of services was identified as an obstacle for accessing services. Respondents stated, “families are simply unsure of how to find programs, or that there are services available if they ask” and, “...often not a lot available, limited and long wait lists or the child doesn’t meet the criteria, same situation with mental health”. Finally, a barrier identified by professionals about the access of programs and services, is the busy schedule of families and the hours of operation of the programs and services. Yet, when asked to identify a top issue facing childcare, the lack of flexible childcare, emergency childcare, and childcare during non-traditional hours was rated low compared to others.

b) Early Years Child Care Provider Perspective

Like the Early Years professionals, the childcare providers (n=73) saw the ability to meet the diverse needs of the children and families as a key role of childcare. They saw their ability to serve the children and families as very important and indicative of their

capacity to respond in a caring and professional manner. Specific mentions were made of Francophone and Indigenous children and their families, of children with special needs and the importance of building educator capacity to support all children’s care and learning. Providers saw responsiveness as being able to meet the demands of families through increased childcare spaces and more flexibility in the subsidy process. This relates to the lack of flexible childcare choices, particularly for kindergarten-age children who would benefit from a more extended period in childcare before transitioning to the school setting.

c) Parent/Caregiver Perspective

While most of the parent/caregiver respondents (n=1252) in the survey were satisfied with the London–Middlesex childcare system’s overall responsiveness to the needs of their children, the area of concern focused on the ability to find flexible, extended childcare when required. Another concern of parents/caregivers was childcare centres’ inability to support children with special needs, children requiring added support due to behaviour, or in need of different layout of the environment to accommodate particular seating devices. Parents/caregivers of children with special needs involved in the focus groups mentioned a lack of inclusion in programs, where some of them indicated they had been turned away or had negative experiences when seeking added support for their child. This was viewed as a lack of responsiveness by the childcare environment and thus impacting access for their child.

Discussion

The study’s objective is to bring the voices of the Early Years professionals to the forefront, adding their perspective to the existing voices of parents/caregivers and Early Years childcare providers, and to identify the challenges the Early Years system faces within London–Middlesex. While there are similarities, it is important to note some of the unique perspectives taken by the three stakeholder groups.

Early Years professionals are very aware of the high cost of childcare, sympathizing with parents/caregivers and advocating for a publicly funded, free

or low-cost childcare system as key to supporting as many children as possible. Parents/caregivers appear to be sympathetic to the lack of decent wages, but for them, the overall cost of childcare is a barrier to accessing the care they preferred, which is the licensed childcare centre attached to a school. Early Years childcare providers see their role as a balancing act between covering operating costs and decent wages for educators while keeping the overall costs of childcare affordable for parents/caregivers.

Parents/caregivers' inability to navigate the childcare system to find available spaces is seen as an access barrier by the Early Years professionals as is the parents/caregivers' lack of knowledge of what is available to them. In contrast, childcare providers see their inability to provide more spaces as not being able to respond to parent/caregiver needs, limiting access to childcare. For parents/caregivers, the waitlist process itself is a barrier to providing more access to the children and families to licensed care in the area.

Both Early Years professionals and Early Years childcare providers see recruitment, hiring, and retention of qualified staff as the biggest barrier to maintaining a quality childcare system. Early Years childcare providers also note the lack of decent wages and the inability to provide ongoing professional development to support the Early Years professionals as barriers to quality. The ability to be involved in professional development also resonates with the Early Years professionals. Challenges to being responsive to children with special needs are identified by both Early Years professionals and Early Years childcare providers as barriers to building quality programs. Both saw an ability to meet all children and families' needs as an important part of a quality childcare environment.

As shown, adding the perspective of Early Years professionals brings the expertise of one of the key stakeholders to the Early Years childcare environment (Mitchell, 2015). It adds the perspective of the practitioner to that of the childcare provider with the view of the organizational infrastructure that supports the practitioner. The Early Years professionals' perspectives on the difficulty parents/caregivers have finding a childcare space, the cost of licensed childcare, and the struggle to recruit, hire, and retain qualified

educators that can meet diverse needs are important aspects to include in the policymaking process. As noted by Mintrom and Luetjens (2016), adding the voices of those who implement policy goals helps bridge the gap between public administration policymaking goals and the lived experiences of citizens.

By mapping the journey described by Evans and Terrey (2016) of those most impacted by the policy, a community, or a province/territory can help inform the larger national context of what is needed to support a national Early Years system. Evans & Terrey (2016) identify seven key questions driving the co-design process of an Early Years policy framework prototype should include:

- 1) Why does London-Middlesex region need a national Early Years policy framework?
- 2) Who can help provide the perspective of those who are living the experience?
- 3) What are the needs of the key stakeholders and their aspirations for the children who are at the heart of any Early Years system?
- 4) How can the voices of Early Years professionals, childcare providers, parents/caregivers, and other key stakeholders in a community come to a mutual understanding of what is needed and how it will be delivered?
- 5) What will this framework prototype look like for London-Middlesex after being explored, refined, and co-designed by the end users?
- 6) How can the co-design story be told to decision-makers so that the voices of the key stakeholders, including those of the Early Years professionals, are part of the policymaking process? and
- 7) How can local needs be balanced within a national Early Years policy framework?

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the current state of the Early Years system across the country and how Early Years professionals' work is essential to families, even more

so during a crisis (Friendly et al., 2020). The level of funding pre-COVID, which had already impacted the creation of a robust and valued workforce of qualified Early Years professionals, makes the current situation even more precarious. A patchwork of funding from various government levels keeps the Early Years professionals at the mercy of short-term planning. It impacts the support children and families receive during times of uncertainty. This issue will not disappear after communities “return to normal”. The lack of recognition or valuing of the role of the Early Years professional makes it even more important to have their voice part of the policymaking process. An image of an intricate tapestry comes to mind when thinking of the various stakeholders’ involvement in the guidance of a policy framework. Parents/caregivers and childcare providers are two separate threads; another would be the Early Years professional; without all of the various threads one cannot weave the intricate pattern of the tapestry, in this case an Early Years policy framework. Moss (2014) speaks to moving away from the expert mindset toward a belief that democratic, civic engagement can help guide both policy and practice. Hence, involving the Early Years professionals alongside childcare providers, parents/caregivers, and other stakeholders (e.g. employers and children) within a community in the co-design of an Early Years policy framework prototype can serve that community and help others who wish to learn and start their own journey into democratic policymaking through a co-design process.

The next step of the research project was focus groups with the three groups: Early Years professionals, childcare providers, and parents/caregivers, and involve them in the co-design process of the Early Years policy framework prototype. Due to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, this step has been delayed. The research will move forward using semi-structured interviews that will provide the opportunity for storytelling from Early Years professionals, childcare providers, parents/caregivers, and employers. These stakeholders’ lived experiences will add another layer of sensemaking (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016), which will provide a deeper mapping of themes that will inform the first iteration of the Early Years policy framework prototype. Using a digital meeting platform, this qualitative methodology, currently scheduled for the spring and summer of 2021, will respect any remaining

safety parameters related to the COVID-19 pandemic while helping the research project move to focus groups planned for the winter of 2022. This process will provide the researchers with the opportunity to continue to involve community partners and student researchers in the facilitation process to be used in the focus groups, a critical step in developing the Early Years policy framework prototype (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016).

Conclusion

The purpose of this research project was to show the contribution the voices of the Early Years professionals can make to policymaking and demonstrate that their insights should be considered when moving forward with the co-design of an Early Years policy framework prototype. The findings of the study show that Early Years professionals have different perspectives from those of the childcare provider and parent/caregiver; they bring the day-to-day practitioner’s insights on the current Early Years system in London–Middlesex. Their direct connection with children and their families sets the context for their belief in the importance of recruiting, hiring, and retaining qualified Early Years professionals who can meet the needs of the children in their care. This connection drives their quest for professional development that engages them in continuous learning of inclusive practices that will support all children. It also informs their insights about the importance of fair wages to ensure stable childcare staffing. The childcare providers approach these key aspects more from an organizational infrastructure perspective, the support needed for the Early Years professionals who are the direct link between children and families.

While there are challenges with the co-design of an Early Years policy framework prototype, it has the potential to make the Early Years system in the London–Middlesex area more responsive to the needs of its children and families. By exploring the potential and creativity of key stakeholders, the co-design of an Early Years policy framework prototype can reflect expertise from lived experiences. This can guide future policy efforts while informing communities in the province and across Canada on policymaking through a co-design approach.

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