

We are Educators



by Jhayvee Tampol

The field of early childhood education is progressively exerting its force in our society as it struggles to make its importance known to everyone. The calls for much-needed change and support have only become stronger while the field undergoes professionalization to increase the quality of the service delivered and to gain respect from society. Part and parcel of this push towards professionalization are the efforts made to prepare budding early childhood educators when they enter the field.

At the George Brown College School of Early Childhood, students are not only taught child development theories but are given the venue to apply this valuable learning in practice. The two-year diploma program, for example, is designed to provide students with seven weeks of academic classes followed by seven weeks of placement in every semester. Through these placements, students are immersed in the field where they work directly with staff and families. A placement at a child care setting allows the student to document observations and plan and implement activities for a specific age group.

While these types of placements provide students with a practical foundation for employment in a child care setting or in the school boards, the college also offers alternate placements in different areas of early learning and child care. One of these is advocacy. Through partnership with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC), the college broadens the opportunities for students' learning in the field.

The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care is a non-profit organization that advocates for universal, high-quality and affordable early learning and child care in the province. It creates initiatives and campaigns that strive to educate and raise awareness among the citizenry and the policy-makers on the significance of child care. This is key in pushing for a national and high-quality child care program that people, regardless of socioeconomic background, can readily access.

My name is Jhayvee Tampol and this is a reflection on my experience as an intern at the OCBCC for my third placement.

Beyond the Classroom: Child Care and Society

In order to better understand and appreciate the role that early learning and child care plays in our society, one has to view it from various lenses, different from the image of a person feeding a child and changing diapers. It is part of the political, economic and social core of our society.

Child care is a political issue. The government is serving a population that depends on child care in order to secure

employment, support educational goals and provide balance in the family. As such, it deserves its own place on the national, provincial and municipal agendas.

My placement at the OCBCC allowed me to take part in the *I Depend on Child Care Campaign*. The campaign was launched to coincide with the 2014 Municipal and School Board Elections. It was geared towards educating the candidates about the importance of child care and the key role that an elected official has in pushing for reforms and progress in this sector.



The campaign ran its course at an opportune time when hopeful politicians were scrambling to build their reputation and secure the support of their constituents. However, the authenticity of the candidates' support can only be realized after the election when elected officials devote time and attention to formulating effective policies on child care.

Child care is also an economic issue. Literature such as TD Economics' Special Report (2012) proves the long-lasting impacts of early childhood education on the economic prosperity of a country. In the long term, investing in quality early learning and care can reap benefits for a country by raising a healthy generation of new leaders. Child care also means a vibrant workforce with active participation from all genders that constitute a family.

And very importantly, child care is a social issue that binds together different sectors of society. It does not mean that if you do not have a child, you are not part of the child care community. Child care allows for a stronger workforce, quality of family life and an educated and healthy population. Everyone in their own small way can work on ensuring that child care is a priority on the government's agenda and investments are made and supported in this field.

Working with the OCBCC has informed me about these different facets of child care and has made me realize how child care is an increasingly vital lifeline in today's society. I have learned that child care is more than diaper changes and facilitating arts and games; it is a larger force that sits in the core of a healthy society. It is something worth advocating for and an issue that should never be allowed to go by the wayside.

Thus, an early childhood educator's knowledge should not be confined to the quality of the service delivered but also to the process through which the service of child care is delivered.

Advocacy in Action

A typical image of an advocate shows a person out on the street, holding a banner and chanting a call to action. However, advocacy translates into many forms. At the OCBCC, my student partner and I were able to attend two District Child Care Advisory (DCCA) meetings and the Early Learning Committee (ELC). In these meetings, I witnessed the power of dialogue in clarifying issues such as the funding options for child care centres, as well as addressing specific concerns and coming up with viable solutions.

It was great to see Jane Mercer from the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care (TCBCC) speak among the sea of attendees and spark a meaningful discussion about child care issues. She asked critical questions backed up with research and evidence.

My student partner and I also had the opportunity to work the OCBCC table during the leadership fair at George Brown College. We talked to our fellow students about the nature of OCBCC's advocacy and its campaign, focussing on the importance of voting. We also submitted a question for the Municipal Election Town Hall debate organized by George Brown College. The event featured Toronto's mayoral candidates. Our question was selected and I was able to personally ask the question to candidates John Tory, Olivia Chow and Doug Ford.

All of these experiences taught us that there is a plethora of advocacy channels that can be utilized to forward a cause.

Advocacy: Behind-the-Scenes

The office of the OCBCC is a hub of ideas where people brainstorm and engage in organizational tasks. These tasks are part of turning ideas into plans and later into action. My student partner and I diligently sorted through campaign materials and mailed them to various child care centres and candidates. We corresponded with these people through e-mail and we ensured that we followed up with them.

Internal and external communication are paramount in a campaign. The people that I worked with in the organization not only served as role models but also created a stimulating atmosphere. The structure of the organization required a division of roles in order for everyone to successfully function at their best productivity.

Mailing packages, e-mailing and data organization may all seem as plain administrative work from afar. But one has to look closely to appreciate the value of these efforts in the organization's cause. They require time and patience and they help one develop an eye for accuracy. Truly, little tasks matter for a bigger cause.

Through dialogue within the organization, we came up with a forum on child care that catered to the George Brown College community. The OCBCC, along with the partner organizations, worked on the content of the program and planned for the logistics of the event. It was a success as the audience got a deeper understanding of the current state of child care in the province.

Advocacy and Technology

The landscape of advocacy has truly changed. Strategies have been developed to make use of the capabilities of

technology. For its *I Depend on Child Care Campaign*, OCBCC used NationBuilder, an online platform that proved helpful in reaching out to candidates to get their support for licenced child care. It is an effective tool to communicate with prospective supporters and volunteers by providing a means to connect with them and organize data. I was assigned to updating the NationBuilder "back end" database once a candidate signed the pledge to express support for child care. From this, I saw the list grow from 40 to almost 300.

I also took responsibility for the organization's Twitter account. Social media is a powerful channel for advocacy as it provides immediacy and interactivity.

Advocacy and Collaboration

The OCBCC is not only physically sharing the office with the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) and the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care (TCBCC) it exists in collaboration with these two organizations whose missions all revolve around child care and early childhood educators.

During my placement, my student partner and I also toured the office of the Child Care Resource and Research Unit (CRRU). We had the chance to talk to child care researchers whose work is essential in providing a framework for policy and legislation.

Growth and Challenges

I have to admit that it was a challenge for me when I began working with the OCBCC. I thought that to be fully successful in this placement, I need to have a solid understanding of the various child care issues in Canada let alone the political system that it operates within. Being an international student from the Philippines, this is not something that you learn overnight. Coming from a country where child care is not as structured as it is in Canada, I first struggled to grasp the entirety of child care as a political, economic and social issue. In the Philippines, the demand for child care is usually met through the support of extended family members such as grandparents and through the hiring of personal nannies.

I dealt with all the challenges by creating achievable goals and striving every day to reach them. I also maintained a positive working attitude through strategies like creating a routine and setting out daily goals. This helped me direct my focus to my work. And also, I worked on improving my communication skills and using the skills that I already have such as my eye for accuracy and organization in order to contribute to the work of the organization.

This placement is what I call my own socio-political history class on child care. Throughout the seven weeks of working with the OCBCC, I saw the bigger picture that constitutes child care. It is not all about the science but also the reality of how it is valued in a society as a measure of good political judgment, economic viability and social cohesion.

As such, I think that it is greatly beneficial for early childhood education students to undertake placements in advocacy groups as it helps them gain a broader understanding of the field.