

From Vision to Action: ECEs role in the Canadian child care movement



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The national ChildCare2020 conference brought together the early childhood education and child care (ECEC) community from across Canada. The conference organizers presented a vision of a high quality, universally accessible, national child care program and challenged us to think about how we would move to action to achieve this vision. As described in the vision [paper](#), a federal child care program would provide an overarching policy framework including a common vision and principles (similar to the Canada Health Act) and long-term sustained funding to the provinces. Provinces would design, regulate and manage high quality, integrated ECEC systems that provided universal access to children and families.

There was broad consensus among the conference participants

that we all have to work together to advocate for the vision presented at ChildCare2020. As we returned to Toronto thinking about what had to be done we started to question: who is the 'we' that needs to work together? And where do ECEs and the child care workforce fit in?

In this article, we will reflect on three interconnected themes that emerged at the conference in order to identify some critical questions, opportunities and challenges for ECEs to meaningfully and effectively engage in a renewed 'child care movement' to make the ChildCare2020 vision a reality. As well, we argue that ECEs and the child care workforce more broadly, with the support of the child care community, have the capacity to be leaders in mobilizing themselves and their communities to



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ECEs as advocates

ECEs and front line staff have not typically been part of, or included in the larger child care advocacy movement. As Macdonald, Richardson & Langford (in press) have written, “unfortunately, being an “advocate” and being an ECE “professional” are often viewed as contradictory, rather than complimentary, roles”. Interviews with child care movement actors in Manitoba and Ontario revealed the perception that ECEs are better suited to advocate at the ‘micro’ and ‘meso’ level, through “conducting oneself ethically and professionally in one’s day-to-day work” and “actively speaking up for children and families on the centre level”, respectively (Macdonald et al., in press).

Many practical reasons were given as to why engaging in macro level advocacy, described as “actively seeking out opportunities to challenge the prevailing social order that negates the value of ECEC and ECEs [themselves]”, was perceived as beyond the capacity of some ECEs. The realities of being overworked and undervalued were considered very real barriers for ECE professionals to engage in the extra work that it takes to be an informed and confident advocate. While this may be true, we know there are many ECEs who are eager to engage in changing the current challenges they face and value the opportunity to work towards better outcomes for everyone.

Macdonald et al.’s research also identified that a lack of understanding and knowledge, and lack of confidence on the part of ECEs were perceived as significant reasons why ECEs do not engage in macro level advocacy. We believe that ECEs have the capacity to be engaged and effective advocates for child care and for themselves. As Macdonald et al. (in press) argued, “ECEs must be systematically supported emotionally, financially and intellectually to overcome these barriers [to advocacy] identified by informants”. This article aims to provide a brief summary and analysis of some of the key themes that emerged at the ChildCare2020 conference and support ECEs in Ontario to begin, or continue to engage with the larger child care advocacy movement in Canada.

Child care as a public good

The discourse of child care as a public good was identified early on and became one of the defining messages taken away from the conference. Variations of this theme were repeated many times over as people described the overwhelming evidence showing the value of high quality child care for children, families, the economy, and the general health of our society. A number of discussions concluded that we no longer have to prove the value of child care, that we in fact have all the proof that we need to justify the importance and absolute necessity of child care for the public good.

While the discourse of ‘child care as a public good’ ties together the numerous benefits of child care in one concrete phrase, this discourse also puts the conversation around child care directly in the political realm. As opening keynote speaker Stephen

Lewis said, “everything you’re doing here at this conference is a matter of politics...this speaks to the fabric of the nation. You’re engaged in nation-building and that is an ideological phenomenon”. Lewis was speaking to the fact that there is an ideological divide between public education and child care that persists in the conceptualization and provision of these services. While education has long been considered a public good and



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a universal entitlement that should be supported through our collective resources and governments, programs considered to be child care have remained firmly entrenched in the private/a-political realm of society. This is evident in the way that child care services are set up through a privatized mixed market of services (to be discussed below), as well as in the perception that child care is the private responsibility of families.

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For ECEs, when we talk about child care as a public good, we are placing greater value on our work. We are saying that the care and education of young children is of public value and therefore deserves to be supported by government with material resources from our collective coffers. This is a political act, one that takes conviction and courage as we face many people who will continue to devalue child care and the work of ECEs in order to justify limited investment of our collective resources. In order to feel confident advocating for child care as a public good, the



entire workforce needs to be supported in understanding the opposing ideological arguments and their implications. It is therefore essential that ECEs have the capacity to explain not only the value of child care as a public good, but also why our current approach to child care provision as a commodity to be bought and sold on the market is not working.

The child care market does not work

There was overwhelming evidence presented at ChildCare2020 that the marketized provision of child care in Canada is the root of the problems we face around accessibility, affordability, quality and the wages paid to ECEs. This topic is covered more thoroughly by Shellie Bird (this issue), but it is our intention to present the challenge that the child care community and its leaders need to support ECEs to learn more about the market vs. the system argument/debate in child care.

International expert Helen Penn explains that, “the childcare market is a way of describing a situation where the state has relatively little influence on – or interest in – how services for young children are set up, maintained and delivered” (2012, p.1). In this reality, it is left up to private groups or individuals to set up and sustain child care services with limited planning or management from government. Government funding is limited and believed to be best delivered through directing money to parents via vouchers, subsidies, tax breaks or direct cash payments. This approach supports the ideological position that child care is a private family responsibility and that parents can ‘choose’ which services to purchase in the free market.

As ECEs, many of us experience the impact of this reality through our everyday work. A number of examples include:

- Parents cannot find a child care space and there are often long waiting lists for spaces and inequitable access depending on where they live.
- Certain groups are grossly underserved, including infants, children with disabilities, families living in rural areas and families working non-standard hours.
- When parents can find a space they often struggle to afford the cost of care. Some municipalities in Ontario also have long waiting list for fee subsidies.
- High parent fees still do not cover the true cost of care resulting in programs being in a constant struggle to balance their budgets by sacrificing important investments to quality such as purchasing materials, hiring extra staff and providing professional development to staff.
- ECEs’ pay and benefits are often low and inconsistent depending on where they work. As the largest item in the budget, we know that our pay is directly related to the fees charged to parents.

The realities of inequitable access, high fees, uneven quality and low pay for ECEs cannot be ignored if we are to take seriously the multiple benefits of child care for the public good. ECEs need to be included in the conversations around the failure of the child care market in order to understand more deeply how this arrangement impacts their everyday work, as well as to engage the parents and communities they work with in these important conversations. We see an essential role for ECEs in motivating this much needed conversation on the ground. For ECEs, we also want to argue that this engagement is essential in our struggle for increased recognition and remuneration as we identify how the child care market neglects the central role ECEs play in sustaining high quality child care programs.

The child care workforce is central to quality

Throughout the conference, articulated by researchers and politicians alike, the child care workforce was acknowledged as an integral element in a high quality child care system. International and Canadian evidence was presented to show that a well trained and supported workforce, above all else, predicts the quality of child care programs. The most gregarious comment came from keynote speaker Stephen Lewis when he exclaimed, “ECEs should be paid as much as doctors!” Furthermore, it was repeatedly argued that the quality of child care is essential if we are to see the multiple benefits to children, families and societies from a national child care program. These understandings present a number of possibilities for how ECEs can approach political conversations and child care advocacy more broadly.

First, we know that the child care market has a negative impact on ECEs and the child care workforce. Fees that would actually

cover the cost of adequate wages and working conditions for trained staff would be unaffordable to the majority of parents. While wages and working conditions are not the only factor in supporting staff and quality, Canadian research has identified this as the primary reason why people do not stay in, or choose not to enter the sector. The result is on-going issues with recruitment and retention of trained ECEs and the unfair conditions for many who do stay in the field, both of which can have a profound impact on program quality. In other words, the child care market fails to support the most important element of quality, the people who educate and care for children and support families on a daily basis.

From this perspective, the same systemic problems that make high quality child care unaffordable and inaccessible to so many families also impact the material realities of ECEs and their ability to carry out the work of providing high quality programs. This presents us with an important question: how can we work with everyone that is negatively impacted by the child care market to advance the fight for universal high quality child care? One answer comes from U.S. feminist economist Nancy Folbre (2005), who has argued that,

care workers and care recipients are natural allies, sharing a common interest in quality of care... Organizing efforts need to emphasize and strengthen this commonality by educating the public about threats to service quality. The relative power and "voice" of care workers often determines the relative quality of services that care recipients enjoy (p. 14).

As caregivers ECEs might struggle with making demands that may negatively impact the children and families they care for, such as increased fees or changes to services. Building alliances with parents through articulating a common struggle and shared demands (i.e. lower fees, higher wages and better quality) may provide a useful strategy to engage in the political process of advocacy.

A second consideration around the central role that ECEs play in implementing and sustaining quality child care is in relation to the ongoing struggle for increased recognition and remuneration. The struggle for increased remuneration for ECEs is directly related to sustaining and improving quality in child care. Therefore, when we advocate for professional pay for professional work we are contributing to the overall objectives of the child care movement. As a significant segment of the child care movement, ECEs could contribute tremendous momentum to the campaign for a national child care program through advocating for the recognition and reward they deserve via public funding and a universal system. Perhaps it is useful to ask: how can the campaign for a national child care program and the campaign for professional pay support one another to make our collective voice louder?

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Moving to action

We have identified three interconnected themes that emerged at the ChildCare2020 conference in order to explore the role of ECEs as advocates for a national child care program and within the larger child care

movement. Our intention was to both share some of the key ideas we took away from the conference with the ECE community, as well as to identify possible challenges and opportunities for ECEs amplified engagement in child care advocacy. Furthermore, the above conversation challenges ECEs to ask themselves the critical question: if we know that the current arrangements for child care do not serve children and families well, nor support ECEs to carry out their very best work, is it not our professional responsibility to advocate for change?

Macdonald et al.'s research concluded that "the responsibility of advocacy cannot be yet one more task added to the under-resourced ECEs 'to do' list". Further discussion and analysis needs to consider how we may engage and support each other in our work as advocates, and the role that the larger child care community has to play in supporting ECEs in this work. As argued by Macdonald et al., ECEs engage in advocacy at various levels, all of which are important and can contribute to the national child care movement in various ways. What can we do to strengthen advocacy at all of these levels? How can we connect our advocacy efforts to make sure that we all have access to the same information and conversations?

We believe that including and supporting ECEs in larger policy and advocacy conversations is critical to mobilizing a significant number of stakeholders, including ECEs and the communities they work in. As trusted educators, caregivers and leaders, ECEs have the potential to reach parents and community members in a way that researchers, academics and policymakers do not. A powerful and informed child care workforce could in fact be a key component to finally winning a national child care program. To quote Nancy Folbre one last time, "joined by others who identify themselves as care providers and recipients, we could make a mighty roar. We might even be able to win a damn election." (p. 22).

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