Advocacy for Underpaid Early Childhood Educators

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Early childhood educators take on one of the most important jobs in our society and yet are one of the most underappreciated professionals. Early childhood educators are underpaid. This fact affects so much around the profession, and also affects our communities. There are so many reasons why this is issue is a concern worth fighting for, but the good thing is there is a way to take action against it and bring it to the people who can make a difference. Before talking about how to fix the problem of ECEs being underpaid, there needs to be reasons why this is an important issue.

People may argue that early childhood educators do not need to be paid more because they are not true professionals, they are not doing hard work, and anything else people say to degrade the hard work that early childhood educators actually do. There are many reasons why ECEs need to be paid more. Firstly, the median wage for ECEs is $17.29 and it can be as low as 14 dollars an hour, which is minimum wage (Why Early Childhood Educators Are Underpaid, 2019). Early childhood educators are professionals who deserve to be paid a professional wage (“I’m more than ‘just’ an ECE”, 2016). The small wages that they receive contributes to high staff turnover, which can affect the childcare centres working conditions, disrupt the child/caregiver relationships, and the child’s development. Because of the low wages, educators may decide to work in a kindergarten classroom instead of a childcare centre (I’m more than ‘just’ an ECE”, 2016). They could also decide that they need to change occupations completely, even if they are passionate about their work because they are not being paid a wage that they can survive with. Leaving a childcare centre where an educator has made an impact on the child can affect the child’s development and behaviour, because this educator was a big part of their life. When ECEs leave childcare centres for Kindergarten or for a job with better wages, a strain in recruiting educators for childcare centres may be created. This leads to the childcare centres hiring educators who may settle for a lower waged ECE position. To add on, Saulnier & Frank (2019) write how the low salaries influence staff to have poorer job satisfaction, and lower quality of service. In short, there may be educators in a role that they cannot enjoy because of the low wages, which makes their job satisfaction lower, their quality of service worse, and makes it harder for them to connect to the children and coworkers around them. This can create a negative stigma towards the idea that ECEs are professionals (Romaine-Tappin & Langford, 2017). This stigma also affects students before even entering the workforce. Students are less likely to even join the early childhood profession after they graduate because of low wages, and these low wages can be connected to the fact that early childhood education is a female dominated profession (“I’m not ‘just’ an ECE”, 2016). Women are more likely to underestimate their professionalism and feel that they are being too irrational when they call themselves professionals. They are more likely to feel that they do not deserve to be called professionals (Hardwood et al., 2012). It is unfortunate that some women in our field feel that they are less professional than other professions because of their sex, and how the public and government has undermined what their job really consists of. This is starting to change with the help of the advocacy behind early childhood educators and their right to be called professionals (Hardwood et al., 2012).

There are multiple ways to address this issue and take action. Firstly, there should be a salary grid for wages. This would help regulate the wages and would help early childhood educators be paid more based on experience, education, and professional development (Romaine-Tappin & Langford, 2017). With these salary grids needs to come increase funds to childcare. According to the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario’s Open Letter (2021), they are calling for a twenty-five dollar minimum wage for ECEs from the government of Ontario. This would address the staffing crisis, recruitment and retention challenges that Ontario is currently facing (Open Letter, 2021). By increases wages, ECE’s will be able to stay at their jobs, and there will be more ECEs getting hired, which means that the ratios can also be enhanced so that there are smaller group sizes. Romaine-Tappin & Langford (2017), also suggest that to professionalize the ECE field, ECEs need to take more complicated roles that call them to be more included in the decisions that surround their work. Essentially, they are saying that it is important for ECE’s to keep up to date on legislation that may be getting passed and overall, just being an advocate for their profession. Furthermore, there should be compensated professional development opportunities that are mandatory. With these further qualifications, it helps policy makers and the public in general see ECEs more like professionals (Romaine-Tappin & Langford, 2017). Lastly, we need to create universal childcare for Canada. Universal childcare would solve so many problems. There would be lower fees for parents, higher wages for educators, more jobs, and most importantly early learning is a great investment which helps society save money in the future because the children who get this strong foundation of early learning is more likely to increase skills in social, academic and other development areas, which keeps them from spending societies money in the future.

All of this information is not very useful unless the right people hear it and understand it. The first group of people that need to be addressed is the government members in charge of childcare, specifically the Premier of Ontario, Doug Ford, and Ontario Minister of Education, Steven Lecce. These are the people that are making the changes to legislation and have the power to make a change in the wages of ECEs. They are the ones that can renew grants like the wage enhancement grant of $2. This grant would add $2 per hour to about 40,000 ECE’s across the province (Why Early Childhood Educators are Underpaid, 2019). They also have the ability to advocate for things like universal childcare in Canada. The Open Letter (2021) written by the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario discussed how important it is for the Ministry to hear and understand the call to action that they are making. If the ministry puts in place some of the suggestions that were discussed in the paragraph before this one, it will still heavily support childcare centres, early childhood educators, families and most importantly, the children at these centres. There are also other people that we can address this problem to: the public. The public’s views on early childhood educators are mostly that they are not true professionals. The information that needs to go out to them is that early childhood educators are professionals. They have a diploma, or degree, and maybe other types of post-secondary education, they follow a code of ethics and standard of practice, and they work with the most important people in our society (Why Early Childhood Educators are Underpaid, 2019). Children are the future, and their foundation for learning needs to be strong, or society will lose money in the long term. What is most important however, is that politicians and policy makers understand that ECEs are undervalued professionals, and hopefully when they get this understanding, the public will start to understand, which would build up support for ECEs and the issues that they are facing.

All in all, this essay describes the many challenges that come with being an ECE, specifically relating to the low wages that they receive. Despite most people’s thinking of parent fee’s being so high, so the educators must be getting paid a lot more than they should, it is quite the opposite. These low wages continue to be a major problem that affects educators, families, communities and children. There are many actions that can be taken to try to resolve this issue, and it starts with politicians and policy makers, hearing what ECEs are saying, and trying to fix the problems that are brewing in this professional field.

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