# Advancing the Educational Preparation and Professional Development of Alberta's Early Learning and Care Workforce

The Muttart Foundation

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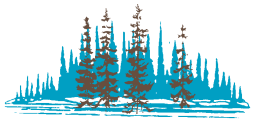

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# Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

Across Canada and beyond, early learning and care is increasingly seen as an important area for public investment. This higher profile is a product both of the growing research on the importance of the early years for a child's lifetime of growth and development and the increasing number of young children who participate in early learning and care while their parents work or study.

The fact that the majority of children below the mandatory school age now spend much of their early years in some form of non-parental care outside of the family home has prompted jurisdictions to rethink how they might best support early learning and care for their youngest citizens and their families. This rethinking extends to almost all aspects of the organization, funding and delivery of services and has resulted in jurisdictions exploring new ways both to expand and enhance the services available to meet the educational and social demands placed upon them.

One of the key areas for focus within this work is that of the early learning and care workforce. Researchers, policy makers and practitioners agree, well-educated and appropriately supported early childhood educators and teachers are central to the high-quality environments and experiences that shape children's early learning. And yet, many early learning and care staff remain only modestly prepared and compensated by comparison to other educators and professional staff who work with young children and work in settings that are often thinly resourced and somewhat isolated from other services.

In 2001, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in the first of its *Starting Strong* cross-national reviews of early childhood education and care (OECD, 2001), drew specific attention to the growing

'educational and social responsibilities' placed on early years workforces and their often limited capacity to respond. As a result, the OECD advised jurisdictions to develop specific strategies to recruit and retain a qualified and well-supported workforce – one better able to deliver the high-quality early learning and child care upon which children's development rests and their families depend.

To date, the Canadian provinces and territories have found it difficult to make progress in this area. While the richer early educational traditions of many European nations have provided them with strong foundations on which to draw, the Canadian provinces and territories have not, for the most part, been able to build on such well-established bases of support. As a result, much of their efforts have focused on narrower or more immediate interventions, such as staff recruitment during periods of economic boom or one-time injections of funding to increase staff wages, rather than the larger task of redeveloping what remain modestly prepared and supported workforces.

Cognizant of these challenges, the Government of Alberta draws specific attention to the need for workforce planning in its *Together We Raise Tomorrow: An Alberta Approach to Early Childhood Development* platform, launched in June 2013. The platform outlines a bold vision for the province's young children and their families. It commits to work collaboratively over the next three years to develop an integrated early childhood development system that includes, as one of its four cornerstones, 'enriched early learning environments' that support all children in realizing 'their full developmental potential when they enter school' (Government of Alberta, 2013). The platform aligns with the priority goals identified in other ministry business plans including the Ministry of Education's focus on an 'excellent start to learning' that encompasses the implementation of targeted full-day kindergarten and the development of an integrated early learning and care system (Government of Alberta, 2014).

The identification of workforce planning as an area for investment provides an opportunity to think critically about the early learning and care workforce the province needs if it is to reach the goals identified in the *Together We Raise Tomorrow* platform and the Ministry of Education business plan. With this in mind, the current paper begins a discussion of workforce planning in Alberta. It focuses on the knowledge, skills and competencies early childhood educators require to support children's early learning and care and the educational qualifications and professional learning which support their development and maintenance.

The paper draws on research from Europe, the US, the UK, New Zealand and Australia that explores the competencies and educational preparation early learning and care staff require to best support positive outcomes for children and their families, while remaining mindful of the different ways jurisdictions approach early childhood education and care. It focuses on those staff that work with children below the mandatory school age, including staff in child care centres and kindergarten programs, and uses the broad term 'early childhood educator' to refer to these staff.

The paper comprises four main sections:

- The first provides a brief profile of the Alberta early learning and care workforce with a focus on the educational requirements for staff and their continuing professional learning;
- The second considers the research evidence on the competencies (including knowledge areas and skills) that early childhood educators require to support high-quality early learning and care;
- The third examines the types and levels of educational qualifications and professional learning that support a well-qualified workforce; and
- The final section outlines some possible strategies to advance the educational preparation and professional learning of Alberta's early learning and care workforce.

The need to contextualize findings about early childhood education and care (Penn, 2009) is a reminder that the field remains firmly rooted in a jurisdiction's culture and values around education, its traditions of support for families, as well as its political priorities. With this in mind, the current paper is best considered a starting point for stakeholder discussions that will explore more fully the ideas and arguments it presents. How Alberta approaches the educational preparation and professional learning for staff who work with children below the mandatory school age will be informed both by the best research evidence available and Albertan's values and interests in respect to early learning and care. Always, however, the focus must remain on that which is in the best interests of children and their families; that which Alberta families and their young children deserve and expect.

# The Alberta Early Learning and Care Workforce

Responsibility for early learning and care for children below the mandatory school age in Alberta is shared between the Ministry of Human Services and the Ministry of Education. Child care, preschool, out-of-school care and family day homes operate under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Human Services. Early Childhood Services (ECS), which include services for children from 2.5 years of age who have an identified special need or who require additional supports, as well as kindergarten, are the responsibility of the Ministry of Education.

As is the case in other provinces, Alberta's early learning and care services have developed from two traditions. Broadly, those under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Human Services have evolved from a tradition of caring for young children while their parents work or attend education programs, while those under the Ministry of Education draw on a stronger educational tradition. More recently, these two traditions have merged given the well-established links between education and care in the early years and increased government investments in families' access to services. As in other provinces, however, there remain differences in how services under the two ministries are funded and delivered – differences that extend to the composition and profile of their respective workforces.

## The Ministry of Human Services – Early Learning and Care Workforce

Early learning and care services under the Ministry of Human Services (centre-based child care, preschool, out-of-school-care and family day home services) are funded mainly through parent fees. Provincial operating support is available to accredited programs and parent subsidies provided for families with lower household incomes.

Private organizations, both for-profit and non-profit, deliver the bulk of these services, although a small number of municipalities and a growing number of school divisions also provide child care, preschool or out-of-school care services. Families purchase services directly from service providers and have no entitlements to service.

## Workforce Educational Preparation

Staff who work in licensed child care, out-of-school care programs, and preschool programs have one of three levels of training or an equivalency assessed by the Alberta Child Care Staff Certification Office (Government of Alberta, 2013).

- *Child Development Assistant*: completion of the Child Care Orientation Course (Alberta government-sponsored course); completion of courses through Alberta high schools CTS program; or completion of a 45-hour (3 credit) college-level course in child development.
- *Child Development Worker*: completion of a one-year Early Learning and Child Care certificate program offered by an Alberta public college, or an equivalent level of training with a Canadian

Language Benchmark Assessment (CLBA) of at least Level 7 (if the post-secondary training was not completed in English or French); and a college-level English/French course.

- *Child Development Supervisor*: completion of a two-year Early Learning and Child Care diploma program offered by an Alberta public college, or an equivalent level of training with a Canadian Language Benchmark Assessment (CLBA) of at least Level 7 (if the post-secondary training was not completed in English or French); and a college-level English/French course. (Government of Alberta, 2014).

Staff in licensed programs must be certified at one of the three levels within six months of employment and cannot have unsupervised access to children until certified. Once obtained, certification does not expire and there are no renewal requirements.

The Child Development Assistant certification was introduced in the 1990s in response to a workforce shortage. It was anticipated that over time staff with this introductory qualification would upgrade to a higher certification level. At present, approximately 41 percent of early childhood educators in licensed program settings have training at the Assistant level, 15 percent at the Worker level and 44 percent at the Supervisor level.

Staff can also hold an educational equivalency at the Child Development Worker or Supervisor levels. The equivalencies for Child Development Worker certification include degree programs in Science (Nursing), Physical Education, Pediatrics, Social Work and Teaching and diploma programs in Educational Assistant, Human Services, and Recreation Therapy. Applicants who do not meet a specific educational equivalency but have some early learning and child care coursework are required to complete an additional 370 hours of coursework in early learning and child care and 400 hours of practicum placement. Educational training programs approved for a Child Development Supervisor equivalency include an Alberta Permanent Teaching Certificate, Child and Youth Care (diploma or degree), Home Science (degree) and Social Work (degree) or 1,545 hours of education in early learning and child care (which includes 800 hours of practicum placement) if a specific educational equivalency is not met.

A recently appointed Ministry committee undertook a review of the use of equivalencies. One item discussed was the requirement for applicants who have degrees and diplomas from other fields to acquire specialized knowledge in early childhood education before entry to practice. This matter is still under review.

Alberta, in common with other provinces, also regulates family day home services (also referred to in the research literature as family child care providers). Regional Child and Family Service Authorities contract with approved agencies to oversee regulated family day home providers. These agencies are responsible for ensuring that providers develop and implement written training plans that cover areas of custodial care, such as safety and first aid, as well as key dimensions of service delivery such as working with parents and cultural sensitivity. Family day home providers are not required to complete formal post-secondary training or hold specified educational qualifications.

## Workforce Professional Development

Staff in licensed child care, preschool and out-of-school care programs have limited opportunities for professional development. The Ministry of Human Services provides some support for professional development through organizations or institutions including the Alberta Child Care Association, ECE university and college programs, the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement (ARCQE) as well as private consultants. ARCQE was established in 2004 as a provincial agency dedicated to providing technical assistance such as workshops, mentoring, coaching, and community building for the early learning and care field. The Alberta Child Care Association (ACCA) has received professional development funding from the Ministry of Human Services, for the three years from 2012 to 2015, to provide bursary support for Child Development Supervisors to access professional learning opportunities.

Much of the professional development available for early learning and care staff takes the form of stand-alone workshops which focus on the acquisition of basic knowledge and technical skills geared to Child Development Assistants and Workers. Evidence of professional development is one of the standards incorporated in the provincially supported voluntary accreditation process available for center-based child care, out-of-school programs and approved family day home agencies. ARCQE provides accreditation support services to these programs or approved agencies.

# The Ministry of Education – Early Childhood Services Workforce

Early Childhood Services (ECS) under the Ministry of Education are primarily publicly funded and delivered through public, charter and private schools - as well as approved non-profit service providers (Friendly, Halfon, Beach & Forer, 2013). Children with special needs or delays are eligible for funding support to access services from approved operators. All children are entitled to attend a part-day, publicly funded kindergarten program through an approved service provider in the year prior to school entry.

## Workforce Educational Preparation

Teachers in ECS programs hold a valid Alberta teaching certificate which requires four years of university study (Bachelor of Education) or a bachelor degree combined with a consecutive teacher preparation program. These teachers deliver kindergarten or work as part of professional teams for students with special needs. They provide direction for paraprofessionals (educational assistants) where required.

Certificated teachers in ECS programs (including kindergarten) are not required to complete a certificate of training or specialization in early childhood education.

## Workforce Professional Development

Certificated teachers participate in professional learning as part of an annual professional growth plan. Both the Ministry of Education and the Alberta Teachers' Association support professional development resources and activities for certificated teachers. In addition, school divisions and individual schools also support professional development opportunities. Much of the professional development available to teachers takes the form of workshops or specified learning days as compared to longer programs of study.

# Core Competencies for Early Childhood Educators: A Summary of the Research Evidence

The critical role early childhood educators play in the delivery of high-quality early learning and care is widely acknowledged. UNICEF's Innocenti Resource Centre's child care report, for example, concludes that the quality of 'early learning and care' depends 'above all else' on the educator's ability to build relationships with children while supporting a 'secure, consistent, sensitive, stimulating, and rewarding environment' (UNICEF, 2008). How early childhood educators develop these relationships and build these environments are important areas for research that have received increasing attention over the last two decades.

Not surprisingly, the questions the research explores and the findings it generates are complex. The demanding nature of working with young children and their families, the different rationale jurisdictions draw on in their support for early education and care, as well as the wide range of program settings in which early learning takes place, all require consideration. As do more recent discussions of how competence is defined, developed and supported in the field of early learning and care.

The current section summarizes these various bodies of research. It focuses on those studies which explore the knowledge, practices and values of early childhood educators that form the basis for the professional competency central to the delivery of high quality early learning and care (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, Van Laere, & Lazzari, 2011). Professional competence in this sense involves the 'ability to successfully meet complex demands in a particular context' and 'implies the mobilization of knowledge, cognitive skills and practical skills' as well as a supporting set of 'attitudes, emotions, values and motivations' (Rychen & Salganick, 2003, p.2).

This notion of competence moves beyond the focus on specific areas of knowledge, or the skills required for individual tasks, and emphasizes instead on the 'abilities' or qualities associated with judgment, initiative, reflection and understanding.

Early childhood educators, as competent professionals, are required to think critically, to exercise professional judgment, to interact with individuals and groups, to connect and work with other professionals and to communicate effectively with different stakeholders (Van Laere, Peeters & Lund, 2012). In short, they must become what a number of researchers describe as either 'reflective practitioners' or 'teacher-researchers' who continually question what they do, and how they do it as they work collaboratively with parents and children (Moss, 2006). In this spirit, professionalism is best understood as an ongoing process of learning and development that contributes to a body of *knowledge and practice* as well as a supporting set of *values* (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011, p. 21).

The European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture in its work further extends the discussion of competence for early childhood educators to include a consideration of the environments or systems in which they work (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011). The Directorate-General argues that the quality of early childhood education is ultimately shaped by the 'interactions between competent individuals' in what must be a 'competent system'. How environments are structured, how services are arranged and delivered and how systems are financed and governed all inform good practice and shape the ways in which staff work. A 'competent system' includes support for staff to foster

children's early learning and care (including structural considerations such as appropriate staff:child ratios and group size) and attends to staff's education, ongoing professional learning and compensation. It values early childhood educators and supports them in providing the high-quality early learning experiences that children and their families need (Van Laere, Peeters & Lund, 2012).

Despite the growing body of research that speaks to the complex and demanding nature of work with young children and their families, as well as the links between competent staff and high-quality services, early education and care in many jurisdictions is neither organized nor supported in ways that reflect these findings. Rather, as Moss (2006), Peeters (2008) and others note, there remains either doubt of the necessity for, or reluctance to support, the professional workforce upon which high-quality early education and care depends.

In this regard, researchers highlight the continued division between early learning and care for the youngest children (those below three or four years of age) and those of kindergarten age as one of the major obstacles to developing a more professional, competent early learning and care workforce (Bennett, 2003; Moss, 2006; Oberhuemer, 2005; Friendly et al, 2006). And report how, in these so called 'split systems', staff who work with older children are typically more highly qualified and better remunerated than those who work with younger children (European Commission 2011; OECD, 2006 and 2012). There is often a further distinction between staff who work with younger children in family day homes and those in centre-based settings – with the educational preparation and working conditions of the former 'not as good' as the latter (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011).

Moss (2006) and Peeters (2008) contend that these differences reflect the historic view that staff who work with very young children are 'technicians' who fulfill the role of mother-substitutes or child minders while those who work with older children are engaged in an educational enterprise. Further, the women who work with very young children are assumed to have a 'natural capacity' to care for them and, therefore, require only a basic level of technical training rather than professional preparation.

As research studies show, however, these more limited understandings of the roles of early childhood educators are inconsistent with the demands of supporting young children and their families (no matter the age of the child) and align poorly with the goals commonly expressed for early education and care (Goffin, 2013).

Drawing on the work of the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture, as well as the North American literature that focuses on early childhood educator knowledge, skills and attitudes, the current section outlines seven areas in which early childhood educators require professional competence. These areas encompass the knowledge, skills and values that come together as part of a competent early childhood educator's daily practice and form a professional foundation for the field (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011).

## Caring Ethically

The word, *care* is now often omitted in reference to early childhood education (Bredekamp & Goffin, 2012). This is surprising since care is central to working with young children and their families. Furthermore, an increasing body of literature on the ethics of care (Noddings, 2013) reinforces that education with care deeply engages and motivates children to learn, develop and flourish.

In some European countries, care as a core competency for professionals is embedded in the concept of a social pedagogue, a "much broader profile" of work with young children, young people and adults with special needs (Oberhuemer, 2011). Moss (2003) sees the place of care in early childhood services as a foundational ethic: "care as ethic moves us from care as a task performed by adults on children. Rather care is inscribed in all relationships – not only between adults and children (understood as an interactive and reciprocal relationship), but also between adults (parents, workers and others) and between children themselves" (Moss, 2003, p. 39). These 'caring' relationships require 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.

A knowledge of the values and practices of caring enables early childhood educators to establish and sustain warm, trusting and responsive relationships with young children and to provide the "generous amounts of attention and support" necessary for learning and development (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011, 2). Every day early childhood educators engage in practices and make decisions that result in caring (or uncaring) interactions with children, families and colleagues. The capacity of early childhood educators to evaluate their caring practices depends on a sound knowledge of the ethic of care. Held (2006, 46) points to reflective practice as central to this evaluation:

"[It] addresses questions about whether and how and why we ought to engage in activities of care, questions about how such activities should be conducted and structured and questions about the meanings of care and caring". Caring ethically also requires early childhood educators to reflect upon their own responses to, and connections with, those children and families who are marginalized or who face significant barriers to their participation in early learning and care settings. At a fundamental level, they must care about and for all the children and families with whom they work.

Early childhood educators must further be aware, and take care, of their own well-being. Research highlights "the consequences of adult emotional and physical health" on child development and points to the links between the two (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011, 9; National Scientific Council on the Developing Children, 2004). Whitebook & Ryan (2011,7), reflecting on US research, state "many early childhood teachers experience persistent poverty, ill health, and depression, all conditions that can prevent adults from meeting the needs of young children."

## Using Knowledge of How Children Learn and Develop for an Early Years Pedagogy

As a second area for competence, researchers point to the knowledge of how children learn and develop that early childhood educators require to set up rich learning environments, to plan and implement inspiring early years pedagogy and to engage in stimulating and sustained interactions with young children. While the need for child development knowledge is critical, it is of little value if early childhood educators cannot tie it effectively to pedagogical practice (Whitebook, Gomby, Bellm, Sakai, & Kipnis, 2009).

Early childhood educators must continually exercise professional judgment "based on knowledge of child development and learning, individual children, and the social and cultural contexts in which children live" to effectively support children's early learning and care (National Association of Educators of Young Children (NAEYC), 2012, 24). Perhaps not surprisingly then, Canadian early childhood education university and college programs all include introductory courses in child development linked to courses in early years pedagogy to support this practice, as do equivalent programs in other jurisdictions.

Pedagogies of literacy, mathematics, science, outdoor education, music and movement and the visual arts all form part of the rich, culturally diverse and creative early learning and care environments that competent staff teams collaboratively understand, negotiate, plan and set up. This collaborative work is not "a [technical] series of skills and pieces of knowledge that individuals need to 'process' to perform a particular task" (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011). Rather, staff must work together drawing on their knowledge, practice skills and values to create pedagogies that meet the needs of the children in their care. Moreover, competent early childhood educators can describe this work to families and the broader community which, in turn, helps to promote a greater understanding of the value of early learning and care.

Researchers further point out that early childhood educators require a strong knowledge and understanding (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011) of the diversity in development, the emerging field of neuroscience, theories of self-regulation (Shanker, 2010), and first and second language development if they are to best support children's early learning. Some of these are developing fields of research, however, and the links with effective pedagogical practices are still emerging. This requires early childhood educators to evaluate the potential for new research to inform their practice and to remain conversant with the emerging ideas shaping the field.

Despite the importance of early childhood educators understanding the relationships between children's early development and pedagogy, two recent large-scale US studies (reported in Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal & Thornburg, 2009) found that staff often lack sufficient knowledge on strategies to promote a language-rich learning environment when vocabulary growth in children is at its highest in the very early years. Similarly, Chumak-Horbatsch (2012, 3), based on her investigations in Ontario ELC settings, found that "classroom practices do not take the bilingual potential of immigrant children into account and do not adequately address their language and literacy needs". In light of these findings, she recommends that education programs include courses of study that cover "the language circumstance of young immigrant children, dynamic bilingualism, the language and literacy needs of young immigrant children, building partnerships with immigrant parents, and promoting multilingualism and multi-literacy" (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2012, 146).

## Working with Curricular Resources

As jurisdictions implement curricular resources to guide and enhance pedagogical practices, early childhood educators are increasingly required to understand, interpret, use and reflect on these resources as part of their professional practice. With a general shift towards an understanding of children as more capable in their learning than previously understood, these resources raise the expectations for early childhood educators and require them to take on more demanding pedagogical roles. Alberta's new curriculum framework, for example, consists of broad holistic goals, emergent approaches to curriculum planning, "playful pedagogies", the use of multiple representational languages and literacies for expression and communication, and participatory strategies (particularly pedagogical documentation) for assessing children's learning.

Most recent curriculum frameworks draw on the understanding that learning in the early years happens predominantly through play. Early childhood educators must, therefore, manage the complexities of supporting intentional playful approaches to early learning for groups of children in what are often very structured, and under-resourced early learning environments. The image of the early childhood educator presented within these frameworks most closely resembles that of Moss's 'early childhood educator as a researcher': a competent professional who actively engages with children in the co-construction of knowledge through joint learning experiences that happen during play.

The introduction of new curricular resources further requires early childhood educators to consider their own images of children as learners from a range of theoretical perspectives. Thus, use of a framework relies on "tools of reflective and critical practice that are designed to challenge and shift educator values, beliefs, and theories about teaching and learning. [The] framework requires educators who are thinkers and interpreters of early childhood philosophies and principles, and who can thoughtfully and critically translate them into practice" (Langford, 2010, 28-29).

Without a firm understanding, developed through formal education and professional learning, of the possibilities that a curriculum framework provides, early childhood educators can either resort to basic, repetitive activities or adopt practices they are familiar with from their own schooling. These highly structured, didactic approaches to early learning are increasingly understood to be a poor match for young children who flourish when they can engage in play-based activities and long-term projects that are appropriately challenging and responsive to their learning, needs, interests and inquiries (NAEYC 2012; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). In learning through play, children benefit from thoughtfully arranged opportunities to interact with other children thereby increasing social learning (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011).

## Working with Families

Many staff enter the early learning and care field expecting their work to be exclusively with children and overlook "the essential work with parents" and other family members (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011). The NAEYC (2012, p. 36) describes the early childhood practitioner's ethical responsibilities to families: "we acknowledge a primary responsibility to bring about communication, cooperation and collaboration between the home and early childhood program in ways that enhance the child's development". High-quality early childhood programs welcome family members and work to establish the ways in which they can be involved in the program (Wilson, 2014). In these settings, early childhood teachers seek to understand, value and learn from the families with whom they work, using approaches and strategies that recognize equity, diversity and inclusion.

Over the past decade, the cultural and linguistic diversity of Canadian families has significantly changed leading Bernhard (2012, 83) to state that support for diverse families "involves looking for and working from assets, strengths and social competencies that are already there". Bernhard adds, "Helping professionals have a responsibility to facilitate the expansion of these assets and work with families to provide positive outcomes and enhance their well-being". Competent early childhood educators must also reflect on their own cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds and consider how these, in turn, influence and shape their interactions with children and families.

As part of its work, The Bernard van Leer Foundation draws attention to the importance of early childhood educators understanding and responding to the growing diversity of the children and families in early learning and care (DECET, 2008). In Canada, for example, the most common out-of-home arrangement for First Nations children living off reserve, Métis and Inuit children is a childcare setting within which an emphasis on traditional approaches and activities provides the most benefit for children and their families (Findlay & Kohen, 2010). Similar arguments can also be made for early learning and

care environments (and the early childhood educators who work in them) that serve children and families marginalized by poverty and/or immigration (Leseman, 2002).

The changing nature of Canadian families and family life means that more families now face difficult and complex issues for which they may seek advice and support from early childhood educators. This requires early childhood educators to have a greater capacity to develop relationships characterized by trust, open communication and reciprocal dialogue (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011), while remaining mindful of the professional boundaries and use of professional judgment required in helping families access other supports and services.

## Supporting Children with Disabilities

Early childhood educators frequently work with children who have identified disabilities or who are considered 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' in their development. Halfon and Friendly (2013, 9) conclude "the research is quite clear: inclusion of children with special needs [in ELC settings] benefits not only the child and family who are included but is good for both the community and the larger society as a whole". Historically, early education services led the way in inclusive practices in Canadian educational settings creating a "virtuous cycle of inclusion" (Irwin, Lero & Brophy, 2004). In this cycle, initial inclusion practices allow early childhood educators to have positive experiences and to learn from inclusion, becoming more confident and competent in including "a broader range of children with special needs" (Allen, Paasche, Langford & Nolan, 2011, 73).

However, when early childhood educators lack specialized knowledge about young children with disabilities then inclusion practices can suffer. The Canadian Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (Flanagan & Beach, 2010) found that early childhood educators do not enter the profession with sufficient specialized knowledge about identifying children with special educational needs, inclusive practices, working collaboratively with families and in interdisciplinary teams. The further requirement that the successful transition of children and families from child care programs to kindergarten classrooms rests, in part, on early childhood educators' knowledge of how these different service systems work heightens the need to strengthen their competence in working with children with disabilities and their families (Villeneuve et al, 2013).

## Linking Research to Practice and Policy

Gestwicki and Bertrand (2008, 136) describe an important early childhood educator quality as a "sense of the big picture" or "an interest and a view that extend beyond the early childhood setting" and "connect the early childhood educator to webs of deeper meaning and social relevance". Thus, reflective early childhood educators recognize their place in the history and philosophy of early childhood education and they form opinions (and make decisions) about practices based on new research gleaned through professional development activities and the popular media.

Early childhood educators, therefore, need the capacity to be critical consumers of new information and to link research to practice as well as evaluate how local, provincial and national ECEC system policies are informed by research. Further, using an understanding of how policies impact program and professional practices, early childhood educators must individually and collectively assess their work within systems of evaluation, monitoring and quality improvement. The NAEYC (2012, 27-28) standard, *Becoming a Professional*, elaborates on this competency:

> Know about the central policy issues in the field, including professional compensation, financing of the early childhood system and standards setting and assessment. They are aware of and engaged in examining ethical issues and societal concerns about program quality and provision of early childhood services and the implications of those issues for advocacy and policy change.

## Communicating within a Democratic Community

Increasingly, the early learning and care setting is viewed as a democratic community in which social cohesion is nurtured through effective communication (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Researchers agree that the key dimensions of high program quality include the positive interactions between adults and children, between teachers and parents, and between team members (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). Communication in these interactions takes many forms: oral, interpersonal, written, informal, formal, digital and visual. And early childhood educators must develop competencies in each.

On a daily basis, early childhood educators must work democratically with others, listen well and effectively

communicate their understandings and ideas to families, colleagues and other professionals. In complex, inclusive early childhood settings, "teachers…are members of a team of professionals who work together to meet the needs of all children in the program". They must embrace cooperation, demonstrate an openness to learning from other disciplines and be flexible in supporting the individual needs of children (Allen, Paasche, Langford & Nolan, 2011, 73).

As part of an early learning community, early childhood educators are required to explain their work to colleagues, families and the public. Written forms of communication are particularly important and include daily notes to families, newsletters, learning stories about children, group and individual program plans and pedagogical documentation. Each form of communication requires a different kind of writing skill; all require good writing skills. Pedagogical documentation, in particular, requires early childhood teachers to skillfully "make visible" through text, photographs and children's work how theories of teaching and learning are enacted in practice (Fraser, 2012).

Through their communication skills, early childhood educators help make the early learning and care setting a site of democratic practice in which the recognition and valuing of differences is evident, the full participation by children, family members and educators is actively encouraged and solidarity in working towards a high-quality program is promoted (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011).

# Educational Qualifications and Professional Learning for Early Childhood Educators

The demanding, specialized and complex nature of work with young children, their families and communities highlights the need for a professional, competent early learning and care workforce (OECD, 2006 and 2012). Research evidence reveals that the educational qualifications early childhood educators complete, both before and after they enter early learning and care settings, matter (Bueno, Darling-Hammond & Gonzales, 2010, Sylva et al, 2010). Higher levels of staff educational preparation are associated with high-quality services, while staff with formal, specialized education are more likely to develop 'stimulating, warm and supportive interactions with children' (OECD, 2001). In brief, better qualified staff support a higher quality pedagogy that contributes to improved outcomes for children and their families (OECD, 2012).

Despite broad agreement on the importance of formal education and ongoing learning, many jurisdictions (including Canada) continue to require early childhood educators (those who are not certificated teachers) to complete only modest levels of formal educational preparation – and in some cases there are no formal educational requirements (this is often the case for many home-based services) (OECD, 2012). Indeed, there are significant differences in staff educational qualifications between jurisdictions, as well as divisions within them between those staff who work with very young children (often below three or four years of age) and those that work with children closer to school-age (OECD, 2006). While some jurisdictions have moved to raise the qualification requirements for early learning and care workforces, for example New Zealand and the UK (Nutbrown, 2012; Meade & Podmore, 2010), key questions remain about the level of qualification staff should hold, as well as how better qualified workforces can be developed and financed given the significant additional public expenditures involved.

The current section considers what the research reveals in respect to the levels and types of educational preparation and professional learning most closely linked with a competent early learning and care workforce. It draws on Huntsman's (2008) three-fold classification of educational qualifications to organize the research findings: first, the level of formal education attained; second, the degree of specialization within that education; and third, professional development or learning. Although these domains are considered separately, each is understood "as an essential part of a system of professional preparation and development (and a career system) so that policies and initiatives related to each part should be linked" (NAEYC, 2012, 53).

## Level of Formal Education – Patterns and Developments

The level of formal education typically refers to the time it takes to reach an educational standard, benchmark or qualification. Depending on the jurisdiction, the time frame for formal education for early childhood educators ranges from less than a month of study to six years. Referring to European Union countries, Oberhuemer (2011; 57-58) describes "considerable variations" in the formal education for work with three to six year olds and "widely divergent approaches" in the qualification requirements for work with children up to three years. These contrasting expectations reflect the continued divide between education and care services present in a number of OECD countries. Broadly, this division is reflected in a narrower range of generally higher level qualifications for staff who work with older children compared with a greater range of lower level

qualifications for staff who work with younger children often in child care settings.

In Canada, the education/care distinction is evident in the different requirements for early childhood educators in child care settings and those in kindergarten. Kindergarten teachers have a degree credential obtained after four to six years of formal educational preparation. In contrast, Flanagan, Beach, Michal & Cormier (2009, 65) report that while "provincial/territorial approaches to ECE credentials generally call for completion of post-secondary ECE courses", the number required varies greatly from three (entry level) to 40 courses (degree). Furthermore, Canadian jurisdictions differ in the proportion of 'qualified' ECE staff they require in child care settings.

Broadly, the educational qualifications countries require for staff that work with young children include entry-level (short courses), certificates (one year), diplomas (two years), degrees (three or four years), professional teacher certification (B.Ed.) and master's degree (one or two years post degree). In Canada, several provinces (including Prince Edward Island and Alberta) and in the US many states require staff in child care settings to complete a minimum entry-level qualification which typically consists of an orientation to child development and/or the basics of early learning and care program delivery. A staff member with an entry-level qualification is sometimes considered to be an 'assistant', although some jurisdictions do not make distinctions between staff based on their educational qualifications.

A certificate qualification typically involves one-year of formal education. When Prince Edward Island increased the educational qualifications for its workforce, the certificate was retained with the addition of a higher diploma level (two years) qualification. Several Canadian provinces require a diploma qualification (for example, Manitoba, British Columbia, Ontario) for at least a proportion of staff in an early learning setting. In contrast to other OECD jurisdictions (for example England and Australia), no Canadian province or territory requires staff to hold a degree qualification. Despite the absence of this requirement, a number of Canadian university and college programs now offer degrees in early childhood education (in Ontario: George Brown College, Sheridan College, Fanshawe College; in BC: Capilano University, Vancouver Island University and in Alberta: Mount Royal University with a focus on early childhood management and leadership).

In a number of jurisdictions, the trend is one of raising the educational qualification for early childhood educators to that of a bachelor degree. In the United States, for example, as of 2008, 18 states require prekindergarten teachers (for four-year old children) to have similar qualifications to those of public kindergarten teachers. A congressional reauthorization of Head Start in United States in 2007 also introduced the requirement that 50 percent of all lead teachers have bachelor degrees by 2013.

Outside of North America, a similar trend is evident. In 2002, the New Zealand government required all staff in child care centres to seek three-year diploma or degree qualifications and be registered, as are kindergarten teachers, by 2012. Australia's national government recently established staged targets for the diploma as a minimum qualification and a degree qualification for pedagogical leaders in child care centres and preschool services.

Over a decade ago, Sweden raised the educational qualifications for its ECE workforce. Ninety-eight percent of staff in centres that serve children one to five years of age receive formal preparation as early childhood specialists ranging from a three- or four-year degree from a higher level university college for pedagogues to a three-year post-secondary professional diploma for assistants. A recent recommendation from the European Commission Network on Childcare established a minimum target of 60 percent of the workforce holding a three-year degree credential, with 23 of the 28 European Union states now requiring staff that work with children from three to six-years of age to hold a bachelor degree qualification (Oberhuemer, 2011).

One impact of these changes, at least in some countries, has been to widen the gap between the formal educational requirements for staff who work either as pedagogical leaders in early learning settings (for example in England and Australia) or who work with older preschool children, often in publicly funded systems, and those who work with younger age children (often in child care settings). As numerous studies note, (OECD, 2006, 2012; Oberhuemer, 2011) there remains a perception that work with young children requires less education than work with older preschool children and that these services can be delivered through private businesses with only modest requirements for staff educational preparation.

## The Degree of Specialization in Formal Qualifications

There is general agreement among researchers that early childhood education is a specialized field with its own pedagogical traditions and approaches (Bennett, 2009). The

care and education of young children is broadly recognized as a unique educational enterprise which requires a specialized knowledge and practice base that can only be acquired through formal education (Goffin, 2013). A combination of early childhood specialization and higher education is considered essential for an early learning and care workforce to deliver high-quality programs.

Contrary to this finding, Flanagan, Beach, Michal & Cormier (2009) note that in Canada, while provincial legislation requires post-secondary ECE programs to offer a specialization for students, the persistent recruitment and retention issues facing the field have led some jurisdictions (including Alberta) to certify staff who hold 'equivalency qualifications' in disciplines other than early childhood education and care. This trend is seen by both researchers and some practitioners as problematic. In some jurisdictions, such as Ontario, the College of Early Childhood Educators has moved to restrict eligibility for registration to those staff who have completed formal early childhood education and care course work.

There is further agreement in the research literature that managers and supervisors also require an additional specialization in administration and leadership, preferably at the degree level (Goffin, 2013; OECD, 2006; Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2011; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). Managers, it is argued, should be able to "concentrate on essential matters, such as quality of learning, the curriculum, pedagogical issues and staff performance, motivation and development" (Council of the European Union 2009, c. p.3).

In Canada, only Manitoba requires directors in full-day child care centres to have either a post-diploma certificate or degree credential. But recognizing that "leadership development [needs to be embedded] into the field's culture and practice", three Ontario colleges have recently launched a common applied degree in early childhood leadership and administration (Goffin, 2013, 20-21). Grant MacEwan University in Edmonton offers an applied human services administration degree which is open to staff working in the early education field. Pedagogical leaders can be both managers and lead teachers. The English and Australian model of a degree-qualified, early years professional - who works with staff to improve quality outcomes - is one example of how jurisdictions approach building leadership in their early learning and care workforce (Taggart, 2010).

A further specialization in infant and toddler care has also been identified as a requirement for jurisdictions to consider. Such a specialization is "more strongly associated with pedagogic quality and the cognitive and social outcomes"; although the question of whether this specialization would be in addition to, or a substitution for, formal education remains unanswered (OECD, 2012, 148). Finally, in some Canadian jurisdictions, a specialization (post-diploma certification or degree) in working with young children with disabilities and their families is required for consultants who serve as resources for inclusive programs.

## Professional Development

Professional development (PD), which can include specialized education and a range of on-the-job activities, flows out of the educational preparation of early childhood educators. When formal education introduces early childhood educators to the reasons for, and the processes of, professionalism they are more likely to continue with PD activities following graduation. Research shows that early childhood educators with higher qualifications are more likely to engage in PD (NAEYC, 2012); although, studies also emphasize the importance of professional development for staff with lower levels of educational preparation (Mathers, Eisenstadt, Sylva, Soukakou, & Ereky-Stevents, 2014).

The current research on professional development commonly examines one or more aspects of the field: first, the broader system in place to support professional learning; second, the types of professional development activities that are most effective within this system; and third, the range of approaches jurisdictions take in mandating professional development requirements.

## A Professional System for Continuous Learning and Development

A system for professional development includes the interrelated elements of qualifications (discussed in the previous section), frameworks or standards of practice, management responsibilities for promoting professional development, professional development itself, and a supporting infrastructure (including financing and work place supports) which enable early childhood educators to become and remain professionally competent (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011). In most OECD jurisdictions, professional development systems (of some form) are in place for certificated teachers (including those that work with kindergarten-

age children), but largely absent for staff who work with younger children in child care settings or family child care (day home) services.

As part of a more systematic approach to professional development, staff's continuous learning is linked to larger educational purposes and goals. This connection helps to promote a professional culture in the workplace that both enhances practice and supports staff's commitment to professionalism (NAEYC, 2012).

Senior staff can support a culture of professional learning and development if they themselves participate in professional development. They can further support opportunities for staff mentoring and coaching to create a culture of learning in the workplace (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011). Some researchers contend that managers or lead teachers must provide "continuous pedagogical support, aiming at documenting practice, critically reflecting upon it and co-constructing pedagogy [with staff]" as a foundation for professional learning, setting both the tone and direction for staff and organizational development (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011).

Despite these arguments, research, including Canadian studies, shows that while many early childhood educators outside of school settings engage in professional development opportunities (Flanagan, Beach, & Varmuza, 2013; OECD, 2012), these are generally not supported in a systematic manner. There remains, for example, few resources available for regular, high-quality professional development activities, few opportunities for staff to participate in professional development during regular working hours, and few incentives (including either opportunities for staff to work towards higher qualifications or remuneration increases) to encourage staff to participate in professional learning.

Overall, the research finds that, outside of school settings and other publicly funded services, the low levels of compensation for early childhood educators, allied with their demanding work environments, have contributed to high rates of staff turnover, a mixed commitment to ongoing professional learning and a workplace culture that often does not strive for high-quality. One response of some jurisdictions to address these challenges is to direct targeted public funding either to early learning programs or to staff directly to increase their access to professional development activities (for example, New Brunswick, Alberta, North Carolina, New Zealand). At present, there is limited research on the benefits of this approach.

## Types of Professional Development Activities

While professional development activities can benefit early childhood educators, a number of researchers have begun to ask if more can be expected from these activities (Dalli & Urban, 2011; NAEYC, 2012; Russell, 2012). A number of researchers, for example, question the merits of the traditional *professional development* activity, typically a one-time workshop that informs staff *how* to carry out a new practice (Loughran, 2010; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011; Fukkink & Lont, 2007; OECD, 2012).

Ryan and Whitebook (2012, 98) advise that "models of professional development have shifted from one-shot decontextualized workshops to more individualized approaches such as learning communities and coaching that provides supports for teachers to try out new ideas in practice". These new approaches, described as *professional learning*, actively engage the early childhood educator in critically reflecting on *why* and *in what ways* new practices work in a particular program context. There is further an expectation that the early childhood educator, as an adult learner and professional, is committed both to linking research to practice and in experimenting with new practices, evaluating and adjusting them.

Professional learning has evolved in some jurisdictions to reflect these newer models with a shift towards a series of connected learning opportunities, ongoing coaching or mentoring sessions, and the development of communities of practice or professional learning. In the US, for example, mentoring ("a relationship-based process between colleagues in similar professional roles") and coaching ("a relationship-based process lead by an expert with specialized and adult learning knowledge and skills") are both now viewed as effective professional development vehicles (NAEYC 2012, 84-85).

Professional learning has also broadened to include staff meetings, which provide staff with time to explore new ideas, and peer discussions which help to promote a workplace culture of on-going professional learning (Whitebook, Gomby, Bellm, Sakai & Kipnis, 2009). Both approaches encourage staff to become invested in the implementation of new practices, as well as their monitoring and evaluation (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011).

Some US studies suggest that professional development that involves targeted coaching leads to more changes in teacher behavior. Powell, Diamond and Burchinal (2012),

for example, set up a Head Start intervention that involved an introductory workshop followed by 12 individualized coaching sessions with teachers (4 on site and 8 via technology). Research results suggest the combination of exemplars with content emphasized by coaches, the intensity of the intervention and higher levels of supportive accountability with nuanced feedback contributed to improvements in teaching practice.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children, in the US, emphasizes the value of early childhood educators situating their own professional development within the larger framework of professionalism, professional standards and/or professional codes of ethics (NAEYC, 2012). Indeed, the NAEYC takes the position that all professional development (or learning) should include early childhood educators establishing their own and/or a staff team's goals for further learning (NAEYC, 2012).

Hamre, Downer, Jamil & Pianta (2012, 507) caution, however, that despite growing research on the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of professional development programs "there is very limited theory or research to inform the processes of professional development". They recommend a new conceptualization of intentional teaching (as in coaching) that they believe underlies the process through which professional development interventions have an effect and transform teacher practice.

Summing up the ongoing shift in professional learning, Van Laere, Peeters & Lund (2012) observe that 'a coherent and diversified policy aimed at continuous professional development at the institutional or team level' (p.3) can produce positive benefits for early childhood educators, a finding that replicates and builds on the earlier conclusion included in the OECD's Starting Strong III report (2012, p. 49):

> Ongoing professional development can lead to higher quality ECEC services and outcomes. Attending a workshop may be an easy way to realize means of professional development; however, high quality subject training, field based consultation training and supervised practices may be more effective. On-going professional development should not only be made available it should be made a requirement to stay and grow in the profession.

## Professional Development Requirements

The research on how jurisdictions approach professional development for early childhood educators reveals a range of approaches from mandated professional development (generally in place for certificated teachers) to no formal requirements for professional development (often the case for staff who work with very young children in child care settings). The Starting Strong III report, for example, finds that professional development is more commonly mandated for kindergarten or preschool teachers than for staff in child care settings – and that jurisdictions are more likely to provide incentives for kindergarten and preschool teachers to complete professional development than for staff who work with younger children (OECD, 2012).

Across Canada, a number of provinces have professional development requirements for early childhood educators in child care settings. For example, in British Columbia, the License to Practice must be renewed after one year if the applicant has a one-year license or every five years for more seasoned early childhood educators. Since 2009, the province has required licensed ECE's to complete 40 hours of professional development every five years, with staff holding an assistant license required to complete an additional credit course in early childhood education. In Ontario, the College of Early Childhood Educators is expected to introduce a mandated professional development requirement that will require all early childhood educators to set annual professional learning goals linked to the College's standards of practice and code of ethics, followed by a self-directed and self-assessed program of actions.

The introduction of curriculum frameworks in early learning and care settings, in Canada and beyond, has prompted some jurisdictions to engage child care staff more fully in professional development. In New Brunswick, for example, all early childhood educators completed 36 paid hours of professional development following the introduction of a mandated early learning curriculum framework (Government of New Brunswick, 2008). While in Australia, a professional development guide was made available to all early childhood services to support the introduction of a new Early Years Learning Framework (Nailon, 2013).

In the US, researchers and policy makers have turned their attention to targeted professional development initiatives for teachers who work with preschool age children because of what are seen as either underdeveloped or inconsistent teacher preparation programs. Evidence of low levels

of effective teaching in pre-kindergarten classrooms has contributed to a greater emphasis on professional development which targets teacher-child interactions in the areas of literacy, oral language and to a lesser extent math and science (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011, 3). All areas which are considered a priority as part of a larger interest in children's school-readiness.

In New Zealand, early childhood educators are required to complete a combination of mandated self-selected professional development activities as well as those specifically identified as important areas for concern for the profession as a whole (for example, appropriate assessment practices in early childhood) (Cherrington & Thornton, 2013). Across jurisdictions, this combination of regulated professional development with some scope for professional choice appears relatively unique for staff who work with very young children, but is more common for certificated teachers who work with older preschool age children.

The different approaches jurisdictions take to professional development requirements for early childhood educators reflect different understandings of their work. Targeted or directed approaches are more consistent with a dominant view of staff as technicians, who require specific knowledge and a mastery of particular skill sets to undertake their work. While ongoing professional learning approaches that are more self-directed, continuous and supported at a higher level reflect an understanding of early childhood educators as competent professionals who benefit from opportunities to collectively reflect on theories, practices and professional identities not knowing the outcomes of these reflections (Dalli & Urban, 2011). Professionals within this characterization are more like "researchers" than "technicians", frequently examining their beliefs and theories about "children, learning and curriculum decision making" (Nailon, 2013, 2).

## Educational Qualifications, Practice, Program Quality and Child Outcomes

Several influential international policy reviews (OECD 2006; 2012; UNICEF, 2008) synthesize the complex research on the relationships between higher educational qualifications, specializations in education, professional learning and high quality programs and child outcomes. And while they each observe the importance of all three in increasing the capacity of staff to create the rich, pedagogical environments that support children's early learning and care, they note the complex nature of the linkages involved.

Summing up these findings, there is a consensus that the educational preparation and ongoing learning of staff remain central to the quality of early education and care. The knowledge, skills and competencies educators bring to early learning and care settings shapes their quality and contributes significantly to the experiences of children and their families (OECD, 2006 and 2012). Qualifications can and do matter given their links to the competencies central to work with young children and families. Better qualified staff are more likely to create the high-quality pedagogical environments that positively impact on children's early learning (Elliot, 2006; Sheridan, 2009), through stable, sensitive and stimulating interactions that support child development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Continuous learning is also important for staff to maintain the quality of their professional practice (Fukkink & Lont, 2007; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011). Well-qualified staff benefit from ongoing professional learning, which is particularly important in the early education and care field given the rapid growth in services over the last two decades, as well as the growth in research that has the potential to inform practice.

In the general absence of Canadian research (Goelman, Forer, Kershaw, Doherty, Lero & La Grange (2006) is an exception), findings from the United States, New Zealand and the United Kingdom cast some light on the relationships between staff education, training, the quality of early learning and care and child outcomes. These findings can also be used to understand better the policy and practice changes jurisdictions have introduced to improve the quality of early childhood education and care.

### *United States Research*

In a recent examination of strategies to improve language and literacy outcomes in child care, American researcher, Neuman (2012, 533) puts it simply: "Nothing can replace the power of a high-quality teacher during children's formative years". Consistent with this assertion, much of the US research, over the last two decades, has sought both to determine the number of years of formal education necessary to produce this "high-quality" early childhood educator and the nature of the education and training he or she requires.

Early US research studies compare the work of child care providers with and without qualifications, finding that qualified providers are more likely to demonstrate practices associated with quality: for example, warmth, responsiveness, and sensitivity (Barnett, 2003; Shonkoff

& Phillips, 2000). More recent studies have focused on the types of teacher-child interactions, mainly in preschool settings, that promote positive child outcomes. These studies find that early childhood educators who use a range of interactional strategies are more likely to enhance children's social and emotional functioning, support their engagement in learning, and foster their cognitive and language development than those who do not (Hamre & Pianta, 2007).

A number of researchers now agree that higher levels of education help to increase the capacity of early childhood educators to use these strategies (Bueno, Darling-Hammond & Gonzales, 2010). Conversely, early childhood educators with lower levels of education do not consistently engage "children in interactions that encourage(d) higher order thinking, problem-solving, or advanced language skills…as well as…use of analysis and reasoning skills" (Pianta & Hadden, 2008, 20). The OECD Starting Strong III report (2012, 2) summarizes these and other related study findings as follows:

> Higher qualifications are found to be strongly associated with better child outcomes. It is not the qualification per se that has an impact on child outcomes. What matters on the ground is the ability of the staff to create a high-quality pedagogic environment that makes the difference for children: that is, the critical element is the way in which staff involve children, stimulate interactions with and between children and use diverse scaffolding strategies.

The results from US studies on the educational qualifications for early childhood educators appear to have informed, at least in part, the decisions of some states to raise the educational qualifications of teachers working in pre-kindergarten classrooms (with four-year-old children) to a degree level. However, in 2007, two large studies yielded mixed results about whether the early childhood education qualification should be at a diploma level or at a degree level. In a meta-analysis of the US research in this area, Kelley & Camilli (2007) found that quality outcomes were better when teachers had a bachelor's degree than when they had less education. In contrast, Early, Maxwell, Burchinal, Alva, Bender, Bryant, & Zell's (2007) meta-analysis showed largely null or contradictory associations between educational qualifications and quality outcomes. Significantly, Early and her colleagues conclude that their findings do not mean that educated staff are not important for children's learning—rather, they propose, what may be more important is the actual nature of this education – that is its specialization.

More recently, US researchers have increased their focus on the nature of the education early childhood educators need to become knowledgeable, skilled and competent – including a focus on the specialized education they need to work with young children. This shift has been motivated in part by concerns about the quality and consistency of early childhood teacher preparation programs in the United States (Cho & Couse, 2008; Hyson, Horm & Winton, 2012; Tarrant, Greenberg, Kagan, & Kauerz, 2008).

Curricula in US early childhood teacher preparation programs are developed from the program standards of the NAEYC and program quality is monitored by two national organizations (Cho & Couse, 2008). However, research has identified a number of areas for improvement including variations in the qualifications and preparation of faculty; student to full-time faculty ratios; limited practicum experiences and a lack of course work in areas such as special education and cultural and linguistic diversity (Cho & Couse, 2008). Researchers have, therefore, called for significant improvements to early childhood teacher preparation programs throughout the United States.

At the same time as the focus on the education of early childhood educators who work with older preschool children, improvements in the educational qualifications and professional development requirements of the child care (0 to 3 years of age) workforce are still pressing. Bassok, Fizpatrick, Loeb, & Paglayan (2013, 14) found that although the educational attainment and compensation of the child care workforce in United States increased meaningfully between 1990 and 2010, it remains characterized by "low-education levels" with nearly 40 percent of staff having at most a high school diploma. Given the greater public investments in preschool (pre-kindergarten) programs at both federal and state levels, the focus on improving the educational qualifications of those staff that work with older preschool children has assumed a greater priority than that for staff who work with infants and toddlers. As the OECD, amongst others notes, this is a common development in countries that continue to deliver early childhood education and care through 'split' or divided systems (OECD, 2006 and 2012).

Taking a more structural approach, Whitebook & Ryan (2011, 6) signal the need for research on "the adult work environment in which teachers operate [and which affects] the extent to which it supports or undermines their ability to apply their knowledge and skills". While Goffin (2013) asserts the need for early education to become a coherent, competent and accountable profession with clear nomenclature from which flow sound educational and professional development expectations.

## The United Kingdom

In the UK several studies form the research base for the relationship between educational qualifications, high-quality programs and child outcomes (Munton, Mooney, Moss, Petrie, Clark & Woolner, 2002; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010). The *Effective Pre-School and Primary Evaluation (EPPE)* project, a six-year study (commissioned by government), investigated the effectiveness of randomly selected early childhood programs on the lives of 3,000 pre-school children through their primary to secondary school years (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010).

The study findings show that early childhood programs with the greatest numbers of qualified staff provide the highest quality of education and care. Children in programs with qualified staff also made better developmental progress particularly in the areas of cognition, literacy and social development. The researchers attribute the children's progress to the ability of qualified staff to consistently demonstrate the following interactional strategies (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010): open-ended questioning with complex language use; instruction through demonstration, explanation, questioning, modelling; sustained thinking episodes that extend children's thinking[1]; and, guidance (rather than domination) of children's thinking.

The EPPE results prompted the British Labour government, in 2004, to undertake policy change to the educational qualifications of the early childhood education and care workforce (Taggart, 2010). In 2008, the *2020 Children and Young People's Workforce Strategy* introduced a new kind of degree-qualified early childhood educator known as the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS). The goal (aspirational rather than mandated) was to have an EYPS educator in each private nursery by 2015.

When this policy initiative stalled in 2012, the Conservative coalition government commissioned the Nutbrown report (2012) which called for a new vision for the English early years workforce, specifying the qualifications of the EYPS and requiring a minimum of 70 percent of staff in group early learning and care settings to hold a level three (diploma) qualification. The Nutbrown report further set out the need for a clear, rigorous system of qualifications for the new level three qualification which would include course work in English and mathematics, course content (among others) on child development, diversity and inclusion, and working with families; and a focus on pedagogical process developed through a minimum of three different and appropriate field placements. As part of its recommendations for advancing the field, the Nutbrown report envisions a professional staff team that includes staff with differing levels of qualification and a pedagogical leader holding an EYPS qualification. To date, the national government's response to the Nutbrown report has been limited, with only a small number of its recommendations implemented.

## New Zealand

As previously noted, New Zealand began to more closely integrate its child care and kindergarten training programs beginning in the 1990s. In 2002, the national government introduced a series of initiatives to bring the education of child care staff in line with that of kindergarten staff requiring both to complete a diploma of teaching with an early education focus (Meade & Podmore, 2010). The Ministry of Education introduced a series of initiatives (including financial supports) to help staff meet these new education requirements.

Early studies showed positive associations between educational qualifications, high-quality services and child outcomes in early childhood centres (Smith, Ford, Hubbard & White, 1995; Wylie & Hodgen, 2007). Subsequent research (for example, Mitchell, Wylie & Carr, 2008) confirmed the benefits of degree-prepared early childhood educators, while Dalli, & Rockel (2012) report that degree-qualified infant and toddler teachers are also better at articulating their pedagogical approach drawn from education and experience.

A further study conducted by New Zealand's professional association for early childhood educators found that "the profile of qualifications amongst teaching staff in the case study centres affected not only the teaching and learning of children specifically, but also the staff's capacity to engage with parents" (Meade, Robinson, Smorti, Stuart & Williamson, 2012:xii). This study identified different patterns of teaching and learning in those centres in which all staff have higher qualifications. In these centres, early childhood educators were found to interact more with the children in their care – including having more and longer conversations and more sustained shared thinking episodes, which, in turn, contributed to enhanced concept development in children. The study further found that in those centres in which staff did not have higher levels of qualification a greater proportion of qualified staff's time was spent mentoring or guiding lower qualified colleagues.

1 "Any episode in which two or more individuals [teacher and children] work… together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc." (Siraj-Blatchford, 2011, 157).

This, in turn, reduced the time qualified staff could spend with the children in their care. Finally, Dalli (2010) advises that while the moves to increase staff qualifications were successful, the decision to exempt some centre staff from the new education requirements, as well as the omission of the home-based portion of the early learning and care sector, remain problematic.

In summarizing the research on links between educational qualifications, early childhood educator practice, program quality and child outcomes Mathers, Eisenstadt, Sylva, Soukakou & Ereky-Stevens (2014, 23) observe that while "it can be difficult to make generalizations from research carried out in different countries and contexts", all research studies offer one common conclusion—"good quality staffing underpins quality practice". It is also possible to discern across research studies how the practices of "good quality staffing" (for example, sustained teacher-child interactions, communication with parents) are consistent with the key competencies identified for early childhood educators in parallel streams of research.

Overall, research studies that examine the links between formal education and good pedagogical practices show that educational preparation is critical for professional competency in these practices. While the precise number of years and the nature of that preparation is still under discussion, the breadth and depth of the specialized competencies required for high-quality early learning and care programs lead researchers to recommend an increase in formal qualifications to the diploma level for all early childhood educators and to the degree level for at least one staff member. The formal education staff complete should also include a specific focus on how young children with diverse abilities learn and develop, pedagogical leadership, early childhood policy and work with other professionals, families and communities.

# Advancing the Educational Preparation and Professional Development of Alberta's Early Learning and Care Workforce

Based on a review of the available evidence, and taking into account the Alberta context, this final section outlines a series of proposed changes to advance the formal educational preparation and professional development of the early learning and care workforce in Alberta. The proposed changes are consistent with the growing body of research and practice findings that highlight the central role a well-qualified, professional early childhood educator plays in the delivery of high-quality early learning and care for children below the mandatory school age.

At this stage, the proposed changes are broadly outlined and can be best thought of as a starting point for further in-depth discussions among early childhood education and care stakeholders on how best to advance the field. The *Together We Raise Tomorrow* report and the priority areas identified in the 2014-17 Ministry of Education Business Plan outline the broad parameters for change in early childhood education and care, including commitments to quality and a closer integration of services. Both documents form part of the context for rethinking the profile of the early education and care workforce.

Central to any discussion of early learning and care are the ideas, values, and beliefs that inform the design, organization and delivery of services for young children and their families. Much of the discussion within the research addresses these key areas and seeks to understand better how their expression informs the work of early childhood educators.

A shared vision of what early learning and care involves, and its goals and purposes, is foundational to any agreement on how early childhood educators are to be prepared to work with young children, families and communities and the qualifications and competencies they are expected to possess. The common vision advanced in much of the research is one in which all children have access to high quality early learning and care that supports their growth and development in ways that understand, respect and value them as children. As part of such a vision, early childhood educators are well-qualified, competent professionals who are recognized and valued by the parents and communities they serve. Perhaps inevitably, implementing this vision has proven problematic as governments respond to the increasing demand for early learning and care services while seeking to balance competing interests and demands on public resources. Nevertheless, progress has been made with enhancements to the early learning and care workforce often central to the changes realized.

Consistent with the broader goal of moving towards a better-qualified, more integrated, professional early learning and care workforce in Alberta, ten changes are proposed.

## 1. The Introduction of an Early Childhood Education and Care Degree Qualification

The research evidence shows that staff with higher levels of formal qualification – a degree level program with a specialization in early childhood education – have the greatest impact in creating high-quality early learning environments that contribute to positive outcomes for children and their families. These staff are better able both to provide pedagogical leadership and to demonstrate the professional competencies linked to effective early learning and care practice than staff with lower level qualifications.

It is, therefore, proposed that the Ministry of Education work with post-secondary institutions and the Ministry of Innovation and Advanced Education to introduce an early childhood education and care degree credential.

Prospective students will complete the credential through two possible routes.

First, Faculties of Education across the province will be supported to reintroduce an early childhood development option within existing education degree programs. This new option will include a core series of courses on early childhood development, early education pedagogy and work with families and communities. The degree credential will also require field study placements in early learning settings.

Over time, it may be anticipated that all certificated teachers in Early Childhood Services settings will have a specialization in early childhood education and care.

Second, universities with existing early childhood education and care diploma programs will be eligible for provincial support to develop a new four-year degree credential. The course work for this new credential will be more advanced than that of the diploma qualification and comprise two foundational years of study followed by two years of more advanced study. The course work will include specialized content in child development, pedagogy, research methods, public policy, work with families (including those from different backgrounds and those considered marginalized) as well as work with children with disabilities. The program of studies will include field placements in a range of early learning and care settings.

Consideration will need to be given as to whether or not students who complete these four year degrees are eligible for teacher certification and, if so, the educational settings in which they are eligible to work.

## 2. A Two-Year Diploma as the Minimum Educational Qualification for Staff in Licensed Early Learning and Care Programs

Based on the specialized knowledge, competencies and skills early childhood educators need upon entry into the field to support children's early learning and care, the minimum educational qualification for staff in regulated early learning and care programs will be raised to that of a two-year diploma.

The two-year diploma qualification will comprise courses of study that parallel those of the four-year early childhood education and care degree outlined above. Staff qualified at the diploma level will have the option of continuing their education to complete the degree requirements.

The approved post-secondary institutions that deliver the two-year diploma will be supported to ensure that courses and field placements are available to a range of eligible students through the use of on-line delivery models and part-time programs of study. Prospective students will be required to meet minimum entrance requirements in core subjects including English and mathematics.

The Ministry of Human Services will consult with early childhood education and care stakeholders to determine the timeline for the introduction of the new minimum educational requirement for staff entering the field. The Ministry will also consider whether or not new staff entering the field will be permitted to hold equivalency qualifications.

A higher minimum qualification for early childhood educators has the potential to encourage current diploma graduates to stay in the field longer while offering them further career paths including upgrading to a four-year degree qualification. It may also help to better position the early childhood education profession in respect to other related professions that work with young children.

## 3. Strategies to Help the Existing Workforce Meet the New Educational Requirements

The large number of current staff in licensed early learning and care settings that do not meet the proposed new minimum educational qualification will require support to increase their level of educational qualification.

To ensure that the early learning and care workforce is appropriately prepared to work with young children and their families, all current certified staff in licensed child care settings that do not hold a two-year diploma or equivalent will be required to upgrade their existing qualifications through the completion of approved, credit-based courses delivered through public post-secondary colleges and universities.

The Ministry of Human Services will consult with early childhood education and care stakeholders to determine the additional course and field placement requirements staff currently certified at either the Child Development Assistant level or Child Development Worker level must

complete to reach a level equivalent to that of a two-year diploma.

The Ministry of Human Services will further consult with early childhood education and care stakeholders and post-secondary institutions to determine the appropriate timelines required for all current staff to meet the new minimum educational requirements.

Current staff certified at either the Assistant or Worker level will be eligible for provincial bursary support to upgrade their educational qualifications. Licensed child care and preschool programs that provide staff with paid-release time to complete approved courses of study will further be eligible for some reimbursement of replacement staffing costs.

## 4. Additional Qualifications for Staff in Management or Leadership Positions in Licensed Early Learning and Care Programs

Researchers agree that managers of early learning and care settings require further education beyond a two-year diploma to provide effective administrative and pedagogical leadership. It is therefore proposed that a new educational requirement (or credential) be developed and implemented for senior management staff in licensed early learning and care programs. At minimum, it is proposed that the senior staff person in a licensed program be required to hold the new educational requirement.

Two possible options are proposed for this new educational requirement or credential.

First, staff or students will complete an approved post-diploma certificate (from six to eight degree credit courses) that focuses on organization management and pedagogical leadership. This new credential will have the potential to ladder into a degree qualification from an approved post-secondary institution.

Second, staff or students will complete a series of specialized management and leadership courses as part of the proposed new four-year early childhood education and care degree credential – or as part of existing four-year degrees with an early childhood education and care focus such as that offered at Mount Royal University.

As with the introduction of a proposed new minimum educational qualification, existing staff in leadership positions will be required to meet the new educational requirement in accordance with provincial timelines developed after consultations between the Ministry of Human Services, the Ministry of Innovation and Advanced Education and early childhood education and care stakeholders.

Existing staff in leadership positions will be eligible for provincial bursary support to complete the new management/leadership educational requirement or credential.

## 5. Minimum Educational Qualifications for Family Day Home Providers

The research findings raise concerns around the generally low levels of educational preparation required for approved family child care (day home) providers. Even within jurisdictions that have increased the minimum qualification requirements for staff in centre-based services, family child care providers have often been omitted from any proposed changes.

The growth in this service model, and the increased expectations of the roles these service providers play in the lives of young children and families, requires that they complete a level of formal education similar to that for staff in licensed child care and preschool settings.

It is, therefore, proposed that the minimum educational requirement for family day home providers will initially be set at the level of a one-year certificate (equivalent to the Childhood Development Worker certification) by a date to be determined through consultations between the Ministry of Human Services, post-secondary institutions and early childhood education and care stakeholders. Further, over an agreed time period, also determined through consultations between the Ministry of Human Services, post-secondary institutions and early childhood education and care stakeholders, the level of minimum qualification will increase to that of a two-year diploma.

To assist family day home providers in meeting these new educational requirements, provincial funding support will be available to cover the costs of approved providers completing a formal program of study (equivalent to that of either a one-year certificate or a two-year diploma) delivered through an approved post-secondary institution.

Investing in the formal education of family day home providers provides an opportunity for those providers with a diploma credential to work across the early childhood education sector over a professional career.

## 6. Professional Learning Requirements for Early Childhood Educators

There is growing evidence that a comprehensive and well-delivered, high-quality program of ongoing professional development, at an institutional or program level, provides positive benefits for staff and program quality.

It is, therefore, proposed that an ongoing professional learning requirement be introduced for all staff in licensed early learning and care settings and for approved family day home providers. This ongoing professional learning requirement would parallel that mandated for certificated teachers. Over an agreed time period, and with appropriate resources for support, ongoing professional learning will become a requirement for continued certification as an early childhood educator.

The nature and form of the required professional learning for early childhood educators will be informed through consultations between the Ministry of Human Services and early childhood education and care stakeholders. Provincial government leadership and support will be required to introduce professional learning requirements for early childhood educators, with the Ministry of Human Services working in partnership with post-secondary institutions and existing infrastructure organizations such as the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement and the Alberta Child Care Association to advance change.

The implementation of Alberta's early learning curriculum framework provides one opportunity for an initial phase of professional development for staff in licensed child care programs and approved family day home providers.

## 7. The Development of Early Childhood Educator Standards of Practice and a Code of Ethics

Standards of practice and a code of ethics are important ways in which a professional workforce defines its roles and responsibilities. In addition, standards of practice and a code of ethics can also help to inform post-secondary early education program standards as well as professional development requirements.

The competencies early childhood educators require to support the delivery of high-quality early learning and care can inform the standards of practice and a code of ethics. A set of standards (Teacher Quality Standard Applicable to the Provision of Basic Education in Alberta) already exists for certificated teachers which may provide one model to inform a similar standard for early childhood educators.

It is, therefore proposed that the Alberta Child Care Staff Certification Office, in consultation with early childhood education and care stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education and the Alberta Child Care Association, develop a standards of practice and code of ethics for the early childhood educator field that can inform the certification, professional development and ongoing evaluation of staff.

Consideration will need to be given as to how the proposed standards of practice and code of ethics align with those already in place for certificated teachers in ECS programs. Further discussion will also be required to determine whether or not certificated teachers in ECS programs are eligible for early childhood educator certification.

## 8. Oversight of the Early Childhood Education and Care Profession

Raising the formal educational qualifications and introducing professional learning requirements for early childhood educators more closely aligns the field with that of other professions, as does the development of standards of practice and a code of ethics outlined above.

Consistent with this realignment is some consideration of how the profession will be governed and where responsibility will lie for regulatory functions such as certification and professional oversight. The regulatory functions for the teaching profession in Alberta are divided between the Ministry of Education and a professional teachers' association. The nature of this division is currently under review.

To advance the oversight and regulation of the early childhood educator profession, it is proposed that the Ministry of Human Services work collaboratively with early childhood education and care stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education and Alberta Child Care Association, to develop and implement an appropriate regulatory model for the field.

One option for consideration is the introduction of a self-regulatory college, created through provincial legislation, to protect the public interest and to oversee standards of practice and a code of ethics for the profession.

## 9. The Establishment of a Provincial Standard for Post-secondary Early Childhood Education Programs

Alberta currently has no provincial standard for post-secondary early childhood education and care programs. Provinces which have adopted provincial standards have drawn on different sources: the Canadian Child Care Federation's National Training Guidelines and the Occupational Standards for Child Care Practitioners (e.g. Newfoundland & Labrador); broad consultation processes involving employers, professional associations, universities, colleges (e.g. Ontario) and Child Care Sector Occupational Competencies established by a Multi-Lateral Task Force (e.g. British Columbia). Broadly, the establishment of provincial standards ensures that students who graduate from post-secondary programs receive a similarly high-level of educational preparation.

It is, therefore, proposed that the Ministry of Human Services, following consultations with early childhood education and care stakeholders, including post-secondary institutions, develop provincial standards for programs that prepare diploma- and degree-qualified early childhood educators. The Ministry will undertake this work in partnership with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Innovation and Advanced Education.

It also should be noted, that the current capacity of post-secondary institutions to prepare an adequate number of diploma- and degree-qualified early childhood educators requires review. At present, there are only a limited number of post-secondary programs that offer a two-year diploma qualification and only one which offers a four-year degree. Similarly, most faculties of Education currently have a limited capacity to offer a four-year degree with an early education and care specialization.

## 10. Realigning the Educational Requirements, Remuneration and Working Environments for Early Childhood Educators

The attraction and retention of well-qualified early childhood educators into the field remains a challenge across jurisdictions. Strategies to increase the professional nature of the field which focus on either the introduction of higher levels of entry qualification or additional professional learning requirements without addressing employment and working conditions are not likely to be effective. Appropriate attention must, therefore, be paid to the value of the work, the compensation provided, and the practice environment.

To address these requirements, it is proposed that the Ministry of Human Services work collaboratively with early childhood education and care stakeholders to determine appropriate strategies to increase the level of remuneration for qualified early childhood educators. The possible strategies to consider, based on the experiences of other jurisdictions, include the development of provincial salary guidelines for staff in licensed programs.

Further, it is proposed that the Ministry engage in similar discussions with stakeholders to determine the parameters for 'non-ratio' or 'non-contact' time that will enable early childhood educators to prepare and plan program delivery, participate in professional learning and engage with colleagues and other stakeholders.

In both of the above, special consideration will need to be given to the nature of the employment relationship (self-employed independent contractors versus employees) and the delivery of service in family child care (day home) settings.

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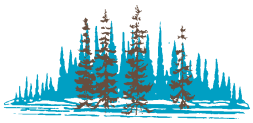

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