Babysitters or Professionals?
The Role of Social Attitudes in
The Recruitment & Retention
Of Child Care Workers

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January, 2002

Child Care Connections gratefully acknowledges the funding support of Child, Family and
Community of Social Development Partnerships of Human Resources Development Canada. The
views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of Human Resources Development Canada.
Introduction

“These are the best of times and the worst of times for those concerned about policies for young children in Canada. Never has there been more recognition of the importance of good quality developmental childcare in the early lives of children, no matter what their parents’ work status…..And yet, ..never in the last couple of generations at least, has the official Opposition party in parliament…..been so deeply conservative on family matters as is the current one. (Cleveland and Krashinsky, 200: 415)

The above quote on the future of child care in Canada was the conclusion of two economists, long involved as advocates for quality child care. It succinctly summarizes their perceptions of social attitudes about child care today. The recruitment and retention of staff for regulated care for children are serious and ongoing problems across Canada. While these are complex issues involving a range of factors, this paper explores the role of social attitudes in creating, maintaining and addressing them.

The paper argues that long held attitudes well entrenched in Canadian and North American society contribute significantly to the undervaluing of child care labour and such attitudes will not be easy to change. Despite consistent lobbying attempts and research that documents workplace realities, major improvements to wage levels and working conditions in both formal and informal child care sectors have made little progress to date.

However lessons from other female dominated professions and other jurisdictions indicate that the maintenance of these attitudes is not inevitable. Nonetheless to change them has its challenges. For the very polarization of attitudes in Canada means that no changes will occur without collective organizing, political strategizing, and conflict.

Social Attitudes Affecting Child Care Labour

A set of inter-related social attitudes plays a major role in explaining the financial undervaluing and societal under appreciation of child care that contributes to difficulty finding qualified staff and a high turnover of staff in regulated settings. Staff with ECE post-secondary training are paid low wages, have poor working conditions and report that while they often enjoy their work, they feel they are not respected by other professionals or society at large for their professional expertise (Doherty et al., 2000)

In addition, regulated settings provide only ten to twenty per cent of the child care for Canadian children, leaving the vast majority of children in the informal, unregulated and hence non-professional sector where wages are usually even lower and working conditions are poorer (Ferguson, 1998). In the “child care market” regulated services compete with those in the informal sector thus contributing to the suppression of wages and working conditions.

Many of these social attitudes overlap each other. However for purposes of raising issues for an environmental scan, there is merit in highlighting them individually. The discussion begins
with the most fundamental belief contributing to these problems: the devaluation of women's caring work, in particular the care of children, an attitude found to some extent in all parts of the world. This is followed by several factors that are more specifically a function of Canadian and North American attitudes: the belief that the care of children is the private responsibility of their parents rather than an issue of public concern; the perception of child care as a commodity to be purchased in the market; and the history of child care as a residual service targeted to mothers who need "care" for their children while they work, not "education" universally provided to all children. The final two issues are more implicit, an outcome of prioritizing other issues in our service system. The first is the lack of respect accorded our youngest children when we leave too many of them at risk in their care settings. The last is the popularity of particular models of service delivery that do not facilitate the best working conditions for staff.

Together these social attitudes underpin our federal and provincial child care policies that result in a "non-system" of child care in Canada. This has serious ramifications for those who work within it.

1. **Devaluation of Women's Caring Work**

Possibly the most significant social attitude impacting on the recruitment and retention of those employed in regulated child care is the long held world-wide belief that women's work caring for children is not "work" or "labour" necessitating financial compensation (Waring, 1999; Neysmith, 2000; Ferguson, 1998). Instead it is considered "a natural, instinctive characteristic of being a woman" (Ferguson and Miller, 2000, p. 20), and a function of women's socially ascribed unpaid role within the family, a labour of love (Baines, Evans, and Neysmith, 1998; Baker, 2001).

It is only during the last century that some countries, notably socialist countries such as Russia, Cuba, Eastern Europe, and China, began the tradition of compensating women for caring for children other than their own. This was followed by some Western European countries, (i.e. Sweden, Denmark, Finland, France and the Netherlands), where rights for women and social democratic belief systems led them in a similar direction (Baker, 1995). It has been very slow to gain hold in Britain, North America including Canada, and many other countries in the world where "compensated care" is still considered by many an unfortunate necessity for women who have to work and "second best" to mother care (Baker, 2001). This is in striking contrast to education, which is considered a social benefit to children and is valuable for all of society (Penn, 2001; Ferguson, 1998).

If the care of children is based upon natural instinct then it follows that training and education is not necessary. Consequently large numbers of parents are willing to use untrained neighbours, friends, and relatives for child care in the informal sector. Because these settings are unregulated, parents alone must assess the quality of care, and what research data there is suggests that at best it varies widely (Jacobs, 2000; Ferguson and Prentice, 2001; Ferguson, 1998).

It is clear when looking at Canada and the U.S., social attitudes on this topic are polarized and often tied to ideology. Conservative family values have gained new power in the U.S. with the
election of the Republicans under George W. Bush. In Canada, as Cleveland and Krashinsky (2001) noted above, conservative family values are very popular. As further evidence they note that in two large and powerful provinces, Ontario and Alberta, (and now possibly in B.C.), governments see universal childcare as anathema (Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2001: 415).

Attempts to change this attitude have been partially successful but have left policy contradictions, resentments, and conflicts among many who currently care for children (Ferguson, 1998). Those without training resent the implication that they are incompetent, while those with post-secondary education are not compensated for that training. Some parents can claim tax receipts while others cannot because family members care for their children, and of course the value of child care remains undervalued across the board. Opportunities to work together are diminished. “These divisions make it easier to avoid the issue of the under-funding and undervaluing of all childcare labour (Ferguson, 1998: 199).

The large numbers of children still cared for in the informal sector, the powerful Canadian lobby of those supporting “family values”, and the strength of this belief in other influential countries such as the U.S., Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand suggest that this social attitude remains strong and widespread (Baker, 1995, 2001). Changing such attitudes is possible, but the challenge is a formidable one and made more complex by other factors, especially the equally important attitude of privatization of the family, discussed below.

2. Privatization of the Family

In those jurisdictions in Canada where at least a minority of parents accept the possibility that child care can be seen as a form of employment deserving of compensation, another issue dominates the electorate: the debate over whether the care of children is the private responsibility of their parents or a matter of public concern (Friendly, 2000: 253). If it is a private matter then mothers who must work or want to work must take the responsibility of purchasing child care. Unlike education and health care where various levels of government contribute substantially and universally to the cost of service provision, child care remains primarily the financial responsibility of parents.

In Canada a small number of federal and provincial programs subsidize the system. The federal government provides tax deductions to parents using child care, but these barely affect the majority of middle income families, and are equally available to those using unregulated care (if tax receipts are provided), thus sustaining the informal sector. Provinces and territories provide subsidies to the poorest of families, primarily so mothers can enter the workforce rather than depending on social assistance. Finally some provinces and territories differentially subsidize the regulated sector through relatively small operating grants. In Quebec, the most generous, $5.00 per day, parent fees are being phased in for centres and regulated homes. It is the only province that is not primarily funded by parent fees. (Tougas, 2001).

However this patchwork of subsidies only reflects the lack of coordinated funding and organization within our so-called “child care system.” After decades of lobbying, federal reports, and government “exploration,” Canada is no closer today to a publicly supported system than it was three decades ago, and many observers report that we are, in fact, even further behind (Friendly, 2000; Prentice, 1999).
Under such circumstances, the wages and working conditions of those employed in child care are severely constrained by what families can afford or are willing to pay. (Friendly, 2001; Rae, 2001; Baker, 1995). Without substantial infusion of federal and/or provincial taxes into a regulated system, wages will remain suppressed, the informal system with untrained workers will flourish, and recruitment and retention of workers in the regulated system will remain problematic.

International observers point out that many Western European countries have very different social attitudes underlying their child care systems.

“They see it as essentially a public service, as an entitlement for children – even for children under three - and as an entitlement for women. Regulation does not arise, since the state sets the framework for policy, training, curriculum, and so on. Services are not determined by what parents can afford; children are not dependent on their parents’ income for a high-quality-place’ (Penn, 2001: p. 112).

3. Child Care as a Commodity

Child care in Anglo-American countries is viewed as a commodity to be purchased in the market. This market includes the informal sector, and regulated non-profit, publicly delivered, and commercial centres and homes (Penn, 2001; Friendly, 2000; Prentice, 1999). This delivery model is supported by the normative belief that the market is the appropriate venue for the exchange of private goods. To protect the quality of goods in the market, the state may subsidize and/or regulate it and impose labour standards. In the case of child care, the state regulates only a small proportion of the care parents use, and even in the formal sector, wages reflect what the market can bear. This has resulted in low wages and poor working conditions.

Nor does it appear that such a model will be easy to dislodge. Although numerous government reports and studies have raised concerns about the quality of care in the market model and have recommended more universally delivered child care, the cost has always been seen as prohibitively expensive for both the federal and provincial governments (Friendly, 2001; Rae, 2001). Most of the Canadian electorate to date has not had the political will to move away from the market model, and in some provinces it has been embraced with enthusiasm (Ferguson and Prentice, 2001). Martha Friendly argues that Canada’s failure to resolve whether child care is a public good or a marketable commodity means that instead of the adoption of a social policy solution, the existing market model is maintained by default (Friendly, 2000: 259). Only in Quebec has the government begun to move in another direction and while it provides an alternative model, it remains unique within North America. Its particular culture, language and political history caution us from being too optimistic that other jurisdictions will quickly follow suit (Tougas, 2001).

4. Child Care as Residual Service

The above three social attitudes, the devaluation of women’s work, privatization of the family and child care as a commodity, together have bred yet another viewpoint that exacerbates the problem of attracting and retaining early childhood educators. The history of child care in Canada is one of a
residual service, one targeted to those who need it because the child’s mother worked, and only subsidized for those who could not pay for it on their own (Prochner, 2000; Prentice, 1999). Subsequently child care was stigmatized and its educational benefits for children underplayed. The public perception was one of a service to working mothers, not children, and the service was described as “care” not “education”. Those who worked in child care were “workers” or “babysitters” substituting for mothers, not “early childhood educators.”

In striking contrast, educational services for pre-school children in the form of part-time nursery schools have been widely accepted for decades as beneficial for children and used by parents to supplement mother care. (Prochner, 2000) Such services were targeted to children for their developmental benefits and children who attended them were not stigmatized. Parents purchased these services and those who worked in them, while not well paid, were often better paid than day care workers, and were accorded the higher status of “teacher”. However these teachers were never seen as providing “care” for working mothers, and their professional credentials were assumed and respected.

Today more middle and upper class mothers work full time, and the educational benefits of child care are more widely understood and appreciated. Those who work in regulated care are increasingly known as “early childhood educators” and accorded the respect due to them for their professional training. However the perception of child care as a stigmatized service for poor working mothers has far from died in the minds of many Canadians. As Pence and Benner (2000) state:

“The perception of child care as a problem, as an inferior form of care for children, may be of no small significance in answering the question why a comprehensive system of care has not been established over the past thirty years, despite the steady increase in the need for child care.”(p. 135)

Such perceptions have been fueled recently by policy changes that either encourage or require single mothers to seek work rather than live on social assistance benefits. As a result, subsidized child care has been targeted to the children of these mothers, further reinforcing class differences, and challenging the educational benefits that child care professionals have been attempting to present as normative and beneficial for all children. This impacts upon the status and respect accorded child care professionals and makes it more difficult to lobby for enhanced wages and working conditions.

5. Lack of Respect for Children

In their examination of child care recruitment and retention issues in Nova Scotia, Ferguson and Miller (2000: 21) observe that another attitude impacting on this problem is the societal lack of respect for children, particularly those under five. They note this is reflected in the large numbers of children in unregulated care of questionable or unknown quality and the rising percentage of children living in poverty. In addition this disrespect is seen in the lack of serious recognition given to studies that highlight the long-term societal advantages that are associated with providing quality, stable, and nurturing social environments for young children (Ferguson and Miller, 2000: 21).
Certainly all these arguments are equally applicable to most, if not all provinces and territories in Canada. While few jurisdictions intentionally disrespect children, their de-prioritization of high quality child care services leaves children at risk. With the large numbers of sole support mothers and two parent families where both parents work, the state has not risen to the challenge of ensuring high quality care for our future citizens (Prentice, 1999). As Baker (1995) and Penn (2001) note, many Western European countries have made very different decisions and prioritized children as citizens and not just as chattels of their parents.

6. Preferred Delivery Models

One of the less appreciated social attitudes influencing the working lives of those in child care is the belief that service is best delivered in small, independent group and home settings (Rothman and Kass, 1999). These either attempt to replicate the “home” environment, or involve the parents on boards of directors or in other volunteer and advisory capacities to make settings less professional or institutional (Jacobs, 2000; Prentice and Ferguson, 2000). While there may be definite benefits for children, parents, and providers in these kinds of settings, there are also some serious drawbacks for workers (Rothman and Kass, 1999).

Staff may feel isolated from the larger world with little adult contact other than the few other workers in their centre, or in almost complete isolation in the case of those working out of their homes. Secondly, there is often less flexibility for workers to meet their own needs for breaks from the children or the centre itself. Thirdly, when parent fees are one of the centre’s primary sources of income, it is not the best for staff to have parents on voluntary boards establishing wage rates and parent fees.

Finally, the individual isolated home or centre is one of the most difficult kinds of settings to organize through unions or professional associations. Unions to date have been the most successful method to enhance the working conditions and wages for child care staff (Rothman and Kass, 1999; Doherty et al. 1999; La Grange, 2000). Yet Rothman and Kass (1999: 267-268) report unionization in such settings has proved to be more complex and difficult than organizing poorly paid female workers in the health or education sectors. Workers may fear unionization because an increase in pay would drive up the cost of operating daycare centres and could lead to centre closures, or it could change the relationship between early childhood educators and the children and families. Finally, servicing isolated bargaining units, often with less than ten staff members is a challenge and made more difficult by the limited public funding constraining the employers, who are often parents on volunteer boards of directors.

On a historical and comparative note, lessons from other female dominated professions whose work has been under valued and under appreciated guide us to seriously consider the potential value of unions (LaGrange, 2001. Baines, 1998). Teachers, nurses, social workers and other allied health professionals have gained respect, enhanced wages and improved working conditions through collective organizing. While these processes have not necessarily been easy, nor always fully successful, many argue they have been necessary (Baines, 1998). Unfortunately history tells us that increased wages and improved working conditions have rarely been offered for altruistic reasons.
Conclusions

The above discussion of social attitudes affecting early childhood educators has revealed a significant number of widespread beliefs that have worked against their best interests. This has no doubt affected their initial attraction to the job and their willingness to stay in their profession. Unfortunately many of these social attitudes have long historical roots, are found in many countries besides Canada, and to date have been unsuccessfully challenged in most Canadian and North American jurisdictions.

These attitudes underlie many other factors (i.e.: poor pay and working conditions and limited professional respect), and are considered fundamental issues by many in the child care field (LaGrange, 2001; White and Mill, 2000; Howe, 2000; Prentice, 1999, 2000; Friendly, 2000; Rothman and Kass, 1999; Ferguson, 1998). Nor, according to academics in other fields, are these attitudes limited to child care. They reflect ideological views about women’s work, particularly that which is labeled ‘caring labour’ (Baines, Evans and Neysmith, 1998; Neysmith, 2000; Benoit, 2000; Waring, 1999).

On a more positive note, lessons can be learned from more successful jurisdictions (Quebec and Western European countries) and other female dominated “caring” professions (teaching, nursing, and social work). Others quote public opinion polls suggesting there is growing support for a publicly supported accessible child care system in Canada (Rothman and Kass, 1999: p.261; Prentice, 1999: p. 150). Observers of the Canadian labour market note that mothers are not likely in the future to leave their paid work to return to the privacy of the home as they have done in the past (Howe, 2000; Baker, 2001).

Making significant changes to social attitudes is a complex and challenging task. With strong political constituencies within Canada favouring conservative family policies, it is not surprising that many observers, advocates and academics agree that the issue is one of garnering political will that inevitably involves conflict (Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2001; Rae, 2001; Friendly, 2000; Neysmith, 2000; Rothman and Kass, 1999; Prentice, 1999). To garner that political will, we also need a wide range of creative strategies such as influencing the media, developing allies, enhancing the reputation of child care with allied professions and fostering public education (Ferguson and Miller 2000: 22).

The problem of attracting and keeping our excellent and committed work force in early childhood education is one we should take very seriously for the sake of our children, our families, and the future of our country. Other nations have seen fit to make policy choices that treat those working in this field with respect and appropriate remuneration. There is no reason we cannot do the same.

“Once we agree that the benefits of good child care outweigh its costs, there is no insurmountable barrier, except the lack of political will, that faces policy makers in designing and implementing universally accessible, good quality, early childhood education and care programs for our young children.” (Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2001: 416).
References


