

Facilitated Expert Focus Group Summary Report:

Prepared for the Training Strategy Project



**Child Care
Human Resources
Sector Council**

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TRAINING STRATEGY PROJECT
FACILITATED EXPERT FOCUS GROUPS
SUMMARY REPORT

This report summarizes the findings from the five expert facilitated focus groups undertaken during Phase II of the Training Strategy Project (TSP).

In addition to the 29 community level focus groups held with child care centre employers and others across the country, the TSP team facilitated five “expert focus groups” with key stakeholders. There were a number of reasons for undertaking the expert focus groups:

- To gain a pan-Canadian perspective of issues and have discussions on possible solutions from key groups
- To share initial findings from the work to date thereby increasing buy-in for the work; and
- To invite strategic input from experts in the development of options for the Training Strategy

The focus group format was intended to maximize input from experts, and to encourage an exchange of ideas and opinions regarding potential strategies for Early Childhood training at the post secondary level.

A total of five expert focus groups were held during Phase 2 of the project:

- Provincial Territorial Directors of Early Childhood Education and Care
- Association of Community Colleges of Canada’s Early Childhood Education (ECE) Affinity Group
- Canadian Child Care Federation: Board of Directors and Member Council
- Child Care Human Resources Sector Council: Board of Directors
- Training Strategy Project Steering Committee

FORMAT

Each of the expert focus groups involved a presentation from the TSP co-leads which included:

- An overview of the goals and objectives of the Training Strategy Project, including an outline of the work intended for the three phases of the project
- Preliminary findings from the 2006 Student Survey, Faculty Survey, and Follow Up Survey
- Emerging themes from the surveys and literature review
- Presentation of contextual factors influencing the development of a training strategy

The presentation was then followed by a facilitated discussion with key questions designed to build on the expertise of the particular group. Depending on the number of people involved, this discussion was either with all participants at once, or was held in small groups, with a feedback process to the full group at the end.

KEY FINDINGS/THEMES

Themes identified from the expert focus groups represent the opinions and perceptions of the participants. In some cases, observations made in one part of the country may not pertain to other regions or jurisdictions.

1. Importance of Contextual Factors

There was overwhelming consensus across all groups that the contextual factors that have an impact on training are inextricably linked to the success of a training strategy. Issues such as wages, working conditions, respect and recognition are affecting the number and calibre of students attracted to early childhood education, and specifically, to those who plan to work in the regulated early learning and child care sector.

Experts noted the different situations regarding training and recruitment in those areas of the country where there has been some public policy decision and investment regarding these contextual factors. As well, the TSP team was advised to examine labour force issues in other sectors in order to ensure a realistic perspective for such issues in early childhood.

2. Provincial Territorial Regulations re Training Requirements

While all stakeholders agreed that increasing the length of ECE training and the proportion of staff in a centre with ECE credentials would support quality programs, there is a hesitancy to recommend that provinces and territories revise regulations to increase training requirements. This is particularly true in those areas of the country where there is limited access to training, where wages are low, and where there are acute shortages of trained staff.

Most jurisdictions – through their licensing divisions – are already in a position of needing to approve variances/exceptions for licenses for existing centres who are unable to recruit enough trained staff to meet current regulations. As a result, government stakeholders were not necessarily in favour of making existing regulations more stringent. There is also a perception that PT training requirements should not be so stringent as to discourage entry to the sector by those who are deemed to be “naturals” with children – although it was acknowledged that these people need to be encouraged to then participate in ECE training so as to gain the theory to support their practice.

The one area where there does seem to be a growing consensus relates to training requirements for Directors. There appears to be widespread recognition that the Director needs to have strong early childhood credentials, an understanding of curriculum, and skills in pedagogical leadership – *“Principals are always teachers first”*. There is agreement that the Director is not just an administrator with business/financial skills – *“To ‘manage’ and to ‘lead’ are two very different things.”* The TSP team received a range of suggestions/opinions regarding training for Directors – which included increased requirements such as post diploma credentials or degrees.

Across the country, however, experts expressed frustration with being caught in a dilemma. There is recognition that higher training requirements will lead to greater respect and recognition

– but without the corresponding remuneration, there is little likelihood of attracting stronger students who are willing to study for 3 or 4 years to become early childhood educators.

3. Gaps and Limitations

Across the country, there was consensus from experts that the following issues needed to be considered when developing a training strategy:

▪ Calibre of students

- The concern about the perceived decline in the calibre of ECE students was often linked to current “first come, first served” approach to entrance requirements in community colleges
- It was also noted that high school guidance counselors and HRSDC employment counselors often advise stronger students to pursue other studies
- Contextual factors have an impact – low wages will not attract the best students
- It was noted that many post secondary programs are seeing a drop in calibre of students coming out of high schools

▪ Disconnect between colleges and centres

- A number of participants commented on the trend among community colleges toward “emergent curriculum” in working with young children, while many centres are using “theme based approaches,” based on their previous ECE training.
- Others noted that ECEs are now required to deal with changing family dynamics, cultural sensitivities, and greater linkages with child welfare authorities, and suggested that some college curriculum may not be addressing these issues.
- The TSP team was advised to consider how colleges and centres could improve communication with each other on these issues.

▪ College Priorities

- In two of the focus groups experts noted that often the role of community colleges is to respond to employment needs with appropriate and timely training programs. As a result, colleges are often under pressure to graduate more students faster and deliver more training in a shorter time frame. There were concerns that this does not match with the early childhood sector’s need for broader and deeper training.

▪ Flexibility in program design and access to training

- Comments included
 - the length of time for distance education students to complete the program for their credential, due to scheduled delivery of the courses they needed to fulfill the requirements
 - difficulties in accessing training programs in rural and remote areas
- It was suggested that one of the options for a training strategy consider a graduated approach to training, i.e., a three year program with various and flexible entry and exit points, with first year giving certificate, second year diploma, and third year post diploma specialization.

4. Professional Development

In all expert focus groups, there was discussion about professional development:

- There was consensus about the need for a focus on professional development as an approach to lifelong learning. This requirement should be part of provincial regulations, as in other professions.
- There needs to be an alternative approach to professional development – a more proactive effort on the part of colleges.
- Colleges are interested in taking on a greater role in professional development, but only in partnership with professional organizations. Time and funding are potential barriers.
- There is interest in professional development opportunities that provide in depth training, and those that may lead to a credential, rather than be considered as one-time only events.
- There is growing interest in the “on-site” consultation model as a vehicle for professional development.
- Colleges see their professional development involvement as a potential marketing/recruitment activity – both for new students, and for potential instructors.
- *Example of a promising practice: The Yukon Child Care Association and Yukon College worked together on a conference – if a person attended the workshop, they were given an assignment afterwards. Completed assignment was then given to college for assessment – person then got elective credit at Yukon college (EC 106).*

5. Occupational Standards

There is a general perception among expert stakeholders that the Occupational Standards for Practitioners and for Supervisors, Administrators, and Managers have the potential to make a significant contribution toward improving the quality and consistency of training in the early childhood sector.

- Occupational Standards are being used at the college level. They are useful for course content, and to identify gaps in the training/program, and to develop an employability profile that is used throughout the program to work toward ensuring that students have the necessary skills to graduate.
- There is some question as to assessment and measurement – with a need to move toward a rigorous assessment process.
- There is also some question as to whether the centres and the colleges would measure/assess competencies in these skill areas in the same way.
- In at least one region of Ontario, Occupational Standards are being used to assess quality in five program areas.
- In Newfoundland and Labrador, the Occupational Standards for Practitioners have been used in the development of new early childhood program curriculum.
- Occupational Standards support career awareness activities by clearly outlining what the work is about.

6. Partnership with the Education Sector

All expert groups noted the growing interest in early childhood from the Education sector, and had varying degrees of awareness of specific initiatives across the country. While there was some cynicism as to the reason for the interest (earlier promise of federal funds, declining enrollments and need to keep teachers employed), many had cautious optimism regarding this

trend. Some jurisdictions have had long standing involvement with the education sector with respect to use of physical facilities for child care programs. A newer trend appears to be Education's collaboration with Social Services, and Education's own initiatives regarding programs for four year old children.

Even so, experts provided the following considerations with respect to implications for training:

- There is a difference between “education” and “training”. Training generally implies a narrow, skills based approach. Education is broader and deeper – this is the preferred approach.
- The Education sector enjoys higher status.
- There are tensions between “education” and “care” in the Education sector. In the Early Childhood sector, they are inextricably linked. Education has a different emphasis. Education unions are working to separate these roles.
- Some colleges are already developing options for students who wish to move on to education. Some universities are working to recognize early childhood diplomas in degree programs, though often in Child and Youth degrees, rather than in faculties of Education.
- At the community level, there is some concern that if the education sector's role becomes stronger, many ECEs with college credentials will be left out. There is also some concern that if the education sector continues to introduce programs for four year olds and four-year olds move into those programs, the primarily younger age group left in child care will require higher staff-child ratios and costs will increase.

7. Realistic Expectations

Preliminary findings from the 2006 Student Survey, Faculty Survey, and Follow Up Survey regarding how well prepared students felt/were perceived to be in working with children with special needs, working with other professionals, and able to take on leadership roles generated considerable discussion among groups of expert stakeholders.

There is a high degree of consensus that expectations as to what new graduates can take on in terms of job responsibilities need to be realistic. Experts noted that other professions and trades do not expect new graduates to be able to perform at the same level as those with years of experience. Experts also noted that new ECE graduates needed to be able to combine their theoretical foundations with working experience that is guided and mentored by experienced ECEs and/or Director in order to gain confidence and the ability to apply their ECE training to a variety of situations.

It was acknowledged that the reality is that new grads are often hired in programs that are trying to meet provincial/territorial regulations for trained staff, and find themselves in positions where they are immediately expected to take a leadership role. In some situations, they may be the only ECE in the centre with credentials – which puts them in a position of working with more experienced (and often older) staff, who may not have early childhood credentials and who may not offer the support and mentoring a new graduate needs.

It was also noted that the high expectations on new graduates can lead to situations where the new graduate is unable to meet unrealistic expectations. This can leave the new graduate feeling unable to perform and without supports and in many cases they leave. These situations contribute to cynicism about the “value” of an ECE credential.

It was also noted that many provinces are finding that new teachers in the Education system are leaving after a few years, and so have introduced mentoring programs to try to address this issue. It was suggested that the Training Strategy Project needs to consider the need for mentoring and the potential for apprenticeship programs.

SUMMARY

Despite the challenges noted in all expert focus groups, TSP consultants were strongly advised to develop and present a training strategy that has a positive tone and is forward thinking. It was noted that the early childhood sector has made great strides forward in the past 20 years, even though the pace of change seems to be very slow. It is important to acknowledge the successes.

The format of the expert focus groups was found to be more effective and informative than a comparable effort to conduct key informant interviews with the same number of people. The exchange of ideas and the strategic discussion was informative and helpful both to the TSP consultants, and to the participants themselves.