

# The Educational Experiences and Anticipated Work Plans of Post-Secondary Early Learning and Care Students in Alberta



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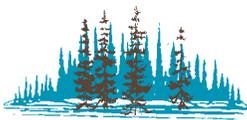
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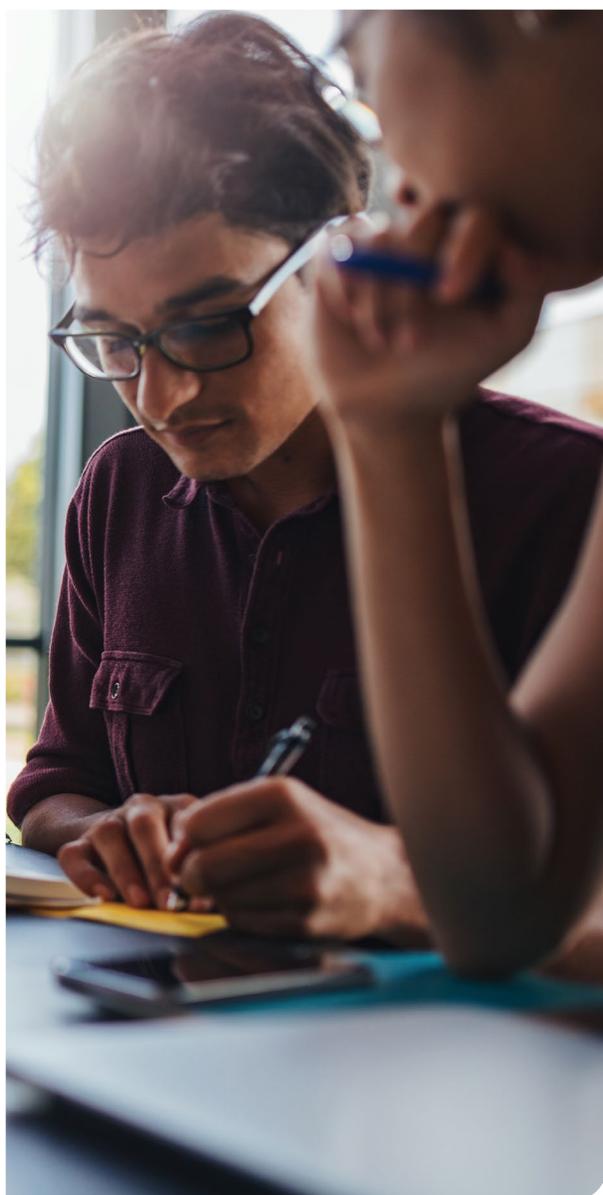
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## Introduction



Researchers, policy makers and service providers agree on the central role early childhood educators play in the delivery of high-quality early learning and care. Formally educated and well-supported early childhood educators provide the foundation for high-quality early learning and care, which, in turn, contributes to positive outcomes for young children and their families. Despite this agreement, early childhood educators across Canada remain modestly prepared for their important work. They further face demanding work environments and are poorly paid by comparison to staff in related fields. The result is long-standing and well-documented shortages of qualified early childhood educators with service providers struggling to recruit and retain well-qualified staff.

Not surprisingly, the majority of provincial governments, including the Government of Alberta, have introduced specific measures to address the workforce challenges facing early learning and care sectors, including incentives to attract qualified staff into the field and improvements in wages to encourage them to stay. The governments in British Columbia and Prince Edward Island have taken more comprehensive approaches and developed workforce strategies to build and strengthen the capacity of their early learning and care workforces. The previous Liberal Government in Ontario similarly developed a workforce strategy that was not implemented, following a change in government.

For its part, the federal Liberal Government included a commitment in its 2019 election platform to support the educational preparation of early childhood educators and followed this up with dedicated funding support for staff recruitment and retention in its 2020 Fall Economic Statement. It further identified the need to invest in early learning and care workforces as part of its Budget 2021 system-building announcements.

If governments across Canada are to succeed in attracting and retaining more and better qualified staff into the field then it will be important for them to better understand the experiences of students completing early learning and care credentials and the various factors that inform their decisions both to consider and pursue work in the field. The current study presents findings from some initial research with students in Alberta completing early learning and care credentials. It explores three related areas of inquiry; first, the reasons students choose to pursue a post-secondary early learning and care credential; second, the nature of their post-secondary educational experiences and how well these prepare and support them for work in the field; and third, their anticipated work plans and career aspirations after graduation. The field research was undertaken prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and so does not take into account the new workforce challenges brought on by this health crisis and the resulting economic and social dislocation.

The most recent national data available on students completing post-secondary early learning and care credentials show that in 2016 30,336 students were enrolled in early learning and child care programs of study (Byrne, 2019). This is a decrease from the 35,784 enrolled in 2014. The majority of these students were female (95 percent) and around half were under 25 years of age. Similar data for the province of Alberta show an estimated 2,100 to 2,200 students studied for early learning credentials in the 2016/17 academic year (Muttart Foundation, 2019).

Nationally, there are around 200,000 early childhood educators and assistants employed in the field as well as a further 86,000 home child care providers. The vast majority of child care workers are female (96 percent) and a significant proportion are younger (37 percent are between the ages of 25 and 34 years of age). In 2016, a third of child care workers were immigrants or non-permanent residents. Four out of five early childhood educators and assistants had an education level above a high school diploma (Uppal and Savage, 2021).

The description of the current study and its main findings are presented in five main sections. The first outlines the profile of the Alberta early learning and child care workforce in spring 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It further presents an overview of the post-secondary programs of study available for students pursuing early learning and care credentials as of fall 2019. Section two summarizes some of the main research findings on the educational preparation of early childhood educators, the challenges of staff recruitment and retention and the educational experiences and work and career aspirations of early learning and care students. Section three describes the research design and includes a description of the data collection methods and analysis. It also provides comment on the challenges of conducting the research and the resulting study limitations. Section four presents the major research findings. It summarizes the observations and experiences students shared during the research process and identifies the main arguments, ideas and themes that emerged. Where appropriate, it also identifies differences in the experiences students shared. The final section of the report presents the key observations and learnings from the study. These have the potential to inform the work of the Government of Alberta and other sector stakeholders as they work to improve the educational preparation of students, their transition into the workforce, and hopefully their longer-term careers in the field.

# The Educational Preparation of Early Childhood Educators in Alberta

The Alberta early learning and care workforce has much in common with the parallel workforces in other provinces and territories. The relatively low levels of public funding for community-based early learning and care, allied with the primary reliance on market-based approaches to organize and deliver services, have contributed to a workforce that is modestly prepared and generally not well-supported for its important work with young children and their families. The following sections provide an overview of the nature of Alberta's early childhood educator workforce at the time the research was conducted, as well as a brief summary of the post-secondary programs of study available for students seeking early learning and care credentials.

## The Early Learning and Child Care Workforce

Close to 19,000 certified early childhood educators work in centre-based child care, family day homes and out-of-school care programs (Government of Alberta, 2020). The vast majority (over 95 percent) are female and there appears to be both younger and mid-career cohorts. Racialized women and those from minority ethnic backgrounds comprise a significant proportion of the workforce, some of whom hold other educational credentials from their home countries.

Based on their educational qualifications, or an equivalency assessed by the Alberta Child Care Staff Certification Office, the Ministry of Children's Services certifies early childhood educators at one of three levels:

- Level I (formerly a Child Development Assistant): based on the completion of the Child Care Orientation Course; completion of courses through Alberta high schools Career and Technology Studies program; or completion of a 45-hour (3 credit) college-level course in child development.
- Level II (formerly a Child Development Worker): based on the completion of a one-year Early Learning and Child Care Certificate program offered by an Alberta public college, approved private college or an equivalent level of training.
- Level III (formerly a Child Development Supervisor): based on the completion of a two-year Early Learning and Child Care diploma program offered by an Alberta public college or university, approved private college or an equivalent level of training.

The equivalencies for Level II certification include degree programs and diploma programs in related fields,

while those for Level III certification include an Alberta Permanent Teaching Certificate and other related degree and diploma programs. Once certified early childhood educators retain their level of certification, although those educators certified below a Level III can apply to be certified at a higher level if they complete additional formal education at approved public or private post-secondary institutions. There are no ongoing professional learning requirements for certified early childhood educators.

The *Early Learning and Child Care Regulation* sets out the requirements for the number and proportion of certified staff in licensed child care programs and services required to hold post-secondary credentials. One in three staff must be certified at a Level II, while a program supervisor must be certified at Level III. Around 41 percent of the active early childhood education workforce is certified at the Level III, 16 percent at Level II, and just under 43 percent at Level I (Government of Alberta, 2020). The annual turnover rate within the workforce (staff who leave their position within a given year) is estimated to be in the region of 25 percent.

Early childhood educators in Alberta remain relatively poorly paid as they do in the rest of Canada. In fall, 2020, the average hourly wage for certified staff ranged from \$18.33 for staff certified at a Level I to \$25.57 for those certified as a Level III (Government of Alberta, 2021). While these rates of pay are higher than those of early childhood educators in a number of other provinces, they remain below the average rates of pay for staff in comparable educational or caring fields with similar levels of education. They are further significantly lower than the remuneration levels for certificated teachers in kindergarten programs.

Over the last two decades, the provincial government has introduced various measures to build the capacity of the early learning and care workforce and to address the challenges of staff recruitment and retention. In the mid-2000s, as a central part of the recently discontinued voluntary child care accreditation process, the government introduced wage enhancements for certified early childhood educators. These enhancements, which were subsequently increased in the late 2000s, were introduced to address high rates of staff turnover and to encourage qualified staff to remain in the field during a provincial economic boom.

In conjunction with these wage enhancements the government also introduced incentives to encourage certified staff to return to the sector, implemented scholarship support for high school students entering the field and provided additional monies for professional development funding for certified early childhood educators. In 2013, the

then Progressive Conservative government, under Premier Redford, announced plans to develop an early learning and care workforce strategy, as part of a broader commitment to advance early childhood development and family well-being (Government of Alberta, 2013). A subsequent change in government leadership resulted in a change in political priorities and a move away from investments in an early learning and care workforce strategy.

More recently, the United Conservative Party government, elected in spring 2019, has discontinued both the incentive payments intended to attract qualified staff back into the field and the scholarships for high school students. In 2020, the government also discontinued the Northern Allowance payments to early childhood educators working in the Wood Buffalo region of the province.

As of spring 2020, and prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, centre-based child care providers reported challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff. In some instances, child care providers advised that centres were operating at below their licensed capacity given difficulties in recruiting qualified staff. They also reported that a number of programs were operating with staffing exemptions in place.

## Post-Secondary Early Learning and Care Programs of Study

During the conduct of the research, 16 public and private post-secondary institutions in the province offered programs of study leading to early learning and care credentials. Alberta students also had the option of completing credentials through online programs offered by post-secondary institutions outside of the province.

The Ministry of Children's Services, which has responsibility for the certification of early childhood educators, recognizes qualifications from 10 public colleges (Comprehensive Community Institutions), two universities (Baccalaureate and Applied Studies Institutions) and two private career colleges in the province. The Ministry further recognizes qualifications from two Indigenous institutions that form part of the First Nations Adult and Higher Education Consortium. (See Appendix One for a listing of the Alberta public and private post-secondary institutions that offer programs of study leading to early learning and care credentials as of fall 2019). Alberta post-secondary institutions, like those in other provinces, actively recruit international students to study for early learning and care credentials. International students who graduate with a

credential are commonly eligible to stay and work in the province.

The early learning and care programs of study delivered through public post-secondary institutions require government review and approval, through the Ministry of Advanced Education, before they can enroll students. Private career colleges, offering early learning and care credentials, must undergo a similar review and approval process, through the same Ministry. In approving credentials delivered through a private college, Advanced Education staff determine whether there is a labour market demand for the proposed credential and whether the 'industry' supports the proposed curriculum.

The Ministry of Children's Services determines whether the credentials offered by public institutions and private career colleges in Alberta and beyond meet the requirements for certification, thus enabling staff to work in the field. The Ministry adjudicates eligibility based on the content of programs of study, the hours of instruction students receive, and the nature and level of the teaching staff's qualifications.

Over the last five years, the number of students enrolled in post-secondary early learning and care programs of study in the province has increased. For the 2016/17 academic year, based on information provided by post-secondary faculty, an estimated 2,100 to 2,200 students studied for early learning and care credentials. In the same academic year, an estimated 525 to 550 students graduated with a certificate credential and an estimated 350 graduated with a diploma credential. A number of these graduates were working in the field during their studies.

College faculty report that recent increases in the number of students studying for early learning and care credentials appear linked, in the main, to public colleges greater use of flexible delivery models (Muttart Foundation, 2019). These flexible delivery models include synchronous and asynchronous online programs of study, as well as part-time, in-class programs of study - a number of which include evening and weekend class times. Some public colleges further offer 'blended' programs that enable students to take both in-class and online courses as part of their programs of study. Seven public colleges offer online programs of study leading to certificate or diploma credentials. Of these, two exclusively provide online programs of study and provide no in-class courses. Based on information provided by college faculty, approximately half of the students studying for early learning and care credentials complete some or all of their courses online.

# The Educational Preparation of Early Childhood Educators, Staff Recruitment and Retention and Student Experiences – a Research Summary

The research literatures that examine the educational preparation of early childhood educators, the longstanding staff recruitment and retention challenges facing early learning and care sectors and the educational experiences of students preparing to enter the field have developed at different rates over the last two decades. There is a large and growing body of research on the educational preparation of early childhood educators, including empirical studies of the links between different levels and types of pre-service education and pedagogy, process quality and, to a lesser extent, child outcomes. There are also studies that document the efforts of jurisdictions to raise the educational requirements for early childhood educators, as well as those which compare the pre-service educational requirements for staff in different jurisdictions.

Much of the research on the recruitment and retention of staff to work in the field is of an applied nature. There are studies that document the human resource challenges confronting early learning and care sectors as well as those which outline the strategies governments have either proposed or taken to increase the capacities of their early learning and care workforces. There are specific Canadian studies which describe the profile and characteristics of workforces at the national level, as well as those which look at the ongoing challenges to staff recruitment and retention.

At present, the research on students preparing to enter the field is more limited, as is that which explores their initial work experiences. There are relatively few Canadian studies that look specifically at the educational experiences of early learning and care students preparing to enter the field, as compared to the much larger body of research on students preparing to work in related fields such as education. There is also only limited research on new graduates' work experiences.

The following summaries highlight some of the major research findings, with reference, where possible, to Canadian studies. They are not intended to provide comprehensive reviews of the different streams of research.

## The Educational Preparation of Early Childhood Educators

There is broad agreement within the research literature that the specialized nature of early learning and care demands a well-prepared and appropriately supported professional workforce (OECD, 2018, 2012 and 2006; Goffin, 2013). The findings from a number of studies confirm the central role that early childhood educators play in supporting high-quality early learning and care experiences for young children and their families (Urban et al, 2011; Whitebook et al, 2009; Ryan and Whitebook, 2012). These findings also show that the formal education early childhood educators complete matters in helping to support their positive interactions with children, as do investments in staff's ongoing learning and professional development (Brunsek, et al, 2020; Siraj, et al, 2019; Muttart Foundation, 2014). A smaller number of studies show more mixed results in the complex relationships between early childhood educator pre-service education and child outcomes. These findings reflect the multiple factors that contribute to child outcomes as well as differences in how staff education is defined and measured (Falenchuk et al, 2017).

Overall, early childhood educators with higher levels of formal education are more likely to develop 'stimulating, warm and supportive interactions' with young children than those with lower levels of formal education (OECD, 2001). These sustained and supportive interactions contribute to high-quality early learning and care experiences for

young children (OECD, 2018; Sylva et al, 2010). Better-qualified staff are further more likely to support high-quality pedagogies that, in turn, are associated with improved outcomes for young children and their families (OECD, 2012).

The importance of early childhood educator pre-service education has led a number of jurisdictions to raise the formal educational requirements for early childhood educators, with the move toward requiring a bachelor degree qualification for a portion of staff (Beach, 2020). Close to two decades ago, the New Zealand government introduced the requirement that all staff in child care centres seek a three-year diploma or degree qualification and be formally registered as early childhood educators (Meade et al, 2012). And while changes in government have made it difficult to realize these improvements, a significant portion of the early learning and care workforce now holds a degree qualification.

The Australian national government similarly set staged targets for early childhood educators to hold a diploma as the minimum qualification, with pedagogical leaders required to hold a degree qualification (Muttart Foundation, 2014). The European Commission Network on Childcare also set a target for 60 percent of the workforce to hold a three-year degree credential, and close to a decade ago, 23 of 28 European Union states had guidelines in place to ensure that staff who work with children from three to six years of age hold a bachelor degree qualification (Oberhuemer, 2011). In the United States, around 40 percent of states require prekindergarten teachers (for four-year-old students) to hold similar qualifications to those of public kindergarten teachers. Fifty percent of all lead teachers in Head Start programs are required to hold a bachelor degree qualification.

In Canada, the educational requirements for early childhood educators remain modest compared to those in other jurisdictions and they are commonly below those for kindergarten teachers (Beach, 2020; Friendly et al, 2020; Muttart Foundation, 2014). The qualifications early childhood educators require to work in licensed settings vary, although in all provinces and territories they remain below those required in countries considered leaders in early learning and care, including the Scandinavian countries.

A number of provinces, including Alberta and Saskatchewan, certify early childhood educators who hold a minimum entry-level course, or its equivalent, and these staff comprise a significant portion of the early learning and care workforces in both provinces (Friendly et al, 2020).

The majority of provinces require at least a portion of early childhood educators in centre-based services to hold either a certificate or diploma qualification. The educational requirements for staff in different types of programs commonly differ. A number of provinces, including Alberta, have no formal educational requirements for family child care providers (Beach, 2020). No province or territory currently requires early childhood educators to hold a degree qualification, although the number of post-secondary institutions offering this credential has increased in Canada over the last decade.

Despite the central role well-qualified early childhood educators play in supporting high-quality early learning and care environments for young children, some researchers have identified the funding costs associated with better-qualified child care workforces as a key factor that contributes to governments' reluctance to raise educational qualification requirements (OECD, N.D.). Early childhood educators with higher qualifications require higher levels of remuneration than more modestly educated staff. This in turn raises the cost of regulated child care for families given the primary reliance on parent fees to cover the costs of care (Fairholm and Davis, 2012).

## Staff Recruitment and Retention Challenges in Early Learning and Care Workforces

Government efforts to increase the educational qualifications for early childhood educators have commonly taken place against the backdrop of shortages of qualified staff and high rates of staff turnover. Despite the current modest levels of education early childhood educators require for certification across Canada, there are longstanding staff shortages in most provinces and territories, a problem that has long impacted child care sectors (Halfon, 2014; Flanagan et al, 2013; Beach and Flanagan, 2007), and constrained the ability of governments to increase the supply of high-quality early learning and care for children and their families.

Child care researchers and advocates argue that the human resource challenges confronting early learning and care sectors stem, in large part, from the primary reliance on markets to organize, finance and deliver services (Penn, 2012; Fairholm and Davis, 2012). And this is certainly the case in Canada, where the levels of public investment in and management of early learning and care services are generally much lower than in most European countries

(Halfon and Langford, 2015). The primary reliance on markets and parent fees to finance regulated child care diminishes the value of early learning and care. It further contributes, amongst other things, to lower wages and a lower status for early childhood educators as compared to staff in related fields with similar levels of post-secondary education (Start Strong Ireland, 2015; Beach and Flanagan, 2007; Fairholm and Davis, 2012).

Research completed by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC) from the early 2000s up to 2013 highlights the longstanding staff recruitment and retention challenges facing early learning and care sectors. Specifically, CCHRSC studies find that a series of related factors present barriers to recruiting and retaining qualified staff, including the lower wages for child care work compared to that of work in other similar fields; the public's perceived lack of recognition for the field and the value of the work; and the educational barriers some older workers face if they decide to change careers and move into child care (Beach et al, 2004; Doherty and Forer, 2004; Beach and Flanagan, 2007; Centre for Spatial Economics, 2009; Fairholm, 2009; Flanagan, Beach and Varmuza, 2013). These findings align with those in other international studies (OECD, 2018).

A comprehensive review of the empirical literature reports similar findings and identifies modest wages and benefits, the poor level of job satisfaction, and alternative job opportunities as barriers to staff retention (Totenhagen et al, 2015). Further research on staff shortages in Australia (Fenech et al, 2009) and the working conditions and staff well-being in the US (Grant et al, 2019) confirm these findings. These studies highlight the challenges of recruiting staff to a field that is often marginalized and seen as less worthwhile than comparable fields such as education or social work, as well as one with challenging working conditions and modest rates of remuneration. They further recognize the need to improve staff wages and working conditions if qualified and motivated staff are to remain in the field (Boyd, 2013), arguments similarly made in Canadian commentaries (Halfon and Langford, 2015).

The recent efforts of provincial governments in British Columbia, Prince Edward Island and Ontario to develop and implement comprehensive workforce strategies for their early learning and care sectors speak to the deep-rooted nature of the challenges facing the field (the Ontario workforce strategy developed in 2017 was not subsequently implemented given a change in provincial government) (Government of British Columbia, 2018; K. Flanagan, 2019; Government of Ontario, 2018). These strategies each

outline broad approaches to advance early learning and care workforces that include efforts to improve staff wages and working conditions while also addressing the broader under-valuing of the field.

Fairholm and Davis (2012), in their analysis of staff shortages in Canadian early learning and care sectors, note the tendency of governments to 'short-circuit' labour market outcomes by seeking to expand early learning and care services through the recruitment of less-experienced or less-qualified staff. This approach runs the risk of reducing the quality of services generally, while also making the field less attractive to staff with higher qualifications.

## The Educational Experiences of Students and their Work and Career Aspirations

As part of the larger body of research that examines the workforce challenges facing early learning and care sectors, a smaller number of studies consider the educational experiences of students preparing to work in the field as well as their anticipated work and career paths after graduation. The Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC) completed a series of studies, beginning in 2003, that explore different aspects of student experiences as part of its *Labour Market Update* work and its subsequent *Training Strategy Project*. This work includes surveys of post-secondary students in 2003 and 2006 as well as student focus group discussions in 2003.

The CCHRSC's research found that students had positive views of their educational preparation, although some reported that the educational preparation required to enter the field should be of a longer duration. Students were of the opinion that all staff in early learning and care should hold a post-secondary credential. Students did acknowledge, however, that the cost of completing post-secondary education was a barrier to access. Related research found that the low wages in the field deter some students from completing post-secondary education, and that the lack of educational opportunities in more remote communities was a barrier to access (Miller and Ferguson, 2003).

Student surveys conducted in 2003 and 2006 found that while the majority of students studying for early learning and care credentials planned to work in the field upon graduation, this proportion falls to just over half when students are asked about their plans five years after graduation (Forer, Beach & Flanagan, 2006). Younger students further reported that the quality of their practicum

experiences had an impact on their decision to consider working in the field. Around half of the students who participated in CCHRSC focus group discussions reported that they saw themselves working in child care upon graduation (Beach & Costigliola, 2004).

Subsequent Canadian research which explores the career aspirations of early learning and care students studying for degree credentials found that the majority of students are not considering work in the field (Osborne et al, 2018). These students report that one or more factors contribute to their decision to not pursue a career in early learning and care including low wages, poor working conditions and the broader lack of public or societal value attached to the field. Some students reported interests in work in related fields such as teaching and social work. These work and career plans for Canadian students studying for degree credentials are similar to those previously reported for Australian students (Thorpe et al, 2011).

By comparison to the field of teaching, there is relatively little research on the initial work experiences of new early learning and care graduates and the supports that new graduates would find helpful in transitioning to the workplace. Some initial research in British Columbia references the relatively high rates of turnover among new staff (Early Childhood Educators of BC) and examines how mentoring and other supports can help new certificate and diploma graduates transition into the field (Doan, 2016 and 2019).

This research finds that new early childhood educators find the work both 'deeply satisfying' and 'overwhelming'. It also reveals, however, that they commonly receive little formal help or support during their first year or more of work, a situation which is common across Canada. New early childhood educators are open to induction support in a range of forms including mentoring or peer support, and such supports have the potential to reduce the high numbers of them who leave the field within five years of

commencing work (Early Childhood Educators of BC, 2012). By contrast to the situation in much of Canada, in New Zealand new early childhood educators are assigned a mentor who provides them with a range of supports including professional development and feedback on their work (Aitken et al., 2008). This support can extend for up to two years prior to an early childhood educator applying for full registration. Early childhood educators find the supports valuable.

## Summing Up

The findings from research on the educational preparation of early childhood educators, the barriers to staff recruitment and retention and student transitions into the workforce reveal the depth and complexity of the challenges jurisdictions face in advancing and supporting well-educated early learning and care workforces. Across Canada, these challenges remain particularly pronounced given the lack of public investment, planning and management of early learning and care, and the relatively low value attached to the field. The efforts of Canadian governments to expand their early learning and care sectors will depend, in large measure, on their ability to increase the size and capacity of their early learning and care workforces. Current child care workforces across Canada, however, remain modestly prepared, poorly paid, and subject to high rates of staff turnover. Comprehensive workforce strategies and increased public investments in the organization and delivery of early learning and care are required to expand and develop early learning and care workforces.

# The Research Design

Building on the limited research to date, the current study explores the educational and initial work experiences of students studying for early learning and care credentials at six public post-secondary institutions in Alberta: Mount Royal University, MacEwan University, Bow Valley College, Grande Prairie Regional College, Norquest College and Lakeland College. The research comprised focus group discussions with ten groups of students across the six institutions: one focus group discussion was held with students at Mount Royal University in Calgary, one with students at MacEwan University in Edmonton; two with students at Bow Valley College - one in Calgary and one in Okotoks; one with students at Grande Prairie Regional College; three with students at Norquest College in Edmonton and two with students at Lakeland College in Vermillion. One hundred and four students, all of whom had completed a significant portion of their program of studies, participated in the group discussions, which were completed between March 2019 and January 2020.

The six early learning and child care programs which hosted focus group discussions serve somewhat different student populations and use various program delivery models. The Mount Royal University students were enrolled in the Bachelor of Child Studies Degree program, with a major in early childhood learning and care. Students complete the program on a full-time basis, with classes delivered on campus in a face-to-face format. During the research period, Mount Royal University was the only post-secondary institution in Alberta offering a degree qualification with an early learning and care focus. The majority of the 14 students who participated in the focus group discussion were in their early 20s and lived in the City of Calgary. A number reported working part-time during their studies.

The MacEwan University students were enrolled in the diploma program, which is also delivered full-time using

an on-site, face-to-face format. This group of 13 students comprised younger students in their 20s as well as a smaller number of more mature students (late 20s and older) some of whom had previous work experience in the field. A small number of students were recent immigrants. Most of the students lived in or close to the City of Edmonton and did not report working while completing their studies.

The two focus group discussions with Bow Valley College students comprised one with students taking the certificate program delivered through the Okotoks satellite campus, and a second with students taking a diploma through the main Calgary campus. The 15 students in the Okotoks focus group were taking their studies through a 'blended' format that included both in-person and online classes. A number of the in-person classes were held in the evenings. These students lived in smaller communities south and west of Calgary and the focus group included both younger and more mature students. For some of the mature students early learning and care was a second career after previous work in other fields. Most of the students were working while completing their studies.

Eleven of the 12 students in the Calgary main campus focus group were completing their studies full-time. Most of these students were more mature, with the youngest in their early- to mid-twenties. Most had previous work and or education experiences. Seven of these students were either immigrants to Canada or international students.

The Grande Prairie Regional College students were enrolled in either the certificate or diploma programs of study, which they were completing through in-class delivery on either a part-time or full-time basis. The nine students were mainly younger and lived in Grande Prairie, surrounding communities and a northern territory. A number reported working while completing their studies.

The three focus groups with students at Norquest College included two groups of students enrolled in the diploma program of studies (one group of 14 students and one of six students) and one group enrolled in the certificate program (five students). Both the diploma and certificate students were attending classes on campus as part of full-time programs of study. Over half of the students were attending the college as international students, while almost all of the others were either immigrants or relative newcomers to Canada. There were a number of mature students in both the smaller diploma discussion group and in the certificate discussion group. A number of these students had parenting or family commitments and some worked part-time.

The two focus group discussions at Lakeland College included students enrolled in the diploma program who attend classes on campus as part of a full-time program of studies. The students in both focus groups, the first with seven participants and the second with nine, were younger in age. There were three international students from India in both of the groups, (six in total), with the remaining participants mainly coming from smaller central Alberta communities.

Despite a number of efforts, the research team was unable to set up a focus group discussion with students completing online programs of study for either a certificate or diploma qualification. Electronic invitations sent to students taking online classes at Bow Valley College and Grande Prairie Regional College did not generate a sufficient number of positive responses to support a group discussion. Further research is therefore required to address this gap in the current study.

The focus group discussions followed a similar format (see Appendix Two for the discussion questions). They explored three main areas of inquiry: the reasons students chose to pursue an early learning and care credential and the factors that informed their choice of program and post-secondary institution; their educational experiences, including how well they considered their studies had prepared them to work in the field and any barriers or challenges they faced in completing their studies; and their work plans and longer-term career goals upon graduation.

The research team prepared transcripts for each of the focus groups which were then shared with the student participants for their review, edits and comment. The analysis of the transcripts involved the sorting of the data into categories, coding on the basis of similar content, and the subsequent identification of major themes and sub-themes. The major research findings from the group discussions are presented in the next section of the report.

As in all research, there are limitations to the current study which must be taken into account in considering the research findings. Four possible limitations may be relevant. First, students self-selected to participate in the focus group discussions. This self-selection process raises the possibility that students chose to participate because they had particularly strong experiences or views they wanted to share. Second, given the focus group format some students may have been influenced by the comments or experiences shared by other participants. There may also have been social or group pressures that shaped what students felt comfortable in sharing. Third, despite considerable effort the research team was unable to set up group discussions with students completing their studies through online delivery only. The views and perspectives of these students are therefore missing from the current study. And fourth, the research team conducted focus groups with students from six of the 16 post-secondary institutions that offer early learning and child care programs of study. The experiences and perspectives of students from the other ten institutions, which may differ, are not included. Given the above limitations, the findings though useful and important reflect the views and experiences of the students who participated in the study. They may not, therefore, be generalizable to the wider early learning and child care student population across the province.

# Student Educational Experiences and Anticipated Work Plans

Students participated actively in the focus group discussions. They appeared keen to share their thoughts and experiences and listened and responded well to those of their peers. In the larger groups, with over ten students, there was less time for students to fully develop some of their thoughts and arguments. The major themes in the student discussions are outlined below based on the three main areas of inquiry. Where appropriate, common themes across the ten groups are highlighted as are some of the differences in student experiences and perspectives. There are also selected quotes from individual students which illustrate some of the main discussion points. Overall, there were many areas of consensus in the perspectives and experiences students shared. There were also some differences.

## Student Motivations for Pursuing an Early Learning and Care Credential

Students expressed different motivations or reasons for pursuing an early learning and care credential. They further took a variety of factors into account both in choosing a particular post-secondary institution and a specific program of studies. For most students the decisions about what and where to study were complex. They involved balancing their interests with the opportunities available to them, while also taking into account constraints such as the accessibility of programs and the costs and time involved in post-secondary study.

Broadly, students described themselves as fitting into one of two groupings. First, the majority, for whom the decision to study for an early learning and care credential was an active and motivated one; and second, a much smaller group, for whom external factors or other considerations played

a greater role in their decision to complete a credential. Significantly, among the first group a number of students saw an early learning and care credential as a pathway or stepping-stone for further study or work in a related field, such as public education or a human service profession.

The key factors that shaped students' decisions to study for an early learning and care credential, and their related choice of post-secondary institution, included their interests in and attraction to work with young children; their desire to support children's learning and development; their longer-term work, professional development and career goals; the external influences of family members, friends or other advisors; the convenience or accessibility of post-secondary institutions and programs of study; and the supports and services post-secondary institutions offered them, which were particularly important for international students.

## Interests in Young Children

The main reasons students chose to study for an early learning and care credential were their love of young children and desire to work with them, and their related interests in learning more about young children's development. Students in all the focus groups identified these motivations, although the importance they attached to them varied.

### ***An affection for young children and desire to work with them***

Around half of the students described an affection for young children and a strong desire to work with young children as their primary motivations for pursuing an early learning and care credential. These motivations were most common among students in the Grande Prairie Regional College, Lakeland College, and Norquest College focus groups. By

comparison, the most common motivations for students in the Child Studies degree program at Mount Royal University were the desire to complete a post-secondary qualification and an interest in learning about children's development and growth. For these students the value of a degree qualification, and the opportunities it provided them for work and careers in a related human services field, were the primary motivations for pursuing an early learning and care credential.

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*I always wanted to work with children. Back at home I was working with children as a teacher assistant. My parents always said education is important. Children are the future in every country and if we invest in them ... I can't express it, but I wanted to learn more in this area. (Mature Student, Bow Valley College, Calgary campus)*

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*I wanted a change of career. Passionate about children. Early age is the root, where the foundation starts. I was researching programs and came to Norquest's open house to understand the field. (Student, Norquest College)*

Some mature students had chosen to study for an early learning and care credential later in life after previously working in non-related fields, such as the retail sector and hospitality industry. They described wanting to work in an area that was more worthwhile and which provided them with a greater sense of purpose than their previous work. Other mature students, including some international students, described how their previous educational and work experiences, including work as teachers, had made them open to the option of working with younger children.

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*I was going from job to job and didn't know what to do. What would give me purpose? What could I do? I wanted to make a difference. Why not children? It helps shape children into a better person. The environments they are in make a difference. (Mature Student, Bow Valley College, Calgary campus)*

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*Before I worked in child care I didn't know where I belonged. My husband told me, "you didn't find job, it found you." I have found my passion. I have a passion for this work and will keep going. I'll finish school and keep going. There is more to learn. (Student, Bow Valley College, Okotoks campus)*

Both younger and more mature students described previous experiences of taking care of younger family members or looking after friends' children as motivating them to pursue an early learning and care credential. Others were attracted to the field by volunteer experiences working with young children. These students enjoyed caring for young children and some saw their previous caregiver roles as preparing them for the more formal or professional responsibilities of an early childhood educator. They described themselves

as 'good' with young children and expressed a natural confidence in working with them. Some reported that it was their family members or friends who had initially recognized their skills in working with young children and, in some cases, it was these family members or friends who had encouraged students to consider working in early learning and care. A small number of students referred to the similar influences of mentors, such as teachers, who had encouraged them to pursue work in the field.

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*I love working with children. I'm the youngest of 3 children and was always taken care of. It is now my turn to take care of others. (Student, Lakeland College)*

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*Growing up, I watched after my three younger sisters. Child care wasn't something I was interested in but I always seemed to be looking after children. (Student, Bow Valley College, Calgary campus)*

### **Learning more about young children; making things better for them**

A smaller number of students emphasized the importance of the early years and of supporting young children's development as their primary motivations for completing an early learning and care credential. These students wanted to learn more about children's early learning and development and in some cases expressed the desire to 'make things better' for children. They expressed a strong sense of caring for young children and a desire to see things from a 'child's' perspective.

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*My mom had a day home and she suggested I become an educational assistant. I love working with kids and learning how their brain works. I got into this field through family. (Student, Lakeland College)*

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Students in four focus groups hoped to remedy what they saw as the relative shortage of high-quality regulated child care. Individual students were also motivated by their own difficult or unhappy childhood experiences to improve early learning and care for young children.

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*When I sent my children to preschool I saw differences across programs and it kind of felt wrong. I just wanted to do it myself, to make it better. I think there should be more educated ECEs. (Mature Student, Bow Valley College, Okotoks campus)*

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## Professional Learning and Development

A second student motivation for pursuing an early learning and care credential was the desire to improve their own learning and professional development. In nine of the ten group discussions, students identified their professional learning and development as one of the main reasons for pursuing an early learning and care credential, although how they hoped to use this learning to advance their work or careers varied.

### **Professional or career development in early learning and care**

Both younger and more mature students saw a formal credential as helping them build on their previous experiences working in the field or in related caring roles, including as nannies and private babysitters. They expressed a desire to ‘move up’ from their current Child Development Assistant (Level I) or Child Development Worker (Level II) levels of certification. Some students saw a two-year diploma as the base credential required to advance their careers in the field.

Individual students reported that holding a Child Development Assistant (Level I) certification left them feeling undervalued, while others saw further educational preparation as necessary to provide them with the knowledge and skills they needed to work more effectively with young children. Three students referred to the higher wages that come with certificate and diploma credentials as their main motivations for pursuing further education.

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*I chose early learning and care because I wanted to work with young children. I previously worked in child care and got tired of being called a Level 1. I wanted to get a higher level of training. (Mature Student, MacEwan University)*

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*I asked myself what do I want to do? I figured it out myself – I loved being with children. I figured out that it isn't just about children, it is more than that. I didn't agree with how my co-workers were dealing with the children or interacting with them. It was clear I had to study more. (Student, MacEwan University)*

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### **Professional or career development in a related field**

For twenty-two of the students, in seven of the focus groups, the choice to pursue an early learning and care credential was motivated by educational or career interests outside of the early learning and care field. Ten of the 14 students completing the Child Studies degree at Mount Royal

University saw a degree qualification as the entry point for a career in related fields such as education, social work and health. They also saw a bachelor degree as providing them with opportunities for further education.

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*It is a good starting point if you want to branch out into other programs. For me I'm contemplating taking Disability Studies. I worked with a girl who has Autism so I might do that. If you are considering another field, this is a good way. (Student, Bow Valley College, Calgary campus).*

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*My end goal was becoming a Speech Language Pathologist. I went to an open house and this program seemed to be a good path to becoming a Speech Language Pathologist. I chose MRU because it is the only university offering this program. (Student, Mount Royal University)*

These students saw a degree qualification as the minimum requirement to enter a professional field. They also described the greater public value attached to a degree as compared to a diploma or certificate qualification. Some students referred to the advice they had received from their parents or other family members on the importance of a degree qualification.

Six students pursuing a diploma credential at the Bow Valley College, Calgary campus similarly saw their early learning and care credential as a pathway to work in a related field, including education and social work. As did two students at MacEwan University who planned to use their diploma credentials as an educational bridge into the health professions.

A number of international students already held undergraduate or graduate degrees in other fields of study from universities in their home countries. Some of these students chose to pursue an early learning and care credential because they were either unable to meet the entrance requirements or could not afford the higher tuition fees in their chosen field of study, such as education or the health professions. Some planned to try and re-enter their chosen field at a later date.

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*I am an international student – and I wanted to study medicine to become a pediatrician. It is very expensive for international students. So, I chose ELCC – this was going toward the path of social work and working with children. (Mature student, MacEwan University)*

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Individual Canadian students spoke of similar challenges in failing to meet the entrance requirements of other programs of study, before subsequently choosing to study for an early learning and care credential. Again, a number of these students anticipated that they would be able to use their early learning and care credential to subsequently pursue work or further study in their chosen field.

## Student Choices of Post-Secondary Institutions and Programs of Study

Building on their motivations or interests in pursuing an early learning and care credential, students described the various factors that shaped their decisions to attend a particular post-secondary institution and take a particular program of study. These included a post-secondary institution's location and accessibility; its reputation; the costs of study and the program delivery model (full-time, part-time; in-class, online or a hybrid of both). For most students the choice of a post-secondary institution was an active one. A minority, however, described having either limited options of where they could study or choosing a particular college without a great deal of research.

Students who worked while attending school highlighted the importance of finding a program that offered either part-time study or some flexibility in how and when courses were scheduled. International students on student visas described some of the unique factors they took into account in choosing where to study, including a post-secondary institution's capacity to meet their needs as foreign students and newcomers to Canada.

### Post-Secondary Institutional Characteristics

Students took various factors into account in choosing where to study for an early learning and care credential. There were common themes across the ten focus groups, as well as some differences in the factors students considered important and the weighting they attached to them. Not all of the students had the same range of options or choices available to them, and for a significant portion the choice of where to study was a pragmatic one.

#### ***Location and accessibility***

The location and accessibility of a post-secondary institution were two of the factors students took into account in deciding where to study. A post-secondary institution's location was particularly important for students living in smaller towns or centres outside of Edmonton and Calgary. Students attending the Bow Valley College Okotoks satellite campus, for example, described its accessible location as key in their decision to complete a credential. A number of these students worked while completing their studies and others had family responsibilities. Some advised that they would not have attended the program if it had only been

available through the college's main downtown campus. Others spoke of their reluctance or inability to travel into Calgary for classes, even if these classes were offered outside of regular day-time hours.

Students at Grande Prairie Regional College and Lakeland College also emphasized the importance of their college's regional location. Many of these students had either lived or grown up in smaller surrounding communities and expressed both a comfort and preference for attending a regional college. Some described the regional character or 'feel' of the college as a better fit for their educational needs.

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*I worked in an Aboriginal Head Start before I applied. I was a substitute teacher at High School and had always loved children. I chose Grande Prairie because my sister always liked it, so I came here. It is also closer than Edmonton and other programs. (Student, Grand Prairie Regional College)*

By contrast, the geographic location of their post-secondary institute was not a primary consideration for the students attending the Bow Valley College Downtown Calgary campus, MacEwan University, Mount Royal University and Norquest College. Although the importance of access to public transit was briefly discussed by Bow Valley College students. Some Norquest College students raised concerns about their travel times in getting to and from school as well as the challenges they faced in getting to and from their practicum placement sites, which for some meant travel on public transit to different parts of the city.

Some Mount Royal University students highlighted its smaller size, relative to the University of Calgary, as a consideration for them, while students at Bow Valley College also referred to its more personal 'feel' compared to the other larger post-secondary institutions in Calgary. International students at Norquest College, most of whom were newcomers to Canada, described the College's cultural accessibility and fit for them.

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*I live in Black Diamond so it is convenient. It is good that I am still able to work full-time. I could not take the course downtown. I would have skipped out on the opportunity if this program wasn't here. (Student, Bow Valley College, Okotoks campus)*

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*You can walk up to anyone here; faculty and staff are very approachable. Proud to be at Lakeland because I'm not just a number but an individual. A lot of my friends take business but not at this school, they say the classes are too big and you are just a number. (Student, Lakeland College)*

## ***Institutional reputation***

Students at Bow Valley College, Lakeland College, MacEwan University and Norquest College described the institution's reputation as an important consideration for them. These students also took into account the early learning and child care program's reputation for quality teaching in choosing where to study. Students at MacEwan University discussed what they saw as the relative merits and reputations of different early learning and care programs in the City of Edmonton as part of their group discussion. Perhaps not surprisingly, they viewed MacEwan University's early learning and care program as strong and well-regarded and expressed a pride in completing their studies at the University. They shared some critical observations of the early learning and care credentials provided by a major private college in Edmonton.

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*I was at U of A. They don't have an ELCC program and I wanted to work with younger children. Most of my friends were at MacEwan or U of A. Other older friends said MacEwan was good and supportive. A child care director also recommended MacEwan. I felt I picked a good place. (Student, MacEwan University)*

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*I chose this college because of the great things I had heard. The small classes were attractive. I heard great things about the program and it is a smaller school. (Student Lakeland College)*

## ***Family history and recommendations***

Students in four of the focus groups had a family history or connection with the post-secondary they chose to attend. Younger students at Mount Royal University and Lakeland College had family members (including parents and siblings) who had previously attended the institution. For some of these students, most of whom were completing their post-secondary education immediately or shortly after leaving high school, their family members' earlier positive educational experiences influenced their choice of where to study and gave them a sense of reassurance that they had made a good decision. Some students followed the specific advice and recommendations of family members in choosing where to study.

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*My whole family is in the child care workforce; my mom and sister took the program and I have always enjoyed babysitting. I also worked in a daycare when I was in grade 10, learned about how to work with kids. (Student, Lakeland College)*

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For Mount Royal University students there was the added consideration that the University offered a degree in Child Studies, the qualification that some of their family members

saw as the basic requirement to enter a professional field. These students described their family members' encouragement both to attend university and to complete a degree qualification.

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*I wanted to take a degree program because it was more socially acceptable. I came directly from high school so there are better job opportunities with a degree. I picked MRU because of its smaller class sizes and my family came here. (Student, Mount Royal University)*

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## **Early Learning and Care Program Characteristics**

Students also described the specific features of their programs of study that attracted them. Not surprisingly, there was some overlap between these features and the institutional characteristics students found appealing.

For Mount Royal University students, the degree qualification again stood out as the most important factor in their choice of program. With no other Alberta university offering a similar degree during the time of the research, students looking for an early learning and care degree credential had no other choices available to them, other than online degrees offered through out-of-province universities.

Students at the Bow Valley College, Okotoks campus were attracted both by the college's flexible program delivery model as well as the convenient location of the satellite campus. The requirement for many of these students that they combine work, and in some cases work and family responsibilities, with school, made the campus's evening classes a good fit, as did the shared life experiences and similar learning journeys of their fellow students.

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*I wanted a degree because I started the program right out of high school. Societally, a degree is more recognized than a diploma. MRU offers small class sizes and is the only one offering a degree in this field. I've always worked with children, so it seemed a natural progression. (Student, Mount Royal University)*

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Other factors that students considered important in choosing a program included the use of in-class, face-to-face delivery models, as well as smaller class sizes. Some students saw links between smaller class sizes and higher teaching standards and a better quality of education. Others saw smaller, in-person classes as providing them with more personal and supported educational experiences. Both younger and more mature students expressed a preference for smaller class sizes, which some cited as helping them

overcome a lack of confidence in their ability to complete a post-secondary credential. A number of students contrasted their current educational experiences with previous ones during which they felt either isolated or unsupported and in which they found it more difficult to learn.

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*I actually live by MacEwan. I knew one person who went to Lakeland and there are less people in the classes, we have a day care that is right here with two-way glass and the practicums seemed more wholesome. It's worth the two-hour drive and I'm currently living in residence. (Student, Lakeland College)*

## The Educational Decisions of International Students

International students at Bow Valley College, Lakeland College and Norquest College described some of the unique factors that guided their choice of post-secondary institution and programs of study, as did individual international students at other post-secondary institutions. Most international students in the focus groups had come to Canada specifically to study for an early learning and care credential. A smaller number, however, had previously immigrated for other reasons, including family ones, and subsequently decided to complete a post-secondary credential.

International students who applied to study in Canada from overseas relied in the main on third-party recruiters for information on post-secondary institutions and the possible programs of study available to them. These students commonly had little or no direct contact with college staff or program faculty prior to making their decision on what and where to study. Some students received information and advice from family or friends already living in Alberta, which they found useful in helping them choose a post-secondary college and a credential.

### ***Institutional supports and cultural fit***

International students at Norquest College and Bow Valley College took into account the supports both post-secondary institutions provide foreign students, including help with visas and the requirements for work, in choosing to study there. Mature international students at Norquest College, some of whom had previously taken other courses or programs at the College, found the cultural diversity among both its student population and faculty appealing and something that made them feel welcomed and accepted. Norquest College in particular provided a number of international students with what they described as a familiar and supportive environment in which to study.

Some younger international students at Norquest College chose to study for an early learning and care credential, in part, because of their inability to meet the higher entrance requirements for other programs of study. The College's willingness to accept credentials or credits from other institutions was also an important consideration for some students, as was the transferability of the credits and credentials they would earn at Norquest College to other post-secondary institutions.

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*Initially I wasn't thinking about children so I applied to a few programs. I love to spend time with children and have younger brothers and sisters. I just found this program as I didn't meet the other programs' eligibility requirements. (Student, Norquest College)*

International students at Lakeland College described the college's smaller size and its location in a regional centre, Vermillion, as good fits for them educationally and culturally. Some had family members in Edmonton, a three-hour drive away, which influenced their decision to attend Lakeland College, as did recommendations from students who had previously attended the College and the views and opinions of prospective students similarly looking to study in Alberta. Significantly, most of the small group of international students at Lakeland College planned to relocate to the Edmonton area to find work when they finished their studies.

More pragmatically, the early learning and care programs at Bow Valley College, Lakeland College and Norquest College all met the requirement that international students complete their studies on a full-time basis. Each college is a 'designated learning institution', approved by the provincial government, which means that international students who complete a credential can apply to the federal Post-Graduation Work Permit Program. This program allows students to gain work experience after graduation which may, in turn, enable them to qualify for permanent residence. Despite this designation, individual students at Bow Valley College reported some challenges in obtaining the necessary study or work permits they required.

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*For all of us international students we must be full-time (students) to have status. If we are not full-time (students) we aren't allowed to study. (Student, Norquest College)*

## **The cost of post-secondary education**

The higher tuition fees international students pay to complete a post-secondary credential also factored into individual students' decisions about what and where to study.<sup>1</sup> International students at Bow Valley College and Norquest College, for example, described the higher tuition fees at universities in Calgary and Edmonton as prohibitive and part of the reason they chose to pursue a diploma credential. Some further shared that they enrolled in early learning and care programs because they could not afford the program fees in their preferred fields of study, including those in the health professions. More broadly, high tuition fees were a source of stress for a number of international students, some of whom relied on their families or personal savings to cover the costs of their post-secondary education.

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*I am an international student – and I wanted to study medicine to become a pediatrician. It is very expensive for international students. So I chose ELCC – this was going toward the path of social work and working with children. I still have a future goal to be a doctor. (International Student, MacEwan University)*

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*Tried to apply to (named university) but it was too demanding with grade requirements, even though I was an 'A' student. Norquest is more accepting of international students, more diversity, and it wasn't online. Because I am an international student I am paying twice the fees. (International Student, Norquest College)*

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*Started out as a community support worker (\$32,000 in tuition) and couldn't afford to take more education but wanted to specialize with children with disabilities. I love to help others, and early learning and child care correlates with my community studies. (International Student, Norquest College)*

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<sup>1</sup> The tuition fees for international students enrolled in early learning and care certificate and diploma programs at public post-secondary institutions in Alberta are two to three times higher than those for domestic students. A similar premium is in place for certificate and diploma credentials in related fields of study.

## **Student Experiences Studying for a Credential**

Students described their experiences studying for an early learning and care credential through a series of related discussions. They discussed what they saw as the main strengths or weaknesses of their programs; the courses or subjects they found most useful, as well as those areas in which they wanted more study; the barriers or challenges they faced in completing a credential; and how well-prepared they felt to work in the field as they approached graduation. Five main themes emerged in students' discussions: the supportive relationships and positive learning environments that helped them during their studies; the varied benefits of different program delivery models; the challenges and stresses of completing a credential; the value of a varied curriculum, and students' sense of preparedness to work in the field.

### **Supportive Relationships and Positive Learning Environments**

Students in all of the focus groups described feeling supported during their studies. This support came both from their fellow students and from program faculty and formed an important part of the educational experience for a significant proportion of students.

Students found that the time they spent together in classes or as cohorts helped them both to provide and receive support from their peers. Younger and more mature students developed strong relationships with the other students in their classes. Individual students credited their peers with helping them complete their studies. Students in the Bow Valley College Okotoks campus, Lakeland College, MacEwan University and Norquest College focus groups drew particular attention to the value of peer support for them, including a number of international students who found the support of their fellow students especially important as they adjusted to the twin demands of study and living in Canada.

Students at MacEwan University, Norquest College, Bow Valley College and Lakeland College also referenced the personal and educational support they received from program faculty. Some students contrasted the close, supportive relationships they enjoyed with early learning and care faculty with the more distant ones they had previously experienced in other post-secondary settings. They found early learning and care faculty caring and highlighted their willingness to provide students with help and assistance outside of class hours.

Students identified a number of factors that contributed to the supportive relationships and positive learning environments they experienced: the in-class, face-to-face delivery of most of their courses; their smaller class sizes; their attachment to the same group or cohort of students for much of their time in school; and, to a lesser degree, the nature of the early learning and care program itself which encouraged students to discuss and share their own experiences as part of the learning process.

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*In India, since childhood we study in peer groups. It works. You become a family because you are spending so much time together. (International Student, Norquest College)*

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*I like the experience and knowledge that everyone passes on. You get to know how to handle things and experience things. You get to learn from people who have been doing it for a long while. (Student, Grande Prairie Regional College)*

MacEwan University students, completing a diploma credential, spoke most to the value of being part of a cohort for the duration of their studies. The majority of these students, who had been together for close to two years of full-time study, highlighted the significant benefits of studying and learning together. They also commented positively on the pedagogical strengths of early learning and care faculty.

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*Instructors' doors are always open. If students indicate they are struggling with this ... the instructors are always here. So students don't fall behind. (Student, MacEwan University)*

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*Our two face-to-face instructors they are our biggest supporters. They provide full support and guide us. This is a huge benefit. Thank you to the instructors. This has a huge impact on how we learn. They are someone who understands. (Student, Bow Valley, Okotoks campus)*

## Program Delivery Models

Students shared different views on the program delivery models they experienced during their studies. A small number also commented on the delivery models they felt were best suited for preparing early childhood educators.

### ***In-person, face-to-face learning***

Students in all of the focus groups expressed a preference for in-person, face-to-face learning. They identified numerous advantages of in-person classes including the chance to interact with other students and program faculty, timely feedback on their work and prompt answers to their questions, and the exposure to different types of knowledge, including the stories and experiences of other students and

program faculty. International students at Norquest College reported that their in-class discussions helped them both to better understand the materials presented in lectures, and to share their own thoughts and reflections. Students at Bow Valley College, Lakeland College, Mount Royal University and MacEwan University identified similar benefits from their in-person, class discussions.

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*The group discussions are vital. We don't just want to hear from the lecturer. We are more engaged and we learn lots from others' experiences. (Student, Norquest College)*

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*I like being in the classroom. If I read something, I don't always understand it. In the classroom the teacher can help with that. I'm more of a visual learner and learn through experiences. In class it sticks to you. (Student, Bow Valley College, Calgary campus)*

For some students in-person classes not only met their social learning needs but also aligned with their self-reported preferences for 'hands-on' learning or 'learning by doing.' Individual MacEwan University students, for example, described the benefits of classroom work that brought theory and practice together, and enabled them to 'practice' strategies or approaches they had studied. Students with previous experiences of attending much larger, more impersonal post-secondary classes in other programs of study highlighted the contrasts with their early learning and care studies. They drew attention to the support and encouragement they received in smaller, in-person classes, which helped some of them overcome their lack of confidence in more academic learning environments.

For students across the focus groups, smaller in-person classes and regular contacts with other students and faculty were positive features of their educational experiences.

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*The people where I volunteered suggested online ELCC programs. I wanted an in-class program. Practical is how I really learn. Small class size and open discussions are good. (Student, MacEwan University)*

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### ***Online learning***

The majority of students in the focus groups had limited experiences with online learning. Bow Valley College students had the most, given the blended nature of their program of studies, which provided them with the option of taking one or more courses online. A small number of Lakeland College students had previously taken some online courses as had two students at Grande Prairie Regional College.

Bow Valley College students saw two main advantages to online learning over in-person classes: first, its flexible

nature, in terms of the timing and location of classes; and second, the different options available for students to participate in class discussions, including through online chat functions. For students balancing the demands of study, family and work, the option of completing at least some of their courses online was a useful one. Individual students credited this option as helping them to complete their studies. At Lakeland College, individual students reported that the asynchronous delivery of online classes helped them balance work and study commitments.

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*Some people work. Sometimes you have to be in class every day of the week. Online helps us with that. It helps with scheduling. (Student Bow Valley College, Calgary campus)*

By comparison, students at Bow Valley College, Lakeland College and Grande Prairie Regional College also shared some of the challenges they found with online classes. These included finding it more difficult to learn from online materials; delays in getting answers to questions or in receiving feedback from faculty on their work; limited connections with other students taking the same classes; and the challenges of participating in group work and completing group assignments with students they either didn't know or found it hard to connect with online. Individual students described having to review online materials multiple times to grasp key learnings and observed that some program faculty did not appear well-trained or supported in delivering online classes.

Individual MacEwan University and Norquest College students identified what they saw as potential challenges with online courses and questioned their effectiveness compared to in-person classes. They saw potential challenges in communications between faculty and students, more limited interactions between students and faculty, and generally lower levels of student learning. On balance, students in the focus groups considered the potential challenges of online learning to outweigh the benefits. Although as noted above, most of the students in the focus groups had limited experiences with online learning.

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*With online courses it feels like you are a robot. You are not really learning and sharing with each other. It is not heartfelt discussion like in-class. (Student, Bow Valley College, Okotoks campus)*

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*The online courses helped me learn about using the computer. I enjoyed the knowledge I learned but I enjoy the face-to-face community. Online made me feel lonely as I was all by myself. It is sometimes overwhelming to learn that way. I prefer in class learning. (Student, Bow Valley College, Calgary campus)*

## **Full-time study**

A small number of students found attending regularly scheduled, in-person classes beneficial. The structure or routine of regular classes helped these students stay current with their studies, while being part of a cohort motivated them to attend classes and to participate in group work. These students described the positive stresses, or accountabilities, of having to attend classes every day and of not letting other students down.

Other students credited their full-time programs as helping them stay focused on their education. Students at both Grande Prairie Regional College and Lakeland College spoke to the benefits of full-time study for them as did individual mature students at Norquest College. While a number of these students were international students who had to study full-time to meet their student visa requirements, others had family commitments which required them to put aside their school work to attend to their family's needs. These students had the common goal of completing their studies in the shortest time possible so that they could begin work and earn income to support their families.

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*There is less distraction with full-time courses, your brain stays fresh and current. You get it over and done with. With part-time you have to keep revising. (Mature Student, Norquest College)*

## **The Challenges and Stresses of Post-Secondary Study**

Students found studying for an early learning credential stressful. Broadly, they identified three main tensions or sources of stress; balancing the demands of studying with work and family commitments; managing heavy program workloads; and the financial costs of studying for a credential. The majority of students experienced challenges and stress linked to more than one of these tensions and, in a number of cases, to all three.

### **Balancing studying with other commitments**

Students in six of the focus groups identified the difficulties they faced in balancing the demands of studying with those of supporting their families. They found striking a balance between school and homelife stressful, especially when the demands of studying impacted on their parenting roles. Some mature students described feeling guilty when they were unable to meet their children's needs in the ways they would have liked. Others described the difficulties of finding care for their own children when they attended classes or completed practicum placements.

Mature students studying full-time at Grande Prairie Regional College, Norquest College, and MacEwan University appeared to feel the greatest burden in balancing the demands of school and family life. By contrast, mature students at the Bow Valley College Okotoks campus site, completing their studies through a flexible program model, appeared better able to strike a balance that worked for them. Two mature students at Grande Prairie Regional College spoke of the related challenges they faced in studying and living away from their home communities and families.

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*I am trying my very best. The hardest part is my second term - 4 classes and 2 online. I am a full-time mom and full-time student. Right now, I'm not being the best mom. I don't want students to have that same feeling. (Mature Student, Bow Valley College, Okotoks campus)*

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*I am currently on maternity leave. I wasn't able to save extra money because I had my son. There has been no break. I am a student all day and go home and be a mom all night. I am in the negative right now because of what I have to spend each month. (Mature Student, Grande Prairie Regional College)*

Students also identified the challenges of balancing school and work, which again impacted those students attending school full-time with regularly scheduled classes the most. Students at Grande Prairie Regional College, Norquest College and Mount Royal University all highlighted the challenges they faced, from time to time, in working and attending school.

Some international students at Norquest College described the specific challenges of having to work in the evenings after spending their day in classes. For a number of these students, part-time work was a necessity to finance their education, but the requirement that they complete their studies full-time to meet their student visa obligations left them with limited options for regular work hours. Students at Mount Royal University described the pressures they faced during their practicums, when the timing of their field placements clashed with their work schedules. Individual students described how these conflicts jeopardized their part-time work and, for some, resulted in the loss of income and even employment.

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*It makes it really hard to work and go to school. Practicums are hard and working 20-30 hours on top of that. We really feel the stress. (Student, Mount Royal University)*

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### **Managing heavy course workloads**

Students in almost all of the focus groups found their course workloads heavy. The concentration of work and

assignments at particular times of the term, the time spent in field placements, and the combination of class-time and assignments presented challenges for individual students. Some students felt discouraged that they were not compensated for their field placements, which, as previously described, made it difficult for individual students to meet their regular work commitments.

Students in the four-year degree program at Mount Royal University described their workloads, and the long hours they spent studying, as physically and mentally demanding. They advised that a number of students had withdrawn from the program because of the heavy workload. Grande Prairie Regional College students also referred to students leaving the program before completion. They attributed this to a combination of the heavy workload and some students' underestimation of the demands of the program. There was a sense among some Grande Prairie Regional College students that other students had enrolled in the program either without a serious commitment to work in the field or a belief that it would be an easy credential to complete.

Students at the Bow Valley College Okotoks satellite campus also described their workloads as heavy and some courses as difficult to complete. Some indicated that they were uncertain as to the number of courses they would have to take each term when they enrolled in the program. As a result they had ended up with heavier course loads than they had anticipated. These students advised that additional time to complete the credential would have helped them better manage their course loads.

Students at both MacEwan University and Norquest College found the number of assignments they had to complete challenging. MacEwan University students further reported difficulties in completing their assignments on time, especially when they also had practicum placements. Completing assignments outside of regular school-day hours was a challenge for some of those students with work and family commitments. Norquest College students also identified challenges with the pacing and timing of assignments, as well as with the drafting and completion of research papers.

Overall, a number of students expressed the opinion that completing an early learning and care credential involved more class time and written assignments than they had anticipated. They also highlighted the additional demands of completing field placements. Some students expressed the view that their course workloads exceeded those of similar programs in related fields of study. A minority of students found the academic nature of some of their classes and formal assignments challenging.

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*Night classes are extremely difficult. 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Being a single mom is hard enough but trying to find child care after child care hours is even harder. It is unreal. Just this one class once per week is difficult. (Student, Grande Prairie Regional College)*

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*I'm worried. The thought of doing 5 courses while working is terrifying. I don't think it is possible to complete and do full-time work. The barriers for me are the course load and balancing work. (Student, Mount Royal University)*

## **Financial costs and benefits**

Students described the financial costs of studying for an early learning and care credential as high and, for some, a cause of significant stress. Some international students found the significantly higher tuition fees they paid, as compared to domestic students, a particular burden. Individual international students questioned why post-secondary institutions could not lower these fees and bring them more in line with those paid by domestic students. Individual students at Bow Valley College, Norquest College and Mount Royal University raised concerns that the costs of studying for an early learning and care credential would not translate into higher wages and benefits after graduation. This led some to question the economic value, at least, of completing a credential.

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*One of the barriers that I see is that all this time I am going to invest in this education, how it is going to increase my wage? I'm very thankful I am taking the program but is it worth it? I did approach my director and asked about what my wage increase would be. I was met with resistance. (Student, Bow Valley College, Okotoks campus)*

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*It is hard to justify to parents and friends as to why I'm taking a degree when I could get the same pay with just a diploma. I talk about professionalism, but it is still hard. (Student, Mount Royal University)*

Both younger and mature students felt stressed by the costs of post-secondary education. Some mature students at Bow Valley College described the financial burdens that had fallen on their families as they self-financed their studies. Students at Grande Prairie Regional College reported relying on their families to cover some of the costs of attending school, while two students referred to the financial support they received from their Indigenous governments. Individual Grande Prairie Regional College students also brought up the additional financial costs they had incurred as a result of having to buy materials for their practicum placements. MacEwan University students described the financial stresses of attending school, with some also sharing their longer-term financial worries, given the

combination of their student debt and lost earnings while completing a credential.

Younger students at Lakeland College reported having to work while attending school because their families were unable to help them out financially. International students at Norquest College also described relying on their families for financial help, despite the fact that some worked part-time to cover a portion of their educational costs. As previously noted, some Mount Royal University students referred to their lost employment income during field placements as a further source of financial stress.

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*My parents struggle to help out financially as we have a big family. It takes me a lot of time for me to process information so homework takes a lot longer. I found some scholarships that helped me and I'm working throughout the summer. Money is a big barrier for me. (Student, Lakeland College)*

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Overall, the financial pressures of studying for an early learning and care credential appeared to fall most heavily on those mature students who were parents and on international students, including those who also had family roles and responsibilities. Those students who did not describe the costs of their post-secondary education as stressful appeared, in the main, to be younger, and to live in a family home. These students appeared to rely on a combination of student loans, employment income and family financial support to cover their education costs.

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*As an international student it's very expensive. You can only work 20 hours. When we work it's just to pay the bills. Often, we have to ask for money from families at home. (International Student, Norquest College)*

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*Finances are a huge barrier. I have four children and this is taking money away from home. I have to do well but it is so difficult. I knew the investment would be more personal, not result in more wages. (Student, Bow Valley College, Okotoks campus)*

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## **Curriculum Considerations**

Students had positive things to say about the content of their courses and saw significant strengths in their programs of study. They saw particular value in those courses that focused on the knowledge and practice skills they would need to work in early learning and care, but also highlighted the importance of developing 'softer skills' and deepening their understanding of the cultural values and beliefs that shape early learning and care. Subject areas students wanted to learn more about included working with children with exceptional needs, licensing requirements and managing organizations. Overall, students provided positive assessments of their programs of study and emphasized

the value of taking a range of courses that covered theory, practice and softer skills.

### **Early childhood development and child behaviour**

Students found their child development and child behaviour courses of particular value and benefit. They considered these courses foundational and linked to other courses such as those on pedagogy. Some mature students, with previous work experiences in related fields, described how these courses had increased their knowledge and understanding of young children's growth and development. Younger students referred to their increased awareness of how much there was to know about young children's learning and development. Students expressed pride in their knowledge of children's early development, which reinforced for some of them the importance of early learning and care as their chosen field of study. Others shared examples of how staff, already working in the field, had sought their advice on how to work with children during their field placements.

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*The number one for me is the Philosophy of Teaching – beliefs and values of teaching, image of child, image of the educator, how do children learn, how to support children in their learning. Beliefs and values are important. (Student, MacEwan University)*

Students identified specific courses they anticipated would support their work as competent early childhood educators: Mount Royal University and MacEwan University students referred to their courses on learning and play; Bow Valley College and Lakeland College students described the importance of courses on inclusion and supports for children with exceptional needs; Grande Prairie Regional College, Norquest College and Mount Royal University students identified courses on child guidance; while Bow Valley College students spoke positively about their Creative Expressions course.

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*Creative expression helped me express myself and feel more comfortable in expressing myself. It is a real hands-on course. We were bringing in bags of stuff. It got me out of my creative funk. (Student, Bow Valley College, Calgary campus)*

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*The Human Development and Exceptionalities courses were good. We looked at different perspectives and children's development so it isn't a total shock when you go out in the field. (Student, Lakeland College)*

### **The importance of 'softer' skills**

As a complement to their more academic or knowledge-based courses, students also described the value of classes that focused on 'softer skills'. MacEwan University, Grande Prairie Regional College and Bow Valley College students highlighted the value of their communications courses. They saw these courses strengthening their interactions with children and families and making them more aware of the importance of communication in all aspects of early learning and care. Similarly, Mount Royal University and Norquest College students found related benefits in their leadership courses. International students at Norquest College, for example, anticipated that the applied skills they learned would help them find employment after graduation, while Mount Royal University students saw their leadership courses building their confidence in working with others.

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*Communications - that class is so helpful on many levels. It teaches you how you should be talking and responding and it helps you look at yourself and how important proper communication is. (Student, Grande Prairie Regional College)*

### **Field (or practicum) placements**

Students at Bow Valley College, Lakeland College and Norquest College saw their field placements as important in getting them ready for work in the field. While the quality of their field placements was a concern for a number of students (and is discussed separately below) they nevertheless viewed them as an opportunity to gain real working experiences. Students found the opportunity to work directly with children and families beneficial and, more broadly, saw their field placements as providing them with the opportunity to experience the day-to-day routines of working in child care. Field placements further gave students the chance to 'put into practice' strategies they had learned in the classroom, although for a number of students the experiences of doing so were not always positive.

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*Practicum - it was hands on. Observation and documentation -we weren't just observing children, we got to understand their families. Passing on information to families. Both helped me a lot. Relationships with families are very important. (Student, Bow Valley College, Calgary campus)*

### **Understanding the culture and values that shape early learning and care**

Students in around half of the focus groups highlighted the importance of learning about the cultural values and beliefs that shape early learning and care in Alberta. Norquest College and MacEwan University students spoke most

about the importance of better understanding culture and values, although their reasons for doing so differed.

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*I work with a lot of Aboriginal families so learning about different cultures is important. You need to know how to work with families and children. Cultures all have different ways to raise children. What we learned was more of an introduction to cultural diversity. (Mature Student, Norquest College)*

International students at Norquest College, most of whom were new to Canada, credited their in-class discussions and their field placements with helping them better understand Canadian cultural norms and expectations around child development, child guidance and family relationships, things they were keen to learn in preparation for working in the field. Some mature international students drew comparisons between the more traditional, adult-centric approaches to early learning and care they had experienced growing up, and working in their home countries, and those they were studying now. MacEwan University students described how their studies had helped them reflect on their own beliefs and understandings of how young children learn and how these might differ from those of the families they could potentially work with after graduation.

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*Learning about different types of families is important because talking to the parents can be challenging. Social context is helpful. What is happening in Alberta? (International Student, Norquest College)*

### **Areas for further learning and study**

Despite having described their course loads as heavy, students identified subject areas in which they saw the need for further study. Four broad areas stood out: inclusion and work with young children with exceptional needs; management and leadership; licensing and regulation and child health and safety. There was a practical aspect to much of the further learning students saw as valuable, which linked in part to their upcoming work plans and interests after graduation. More generally, individual students highlighted the need for ongoing learning given the developing nature of the early learning and care field.

Students at Bow Valley College, Grande Prairie Regional College, Mount Royal University and Norquest College wanted to learn more about inclusion and working with preschool-aged children with special needs. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, autism, and infant mental health were specific areas students identified for further study. Students in two focus groups expressed interests in learning sign language to help them communicate with young children with sensory impairments. Some students were concerned

that they did not know how to assess whether or not children had special needs and were not aware of the specialized services and supports available to children and their families.

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*Special needs course - they had one class in the third semester. They need to talk more about special needs. They talked about autism in two classes. Need more about special needs and inclusion. (International Student, Norquest College)*

Students at Bow Valley College, Lakeland College and MacEwan University wanted to learn more about management and leadership, and specifically the role of the director in centre-based child care. They described having only limited knowledge about the roles and responsibilities of senior staff in areas such as human resources, budgeting and planning. Students saw additional education in these areas as useful given their interests in taking on leadership roles and potentially setting up their own early learning and care organizations. Other students saw management and leadership skills as a basis for improving the quality of child care.

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*There could be a focus on management or leadership – if they are leaning toward being a director this would be useful. (Student, MacEwan University)*

Students at Bow Valley College, Lakeland College, MacEwan University and Mount Royal University also wanted to learn more about child care regulation and licensing requirements before they began work in the field. They described having only a basic knowledge of licensing requirements and saw further study potentially helping them find employment after graduation. Generally, student interests in regulation and licensing had an applied or practical focus rather than a pedagogical one linked to questions of quality and effective practice.

Finally, students at Bow Valley College, Mount Royal University, Grande Prairie Regional College and Norquest College wanted to learn more about children's health and safety. Individual students wanted to learn more about nutrition, food safety and child trauma. They also wanted instruction in first aid and the administration of medicines. Some Bow Valley College students saw merit in early childhood educators better understanding the field of child protection and knowing how to recognize signs of child abuse or neglect.

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*Teachers need to know more about children who are abused, the telltale signs. What to do in those situations. Is it abuse or neglect? (Student, Bow Valley College, Calgary campus)*

## Feeling Prepared

Students in all of the focus groups felt well-prepared to work in the field, although a minority had some concerns about their readiness to begin full-time work. Students felt confident in their educational preparation and commented on how much their knowledge of children's development and working with children had increased during their studies. They compared their programs of study favourably with those in other related professional fields. Students at Grande Prairie Regional College and Mount Royal University commented that their educational preparation exceeded that of many staff already working in the field, and some anticipated potential challenges after graduation in working alongside staff who had not completed post-secondary education.

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*When I first came here, I thought I would be a glorified babysitter. I am confident. I feel as smart and prepared as a high school teacher. I have the confidence to talk to parents, to colleagues and other professionals. Life long skills, life long friends. (Student, Bow Valley College, Calgary campus)*

Some of the students in the Bow Valley College, Okotoks focus group, who were at an earlier stage in their program of studies, described themselves as 'still learning', and recognized the need for further study before they began work in the field, as did individual students at Lakeland College. Individual students at Norquest College, Grande Prairie Regional College and Lakeland College saw potential gaps in their readiness to manage the practical, day-to-day demands of working in early learning and care. They wanted to know more about the daily work routines of early childhood educators, and more guidance on how to implement the strategies they had learned in the classroom. Individual students further shared that they felt somewhat unprepared to work with young children with exceptional needs and were uncertain about how to manage situations in which children presented challenging behaviours. Individual Mount Royal University students spoke of the need to 'refresh' or revisit some of the subject areas they had covered at the beginning of their program.

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*The courses have taught me a lot of information – the do's and the don'ts. It is hard when you start working in the field. I'm prepared, but I'm not finished training yet. (Student, Lakeland College).*

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*I think there is always room for learning and expanding knowledge. I'm not done as I want to take Level 3. The field is always changing, society is always changing. I don't feel I will ever be done learning. I always thought I knew things but realized I really didn't. (Student, Bow Valley College, Okotoks campus)*

## Student Field Placements

The majority of students had completed at least three field placements as part of their studies, usually at different program sites. These placements provided them with a range of practicum experiences. For most younger students, their practicum placements were their first experiences working in the field and their first opportunity to put into practice what they had learned in the classroom. Field placements provided the majority of international students with their first exposure to Canadian early learning and care settings. Some mature students at Bow Valley College and Grande Prairie Regional College had completed workplace practicums, while students at Bow Valley College and Lakeland College had participated in college-based 'lab' placements as well as community-based practicums.

Students discussed the nature and quality of their practicum placements and shared their views on how well the practices at their placement sites aligned with their classroom studies. Two main themes emerged; first the significant variation in the quality of practicum placements, which ranged from high-quality learning opportunities to ones that were much more modest and of limited value; and second, the level of support students received during their placements, which also varied greatly.

## Variations in the Quality and Value of Practicum Placements

Students in all of the focus groups reported significant differences in the quality of their practicum placements. While some provided students with good learning opportunities others did not. 'Hit and miss', was how one student described both her own and her fellow students' field placements; a view that summed up the experiences of other students. While students had positive practicum experiences many also had poor or negative ones and it was these which took up much of the discussion.

Students in the Bow Valley College, downtown campus and Grande Prairie Regional College focus groups spoke most to the challenges they encountered during practicum placements. By comparison, mature students at Norquest College, completing a diploma, generally described their placements in more positive terms, although they also reflected on differences in their quality and value. Broadly, students identified the following factors as contributing to the quality and value of their field placements: the knowledge and competence of staff, including practicum supervisors or mentors; the pedagogy and caring practices at placement sites; and the culture and auspice of the

organization hosting the placement.

### **Staff knowledge and competence**

Bow Valley College, Grande Prairie Regional College, Lakeland College, Mount Royal University and Norquest College students raised concerns about the knowledge and competence of the staff they worked with during their placements. These staff included their practicum supervisors as well as the early childhood educators they worked alongside. Students described significant differences in staff's knowledge of pedagogy and child development, which they linked, in part, to differences in their educational preparation. Although some also found that staff certified at Level III appeared to lack the foundational knowledge they had anticipated; including, in some cases, their practicum supervisors. Students at Bow Valley College identified related challenges in working with senior staff who held equivalency qualifications.

Students described the early learning approaches of some front-line staff as more directive and limited. This led some to conclude that their own studies had given them a stronger, more current knowledge of early childhood education theory and practice than staff already working in the field, including those staff with many years of experience. Individual students reported that their practicum supervisors advised them that front-line staff were more likely to learn from them than they were from front-line staff. Students shared a range of responses to what they saw as staff's modest knowledge of children's early learning, ranging from surprise to disappointment and in some cases concern.

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*I was placed in a room where both educators were [name of post-secondary institution] grads. I thought [name of post-secondary institution] students would have a good understanding of children, but what I saw was not consistent with what we learned. Forcing children, creating roadblocks. Not emergent curriculum. Very directive. (Student, MacEwan University)*

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*I didn't know how to handle a special needs kid at my practicum and the educators there didn't either. There were no additional support workers who knew how to handle him. He would bump his head on the floor when he was overwhelmed or not getting his way. The educators at my practicum said it would be ok if he was left on his own. I didn't know how to handle him, how to stop him from hurting himself. (Student, Norquest College)*

### **Poor early learning practices**

Students also drew attention to the significant differences they observed between the pedagogies and early learning approaches they had studied in class and those at their

placement sites. Students at Bow Valley College, Grande Prairie Regional College, MacEwan University and Norquest College shared examples of staff using more directive approaches with young children and advised that they saw limited use of the Alberta *Flight* curriculum at their placement sites.<sup>2</sup> They reported taking few learnings from these placements, and in some cases expressed discouragement in seeing what they felt was poor practice.

Students at Grande Prairie Regional College, Lakeland College, Mount Royal University and MacEwan University shared examples of the poor and neglectful practices they observed during their practicums. These included individual staff treating young children harshly, using disrespectful language, restraining children and not actively interacting with the children in their care. They described feeling uncomfortable and largely powerless in these situations. While some students advised senior staff when they saw instances of poor practice, others reflected that they were afraid to speak out given their position as practicum students. These experiences left some students feeling discouraged, and students across the focus groups agreed that it was difficult to take positive learnings from poor practicum placements. As one student observed, it was about learning 'what not to do.' Some students referred to the support they received from post-secondary faculty to help them manage challenging practicum placements.

The poor quality of practicum placements led some students to suggest that they be given the opportunity to evaluate practicum sites. They saw this evaluation process as potentially reducing the likelihood that future students would be placed in poor practicum sites. MacEwan University students reflected on some of the possible reasons for the poor practice they observed during field placements, including from former graduates of their own program. They suggested that, over time, staff in poor quality environments may lower their own standards and come to accept poor practices as normal.

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*What we are learning in the classroom is not even close to what is happening in the real world. You can't say anything. You can't correct anyone. Can't tell anyone the mistakes they are making or give suggestions. Knowing what we know. They need to be reminded about what they are supposed to be doing, why they are doing it. (Student, Grande Prairie Regional College)*

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<sup>2</sup> During the research period the Alberta *Flight* curriculum was not widely implemented across the province, although it was included in the programs of study at the six participating post-secondary institutions.

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*Practicums are very helpful - going there and practicing doing this. Some practicums they are doing things naturally – planning, dispositions. In other programs they just do this to prepare for accreditation but only pretend to do it. They don't do it all the time. (Student, Norquest College)*

### **Organization culture and auspice**

A small number of students linked the quality of their practicum placements to broader aspects of organizational culture and auspice. Bow Valley College, Grande Prairie Regional College, Lakeland College, MacEwan University and Norquest College students reflected on the differences they observed between organizations and considered how these shaped the quality and value of their practicum placements. Norquest College students drew a distinction between the learning approaches they had observed in non-profit and for-profit child care programs. They described the early learning approaches in the non-profit organizations as generally more aligned with those included in their program of studies. Conversely, individual students found the practices in for-profit centres more academic with a focus on managing costs. Norquest College students further found that pedagogies in the former Early Learning and Child Care Centre Demonstration sites aligned well with those they had studied in class.

Lakeland College students referred to their positive practicum placements in publicly funded, school-based programs, as well as those in the College's on-site lab. Bow Valley College students similarly described positive placements in their college lab as well as in publicly funded sites. Norquest College and Grande Prairie Regional College students both further noted the important roles organization leaders and owners play in establishing organizational cultures that, in turn, contributed to positive practicum placements.

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*There was a difference between private and non-profit childcare centres. Difference in qualifications. If the educators are not from Canada their teachings are different. Non-profit is stronger, they value the child's learning opportunities and they have more learning materials. They also have strong relationships with families and children. (Student, Norquest College)*

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*I struggled to connect what I was learning to what my centre practices. My centre doesn't understand - it is a franchise. They believe they are emergent curriculum, but they have these binders and crafts that aren't developmentally appropriate and are not emergent. (Student, Bow Valley College)*

## **Practicum Supports, Structure and Expectations**

The support students received during their field placements also contributed to their quality and value. Again, students spoke of differences in the support they received and variations in the opportunities made available to them to work directly with children. They also drew attention to the impacts of practicum formats on their learnings and the importance of shared expectations around practicum placements.

### **Staff relationships and interactions**

Students observed that the support they received at their placement sites significantly impacted their confidence and comfort, as well as the learnings they took from their placements. In nine of the ten focus groups, students highlighted the central role the practicum supervisor plays in a field placement and the challenges that can arise if this individual is either unsupportive or disengaged. They also commented on the power the supervisor has over the student given their role in assessing the student's performance during a placement.

Bow Valley College, Grande Prairie Regional College, Lakeland College, Mount Royal University and Norquest College students also referred to the influences that program staff had on their practicum placements – with some commenting on the lack of support they received. Individual students described some staff as 'bossy' and referred to what they observed as poor working relationships within staff teams. A small number of students observed what they described as conflicts between other staff members.

Some students shared the view that individual front-line staff appeared unwilling to treat practicum students as co-workers and were defensive about their practice. Others suggested that individual staff members appeared threatened by their presence. Individual students further described being either ignored or not included by other staff members. Broadly, a number of students were disappointed that the reflective practice they had studied and learned about in their classes was often not followed or modelled in their practicum sites.

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*I didn't want to be at my practicum as there was a lot of drama and the educators would yell at one another. I had to cover the children's ears and distract them from their fights. Second practicum there was so much gossip. They clearly had issues they needed to sort out. (Student, Lakeland College)*

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*They had information about one staff member and it was documented how bad she was. She was prickly. When she was upset with boys she would just yank them out. I questioned her about this and she responded, "why are you watching me? You are a student, not a staff". She made my two weeks at the practicum miserable. I had to walk on eggshells every day. (Student, Grande Prairie Regional College)*

### **Learning opportunities**

Students described positive field placements as those which provided them with a range of learning opportunities. They highlighted the importance of being able to put their learnings into practice and the increased confidence they developed by doing this. They also found it beneficial to observe the strong practices of other staff. Students who felt some level of autonomy during their practicums, albeit with the support of a practicum supervisor, also found this beneficial.

Students in seven of the focus groups, however, described the more limited opportunities for learning they encountered in one or more of their practicum placements. Students at Bow Valley College, Grande Prairie Regional College and Lakeland College described being 'shut down' when they tried to introduce early learning approaches they had studied in school and found some of the staff in their placement sites reluctant or unwilling to let them take on more active roles. Students at Bow Valley College, Mount Royal University and Norquest College described spending much of their placements in support roles, including cleaning and the preparation or serving of food, with limited opportunities to work directly with young children. These students described missing out on the learning opportunities that a practicum placement is intended to provide.

Students at Bow Valley College and Mount Royal University described themselves as 'free labour' during some of their placements and advised that they only had limited opportunities for learning or growth.

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*I was told on my second day that I was there for "free labour." I didn't even get a grade as my supervisor was too busy.... I came into the program with five years of experience and wanted to implement good practice. My supervisor and I just didn't click. (Student, Mount Royal University)*

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*My first practicum was great. At my second practicum it was happy-go-lucky on the outside but different when you worked there. The educators made me do the sanitization and cleaning not working with children. I don't blame the college because my instructor helped me and stepped in, but it is the college's responsibility to know about the practicum centres. The students*

*should do an evaluation about the centres so future students don't go through the same thing. (Student, Norquest College)*

### **Practicum requirements and expectations**

Students at Mount Royal University, Grande Prairie Regional College, Bow Valley College, Lakeland College and Norquest College encountered challenges with either the requirements or expectations for their practicum placements. Some Grande Prairie Regional College students found their first practicums, which involved one day per week at their placement sites, made it difficult for them to develop relationships with either children or program staff. They suggested that longer placements, involving more days per week at a program site, would have better supported their learning.

Some Mount Royal University students struggled with what they described as differing expectations for practicum placements. They advised that students, placement site staff and University faculty sometimes had different goals for practicum placements, particularly in respect to their 'leadership' placements. Students at Norquest College raised similar concerns and described their own uncertainties as to what was expected of them in some of their placements.

Some Lakeland College and Grande Prairie Regional College students indicated their surprise at the physical nature of caring for very young children. They further identified the challenges they faced working in environments that were not well-resourced and in which they did not feel supported. Students referred to the lack of time they had to get to know the children in their care and their interests, and the limited opportunities for planning and preparation.

Students at Bow Valley College and Grande Prairie Regional College faced the financial burdens of having to buy materials for use during their field placements. These were costs they had not anticipated and could not afford. They were further costs that other students did not have to cover.

Bow Valley College students who completed workplace practicums saw both advantages and disadvantages to these types of placements. On the positive side, they knew the children in their care and the staff team with whom they worked. In terms of disadvantages, they did not have the chance to experience working in different early learning and care settings and, depending on their own workplace, faced challenges in separating their practicum experiences from their regular work responsibilities. Some students further commented on the differences between the early learning

and care approaches they had studied and those used in their workplaces.

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*The supervisors need to know what the purpose of (the) practicum is. It is disheartening that there isn't that consistency across all of them. Having good experiences helps me feel prepared to work in the field. (Student, Mount Royal University)*

## Student Work and Career Plans after Graduation

As part of the final focus group discussions, students described their anticipated work plans and, in some cases, longer-term career goals after graduation. The majority of students were either in the final term or the penultimate term of their studies and, in most cases, were actively preparing to enter the workforce. A number of mature students at Bow Valley College were already working in early learning and care, as were a smaller number of students at Grande Prairie Regional College.

The most common work choice for students after graduation was early learning and care, although a significant number also saw themselves working in related fields. A common theme students raised was the lack of value attached to early learning and care as compared to education or other human service professions.

### Plans to Work in Early Learning and Care

With the exception of the Mount Royal University and Bow Valley College, Okotoks campus focus groups, the most common work choice for students after graduation was early learning and care. Half of the students in the focus groups planned to work in community-based child care, with most looking at employment in centre-based child care. A much smaller number planned to start their own family day home. The majority of international students at Norquest College and Lakeland College planned to work in child care after graduation, with a smaller number interested in working with children with special needs. The international students at Lakeland College planned to relocate to the Edmonton area to find work in child care.

Those students planning to work in centre-based child care had a common goal of moving into more senior or program director positions over time. Some also wanted to open their own child care centres, to ensure that children had access to high-quality early learning and care but also to raise their incomes. Individual students at MacEwan University expressed an interest in learning more about the

degree qualification the University had recently announced (MacEwan University introduced a Bachelor of Early Childhood Curriculum Studies in September 2020) before deciding on their work and career paths.

Students at Bow Valley College, Calgary campus, wanted to work in child care programs in which the pedagogical approaches aligned with their own philosophies and values. They drew attention to the significant variations in the quality of regulated child care and advised that they had expectations about where they would work. Younger international students at Norquest College reported their preference to work in a non-profit child care centre rather than a for-profit one. They based this preference largely on their practicum experiences during which they had observed that non-profit centres were more likely to use early learning and care approaches that aligned with those they had studied in school.

Some of the students who planned to work in child care after graduation, including international students, had short- or medium-term goals to either pursue further education or to move into a related field such as public education or family support. These students saw community-based child care as a starting point for their longer-term careers.

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*I always wanted to be a teacher. Things you learn in ELCC programs are very helpful. (Student, Grande Prairie Regional College).*

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*I would like to continue to the diploma program. I'm not sure if it is beneficial to me professionally but the knowledge is beneficial personally. I'd probably do an EA certificate but am not an online learner. I'd like to develop where I am at. (Student, Bow Valley College, Okotoks campus)*

### Plans to Work in a Related Field

Just over a third of the students had plans to work in a related early education or caring profession after graduation, including 20 students who wanted to work in school-based early education programs. School-based early education was the second most common work choice for students at Mount Royal University, Bow Valley College, Lakeland College, Grande Prairie Regional College and MacEwan University. Sixteen students had plans to work in a related health or human service profession. This was the most common work choice for Mount Royal University students, a number of whom expressed interests in the speech language pathology field.

Those students planning to work in a related field identified a number of reasons for their choice including the poor quality of child care programs and services, the challenging

work environment in some child care centres, the relatively low public value attached to child care work and the poor pay and limited career opportunities that characterize the field. These students saw school-based early education programs as providing them with better working conditions and career opportunities. Some students planned to work as educational assistants in school-based programs, while a smaller number wanted to continue their education to become certificated teachers. Individual students at Norquest College, Bow Valley College and Lakeland College described their interests in working with children with special needs.

Some students saw their early learning and care credential as providing them with a range of work and career opportunities, although they also reflected on the need to begin work quickly after graduation given their student debt loads and lost earnings while studying. Mount Royal University students particularly saw their degree as a pathway for further study and work outside of child care.

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*I don't see myself in daycare for very long. It is disappointing not to be given credit for the amount and nature of work they do. Parents appreciate you as an ECE but the director doesn't appreciate my work. There are politics and unfairness and it is heartbreaking - kids deserve educators who are educated. My centre and other centres, kids aren't always the priority. Daycare is heartbreaking, disheartening. (Student, Bow Valley College, Okotoks campus)*

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*I have my heart set on being a Speech Language Pathologist. (Student, Mount Royal University)*

## Advocates for Early Learning and Care and Early Childhood Educators

A number of students spoke to the need for changes in how early learning and care is understood and valued. Bow Valley College, MacEwan University and Norquest College students saw the need for more advocacy for the field, and individual students indicated that they would advocate for the importance of high-quality programs and services after graduation. Students wanted the field to be more valued and for early childhood educators to be seen and supported as professionals. Individual students expressed both regrets and some frustration that this was not currently the case. Students shared that some of their own family members held limited views of early childhood educators and their work.

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*People need to be educated about the field, it's serious business. As educators we spend time, put our life on hold to do this and don't like how we are treated. We are underpaid. Should be valued and paid well. (Student, Norquest College student)*

Students expressed some frustrations at the inconsistencies in the quality of community-based early learning and care and expressed the view that all certified staff should hold formal educational credentials and complete continuing professional development. They saw the low wages and poor working conditions in community-based child care as barriers to improving the field, with individual students identifying both as the reasons they were not considering a longer-term career in the field.

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*My biggest struggle is being in an ELCC program and working so hard. I am working with people who are Level III and get more money than I am but have no clue as to what early learning in child care is. They are equivalents. Watching the differences with the job descriptions and the levels of certification. It is difficult to connect with Level IIIs who don't understand what I am learning in my ELCC program - wages are just crazy. (Student, Bow Valley College, Okotoks campus)*

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*I'm exploring different things. With this degree you can go into schools, not-for-profits, hospitals. You can even make up a job including child therapy. (Student, Mount Royal University)*

## Summing up Students' Educational Experiences and Anticipated Work Plans

Students in the ten focus groups shared their rationale for pursuing an early learning and care credential, reflected on their educational experiences and outlined their anticipated work plans after graduation. The presence of younger and mature students in the focus groups brought some differing perspectives to the main discussion areas, as did the participation of international students, many of whom were new to Canada and early learning and care. Regardless of their age, or life-stage, however, students shared some common experiences and insights on the educational preparation of early childhood educators. They also offered important, and at times, critical perspectives on how new graduates see the field and the opportunities it presents for them.

The rationale or motivations students shared for pursuing an early learning and care credential included their attraction to work with young children and their interests in learning more about how young children learn and develop. They also spoke of their professional and related career ambitions, which for a proportion of them involved using their early learning and care credential as an entry point for work in a related educational or human service profession.

Overall, students' educational experiences were positive and they felt well-prepared to work with young children and their families and well-supported by college faculty and their fellow students. That said, a number identified challenges with their field placements and spoke of the disappointments they felt with this critical aspect of their educational preparation. Students also described the stresses of studying for a credential, which included balancing school and other commitments as well as the costs of post-secondary education and the resulting lost or forgone earnings.

Students' anticipated work plans after graduation were similar to those reported in previous studies. While work in early learning and care was the anticipated path for half of the students, over a third had plans to work in school-based early education or a related human service profession. A small number of students were planning to continue their education. Those students looking to work in a related profession referred to the challenging working environments and modest wages in child care as their reasons for looking for work outside of the field as well as the lower public value attached to child care. For some students an early learning and care credential was a pathway to work in another human service profession.

# Key Observations and Learnings for Advancing the Early Learning and Care Workforce in Alberta

The current research on the educational experiences and anticipated work plans of Alberta students studying for early learning and care credentials provides some important insights on the opportunities students see for themselves in community-based child care. It also reveals the challenges and tensions they experience in studying and preparing to work in a field which, by their own estimation, remains undervalued.

The experiences students shared during the focus groups, allied with the findings from previous related research, provide the basis for the following key observations and learnings that policy makers and early learning and care stakeholders are advised to consider as they seek to build the capacity of the early learning and care workforce in Alberta.

## Student Motivations for Pursuing an Early Learning and Care Credential

One of the key starting points for increasing the capacity of the early learning and care workforce in Alberta is the recruitment and retention of greater numbers of motivated and well-qualified students into the field. The students in the current study attended six public institutions and were nearing completion of certificate, diploma and degree credentials. They comprised both younger and more mature students, as well as international students. The vast majority of the students were female.

The majority of students expressed strong motivations for pursuing an early learning and care credential. For some, these motivations were linked to their attachments to young children and work with young children, while for others

there was a desire to learn more about and better understand children's early development and learning. The former students shared interests in caring for and nurturing young children. Some highlighted what they saw as their natural skills or abilities in these areas and described their sense of accomplishment and fulfillment in working with young children. The latter students described their motivations in more academic terms, expressing strong interests in better understanding how young children learn and develop. They also referred to the importance of the early years for children's learning and well-being.

Some mature students had changed careers later in life to work in early learning and care. These students described work in the field as more meaningful and personally rewarding than their previous employment in the service and retail sectors. A smaller group of students, including the majority of students in the Mount Royal University focus group completing a Child Studies degree, chose to study for an early learning credential because of the opportunities it provided them to work with young children and families in related fields such as education and health. A degree credential was of particular importance to these students, the majority of whom did not intend to pursue work or career opportunities in community-based early learning and care.

The strength of the motivations many students expressed for working with young children speaks to the capacity of the field to attract students, although the vast majority remain women. Significantly, however, students pursuing a degree credential did not appear to share the same motivations as students completing a diploma or certificate credential. While degree students were still motivated to work with children and families, they attached particular value to the degree credential itself, which they saw as providing them with work and career opportunities outside of community-

based early learning and care. These students' plans, as well as those of others pursuing an ELCC diploma credential who intend to work outside the field, raise questions about the ability of the early learning and care sector, as currently organized and financed, to attract larger numbers of more qualified staff. These questions are not new and have been highlighted in previous research including that undertaken by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council over a decade ago. The presence of staff in the field without formal educational qualifications and the limited career paths for students with degree and diploma credentials makes the field unattractive for some students with higher qualifications. These students see more attractive work and career options in school-based early education and other related health and human service fields with higher educational requirements.

## The Recruitment of International Students

The focus groups at Norquest College, Bow Valley College and Lakeland College included international students, most of whom had come to Canada specifically to study for an early learning and care credential. These colleges are 'designated learning institutions', approved by the provincial government. International students who complete credentials at these colleges are eligible to apply to the federal Post-Graduation Work Permit Program to gain work experience which may, in turn, qualify them for permanent residence.

The majority of international students who participated in the current study were recruited by third-party agents or brokers working overseas. They had very limited or no direct contact with early learning and care faculty prior to enrolling in a program and coming to Canada to study. Some students relied on family members already in Canada for advice on living and studying in Alberta. Others sought similar information or guidance from international students who had previously attended college or university programs. The students' study permits required them to attend full-time programs of study and their tuition fees were significantly higher than those of domestic students. A number of international students already held post-secondary qualifications from their home countries. The majority reported that they planned to work in early learning and care after graduation.

The potential benefits for the early learning and child care sector in Alberta of post-secondary institutions recruiting international students to complete credentials requires

further review and investigation, which was beyond the scope of the current study. The knowledge, skills and motivations international students potentially offer the field are significant. There are questions that arise, however, about how they are recruited, the rationale for the much higher fees they must pay to complete credentials compared to domestic students and their longer-term work and career goals in the field after graduation.

If the early learning and care sector in Alberta is to rely, to a significant degree, on international students to increase the capacity of its workforce then new public investments will be required to bring greater structure, resources and consistency to their recruitment, the financial supports available to help them complete credentials and their transition into the workforce. The federal government's International Education Strategy, launched in 2019, provides investments both to help Canadian students study abroad and international students to study in Canada. This strategy represents a possible model the Government of Alberta might consider as the basis for developing an Alberta international student initiative that focuses specifically on recruiting, educating and supporting students to work in the early learning and care field. The Alberta government might best work with post-secondary institutions, the Government of Canada and early learning and care sector stakeholders, including the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, to develop such an initiative.

## Students Feel Well-Prepared to Work in Early Learning and Care

Students in all of the focus groups provided positive assessments of their early learning and care programs of study. They felt well-prepared to work in the field after graduation and were generally confident that they had the knowledge and skills they needed to support children's early learning and care. Broadly, it appeared that students looked to their programs of study for a combination of practical skills and procedural or applied knowledge. A portion further sought to situate their learnings in theory, particularly in respect to pedagogy and children's early learning. For these students there was an interest in linking practical skills with underlying theoretical knowledge. Two areas in which students expressed an interest or need for further pre-service education included work with young children with special needs and the practical day-to-day operations of child care programs, including meeting licensing requirements.

Students found their smaller class sizes and the support they received from their fellow students and college or university faculty during their studies beneficial. Students at Lakeland College and Grande Prairie Regional College appreciated being able to complete a credential at a regional college which, for a number of them, was close to their home communities. This meant that they did not have to incur the significant costs of relocating to either Edmonton or Calgary and further allowed them to maintain the support of family and friends. For some students studying at a smaller, regional post-secondary institution was a better cultural fit, while mature students completing their credential through the Bow Valley College, Okotoks campus, found that attending classes at the local satellite campus site enabled them to combine their work, family and study commitments.

Students, the majority of whom were enrolled in in-person classes, expressed a preference for in-class learning rather than online instruction. Those students taking online classes, primarily through Bow Valley College, found the flexibility of online, asynchronous learning beneficial, although some also encountered challenges with online learning. Individual students reported that they found it more difficult to learn from materials delivered or posted online as compared to those presented during in-person classes. They also reported that individual instructors did not appear well-prepared or supported for the delivery of online classes.

The growing number of early learning and care students who complete all or a portion of their credentials through online study, including mature students combining work, family and education commitments, makes it critical that post-secondary institutions organize and deliver online courses in ways that meet both educational and student learning needs. Research findings on online learning and teaching highlight the importance of well-designed course content, significant interactions between instructors and students, and well-prepared and appropriately trained and supported faculty. They further emphasize the value of instructors and students working together to create online learning communities that help students develop a sense of connection and belonging. The rapid advancement of learning technologies provides post-secondary institutions with a range of options both to engage with students and to support their learning. Post-secondary institutions must ensure, however, that online programs of study, and the faculty that deliver them, are appropriately resourced and supported to provide students with high-quality learning environments and experiences.

## Challenges with the Quality and Value of Field Placements

In contrast to the overall positive view students had of their programs of study, a significant number experienced challenges with their field placements. Students found the quality and value of their field placements varied and many reported that one or more of their practicum placements were not useful or beneficial in preparing them for work in the field. Indeed, the poor quality of their practicum placements left some students discouraged.

Students identified a number of factors which contributed to poor practicum experiences including the low-quality of the learning and care practices they observed at field placement sites, staff's limited knowledge of pedagogy and child development, the lack of support they received from placement site staff, the disconnect between the theory taught in their classes and the practices in their placement sites, and the limited opportunities they were given either to work directly with children or to implement the ideas and approaches they had studied in the classroom.

The poor quality of student field placements is an area of significant concern. Field placements are a foundational element of early learning and care programs of study, just as they are in other credential programs in related fields of study. They are intended to provide students with supported opportunities to develop the practice skills they will need to work in the field. For many students, their practicum placements are their first introduction to professional work and, as such, have the potential to influence or shape how they see the field and the employment and career opportunities it can provide them after graduation.

The negative or poor-quality practicum experiences students described in the current study suggest the need for changes in how field placements are organized and supported. At present, post-secondary staff organize placements with individual program sites. The shortage of high-quality field placement sites, however, results in faculty having to place some students in practicums that are unable to provide them with the learning opportunities they need. It also appears to result in some competition between post-secondary institutions in securing high-quality practicum sites for their students, particularly in Edmonton and Calgary where a number of post-secondary institutions offer early learning and care credentials. While post-secondary faculty can and do support students to help them manage poor field placements, they are unable to fully compensate for the missed learning opportunities and diminished workplace experiences some students encounter.

One potential option to address the above challenges is for the Ministry of Children's Services, post-secondary institutions, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement to work together to develop province-wide resources and supports that increase the capacity of regulated child care programs to support high-quality student practicum placements. With the support of new and sustained Ministry investments, the four partners could develop dedicated resources for practicum supervisors to build their skills and knowledge around placement supervision. These resources might include educational and training programs to prepare supervisors for their placement roles, as well as supports and other materials they could access during student placements. In addition, the Ministry could explore options for providing practicum supervisors with either honoraria for their practicum roles or some form of paid release time to allow them to dedicate time during their workday to the supervision of practicum students. It could also dedicate new funding for 'practicum liaison positions' within post-secondary programs that help faculty identify appropriate practicum placement sites for students.

The above partners might also develop complementary resources for child care providers that host practicum students. These resources could include descriptions of the roles and responsibilities for organizations hosting a student placement and provide guidelines on how senior staff and staff teams can foster and support appropriate learning opportunities for students. The Ministry of Children's Services could contract with the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement, post-secondary institutions and the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta to help educators and organizations support the implementation and use of the proposed resources.

## Students find Studying for an Early Learning and Care Credential Demanding and Stressful

In common with post-secondary students in general, early learning and care students found studying for a credential stressful. They described a combination of academic, financial and home-life pressures which resulted in significant stress for a number of students. The stresses students experienced included managing the weight of their course work loads, balancing study, work and in some cases family responsibilities and the cost of completing a credential.

While most students did not anticipate challenges in finding employment after graduation, a common concern for many other post-secondary students, some expressed fears that the modest pay they would receive as an early childhood educator would not provide them with a reasonable economic return on their investment in post-secondary education. These concerns led some students to question the economic benefits at least of completing a credential. Both mature and younger students felt pressure to complete their credentials in a short-a-time as possible so that they could work and earn an income.

Not surprisingly, the demands of balancing school and family commitments were a particular concern for students with young or school-age children. Despite some of these students completing their studies on a part-time basis, they still found balancing family responsibilities and schoolwork stressful, particularly when they felt unable to fulfill their parenting roles.

To alleviate the financial burdens on students completing early learning and care credentials, and potentially to help attract new students into the early learning and care field, the Ministry of Children's Services could work with the Ministry of Advanced Education and public post-secondary institutions to review possible student finance options. Among the options the Ministry of Children's Services might consider are financial awards or incentives for eligible students who complete early learning and care credentials and who commit to work in the field after graduation as well as direct funding to public post-secondary institutions to lower the cost of early learning and care credential programs for all enrolled students.

To reduce the demands on mature students already working in the field who want to increase their level of education the Ministry of Children's Services could build on the recently announced new funding for staff seeking to upgrade their credentials<sup>3</sup> through the introduction of a workplace education or training program similar to that implemented in Manitoba: *The Early Childhood Education Workplace Training Program*. The Manitoba Workplace Training Program is an accelerated diploma level course of study that enables eligible students to attend class for two days per week, while working for three days. Eligible students continue to earn their regular salary but are responsible for their tuition costs. The Department of Family Services covers the costs of substitute staff. The program was

<sup>3</sup> In fall 2021, the Ministry of Children's Services increased funding for certified early childhood educators to complete post-secondary coursework and added a provision for release time payments to allow educators to be paid while completing eligible coursework up to a maximum amount per year.

introduced in 1984 and is reported to be successful in helping eligible early childhood educators increase their educational levels.

## Student Work Plans After Graduation

Half of the students in the focus groups planned to work in community-based early learning and care after graduation. A further third wanted to work in a related education or caring field, including 20 students who intended to seek employment in school-based early education. Students were keen to start work immediately after completing their studies, some for financial reasons. They shared some concerns, however, about both the quality of community-based child care and what they saw as the undervaluing of the field compared to other professions such as education. These concerns were raised both by students who planned to work in community-based child care as well as those who did not.

Much of the students' concerns around quality centred on what they saw as the disconnect between what they had studied in school, in terms of pedagogy and early childhood development, and the more limited approaches to early learning and care they had observed in regulated child care programs. They further anticipated challenges in working with staff who had either not completed formal post-secondary education or who had completed credentials many years earlier and were not familiar with more recent pedagogies and practice. Some students expressed concerns that their own professional views and aspirations for the field would not align with those of other front-line staff. Given the above concerns, some students expressed clear expectations of the kinds of programs in which they wanted to work, as well as those in which they did not.

Some students planning to work in community-based child care hoped to overcome the relatively flat career ladders common to the field either by moving quickly into more senior level positions or, in a smaller number of cases, by opening their own child care centre or family day home. Mount Royal University students completing a degree credential did not, in the main, see community-based child care providing them with the career opportunities they were looking for. The majority of these students planned to work and pursue careers in the education and health fields for which a degree credential was the base or entry qualification. Those students looking to pursue work in school-based early education programs drew attention to the higher value attached to public education as compared to

community-based child care. They also referenced the better working conditions, compensation and benefits as factors informing their choice.

If the Government of Alberta is to build the capacity of the early learning and care workforce through the recruitment and retention of greater numbers of staff with higher levels of education then it will need to address the modest compensation, challenging work environments and lower status of the field compared to other education or human service professions. These changes will require significant new public investments and new public policy priorities with a focus both on improving the quality of early learning and care, including raising the educational requirements for certified early childhood educators, and on raising the public profile and value of the field.

In those countries with well-developed, publicly funded systems of early learning and care, professional, well-educated early childhood educators are valued and recognized for their work in supporting children and their families in ways that parallel the fields of education and health. The advancement of the early learning and care workforce in Alberta will, in the long-run, require similarly larger changes and new public investments. The federal investments announced in Budget 2021 provide an opportunity for the Government of Alberta to begin to make these changes pending the Alberta government reaching an agreement with the federal government to access the new monies available.<sup>4</sup>

A more immediate strategy the Ministry of Children's Services might consider to help new early childhood educators transition into current child care workplaces, and potentially remain in the field longer, is the development and implementation of an induction program or early career support program. Based on research in related fields, well-developed induction programs have the potential to help new graduates transition into the workforce and can further encourage them to stay in the field for at least the short- to medium-terms. Induction supports are common in other educational and human service professions and some countries, such as New Zealand, provide all new early childhood educators with a mentor who supports their professional development for an extended period.

Preliminary research from British Columbia (Doan, 2016 and 2019) finds that new early childhood educators can

<sup>4</sup> As of September 2021, the Alberta government had not reached an agreement with the federal government to access the new federal investments for early learning and care system building announced in Budget 2021.

benefit from induction supports that take a variety of forms including mentoring, peer support and observations of practice, feedback and professional development. Consistent with these findings, the Ministry of Children's Services could work with post-secondary institutions, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, and the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement to design and implement a province-wide induction program to help support the transition of new early childhood educators into the workforce as one step toward building broader workforce capacity. The Ministry could provide honoraria for senior staff working in the field who take on mentoring or peer support roles for new graduates.

## Conclusion

The current study explores the educational experiences and anticipated work plans of students completing early learning and care credentials at six post-secondary institutions in Alberta. It starts from the agreed position that well-qualified, and appropriately supported early childhood educators are central to the delivery of high-quality, community-based early learning and care and seeks to better understand students' motivations for pursuing an early learning and care credential, how well their post-secondary programs of study prepare them to work in the field, and their work plans after graduation.

The study findings replicate, in the main, those of previous national research undertaken by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council beginning in the early 2000s. They reveal the potential for the early learning and care field to attract motivated students who have strong interests in working with young children and supporting their early learning and development and highlight the strength and merits of public post-secondary programs of study in preparing students to work in the field. They also confirm, however, that a significant proportion of students completing post-secondary credentials do not intend to pursue work and longer-term careers in community-based child care after graduation.

Despite feeling well-prepared to work in the field, only half of the students in the current study planned to work in community-based child care upon graduation, with a third looking to work in related fields, including school-based early education. The main reasons students cited for not working in community-based early learning and care include the low-quality of programs and services and poor working conditions, the lack of value or respect attached to the field, and modest pay and limited career opportunities. Some of those students planning to work in community-based child care advised that they would actively seek out programs and services in which the early learning and care approaches and

philosophy matched their own. Other students indicated their intention to advocate for the field.

As previous research has indicated, and the current research similarly finds, significant improvements will be needed in the wages and working conditions of early childhood educators if the proportion of students with post-secondary credentials considering work and careers in the field is to increase.

Further, the early learning and care sector itself will need to be repositioned in a more positive light with a greater emphasis on its value for society and the importance of public investments to build capacity rather than a focus on the economic costs of regulated child care and the burden these place on families.

The recruitment and retention of higher numbers of qualified early childhood educators in the field, including those with degree-level qualifications, will ultimately require changes in how early learning and care services are organized and funded, allied with a higher valuing of work with young children. The move toward the early learning and child care system outlined in federal Budget 2021 has the potential to raise the profile of the field and support the recruitment and retention of staff with higher level qualifications. The current primary reliance on a market-based approach to the financing and delivery of child care in Alberta, as in much of the rest of Canada, presents barriers to improvements in the educational preparation, wages and employment conditions of early childhood educators. It further contributes to a broader devaluing of the field that positions it behind public education and other related human service professions as a potentially worthwhile and rewarding career for qualified post-secondary students. A well-prepared and appropriately remunerated and supported professional early learning and care workforce is central to providing all Alberta children and their families with access to rich and engaging early learning and care experiences.

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# Appendix One – Public and Private Post-secondary Institutions Offering Early Learning and Child Care Programs of Study

In the 2019/20 academic year, ten public post-secondary colleges, two universities, two private career colleges and two First Nations post-secondary institutions offered programs of study leading to early learning and care credentials.

## **Public Post-Secondary Colleges**

Bow Valley College  
Grande Prairie Regional College  
Keyano College  
Lakeland College  
Lethbridge College  
Medicine Hat College  
Norquest College  
Northern Lakes College  
Portage College  
Red Deer College

## **Public Universities**

MacEwan University  
Mount Royal University

## **First Nations Post-Secondary Institutions**

University of nuhelot'ine thaiyots'i nistameyimakanak  
Blue Quills  
Maskwacis Cultural College

## **Private Career Colleges**

CDI College of Business, Technology and Health Care  
MCG Career and Employment Services

# Appendix Two – Focus Group Discussion Questions

## **1. The reasons students chose to pursue early learning and care credentials at the certificate or diploma level at a particular post-secondary institution.**

### *Introductory statement*

The field of early learning and care has received significant attention in recent years. There is perhaps a greater knowledge of the importance of the early years for young children's development now than in the past and a greater understanding of the how high-quality early learning and care services can support families and communities more generally.

### *Questions*

- a. What attracted you to the field of early learning and child care and led you to pursue a credential (certificate/diploma/degree) in this field of study?
- b. What factors were important to you in choosing to pursue the credential/course of study you chose at (name of post-secondary institute)?

## **2. Student perspectives on their post-secondary programs of study/experiences including their assessment of the merit of their programs of study (including the models of delivery), the identification of any barriers or challenges they faced in completing formal programs of study, and their assessments of the value of these programs of study in preparing them to work in early learning and care settings.**

### *Introductory statement*

Ten public colleges and three universities offer early learning and care programs of study that lead to credentials eligible for provincial certification. These colleges and universities offer programs of study that have many similarities as well as some differences.

Thinking first about how programs of study are delivered (e.g. face-to-face, online in blended formats as well as full-time and part-time).

### *Questions*

- c. Based on your experiences, what would you say are the main strengths or advantages of taking courses through in-class instruction, as part of a full-time program of study? What about online instruction?
- d. What are the main weakness or challenges of these approaches?

### *Introductory statement*

Early learning and care programs of study include a number of different subject matters or content areas including children's development, pedagogical approaches, and working with families. These content areas are intended help prepare early childhood educators to work with young children and their families.

### *Questions*

- e. Based on your experiences, which particular courses or broader subject areas covered in your program of studies were most useful in preparing you to work in early learning and care? Seek to follow up with a 'why' question where appropriate.
- f. What additional courses or subject matter (if any) do you think should be added to your program of studies to better prepare you to work in early learning and care? Again a 'why' follow-up if appropriate.
- g. Overall, how well do you think your program of studies has prepared you to work in early learning and care? Students could be asked to rate their program (on a 1 to 10 scale) to start the discussion.

### *Introductory statement*

Previous studies find that some students studying for post-secondary credentials, including students in early learning and care programs of study, can face barriers or challenges in completing their studies. Some of these barriers or challenges relate to things like the costs of post-secondary education. Others involve difficulties in attending or accessing classes that are offered in particular locations or at specific times. Others still involve trying to balance study commitments with those of work or family needs. Not all students face these barriers, however. But some do.

### *Questions*

- h. What barriers or challenges if any did you encounter in completing your programs studies?
- i. What resources or supports might the post-secondary institute have provided or made available to help you deal with these barriers or challenges?

## **3. Student work experiences, including their practicum placements, and their anticipated longer-term career plans and goals.**

### *Introductory statement*

There is a strong demand for qualified early childhood educators in Alberta. Early childhood educators work in a range of child care settings as well as in related fields such as education or family services. The pressures on early childhood educators are often significant however, and there can be a range in the quality of early learning and care environments and workplaces.

Post-secondary early learning and care programs include practicum placements to help students connect theory to practice. These placements are an important part of the post-secondary education experience for students and help students prepare to work in the field. They also help students gain an initial understanding of what working in the field may be like.

### *Questions*

- j. Overall, how would you describe the nature and quality of your practicum placements?
- k. How did the practice at your practicum sites align with what you are learning in your program?
- l. In what type of program or service do you hope to work when you complete your current program of studies? What do you anticipate will be your role or position within this program/service?
- m. What do you expect to be doing/where do you expect to be working in 5 years?
- n. If students identify other related fields – this should be explored as should the reasons for these choices?

### **Closing the Focus Group Discussion**

If time permits, the facilitators may ask the group if there are any final comments that they would like to make on their educational and work experiences as they complete their diploma studies.



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