Identifying recruitment and retention challenges in Hamilton's Early Childhood Education Workforce

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Executive Summary

Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) are essential to the education sector. Given anticipated ECE shortages and the current paucity of data on the ECE workforce in Hamilton, Workforce Planning Hamilton (WPH) approached the McMaster Research Shop seeking to understand recruitment and retention issues in the region. While issues with wages in the sector are well-known, this research aims to explore other challenges ECEs experience.

The project was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 consisted of a qualitative study including a literature review and interviews with individuals in the ECE workforce to identify major issues to explore in a survey. Phase 2 included a city-wide, online survey of ECEs working in various settings to estimate the prevalence of challenges identified during Phase 1.

There were 11 participants who participated in the interviews and 123 responses included in the survey. While this research aimed to explore issues in the sector beyond low compensation, compensation was the issue that resonated most with ECEs in the study sample. All 11 interview participants raised this issue and 61% of survey participants believed they were compensated "very unfairly" or "unfairly". Participants also identified several other major issues facing ECEs: high workloads, unrealistic staff ratios (particularly in relation to supporting children with disabilities), completing work on unpaid time, and spending their own money on classroom supplies. Participants were also frustrated by the lack of respect for their profession (i.e., being considered "babysitters"), despite having rigorous training and professional development requirements.

This report is intended as a resource for policy and program development for a broad range of stakeholders and general community members. Some suggested ways to use the findings include:
- Funding applications for ECEs and childcare-related projects
- Sharing findings with key decision-makers and/or organizations who can leverage this research to advocate for change (e.g., political representatives, labour organizers)
- Supporting initiatives that can raise public awareness of the role of ECEs and their importance

Introduction

Context

Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) are an essential part of Ontario's education industry and play a crucial role in shaping its future workforce. The Government of Ontario estimates that the province will face a shortage of 8,500 ECEs by 2026.

There are limited data on the ECE workforce in Hamilton. Workforce Planning Hamilton (WPH) approached the McMaster Research Shop seeking to understand issues with recruiting and retaining ECEs in the Hamilton area. Full-time ECEs are among the most underpaid occupations in Ontario, with a median employment income of only $39,600. In Hamilton, the median salary for ECEs is not much higher at $42,000. In comparison, the provincial median employment income is $65,000. While the issues with wages in the sector are well-known, this research intends to delve into other challenges with retaining ECEs, such as workplace culture.

Research Questions

This research seeks to answer the following research questions:
- What are the recruitment and retention challenges Hamilton ECEs are facing?
- What initiatives could support the profession in the region?

This report is intended as a resource for policy and program development for a broad range of stakeholders within the ECE sector as well as general community members. WPH may use the findings for funding applications for ECEs and childcare-related projects.

Methods

This project was conducted in two phases:
- Phase 1: A qualitative study including a literature review and interviews to identify potential challenges that the ECE workforce experiences and to inform the development of a survey
- Phase 2: A city-wide, online survey of ECEs working in private and public settings in Hamilton to identify the prevalence of challenges identified in phase one and potential breakdowns based on demographic characteristics (e.g., citizenship status, race/ethnicity)

Literature Review

The research team conducted a brief, selective literature review to identify challenges with ECE recruitment and retention documented in existing literature and to explore the demographic characteristics of ECEs such as gender, age, citizenship status, and

race/ethnicity in the province and in comparable municipalities (e.g., Toronto). The research team used search strings such as "recruitment OR retention OR barriers AND ECE".

The research team aimed to find academic and grey literature that was specific to Hamilton, neighbouring municipalities, or the province. The team focused primarily on literature from 2020 onwards, following the beginning of the pandemic. The team developed key themes from the literature into a coding framework and coded articles accordingly.

Interviews

Following the literature review, the research team conducted interviews with current and former ECEs and those in ECE-related roles in the Hamilton area. The research team developed an interview guide (Appendix 1). The team then compiled a list of all EarlyON and childcare centres in the area with publicly available contact information and invited participants from randomly selected centres to interviews. WPH also recruited interview participants by posting in ECE Facebook groups. Participants were offered $20 gift cards to Metro or Food Basics upon completion of the interview. From February – May 2024, the research team scheduled and conducted interviews. The research team recorded audio from the interviews and transcribed the interviews for analysis.

The key themes from the literature formed the basis for the coding framework used to analyse the interviews. The research team reviewed the first two interview transcripts to validate the themes from the literature review and added additional themes that emerged from the interviews. Once the coding framework was complete, members of the research team coded each interview independently and then met in pairs to discuss their interpretations and finalize their analysis. The team then counted the number of interviews that mentioned each theme.

Survey

The findings from the literature review and interviews were used to inform the survey questions. Once the survey draft was completed and WPH reviewed the questions, the team used LimeSurvey to create the online survey form (see Appendix 2 for the survey questions). The research team asked interview participants to participate in pilot testing the survey and made changes based on their feedback.

Recruitment
The research team recruited participants for the survey in the following ways:
- Distributing the survey to ECEs working in the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) (more information below);
- Sharing the survey link on social media platforms (i.e., LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter);
- Emailing the survey to stakeholders in WPH's network and including it in their newsletter;

- Compiling a list of private childcare centres including licensed centres, homecare centres, EarlyON Child and Family Centres, and private co-operative pre-schools and emailing them the survey; and
- E-mailing the survey to interview participants and asking them to circulate it within their networks

To facilitate recruitment of ECEs working in the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB), the research team worked with WPH to submit an ethics application to the school board's Research Ethics Board (REB). The REB reviewed the survey questions and the research team made revisions accordingly. A flyer including a link and QR code to the survey was forwarded to school principals within the HWDSB, who distributed it to the ECEs they employed. The research team explored submitting an ethics application for the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board (HWCDSB); however, the HWCDSB's ethics application guidelines state that they did not permit summer data collection past May, which was the target timeline for this survey. The research team searched for alternative ways to recruit Catholic school ECEs e.g., contacting local unions, but did not receive any responses.

Data cleaning
Prior to analysis, the research team undertook data cleaning. The survey form had CAPTCHA enabled to prevent bot-generated responses. The survey data contained mostly authentic responses given participants were primarily recruited via email; however, some bot responses were still apparent in the data most likely as a consequence of posting the link on social media. The research team determined which responses were bot-generated based on timestamps and email addresses. The team removed surveys that were completed at inappropriate times of night and/or had suspicious email addresses. The research team also removed all survey responses that were incomplete (i.e., lacked a timestamp for submission and did not reach the last page of the survey).

To ensure that the survey remained focused on the ECE community, participants were asked to identify their position (e.g., Current ECE, ECE Manager, etc.). The research team removed responses where participants selected "none of the above" and consulted with the community partner on responses where participants selected "other (please specify)". Two participants were removed from the sample as a result.

Analysis
The survey included a mix of categorical and open-ended questions. For categorical questions, the research team reported the frequency and proportion of participants who selected each response option. The research team reviewed free text responses for any categorical questions with an "other (please specify)" option with the community partner and recoded responses as appropriate. For open-ended responses, the research team identified key themes, categorised each response, and reported the number of participants who mentioned each theme.

Findings

Literature Review:

To provide context on the ECE workforce, the research team looked at the demographics of ECEs in neighbouring municipalities and at the provincial and national level. The team also reviewed available academic and grey literature on recruitment and retention in the early childhood education sector. The literature search yielded 8 articles.

Demographics
We reviewed the demographic characteristics of the ECE workforce including age, gender, citizenship, educational attainment & employment status. To our knowledge, the demographics of ECEs in Hamilton have not been widely reported; however, we were able to find demographic information pertaining to Toronto and Ontario.

In Ontario, the majority of registered ECEs are aged 25-54, with 29% being age 25-34 (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2023). Several reports demonstrated that ECEs are predominantly female. 98% of ECEs registered with the College of ECEs identify as female, while 2% identify as male (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2023). A survey conducted in Toronto found that 97% of 1100 ECE participants identified as female (Toronto Children's Services, 2023). Among survey participants, 42% were born outside of Canada and 10% identified as newcomers to Canada (Toronto Children's Services, 2023). 41% also identified as racialized including 12% who identified as Black, 10% who identified as South Asian or Indo-Caribbean, 9% who identified as Southeast Asian, and 4% who identified as First Nations, Inuit, or Metis (Toronto Children's Services, 2023).

In Toronto, most ECEs worked full time (77%) as compared to part time (23%) (Toronto Children's Services, 2023). In Ontario, most ECEs work in licensed childcare settings (56%), followed by educational settings (33%) (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2023).

Labour market information from the Government of Canada shows diversity in educational attainment among ECE professionals in Ontario. 52% have a college certificate, diploma, or university certificate below an undergraduate degree, 20% have an undergraduate degree, 16% have a high school diploma, and 5% or less have either no high school diploma, an apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma, or a university certificate/degree/diploma above the undergraduate level (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2023).

Insufficient Compensation
Our review suggests that insufficient compensation, including low wages and lack of benefits (e.g., pension plans, healthcare insurance etc.), has been historically pervasive and continues to be an issue in the childcare sector today. Historical data illustrate that low wages have been a longstanding contributing factor to recruitment and retention

difficulties, influenced by inadequate public funding (The Centre for Spatial Economics, 2009). More recently, ECE wages have not kept up with the cost of living in Toronto, with many ECEs lacking employee benefits such as health insurance and paid sick leave (Toronto Children's Services, 2023). One paper discusses how low compensation during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic led to significant staffing shortages and challenging working conditions (YMCA, 2023). Similarly, a survey of ECEs in Ontario demonstrated how low compensation contributes to high rates of staff turnover (Powell et al., 2021). The low wages and lack of benefits for many childcare workers contribute to the gender wage gap given the childcare sector is dominated by a female workforce (McCuaig et al., 2022). A research paper examining Canada's childcare workforce contains similar findings (Halfon, 2021). The difference in ECE wages across Canadian provinces demonstrate that wages for ECEs in Ontario lag behind other provinces including Prince Edward Island, Manitoba, and Alberta (Seward et al., 2023).

High workload
Our literature review identified high workloads as a major reason for continued challenges in ECE recruitment and retention. Two reports noted that ECEs in Ontario are overwhelmed with large class sizes and many are working in understaffed centers (Powell et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2023). The result is more children under each ECE's care, administrative work, and preparation time (Richardson et al., 2023; Toronto Children's Services, 2023).

Irregular work schedule
ECEs work long shifts without many breaks, experience irregular work schedules (e.g., split shifts), have long commutes, and often do not have paid time off (Powell et al., 2021; Toronto Children's Services, 2023; YMCA, 2023). Some ECEs may not be employed full-time and may consequently work at multiple sites or programs to increase their income (Powell et al., 2021). Accumulation of these stressors can contribute to burnout and increased staff turnover (Toronto Children's Services, 2023).

Limited or undefined career progression
Our literature review showed that limited or unclear career pathways are a concern in the ECE sector. Staff in the ECE sector indicated needing more career opportunities and support for developing their professional practice (Toronto Children's Services, 2023). One paper suggested that the sector could benefit from defining specialist roles such as leadership or supervisory positions and special needs educators. Without clear career pathways, ECEs do not have an incentive to maintain a long-term commitment to the sector (YMCA, 2023). ECEs are also not provided resources to engage in continuous professional development (Richardson et al., 2023).

Lack of public and professional recognition
Compared to other professions such as teaching and nursing, ECEs in Toronto note that there is limited public understanding of the role or importance of ECEs (Toronto Children's Services, 2023). One paper noted how the public perceives the work of ECEs as babysitting and does not recognize the significant role childcare plays in child

development or the expertise of ECEs (YMCA, 2023). This lack of public understanding is also reflected in the low wages that ECEs are paid (Seward et al., 2023).

Poor treatment from coworkers, mangers, families, etc.
In a survey conducted with ECEs in Toronto, participants were asked whether they had been, or felt that they have been, discriminated against, harassed, or bullied in their workplace. 52% of the respondents reported that they experienced discrimination, including from families (17%), colleagues (20%), and their employers (15%) (Toronto Children's Services, 2023). While this theme was not mentioned extensively in our literature search, it was worth noting as a potential theme that may emerge among ECE professionals in Hamilton.

Interviews

The research team conducted 11 interviews with current and former ECEs, ECE supervisors, and individuals in ECE-adjacent roles from the Hamilton area. Key themes are presented below.

Rewards of being an ECE

To provide context for understanding the challenges in the sector, the research team asked participants what aspects of the ECE profession they felt were most rewarding. Four participants mentioned that they enjoyed celebrating children's accomplishments, as one participant explains:

> "The reward for the teacher is seeing them nourish every day and knowing this is due to us…the steps I've taught them, the toilet training I've taught them, the vocabulary they've started speaking here – it's a satisfaction that doesn't compare to anything else… At the end of the day… it's stress free – children don't cause the stress. It's rewarding that way and there's no other word to explain it other than what you bring to the table for them every day."

Similarly, one participant mentioned they enjoyed participating in children's formative years:
> "Being in the classroom, being hands-on, and find joy in everything they do, following their leads, and I'm proud that we get the chance to foster a love for learning from the start. They say the first five years are the most important. And I like being part of that for the first five years."

Five participants indicated they enjoyed building relationships with the children's families. A former ECE noted, "I miss the kids. I miss the family. That's the best part of [the job]." Similarly, another participant stated:

> "I'm not at a large-scale centre where the parents don't really get a chance to get to know the [ECE] – and build a relationship. I always had that – it was me and the parent – communication was right there. I was this familiar face every day. It

wasn't me and another teacher. It was me giving them the feedback every day. A reward for them and a reward for me. The flowers they brought me weekly… it really is a very personable, loving job in a nutshell."

One participant also mentioned enjoying working "on a community level, [to meet] the needs of families by collaborating with other colleagues."

Challenges of being an ECE

Many of the challenges of being an ECE that emerged from the interviews were consistent with the themes from the literature review: insufficient compensation, high workload, irregular work schedules, limited or undefined career progression, and lack of public and professional recognition. Two new themes also emerged: under-resourced classrooms and lack of supportive culture among staff.

Insufficient compensation:
Insufficient compensation was a consistent theme in our interview findings, given that all 11 participants mentioned it as a challenge facing the ECE sector. One participant noted that it is difficult for ECEs to afford basic needs on their current wages:

> "So, when I think about a woman working in the field trying to support her own family, trying to maintain an income, staying in the field, it's very difficult to work at a low income….She may be moving on very quickly from the field because the income may not sustain what she needs to maintain her home life, feed her own family and pay her own bills based on the income that she's receiving."

Similarly, another participant noted how ECEs are unable to afford living independently on a single income:

> "It's very hard to be a single income and own a house and live right now, so I find that all the educators I know needed double income. Need somebody else in order to live."

One participant notes the disproportionate effect of the low wages on women, who make up most of the ECE workforce:

> "Lately I know that. I mean, I know the living wage in Hamilton right now is $20.80 an hour or something and ECE's have just been granted like there was this this big thing from the city saying that they're going to increase wages for ECE's… in like 2026 to be making 22 dollars when a living wage is $20.80. I mean, these are primarily women who have been to college and are not making a living wage. So that to me is huge. And probably one of the reasons that right now there is such a high demand for quality ECE's because we're not compensating them the way we should be or could be."

Interviewees also mentioned a lack of benefits and sick days:

"I personally do have benefits. I work for the school board. And so, for many, they don't have benefits. They don't have vacation time, they don't have sick pay. Depending on which sector they're working for --and that falls into private care, that falls into nonprofit."

The absence of pensions also emerged as a concern among the interviewees. One participant highlighted, "We have no pensions…. So like teachers have pensions that they pay into, which is great. But like [ECEs] don't." Another participant echoed this concern: " You know, 35 years in this field? I never had a pension from any of the daycares or the preschools that I've worked at." Low compensation also makes the planning for retirement difficult, as noted by one participant: "I don't even know if you could save enough to retire at a normal age. I know a lot of people retire from the [ECE] field, but then get another job…."

High Workload
All participants mentioned that high workload is a prevailing challenge for Hamilton-based ECEs. Several factors contribute to the high workload. Participants noted that policies around staff ratios posed difficulties, particularly when trying to provide inclusive care that was accommodating of disabilities and behaviours from children. One interviewee discussed the challenges of providing inclusive care:

"I think that [a ratio of] one to five, like one adult to five toddlers is manageable, but it's not easy. Especially when you take into account special needs and behaviour… I think that the ratios need to be lowered based on the needs of your program, right. So, if I have eight kids and three of them have special needs and they need more attention and the thing is like to provide an inclusive environment, I feel like, yes, I am doing my best to make sure that these children with special needs and certain other aspects of their development are included in my program. However, my attention is focused so much on these children because, you know, of safety reasons or emotional support that some of the other children, so I feel like even if there was one extra educator in the room, I feel like the overall experience for everybody would be at a higher quality."

Some participants noted that ECEs are expected to perform a variety of tasks beyond educating children and that these high expectations create burnout. As one participant explained, ECEs play a number of different roles in the classroom:

"…we have to play educator, we have to play custodian, we have to play conflict resolution, you know with parents and like sometimes our supervisor are not there to support us when there's a conflict with parents. So, we have to deal with that. There's other hats that we have to put on in addition to our primary role as an ECE and that creates a lot of burnout most of the time because we are expected to perform our best for these kids in their education."

Similarly, many of the tasks that ECEs take on pertain to health and safety checks for the children, in addition to planning activities:

"… we do have a lot of expectations for educators. Just knowing, you know the health and safety part of it. There is a lot to like, you know, every week the all the areas in the classroom --and this is I'm talking about dramatic toys, creative materials, science, math, building blocks, all those materials they have to be sanitized and cleaned weekly. So, they and then they also have their programming that they have to do daily. They have to do their sleep checks, daily. There's also checking that the water is, you know, when we do the flushing of the water, getting lunch prepared…. So, it's trying to manage all of that on top of ensuring that we have the environment set up for the children.

Six participants also cited having inadequate time to plan appropriate programs and activities. For example, one participant stated:

"…we're supposed to get like the time, like planning time. It's an hour a week, which is not enough… We need to plan and program for what's appropriate for this age group, for what their interests are, you know, do some research on the computer or laminate or go somewhere and get stuff if we need stuff. We don't have enough time for that."

Three participants mentioned having to use their breaks or unpaid time to complete work. Examples include using lunch breaks to set up classroom activities based on the children's interests or bringing work home:

"I was working long hours. I was working at home. Because if the work doesn't get done [during the day], it still needs to get done…it's really hard not to bring your work home with you, especially for those who are passionate about it and passionate about the kids and passionate about the families."

Four participants mentioned that the physical demands of the role. One participant explained:

"It is physically demanding…There's not a lot of wiggle room or adjusted duties that you can do, like you're taking care of children, so you have to be able to pick them up. You have to be able to be mobile."

Others noted that being short-staffed increased the workload because it was challenging to find supply staff when needed. For example:

"Like even just to take a mental health day was a struggle because ... if you got the day off, you'd be worried about what was going on there and ...your friends and your colleagues were struggling without you because it is a struggle when you're short-staffed."

Irregular Work Schedule

Five participants spoke about having irregular work schedules. One participant mentioned, "…in daycares, childcare [staff are] having to stay late, start early because

there isn't enough staff." Another participant described some of the challenges of scheduling in private sector childcare centres:

> "They're long hours. So [families] get to me before they even start work and they come pick up [children] after they've already finished. That adds over an hour to everyone's day what I was doing. Now, did I have someone come and cover for me at lunch … which made it work for me. A lot of private daycare owners aren't able to pay out to have someone come cover them. I'm going to guess 90% of them don't. So it makes for a very long day/a long week."

In some cases, staff are not provided enough flexibility in scheduling tasks that do not get completed during work hours:

> "[We] early childhood educators, we all love our job. You know, we make a great impact on kids, but we also have a life at home… I still want to do hobbies after work, after an 8-hour shift, sometimes night. And [if I have] notice maybe a week prior or a couple days prior [then] at least I can have a choice whether to stay back or not, or if [the work] could be done the next day during my shift, then I'll do that…. You know, as much as I love the kids, I love the parents, I need to have time for myself and if I could fit that in my schedule, OK, I could stay back maybe an hour, an hour and a half, I'll do it. But just give me some notice prior to that."

Limited or Undefined Career Progression

Nine participants stated they have limited opportunity for professional advancement. As one participant explains, there are not many career pathways available:

> "There's not a lot of growth opportunity. You can be an early childhood assistant. You could be an early childhood educator. You can be a supervisor and that's kind of where it ends."

Similarly, there are few supervisor or manager roles available in the sector:

> "There's only so many of those roles available to staff and you need to have been working in the field for a certain amount of time. So, for advancement, I would say, there's not too much room for it because there's only so many supervisory roles available."

Although further training is not necessary for career advancement, one ECE described how going back to school helped them gain the necessary skills needed for a supervisory position. The participant indicated a lack of support and incentive to go back to school is a common obstacle to career advancement:

> "The education that I, a registered ECE, receives is very different from that of a human resource person who would be a supervisor, so I had to go back to school and train myself so that I felt capable in that position. So, I think one of the barriers is education support for ECEs who want to move on to other positions.

The jobs are very different. I think incentives to go back to school and learn about becoming a supervisor, director or principal so you have the skills needed for that position."

Other participants similarly stated there is a lack of financial incentive to upskill. The main reason many ECEs go through additional training is because of their personal interest in becoming become better educators:

"I want to take infant mental health. I want to take outdoor programming [courses]... I don't get paid more... there is no incentive [for taking on additional training]. It's really my own personal interest whether... I want to or not and good educators will do that stuff."

One participant mentioned limited time to participate in professional development opportunities, even for those who are interested, which can result a lack of PD days and from having competing priorities during work hours:

"But just finding time to do that. Because we do, you know, offer these different trainings for educators, and sometimes it's during the day, but during the day, they've got books to do. They've got, you know, logs to complete. They have already a number of things that they're doing daily or weekly, that it's like trying to encourage them to here, why don't you, you know, do this extra professional development?

Lack of Public and Professional Recognition
Nine participants mentioned the lack of public and professional recognition for the ECE role. Despite the significant responsibilities and skills required to be an ECE and the liability that comes with the profession, one interviewee stated, "We're looked at as babysitters". Some interviewees also drew comparisons to their counterparts in primary education saying they have similar workloads but get much less time off, respect, and recognition. One respondent highlighted:

"I can work in a kindergarten room as an ECE, but what a substantial difference in pay…. So the teacher and I, for instance, would be partners in the kindergarten room, but my pay would be half."

ECEs also discussed how they are not perceived as professionals within the broader community and how there is a general lack of awareness within the public of what constitutes early childhood education. This lack of recognition undermines the legitimacy of ECE as a profession. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these issues. Despite being deemed essential workers, ECE professionals did not receive hazard pay or the same level of consideration as other frontline workers in the education sector. As one interviewee expressed:

"They say that daycare and school are under the same umbrella of education, but then it would be totally separate in the announcements, and nothing was said

to us first…they would make an announcement to the world. But we would have no idea what's going on like we would get the news at the same time that the parents did. And then daycare was one of the first [to open back up] when the world shut down".

A few participants also raised the issue of the role of the College of ECEs. One participant confirmed that ECEs are required to register with the Collage to be recognized as ECEs. However, the College focuses on ensuring that ECEs are compliant with regulations that are intended to protect the public. Two interview participants noted that they do not feel supported by the College of ECEs despite paying a fee for their membership:

"We pay the College of ECC's to hold our title. And I'm not totally convinced that they do enough for us as a profession to protect us as a profession. We pay more than nurses pay. And make a fraction of what nurses make. And kind of for what? Like I didn't feel the College of ECES protects us or supports us in ways."

Under-resourced Classroom
Interview participants described how their classrooms are under-resourced. A major recurring theme among our interviews is under-resourced classrooms. Two participants explained they do not have enough space for indoor/ outdoor daily programming activities, activity preparation, and staff offices:

"We're finding now that children are being schooled in daycares where there may not be a lot of space – where there's a lot of kids and not a lot of floor space, where there's environments where there may not be enough counter space, where there's not enough office space… All these environments really matter because everybody wants a healthy working space."

Five participants noted they do not have enough classroom supplies:

"…I do find it challenging sometimes not having the money to buy materials and you know, sometimes you'll think of an activity you really want to do it with the children. But then you look in the cupboards and you don't have the materials…."

Lack of supportive culture among staff
Five participants alluded to the lack of a supportive community, including support from managers and colleagues. One participant described the culture in their workplace as follows: "One of the places I would cry all the time because [some] of the staff were awful. The support was awful. Like nobody felt like they were on a team."

Another participant linked issues with their working conditions to their relationships with their co-workers:

"There's only a handful of educators that I had a good relationship with. But most of my experiences across all these workplaces unfortunately I have experienced or other educators have experienced bullying, passive aggressiveness,

gossiping, rumors circulating around them. It could be multiple factors as to why. It could be something that these educators were dealing at home, or in the workplace, or both of them as well. They're frustrated of how the workplace is again with the pay, the poor leadership, the parents sometimes can grind our gears a little bit, and the lack of support from the Ministry of Education, you know, the lack of funding, it could be multiple things that I think that these educators who feel inclined to again bully, tease, be passive aggressive with others."

A lack of support can be manifested through unequal distribution of workload:

"I've also found that you can get a supply staff, you can get a new staff that they don't do very much, so you're doing a lot of the workload. I've worked with the staff before where I'm running around doing a lot of things and they just sit there and are just monitoring, making sure no one gets hurt, but they're not doing anything."

Participants noted that a lack of support and leadership from managers can create burnout among ECEs. One participant described how information was withheld or miscommunicated by managers and its effect on front-line staff mental health:

I had gone off as I had surgery, so I was off on a leave for six weeks and both my room partners actually had to go on a mental health leave because our room was so behavioral. And we had a child there that was kicking, hitting, running from us, like, very dangerous ...I had some of the parents come to me, some of the board members and say, "I'm so sorry. We did not know it was like this because your manager, supervisors, director, did not tell us what was going on."

Survey

The survey was open online from May - June 2024. A total of 123 responses including three pilot responses were included in the final survey sample.

Demographics

To understand the make-up of the ECE population in Hamilton, the survey asked participants to provide responses to several demographic questions, including age, gender, citizenship status, race, and level of education.

29 participants (24%) identified in the 35-39 age group, followed by 19 (15%) in the 50-54 age group and 17 (14%) in the 45-49 age group (Table 1).

Table 1: Age distribution of participants

Response	Count	Percent
18 - 24	4	3%
25 - 29	10	8%
30 - 34	15	12%

35 - 39	29	24%
40 - 44	14	11%
45 - 49	17	14%
50 - 54	19	15%
55 - 59	9	7%
60 - 64	3	2%
65+	2	2%
Prefer not to answer	1	1%

122 participants (99%) identified as women, while one participant (1%) preferred not to answer. 120 respondents (98%) identified as Canadian citizens or permanent residents (Table 2).

Table 2: Citizenship/Immigration status of participants

Response	Count	Percent
Canadian citizen or permanent resident	120	98%
Immigrant (5 years or more in Canada)	2	2%
Recent immigrant (less than 5 years in Canada)	1	1%

81 participants (66%) identified as White/European descent (Table 3).

Table 3: Race/ethnicity of participants

Response	Count	Percent
White/European descent	81	66%
Latin American/Latinx	9	7%
Black	7	6%
Middle Eastern	7	6%
South Asian	6	5%
Southeast Asian	2	2%
East Asian	1	1%
Indigenous (First Nations, Metis, Inuit)	1	1%
Indigenous outside of Canada	1	1%
Prefer not to answer	10	8%
Other	2	2%

87 participants (71%) completed a college diploma, which reflects the minimum education requirements to be an ECE (Table 4). 26 participants (21%) have completed a Bachelor's degree.

Table 4: Highest level of education completed.

Response	Count	Percent
College diploma	87	71%
Bachelor's degree	26	21%
Master's degree	6	5%
Some college or vocational training	2	2%
High School or equivalent	1	1%

Employment context

To further contextualise challenges in the sector, the survey also asked participants about their current job position, their employment status, how long they have worked in the sector, the number of positions they currently hold, and their current employment setting.

65 participants (53%) identified as "Current ECE", while 31 participants (25%) identified as an "ECE Manager" (Table 5).

Table 5: Position in the early childhood education profession

Response	Count	Percent
Current ECE	65	53%
ECE Manager	31	25%
Early Childhood Assistant (ECA)	15	12%
Senior Leadership	5	4%
Left the early childhood education profession	5	4%
Other	2	2%

105 participants (89%) indicated they were employed full-time (Table 6). Of the 13 participants who said they work on a part-time or casual basis, 11 (85%) reported that early childhood education is their main source of income.

Table 6: Current employment status

Response	Count	Percent
Full-time	105	89%
Part-time	9	8%
On a casual/supply basis	4	3%

102 respondents (89%) said they hold only one job (Table 7). Among the 13 participants who said they hold multiple jobs, 4 participants (31%) reported that they hold multiple ECE-related jobs.

Table 7: Number of positions you currently hold

Response	Count	Percent
1	102	89%
2	10	9%
3 or more	3	3%

44 respondents (36%) worked in an ECE role for 10 to 19 years, while 40 participants (33%) have worked for 20 years or more (Table 8).

Table 8: Years in Early Childhood Education Role

Response	Count	Percent
20 years or more	40	33%
10 - 19 years	44	36%
5 - 9 years	20	16%
3 - 4 years	11	9%
1 - 2 years	6	5%
Less than one year	2	2%

79 participants (64%) worked for licensed childcare centres while 32 participants (26%) worked for school boards (Table 9).

Table 9: Type of Setting

Response	Count	Percent
Licensed Childcare Centre	79	64%
School Board (e.g., HWDSB, HWCDSB)	32	26%
Not-for-Profit	20	16%
Before and After School Program	20	16%
EarlyON Child and Family Centre	7	6%
Licensed Home Childcare	5	4%
Unlicensed Home Childcare	3	2%

Job Satisfaction and Workplace Challenges

The survey asked participants a variety of questions to understand their overall job satisfaction, their motivations for working in the sector, and the challenges they experience in their work.

92 respondents (78%) indicated they were either "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with their ECE role (Table 10).

Table 10: Job Satisfaction in Early Childhood Education Role

Response	Count	Percent
Very satisfied	25	21%
Satisfied	67	57%
Unsatisfied	23	19%
Very unsatisfied	3	3%

The survey asked participants which aspects of their job motivate them to work in early childhood education (Table 11). Participants indicated that their top motivators included working directly with children (102 respondents, 86%), interacting with parents and/or caregivers of children (88 respondents, 75%), and working with other staff and educational professionals (82 respondents, 69%).

Table 11: Motivations for working in Early Childhood Education

Response	Count	Percent
You enjoy working directly with children	102	86%
You enjoy interacting with parents and caregivers of children	88	75%
You enjoy working with other staff and educational professionals	82	69%
You enjoy planning educational activities for children	66	56%
Hours of work	43	36%
Job security	36	31%
Compensation	12	10%
Other	2	2%

Participants were asked to rate their agreement with several statements pertaining to issues they experience in their workplace. Those who selected "strongly agree" or "agree" were prompted to elaborate on their choice.

Most participants considered the following issues to be pertinent to their workplaces: 1) having low ratios of staff to children, 2) completing work during off hours, 3) being considered a "babysitter", and 4) spending their own money on classroom supplies.

79 participants (67%) "strongly agree" or "agree" there are too many children and not enough staff (Table 12).

Table 12: I feel there are too many children and not enough staff

Response	Count	Percent
Strongly agree	38	32%
Agree	41	35%
Disagree	30	25%
Strongly disagree	9	8%

Participants stated there are not enough regular or supply staff at their centres: "There is not enough staff to cover for programming, professional learning time, fill in for sick staff." One participant working as an ECE supervisor additionally noted there are not enough qualified candidates willing to work as supply staff:

> "As a supervisor of the program I struggle with supply staff. There are not enough qualified candidates that would like to work as an on-call staff. The reason is that the hours are not guaranteed, and the pay is low."

The limited number of staff led to unrealistic classroom ratios. As one participant described:

> "Ratios are ridiculous and unrealistic. We are expected to provide quality care and provide small groups but it's difficult to fulfil the needs of the children when you're on your own with a group and can't split yourself."

Participants also mentioned that there are many children in their classroom with special needs and they need more hands-on staff to improve their quality of care:

> "I feel like over the last 5-8 years there have been diagnosis, or children with more needs that require more one on one support. The current ratios were good, but now I strongly feel they need to be reduced more as educators are burning out quickly when there are multiple kids in their groups with high needs. Infant ratios should be 1:2, Toddler Care should be 1:4, and Preschool 1:6. This will let educators breathe a bit more and spend more quality time helping those in their care reach their milestones and get the appropriate care they need."

76 participants (65%) "strongly agree" or "agree" that they spend time outside of work preparing classroom activities (Table 13).

Table 13: I spend time outside of work hours preparing activities

Response	Count	Percent
Strongly agree	36	31%
Agree	40	34%
Disagree	29	25%
Strongly disagree	11	9%

Many participants noted that, unlike teachers, they do not have preparation time allocated during the workday, and they complete work on unpaid time to compensate: "We don't receive any prep time throughout the day so all our time getting things ready for school are done at home which takes away from my own family time".

69 participants (60%) "strongly agree" or "agree" that people think of them as a babysitter (Table 14). They attributed it to a lack of awareness of the ECE role.

Table 14: People think of me as a "babysitter"

Response	Count	Percent
Strongly agree	22	19%
Agree	47	41%
Disagree	35	30%
Strongly disagree	12	10%

One respondent stated that "there is still a regard for this field as 'wiping noses/bums' all day rather than actual education and care routines as part of safe attachment and education". Another respondent elaborated that "the community doesn't realize the importance of early childhood educators and treat us as babysitters. Our time and commitment don't feel respected or acknowledged most days."

64 participants (55%) "strongly agree" or "agree" that they spend their own money on classroom supplies (Table 15).

Table 15: I spend my own money on classroom supplies

Response	Count	Percent
Strongly agree	36	31%
Agree	28	24%
Disagree	34	29%
Strongly disagree	18	16%

Many participants stated that they do not have enough money in their budget for classroom supplies. As one participant explained:

"It's become an expectation that educators spend their own money on supplies. My centre provides us with a lot of supplies but there is still a deficit that I need to compensate for. For example, if we want to do planting, I need to go and get the pots, soil and seeds. I may get reimbursed, but it's not guaranteed, and it takes weeks to know."

A few participants mentioned they sometimes spend their own money on supplies since it is faster and easier than going through the system to get their purchases approved:

"Rarely, but sometimes it's easier to just buy something small at the dollar store rather than go through the channels of having a small purchase approved."

Though not the majority, a considerable proportion of participants considered time spent on paperwork and the lack of breaks to be issues relevant to their workplace.

50 respondents (43%) of respondents "strongly agree" or "agree" that they spend too much time on paperwork (Table 16).

Table 16: I spend too much time on paperwork

Response	Count	Percent
Strongly agree	17	15%
Agree	33	28%
Disagree	51	44%
Strongly disagree	15	13%

Participants reported having extensive reporting requirements. As one respondent described, "there is far too much paperwork required by both government agencies (such as ministry of education, health department, etc.) and then my own organization's expectations," while another respondent provided examples of reporting such as "…filling out behaviour logs, filling out incident reports".

Participants also felt that paperwork took time away from the children, as one participant explained:

"Having to sign children in, document health, document food, document toileting, etc. takes away from time spent with the children as well as preparing activities. Documentation is so important but it takes away building relationships with children."

Another respondent shared similar feelings: "[Paperwork] takes away from being with the children in the classroom or being able to spend the time supporting my staff even more".

49 participants (41%) "strongly agree" or "agree" they don't get enough breaks during their shifts (Table 17).

Table 17: I don't get enough breaks during my shifts

Response	Count	Percent
Strongly agree	17	14%
Agree	32	27%
Disagree	50	42%
Strongly disagree	19	16%

Some participants stated they only have a lunch break and that there are days where they are too busy to take their break:

> "The days can get so busy that I rarely take a lunch break because I am typically trying to cover other staff, help children who need the extra helping hand. Even if I do get a break, phone calls come in and my break gets cut short."

Participants also shared that they could not take washroom breaks due to a lack of coverage: "Sometimes you can't go to the washroom because there is no one to cover so you need to wait until your lunch break."

Most participants did not consider their work schedules or the treatment they receive at work (e.g., from managers/supervisors, parents/caregivers, or colleagues) to be major issues.

15 respondents (13%) "strongly agree" or "agree" that their work schedule is irregular (Table 18).

Table 18: My work schedule is irregular

Response	Count	Percent
Strongly agree	5	4%
Agree	10	9%
Disagree	42	36%
Strongly disagree	60	51%

Of participants who did "strongly agree" or "agree" with this statement, they attributed their irregular work schedules to staff coverage and split shifts. One respondent stated, "As a manager, [I] have to flex my schedule frequently to cover in program when staff call in" while another respondent stated, "Due to staffing needs- shift changes daily".

Regarding split shifts, one respondent explained:

> "It's difficult to find a full time job where they pay enough. That's why I decided to work just part time and find another job. As an ECE you can find more opportunities on Before and After school programs…"

With split shifts, one participant explained it was also "…not possible to work in between shifts".

18 participants (15%) "strongly agree" or "agree" that they are treated poorly by parents/caregivers (Table 19).

Table 19: I am treated poorly by parents/caregivers

Response	Count	Percent
Strongly agree	4	3%
Agree	14	12%
Disagree	62	53%
Strongly disagree	38	32%

Of those who "strongly agree" or "agree" that they are treated poorly by parents/caregivers, some mentioned that they experience lack of respect and unrealistic demands from some of the parents. One respondent mentioned that "parents are often rude and lack understanding when challenges and changes arise."

13 participants (12%) "strongly agree" or "agree" that they are treated poorly by their managers/supervisors (Table 20).

Table 20: I am treated poorly by managers/supervisors

Response	Count	Percent
Strongly agree	3	3%
Agree	10	9%
Disagree	47	40%
Strongly disagree	57	49%

Of those who "strongly agree" or "agree", participants noted that there was a lack of support from administrators. One participant mentioned that they are "not respected equally as [they are] not the 'teacher'". Others mentioned that the quality of their work is not recognized.

12 participants (11%) "strongly agree" or "agree" that they do not feel part of a supportive team (Table 21).

Table 21: I do not feel part of a supportive team

Response	Count	Percent
Strongly agree	2	2%
Agree	10	9%
Disagree	68	59%
Strongly disagree	36	31%

Those who "strongly agree" or "agree" noted a lack of teamwork in their workplace. One respondent mentioned "I feel I am supporting all the staff, but they do not reciprocate and help out the supervisor." Similarly, another participant shared that "[they] and one other person [do] all the work and everyone else gets the credit."

Compensation

51 participants (43%) said they earn $27.00 per hour or higher, 18 participants (15%) said they earn $25.00 - 26.99 per hour, and 22 participants (19%) said they earn $22.00 - 24.49 per hour (Table 22).

Table 22: Hourly wage

Response	Count	Percent
$16.55 - 19.49	6	5%
$19.50 - 21.99	14	12%
$22.00 - 24.49	22	19%
$25.00 - 26.99	18	15%
$27.00 or higher	51	43%
Prefer not to answer	7	6%

The survey asked participants about benefits, paid leave, and other supports they received as part of their compensation. Participants most often receive health benefits (81 participants, 69%), paid vacation (78 participants, 67%), and paid sick leave (77 participants, 66%) (Table 23).

Table 23: Compensation and benefits

Response	Count	Percent
Health benefits (e.g., vision, dental etc.)	81	69%
Paid vacation	78	67%
Paid sick leave	77	66%
Pension	36	31%
None of the above	8	7%
RRSP match	5	4%

Other	5	4%
Unsure	2	2%
Prefer not to answer	1	1%

72 participants (61%) of survey participants believe they are "very unfairly" or "unfairly" compensated given their educational background and work experience (Table 24).

Table 24: Fairness of compensation

Response	Count	Percent
Very unfairly	24	20%
Unfairly	48	41%
Fairly	39	33%
Very fairly	7	6%

When asked if they were considering leaving the profession, 71 participants (60%) said "No" and 47 participants (40%) said "Yes".

Of those who indicated they were considering leaving or who had already left the profession (50 respondents), the top three reasons participants included low compensation (43 participants, 86%), stressful work environment (34 participants, 68%), and high workload (28 participants, 56%) (Table 25).

Table 25: Reasons for leaving or wanting to leave the profession

Response	Count	Percent
Low compensation	43	86%
Stressful work environment	34	68%
High workload	28	56%
Lack of career progression	19	38%
Changing career interests	9	18%
Retirement	6	12%
Family reasons (e.g., maternity leave caretaking)	5	10%

Participants who indicated they were considering leaving the profession or who had left the profession had the opportunity to elaborate on their reasons.

1. Low compensation

Low compensation can include not receiving a liveable wage, pay that is proportionate to the workload, benefits, or paid time off (e.g., sick time, vacation). One participant explained, "We do not make enough as RECE's to afford our bills, I am considering leaving to find another job that may bring less stress with more money or equal too."

Another participant explained the problem with having a not having paid time off:

> "There needs to be more paid sick days, we are often sick and unwell because of the children that attend childcare sick because their parents have to work. 2 weeks vacation is not enough time off from this profession."

The pay is also not disproportionate to the expected workload for ECEs, as one participant described:

> "[I] did not receive more than $17 per hour before I applied as an RECE. When I become an RECE it raised to $20 per hour. It should be more than $20 per hour considering how much duties and responsibilities ECE's are required to do, including education."

2. Stressful work environment

Participants stated that high expectations, low staff ratios, and lack of pay for their workload contributed to a stressful work environment. As one participant described,

> "There are more and more children with special needs and because we are a team of 2, we get little to no support even when we have 3 children that are high needs with 3 different challenges. It feels impossible sometimes to teach. We are just keeping children safe."

Participants also mentioned there is a lack of support from administrators: "Poor leadership across in all experiences. Management did not know how to lead with fairness and transparency."

3. High workload

Participants highlighted that a high workload is a primary reason for leaving the profession, attributing this to two main factors: low staff ratios and high expectations. One participant described their workload as follows: "Working with children all day and then having to deal with parents and possibly superiors who set high expectations." Another participant emphasized the need for more staffing support: "We need more qualified staff to help manage the number of children with high needs and diagnoses."

4. Lack of career progression

Participants highlighted that a lack of career progression is a reason for leaving or wanting to leave the profession. They noted that there are few opportunities for promotion or to earn additional compensation. As one participant described:

> "There are very few opportunities to move up as an ECE. And even when one comes up, [there are] between 1-3 opening for hundreds of employees. Even

when we do after hours workshop it doesn't lead to higher wages or opportunities within the board."

Similarly, another participant stated:

"An ECE diploma or degree is limited. Unless I were to pursue additional education to be in other industries, doors do not open much for ECE professionals based on my experience. However, I might have not been aware of career opportunities at the time. There could be opportunities to progress in the field, but this information is not openly shared."

5. Retirement

Participants described being unprepared for retirement:

"It is stressful to think we are not prepared for this as our wages are so low, we can barely afford to live week to week that it is hard to save for retirement. I personally have 2 children and after payday, I am lucky if my bank account is in the positives after buying groceries for my family."

6. Family commitment

Some participants described their need for more time to take care of their own families. As one described, "My own children need me just as much as everyone else's. Most days when we have to put in overtime and work at night this takes away from our own family time."

7. Changing career interests

Participants indicated they had changing career interests for a few reasons: stress and better opportunities for compensation. As one participant described:

"This career put so much stress and anxiety on me, taking the emotional distress of demanding parent's home with me and working around the lack of staff is draining. The long hours are exhausting, and I am seriously considering changing my profession and trying to do something else that brings just as much joy without all the stress"

Another participant stated there are other careers offering better compensation: "There are other opportunities in other sectors that compensate far better than this field."

The survey asked participants who indicated that they had changing career interests what alternatives they were considering. Those who answered listed administrative positions (e.g., office manager, human resources, bookkeeping, travel agent) and other care professions (e.g., social work, nursing).

The survey asked participants who indicated they were considering leaving the profession to estimate how long they expected to continue working. 29 participants (62%) envisioned working for 1 - 4 more years (Table 26).

Table 26: Anticipated time for remaining as an ECE

Response	Count	Percent
Less than one year	8	17%
1 - 2 years	14	30%
3 - 4 years	15	32%
5 years or more	10	21%

Education and Professional Development

The survey asked participants how likely certain initiatives would encourage them to enrol in an ECE college program if they were a prospective student today. Most participants rated the given options highly. Most notably, 108 participants (91%) said government incentives and 106 participants (89%) said scholarships/grants would "very likely" or "likely" encourage them (Table 27).

Table 27: Potential student initiatives

Response	Very Likely	Likely	Unlikely	Very Unlikely
Government incentives	57 (48%)	51 (43%)	5 (4%)	4 (3%)
Lower tuition	61 (51%)	39 (33%)	9 (8%)	6 (5%)
Paid placements	58 (48%)	41 (34%)	13 (11%)	7 (6%)
Scholarships and grants	62 (52%)	44 (37%)	7 (6%)	4 (3%)
Streamlined education pathway	38 (32%)	62 (52%)	13 (11%)	4 (3%)

When asked about to suggest any other initiatives that would encourage prospective students to enrol, 26 participants stressed the need for better working conditions such as fair wages and low-class sizes (Table 28). According to survey participants, these barriers currently prevent future students from becoming ECEs.

Regarding educational initiatives, participants suggested the following:
- **Work placements:** Nine participants emphasised the importance of work placements. They suggested providing high school students coop opportunities to encourage enrolment and incentivizing employers to take on paid practicum students to help them transition into the workforce.
- **Networking/mentorship:** Two participants stressed the need for networking and mentorship opportunities for prospective students to help prepare students for the workplace.

Table 28: Other suggestions to encourage student enrolment

Theme	Count	Example quotes
Better working conditions (fair wages, lower class sizes/ratios)	26	- "Higher Pay, safe work environment, true inclusion and not only the physical one, make the expectations in college same as on the job so students don't get choked and leave, stability" - "higher pay, better vacation and sick days, PENSION won't help me but the next generation of Ece's, better recognition in the community less divide"
Work placements (e.g., high school coop, paid, incentives for employers etc.)	9	- "Creating an apprenticeship style system where ECE students are working (paid) 90% of the time. the other 10% is in school, like the journeyman/trades apprentices. One day a month my husband had to attend school - the rest of the time he was bringing home money to support us while he finished his 310S license." - " placements need to be longer so they get mentored properly in a work environment"
Networking/ mentorship	2	- "Network opportunities where students can meet with other ECE professionals who work in and outside of early years classrooms."

Participants were asked to select the top 3 professional development opportunities they were most interested in. 79 participants (69%) chose Mental Health, 73 participants (64%) chose Programming and Curriculum Development, and 64 participants (56%) chose Leadership and Management (Table 29).

Table 29: Professional Development Training

Response	Count	Percent
Mental Health	79	69%
Programming and Curriculum Development	73	64%
Leadership and Management	64	56%
Disability Justice and Accommodations	27	24%
Health and Safety	26	23%
Anti-oppression	17	15%
Other	4	4%

Improving ECE retention

The survey asked participants who left the profession or who were considering leaving what changes would encourage them to stay (Table 30). The top three changes include the following:

- **Higher pay:** 36 participants mentioned higher pay, which was the most often cited change.
- **Respect for the profession:** 12 participants mentioned respect for their profession. Participants felt that their expertise should be recognized and that the importance of their role in childhood development should be acknowledged.
- **Lower staff ratios/smaller classes:** 9 participants mentioned lower staff ratios or smaller classes to ensure ECEs can support students with disabilities who require accommodations.

Table 30: Changes that would encourage ECEs to stay in the field

Theme	Count	Example quotes
Higher pay	36	- "Higher wage, so we don't have to work two jobs and go on EI every winter break, March break and summer..." - "We need to be paid much more. We need a pension and more benefits. We need paid sick time. [ ] We need better schooling for the current ECE's. and if we are paid more we will get a better level of ECE. Leaving the field will happen over and over again until we are treated better [ ] and the annual $ payment to our college is far too much for the amount that we make. This incoming generation will not take it."
Respect for profession	12	- "…We are hard workers, we have so much to offer our knowledge of child development our expertise with understanding the needs of young children and the way in which we connect to families is crucial to this program. We deserve to be treated like professionals not babysitters." - "…mutual respect for all educators (teachers or ECEs). Admin staff acknowledging that it is a partnership (the ece carries A LOT of the workload as well)...."
Lower staff ratios/ smaller classes	6	- "…the ratios of children to educators needs to change" - "Reduce ratio and get more help. Fix the stupid way we get support for special needs and behavior children. We need actual help. More hand in the classroom to manage a regular class with needs it's far worse..."
Paid time off (sick pay, vacation, personal days etc.)	6	- "…We need paid sick time…" - "…More vacation time in the summer" - "…More paid sick days/personal days."

Support for students with disabilities	4	- "…more special needs support…" - "… We need to have support in the classroom that is actual help with behaviours, not a list of things that we need to do…."
Preparation time	4	- "…more prep time…" - "…time to prepare materials…"
Career advancement opportunities	4	- "If someone were to have shared with me or if I came across opportunities to progress in my ECE career, I would have considered staying in the profession. For example, I would have been a policy maker." - "I would need expertise and experience to count for something. I deserve better acknowledgment from our admin about my skills, and an opportunity to grow based on my work ethic."
Benefits	4	- "…better benefits…." - "…group benefits…." - "…better vacation and benefits"
Less paperwork	3	- "…Spending less time on ipads to update parents and interact with children more." - "… And remove all unnecessary paperwork and responsibilities."
Pension	3	- "…pension…"
Staff coverage for sick time	2	- "If I could get enough supply/floater staff in the program."
Adequate classroom budget	1	- "…petty cash for materials…"
More breaks	1	- "…at least 2 breaks"

The survey asked participants to identify strategies or policies that their workplace could implement to support them in their early childhood education role (Table 31). Participants mentioned the following strategies most often:

- **Increase wages**: 16 participants stated they should have higher wages and pay parity with kindergarten teachers.
- **Increase paid programming time**: 15 participants said there should be paid preparation time during work hours for ECEs alongside their teaching partners.
- **Paid time off**: 12 participants said they should have paid time off (e.g., sick days, personal days, vacation time). Some participants mentioned it is unfair that they had to rely on employment insurance during holidays.

Table 31: Workplace strategies or policies to support ECEs

Response	Count	Example quotes
Increase wages	16	- "Pay us for such an important role. Everyone knows 0 to 4 is the most formative years but it does not reflect in our pay and that is what society looks at." - "Make progress toward compensation and benefit standards at parity with kindergarten teachers, increase wages, and reward degree completion with wage supplements."
Increase paid programming time	15	- "ECEs should have at least 1-2 hours of programming a week (during work hours)." - "Fairness among the OCT's we work with. Not so much the pay but seeing that we are a team and having prep time together or in general the classroom being both of ours not just OCT's."
Provide paid time off (e.g., sick days, personal days, vacation time)	12	- "Instead of going on EI during our holiday: summer break, March break and Christmas break, we should be getting paid by the school board. We are full time employees and shouldn't have to look for work during those times. It's unfair if I decide to leave Canada on my vacation time during those weeks, I miss out on EI. The vacation costs more because those are expensive times to travel, and I do not get paid by EI because I left Canada. That is unfair."
Hire more staff	10	- "While policies have moved to integrate all children in our programs, no hands-on support has been forthcoming. Honestly, I don't need recommendations on what will help children in a preschool environment, I need the hands to make it happen."
Provide education on ECE role	8	- "Teach all non- RECE staff what our role is." - "Clarify the role of ECE and EA in the classroom…." - "More recognition from the society in general."
Compensate for professional development	8	- "I would like HWDSB to recognize my commitment to professional development and to compensate me in a similar way as the Board does with OCT's. By this, I am referring to AQ [Additional Qualification] courses. I have taken a Kindergarten

		AQ course on my own time and had to sign a waiver stating that it would be null and void if I decided to become a teacher. In the school board, if a teacher takes a AQ course (on their own time) are eligible to move up on their pay grid, ECE's are not. The cost of this course for me at the time was approximately $600." - "Provide paid time for professional learning."
Provide full benefits (e.g., medical)	8	- "I feel I left typical 'daycare' employment and moved to a cooperative non-profit due to a lack of support, pay and benefits. I have worked my entire career in this field and have no pension to show, no direct benefits, medical or other."
Improve and enforce a code of conduct (e.g., for staff, parents, etc.)	6	- "Fill out forms if a child hurts you. I've had some rough classrooms I've taught in and there is not much support. My principal is WONDERFUL and supports us for everything, but I've had some principals who were not supportive and basically brushed things under the rug." - "Behaviour policies for staff: Disciplinary action for toxic, bullying staff."
Provide pension or RRSP match	5	- "RRSP contribution or pension plan would be exceptional."
Provide more classroom supplies/space	4	- "Budget to provide supplies and age-appropriate materials to children play and learn."
Provide more paid break times (e.g., lunch, 15 min breaks)	4	- "We used to have a 15 min break in the morning and the afternoon. It would be nice to bring that back even if it's just one 15 min break."
Reduce college of ECE membership fees	2	- "Reduce membership fees for RECE."
Reduce administrative burden	2	- "Flexibility in work hours and admin hours be virtual/from home."

Key Takeaways and Next Steps

This research consisted of interviews to get a preliminary understanding of issues facing the ECE workforce in Hamilton and an online survey of the ECE workforce in Hamilton. The survey sample comprised almost entirely of women, and mostly included those who have worked in the sector for 10 years or longer, who were able to speak to long-standing issues in the sector.

Low compensation was a major theme in both the interviews and the survey. All 11 interview participants also raised this issue. 61% of survey participants felt they were compensated "very unfairly" or "unfairly". Of those wanting to leave or who have already left the profession, 86% attributed it to low compensation. Survey participants also cited higher pay most often as a way to support ECEs currently in the field and encourage them to stay in the field. The ECEs who participated in this study noted that they do not receive liveable wages and that their wages are disproportionate to their workload. Participants felt that the workload expectations are unrealistic due to the range of duties, staff ratio policies, and lack of staff to accommodate varying needs of children. Most survey participants noted that they have to spend time completing work on unpaid personal time to ensure it gets done.

The lack of compensation is especially notable based on the demographics within this field – women dominate this field and are therefore disproportionately affected by the low wages. The issue of being paid is also compounded by the lack of funding for classrooms, which results in ECEs spending their own money on supplies. While this research sought to explore issues beyond low compensation, it is clear that this issue remains prominent among the ECEs in the study sample. Participants also identified a lack of respect for the field and that their role is often considered the same as a "babysitter", despite the rigorous training and continuous professional development that ECEs undertake.

There are limitations that exist in this research. The surveys were not distributed directly to ECEs. For those working within the HWDSB, school principals had discretion over whether to forward the survey to ECEs at their schools. Similarly, in licensed childcare/private daycare centres, supervisors and owners had the choice to forward the survey to ECEs that they employed. In these latter centres, the research team sent the survey to the only contact information that was available and may not have reached an exhaustive list of centres in the Hamilton area. Recruitment for ECEs in the Catholic Board was also limited given that the timelines for ethics approval did not align with the timelines for this study. There may also have been survey fatigue from ECEs who are asked to complete surveys on a regular basis.

The survey sample was relatively small given the limitations to recruitment and the survey lacked responses from racialized women. The survey also had a limited number of individuals who were newer to the field who could have spoken more to barriers to entry. The survey also did not include ECE students or owners/operators. Future research can focus on exploring subgroups within the current ECE workforce as well as

students or owners to capture additional perspectives on what changes are needed within the field.

While survey security features were enabled and the research team took steps to remove bot responses from the sample, it may not always be possible to discern bot responses from authentic ones; therefore, some bot responses may still exist in the data set.

This research was intended as a tool for policy and program development and advocacy for a range of stakeholders. Therefore, Workforce Planning Hamilton should explore ways to mobilize these findings for key decision-makers and/or organizations who can leverage this research to advocate for change. Some examples of where to share this research can include:
- Hamilton's political representatives at the municipal and provincial levels so they can bring this issue to the government agenda
- Labour organizers and advocates

Many ECEs in this research identified a lack of respect towards their profession and understanding for their role in child development. Another potential use for this report would be to support initiatives that will bring recognition to the ECE workforce by providing education to the public on the importance of their role, which can ultimately raise their profile and encourage a culture shift.

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Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Hello, my name is <mark>[introductions]</mark>. We want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. We're working on a Research Shop project on behalf of Workforce Planning Hamilton. The purpose of this research is to identify the challenges in the early childhood education sector in Hamilton, Ontario and determine steps that may help alleviate these issues. The findings from this interview will inform a city-wide survey to understand the issues in the sector across Hamilton.

We will be asking you about your experiences working as an ECE including the challenges and barriers you face in your current role and your suggestions for changes needed to help strengthen Hamilton's ECE sector. If you have left the ECE sector, we will also ask your reasons behind leaving. The findings from this project are intended to inform a public report which will serve as a resource for policy and program development.

Confidentiality - Before we begin our discussion, I want to spend a few moments going over some basic ground rules for today:
Your participation is voluntary. You can stop participating in this interview at any moment you choose.
You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.
The information which we collect from these interviews will unlikely be attributable *(connected or associated)* to you. If we decide we want to use a quote and attribute it to you, we will contact you ahead of time to ask for permission.
I will strive to protect the confidentiality of our discussion. Keep in mind that you may be identifiable through the stories you tell when deciding what information to share.

Use of recording – with your permission, this interview will be recorded to increase accuracy and to reduce the chance of misinterpreting what you say.
All audio files and transcripts will be stored securely stored in a OneDrive folder that only the Research Team can access
We will also be taking notes throughout the discussion.
Only the research team will have access to transcripts from this discussion.
The recordings and transcripts will only be used for this project and will be destroyed once the report is complete.
We ask that when using abbreviations or acronyms, you say the full name at least once to aid transcription.

If at any point you feel tired, please let us know and we can take a short break.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

<mark>***START RECORDING***</mark>

Interview Questions
1. Are you currently working in an early childhood education role?

a. [If yes] – What role do you currently hold?
b. [If no] – What was your previous role in the sector?

If currently working in early childhood education:
2. How many years have you worked in early childhood education?
3. In what type of setting(s) do you work (e.g., private, non-profit, education)?
4. What aspects of your job do you find most rewarding?
5. What are some of the challenges you have experienced in your workplace?
   [Prompts: Workload (e.g., ratio of staff to children), work schedule (e.g., consistent work hours, adequate notice before shifts), workplace policies, treatment by supervisors/ parents/other education professionals]
6. Thinking of both your own experience and the experiences of others, what do you think are the biggest challenges for someone working in early childhood education?
   [Prompt] What might make someone leave the profession?
7. What, if any, are some barriers to professional advancement in early childhood education roles (e.g., becoming a supervisor/manager)?

If no longer working in early childhood education:
8. How many years did you work in early childhood education?
9. In what type(s) of setting(s) did you work (e.g., private, non-profit, education)?
10. Can you tell us why you left the profession?
11. Thinking of both your own experience and the experiences of others, what do you think are the biggest challenges for someone working in early childhood education?
    [Prompt] What might make others leave the profession?
12. How long do you believe a career in the ECE sector should last?
    [Prompts: Is it feasible/normal to expect a lifelong career? Compared to other industries, what career length would indicate that the ECE sector is sustainable?]
13. What, if anything, would have made you reconsider leaving the profession?

Suggestions for improving the sector:
14. From your perspective, what does fair compensation include for professionals in the ECE sector?
    [Prompts: livable wage/ salary range, pay parity with another profession/broader education sector, benefits, paid time off]
15. Outside of fair compensation, in an ideal world, what changes would you make to the working conditions in the ECE sector?

Final Thoughts
16. Do you have any other feedback or suggestions for improving the early childhood education sector that you have not already mentioned?
17. We are still recruiting interview participants for this project. Do you know of anyone else we should speak with to get a clear understanding of challenges in the early childhood education sector? Can you provide contact information for said individual(s)?

18. As mentioned earlier, the findings from the interviews will be used to develop a survey on challenges in the ECE sector.
    a. Would you be interested in participating in a pilot test of the survey? *[Offer to provide the survey link during the meeting and/or via email to the participant]*
    b. Do you have any suggestions for where we might recruit ECEs or those in related roles to participate in the survey?

Thank you for participating in this interview.

Do you have any final questions before we end the session?

Appendix 2: Survey

Survey Draft - Identifying the Challenges in the Early Childhood Sector in Hamilton

Thank you for your interest in participating in our survey. Please carefully read the following information prior to completing the survey.

This survey is a collaboration between Workforce Planning Hamilton (WPH) and the McMaster Research Shop. The purpose of this survey is to identify the hidden challenges Early Childhood Educators (ECE) experience in Hamilton, Ontario and explore potential actions that may alleviate these challenges.

The findings from this project are intended to serve as a resource for policy and program development. The report will be published on WPH's website as a public document and will be accessible by a broad range of stakeholders and community members.

The survey will ask you for basic demographic information, feedback on your experiences working as an ECE in Hamilton, and your ideas for how the sector can be improved. It will take approximately 10 - 15 minutes to complete.

Your responses will remain anonymous and confidential. All data will be securely stored in a OneDrive folder that only the Research Team can access.

Participants who complete the survey are eligible to be entered in a draw for one of four $50 gift cards to Food Basics/Metro. Participants interested in entering the draw can choose to provide an email address and/or phone number where they can be reached if they win. Identifying information will be removed prior to analysing the survey responses and will be destroyed once incentives have been provided to participants.

Participating in this survey is completely voluntary. You have the option to skip any question that you are not comfortable answering. Should you feel distressed at any

point while completing the survey, please stop filling out the survey immediately. If you feel distressed as a result of your participation in this survey or have any other questions, please contact labour.market@workforceplanninghamilton.ca.

Demographics
8. What is your age group?
   a. 18 - 24
   b. 25 - 29
   c. 30 - 34
   d. 35 - 39
   e. 40 - 44
   f. 45 – 49
   g. 50 – 54
   h. 55 - 59
   i. 60 - 64
   j. 65+

9. What is your gender identity?
   a. Woman
   b. Man
   c. Non-Binary
   d. Genderqueer
   e. Two-Spirit
   f. Other (please specify):
   g. Prefer not to answer

10. What is your citizenship status?
   a. Canadian citizen or permanent resident
   b. Recent immigrant (less than 5 years in Canada)
   c. Immigrant (5 years or more in Canada)
   d. Other (please specify)
   e. Prefer not to answer

11. Which category best describes your racial or ethnocultural identity? [Select all that apply]
   a. Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuit)
   b. Indigenous outside of Canada (e.g., Māori, Maya, Nahuatl, Quechua, Indigenous Hawaiians)
   c. Black (e.g., Black African, Black Caribbean/West Indian, Black North American, Afro-Latinx/Black Latin American)
   d. East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese)
   e. Southeast Asian (e.g., Cambodian, Filipino, Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese)

f. Latin American/Latinx (e.g., Latin America including South America, Central America, Latin Caribbean (Spanish-speaking Caribbean and/or Haiti), and México)
g. Middle Eastern (e.g., Arab, Persian, West Asian)
h. North African (e.g. Egyptian, Libyan)
i. South Asian (e.g., Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Indian, Indo-Caribbean, Indo-Fijian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan)
j. White (European descent)
k. Other (please specify)
l. Prefer not to answer

12. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
a. High School or equivalent
b. Some college or vocational training
c. College diploma
d. Bachelor's degree
e. Master's degree
f. Doctorate or other advanced degree

13. Which of the following best describes your position?
a. Current ECE
b. ECE Manager
c. Early Childhood Assistant (ECA)
d. Another ECE-related role (please specify):
e. Left the early childhood education profession
f. None of the above

14. What is your current employment status?
a. Full-time
b. Part-time
c. On a casual/supply basis

15. [If employed part-time/casual] Is early childhood education your main source of income?
a. Yes
b. No

16. How many job positions do you currently hold?
a. 1
b. 2
c. 3 or more

17. [If answer to #9 is b or c] Are you working at multiple ECE-related positions?

a. Yes
b. No

18. How many years have you been in an early childhood education role?*
    a. Less than one year
    b. 1 – 2 years
    c. 3 – 4 years
    d. 5 – 9 years
    e. 10 – 19 years
    f. 20 years or more

19. In what type of setting(s) do you work? [Select all that apply]*
    a. Licensed child care centre
    b. EarlyON child and family centre
    c. Licensed home child care
    d. Unlicensed home child care
    e. School Board
    f. Before and after school program
    g. Not for profit
    h. Other (please specify)

Recruitment/Retention
20. Please rate your overall job satisfaction in your early childhood education role:
    a. Very satisfied
    b. Satisfied
    c. Unsatisfied
    d. Very unsatisfied

21. Which aspects of your job motivate you to work in early childhood education? [Select all that apply]
    a. You enjoy interacting with parents/caregivers of children
    b. You enjoy working with other staff and educational professionals
    c. You enjoy working directly with children
    d. You enjoy planning educational activities for children
    e. Job security
    f. Hours of work
    g. Compensation
    h. Other (please specify)

22. Please rate your agreement with the following statements (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree):
    a. I don't get enough breaks during my shifts

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* Will be worded in past tense for individuals who select "Left the early childhood education profession" in question 6

b. My work schedule is irregular (e.g., part-time hours, split shifts etc.)
c. I spend too much time on paperwork
d. I feel there are too many children and not enough staff
e. I spend time outside of work hours preparing activities
f. I spend my own money on classroom supplies
g. I am treated poorly by managers/supervisors
h. I am treated poorly by parents/caregivers
i. People think of me as a "babysitter"
j. I do not feel part of a supportive team

23. If you feel comfortable and wish to elaborate on these issues, please do so below.
    [Small text box for each]
    a. I don't get enough breaks during my shifts _____
    b. My work schedule is irregular (e.g., part-time hours, split shifts etc.)_____
    c. I spend too much time on paperwork _____
    d. I feel there are too many children and not enough staff _____
    e. I spend time outside of work hours preparing activities_____
    f. I spend my own money on classroom supplies _____
    g. I am treated poorly by managers/supervisors _____
    h. I am treated poorly by parents/caregivers _____
    i. People think of me as a "babysitter" _____
    j. I do not feel part of a supportive team _____

24. If there are any other issues that affect your day-to-day work that you have not already shared, please list them below.

25. What hourly wage do you currently receive?
    a. $ 16.55 - 19.49
    b. $ 19.50 - 21.99
    c. $ 22.00 - 24.49
    d. $ 25.00 - 26.99
    e. $ 27.00 or higher
    f. Unsure
    g. Prefer not to answer

26. Which of the following do you receive as part of your compensation? [Select all that apply]
    a. Health benefits (e.g., vision, dental etc.)
    b. Paid vacation
    c. Paid sick leave
    d. Pension
    e. Other (please specify):
    f. Unsure
    g. Prefer not to answer

27. How fairly do you believe you are compensated given your educational background and work experience?
    a. Very unfairly
    b. Unfairly
    c. Fairly
    d. Very fairly

28. Are you considering leaving the profession?
    a. Yes
    b. No

29. [If yes to previous] Why are you considering leaving the profession? [Select all that apply. If you would like to elaborate on your reasons for wanting to leave, please explain in the text box provided] *
    a. Low compensation
    b. Stressful work environment
    c. High workload
    d. Lack of career progression
    e. Retirement
    f. Family commitment (e.g., maternity leave, caretaking)
    g. Changing career interests
    h. Other (please specify)

30. [If changing career interests] Which alternate career(s) are you considering?*

31. [If yes to #21] How much longer do you envision yourself working as an ECE?
    a. Less than one year
    b. 1 - 2 years
    c. 3 - 4 years
    d. 5 years or more

32. [If yes to #21] What changes, if any, would encourage you to stay as an ECE?*

Suggestions for improvement to sector
33. What strategies or policies should your workplace implement to support you in your early childhood education role?

34. If you were a prospective ECE student today, please rate how likely the following would encourage you to enroll in an ECE college program or equivalent (1 = very unlikely, 4 = very likely)
    a. Paid placements
    b. Streamlined education pathway
    c. Scholarship/grants

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* Will be worded in past tense for individuals who select "Left the early childhood education profession" in question 6

d. Government incentives
   e. Lower tuition

35. If there are any other initiatives you believe would encourage prospective ECE students to enroll today, please list them below.

36. What types of professional development training would you be interested in? [Select your top 3]
   a. Mental health
   b. Leadership and management
   c. Programming and curriculum development
   d. Health and safety
   e. Anti-oppression
   f. Disability justice and accommodations
   g. Other (please specify)

37. Do you have any other suggestions for improving the early childhood education sector that you have not already mentioned? Please list them below.

38. Do you want to be entered in the gift card draw?
   a. Yes
   b. No

39. The results of this survey will be summarized in a report that will be published online. Would you like to receive a copy of the report?
   a. Yes
   b. No

40. [If yes to gift card draw or receiving report] Please provide your name and contact information below:
   a. First name:
   b. Last name:
   c. Email address:
   d. Phone Number:

Thank you for participating in this survey. If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to labour.market@workforceplanninghamilton.ca