

Data collection and reporting
platform to guide early
learning and child care
workforce policy development
and system planning in Ontario

KON PHASE 2



Early Childhood Education - Research Policy Action (ECE-RPA)¹

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The Knowing Our Numbers project is a ground-breaking initiative in terms of the collaboration and data-sharing achieved as well as the insights it has generated. It has augmented and complemented the existing data regarding the early childhood education profession and shone a light on critical issues contributing to the current workforce shortages. The College of Early Childhood Educators looks forward to continuing to collaborate on this important work.

BETH DEAZELEY, LL.B.
REGISTRAR & CEO, COLLEGE OF EARLY
CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

WHY KON PHASE 2?

Ontario's early childhood education workforce faces acute challenges. Poor compensation, limited benefits, and difficult working conditions have made early learning and child care (ELCC) an unattractive career choice. Many new Early Childhood Education (ECE) graduates are opting for other fields, and existing staff are leaving at unsustainable rates. These workforce challenges have constrained space expansion efforts, leaving programs unable to meet pre-pandemic capacity or federal targets.

Evidence from other Canadian jurisdictions shows that investing in educator compensation and working conditions strengthens the workforce and accelerates space expansion. Investments in the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) initiative have already driven a 1.4% increase in women's workforce participation nationally, equivalent to 110,000 women returning to work. However, Ontario lags, with significant disparities across regions that hinder equitable access to high-quality care.

Ontario's unique children's service system model allows for tailored policy planning at the regional level, but it also highlights the critical need for consistent, reliable sector data. While some workforce challenges are province-wide, others vary due to geographic disparities, demographic differences, and variations in population density.

Workforce data collection is inconsistent, lacks cohesion, and is conducted by multiple sources (e.g., academics, governments, advocates, sector organizations etc.). This approach makes it impossible to track progress, measure the impact of policy decisions, or effectively address regional differences. Although some provincial-level data exists, some Social Service Managers (SSMs) report frustration with insufficient access to the information they need to develop strategic, locally informed solutions.

BACKGROUND: KON PHASE 1



In 2023, the ECE-RPA team launched Knowing Our Numbers (KON), an ambitious initiative to assess the state of Ontario's Early Childhood Education (ECE) workforce. This province-wide study, conducted in collaboration with the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) and 44 of Ontario's 47 regional SSMs, uncovered invaluable insights.

KON identified provincial trends and regional differences in critical areas such as workforce demographics, compensation, professional development, discrimination, equity and inclusion training, program quality, support for children with disabilities, and workforce stability. The results were captured in 30 detailed reports. These findings are now vital resources for SSMs, informing service planning, policy development, sector engagement, and investments. The study's public availability has also equipped academics, advocates, and policymakers with reliable data for their work.

While KON has filled a critical gap, the project also highlighted the need for consistent, ongoing data collection. Stakeholders, particularly SSMs and their Data Analysis Coordinators have expressed the importance of a system that tracks workforce dynamics and adapts to the evolving needs of the CWELCC program and potential shifts in federal government priorities.

THE IDEA

To address this need, we propose developing an innovative data collection and analysis platform that simplifies the process for SSMs while ensuring comprehensive, accessible data for all stakeholders. Inspired by a successful model we studied in the United Kingdom, the platform will:

- 1. Streamline Workforce Surveys:** Incorporating key questions from KON Phase 1 will provide consistent, actionable insights into the workforce.
- 2. Enable Advanced Analysis:** Data visualization and GIS mapping tools will localize results, allowing for detailed regional and provincial insights.
- 3. Support Transparent Decision-Making:** All data will be publicly accessible and structured for local, regional, and province-wide analysis.

The platform will be developed in partnership with the Sault Ste. Marie Innovation Centre (SSMIC), leveraging its economic development and technology integration expertise. As the regulatory body for Ontario's Registered Early Childhood Educators, CECE will release the survey and provide access to its comprehensive database of registered professionals and support analysis efforts. SSMs will support participation within their regions, ensuring robust sample sizes.

Ontario has never had access to this depth of workforce data. It is the only provincial repository on workforce experience, enabling cross-jurisdictional learning and collaboration. KON has already proven the value of comprehensive information for addressing systemic challenges in the ECE sector. This platform will provide:

- **Actionable Insights:** By tracking the impact of policy changes, the platform will allow stakeholders to recalibrate strategies, monitor workforce trends, support fiscal responsibility, ensure investments can be targeted to priority issues (as revealed in the data), and ensure equitable outcomes for children, families, and educators.
- **Efficiency and Consistency:** The platform will replace fragmented, one-off workforce surveys with a unified, streamlined approach, saving time and resources while improving data quality. Phase 2 would put data directly in the hands of SSMs, enabling detailed analysis on local workforce challenges.
- **A First for Canada:** No other jurisdiction has created a public, comprehensive, and accessible workforce data system for the early years. KON Phase 2 can serve as a model for data-driven policy and practice.

A detailed blueprint and costing for the platform has been completed, ensuring a clear path to implementation.



IMPACT ON EQUITY SEEKING GROUPS

Phase 1 revealed discrimination within early childhood education (ECE) settings, stemming from management, colleagues, parents, and even children. Staff who reported experiencing discrimination were significantly more likely to express intentions to leave the sector.

Racialized staff faced notable inequities, earning an average of \$2 less per hour regardless of their position. They were also less likely to hold ECE qualifications or occupy management roles.

Professional development opportunities for staff on equity issues were limited, particularly in key areas such as promoting inclusion, addressing anti-Black racism, supporting LGBTQ2S+ and newcomer families, and integrating decolonization and Indigenous ways of knowing and being into practice.

Discriminatory practices within the early years workforce were shown to affect the quality of programming children directly receive. Across Ontario, workforce shortages have particularly dire consequences for children with disabilities. They were often sent home or denied access to childcare altogether due to a lack of adequate support.

In some regions, hundreds of childcare spaces operated without a qualified educator, jeopardizing the quality of care and early learning. Francophone and Indigenous childcare centres face unique challenges, often operating without any native language speakers, further limiting culturally and linguistically appropriate programming for children. These systemic issues underscore the urgent need for equity-driven solutions in the sector.

However, Phase 1 also highlighted that interventions can make a meaningful impact. Staff in programs that actively promoted equity-focused strategies and human resources policies reported fewer experiences of discrimination and expressed a stronger intention to remain in the childcare sector.

Regular surveys of the early childhood workforce are crucial for giving policymakers direct insights from the people their policies affect. By uncovering discriminatory practices, these surveys create a pressing need for operators and policymakers to take action. Additionally, identifying regions with low levels of reported discrimination offers an opportunity to analyze and share effective practices that foster equity and inclusion across the sector.

KON TEAM OVERVIEW

The KON team brings 18 months of experience from Phase 1, adding expertise in data analysis, communication, capacity building, and relationship development to this project. Our team has established connections with Ontario's regional children's services managers and their DACs, as well as with the CECE and SSMIC.

TEAM MEMBERS

Dr. Emis Akbari, Ph.D. – Principal Investigator

Dr. Akbari co-developed the KON project. She is a respected academic and recognized early childhood education and workforce policy expert. She co-authors the Early Childhood Education Report (ECER), a collaboration with officials from all 13 provinces and territories to evaluate early childhood education provisions. The ECER is a valuable tool for policymakers to identify gaps and chart pathways to success. Dr. Akbari is a sought-after speaker who has appeared before various audiences and media outlets.

Kerry McCuaig – Principal Investigator

For decades, Kerry McCuaig has been a driving force in early childhood education policy development. She founded Toronto First Duty, a pioneering initiative in integrated early childhood programming and a model for full-day kindergarten in Ontario. Kerry co-developed the Early Childhood Education Report and the KON project. She regularly advises government officials on advancing workforce strategies.

Michelle Schurter – Partnership Liaison

Michelle Schurter was the inspiration for KON. She has a strong organizational development background, advising public organizations and private businesses on workforce growth in cross-generational contexts. Michelle honed her organizational expertise in the public sector, serving in various roles in the Ontario government, with municipalities, and post-secondary education (spanning health, agriculture, children and youth, and education). She holds a double Master's in Social Work and Business Administration and has been recognized with numerous awards and scholarships.

■ TEAM MEMBERS

Stacey Mudie - Project Coordinator

Stacey Mudie is a skilled project coordinator, executive administrator, and communications specialist with over 30 years of experience. In the first phase of the KON study, she successfully coordinated efforts across 44 regional SSMs, overseeing administration, financial management, and communications.

Dr. Petr Varmuza – Quantitative Data Analyst

Dr. Petr Varmuza brings extensive experience in public sector policy and planning. Before retiring as Director of Operational Effectiveness in Children's Services for the City of Toronto, he managed policy development, service planning, and an annual operating budget exceeding \$400 million. In 2020, he completed his Ph.D., focusing on equity in early childhood education policy.

Sophia Akbari – Qualitative Data Coordinator and Research Assistant

Sophia Akbari, a linguistics major at Concordia University, is an original member of the KON team. She has led the project's qualitative data analysis and census data extraction, contributing significantly to its research framework.

■ COLLABORATORS AND SUPPORT

The KON project is supported by key partners & collaborators, including the CECE, and the SSMIC, web developer Kathleen McBride of Cranberryink, and podcaster Stephen Hurley, who has helped disseminate KON findings to wider audiences.

This collective expertise ensures a robust foundation for the continued success and impact of the KON project.