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Addressing the achievement gap through Pre-Primary:  
Exploring families' experiences and future workforce  
expectations to support future implementation



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## Background

The early years (0-6 years) are recognized as a critical period for establishing the conditions for lifelong health and learning (1). Early childhood development is a social determinant of health, and research suggests that early education, family support and services, and early intervention can improve long-term health and education outcomes and reduce inequity in the population (1–4). The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) has started implementation of a Pre-Primary Program to support early learning and development. This program builds on existing initiatives from the DEECD (Early Years Centres) and regional-specific programs (HRSB’s Early Learning Opportunities and CSAP’s four-year old program) to support early childhood learning and development. The implementation of Pre-Primary in NS offers a significant change in the delivery of early childhood education across the province; this may help to redress the achievement gap by ensuring access to early childhood education to four-year olds across the province.

***Children in NS are particularly vulnerable due to rising rates of poverty, limited resources, and changing family living conditions, which may influence access to early learning programs, such as Pre-Primary.*** Broader societal outcomes of high quality early childhood programs include allowing parents to balance work and family responsibilities in order to contribute to economic activity (5). Previous research has suggested positive learning impacts from similar pre-school programs (6–10) but these positive effects will only be observed among families that *access* Pre-Primary. Further, families may not have access to other community programs and services that could support their child’s development and redress future achievement gaps (e.g., Early Childhood Development Intervention Services, Public Health, Primary Care, Family Resource Centre Programming) due to the challenges with navigating the fragmented system (3), especially as they transition to the public school system (11). In NS and across Canada, families experience a complex array of challenges that place some at an inequitable disadvantage to early childhood development (12). The challenges families experience result from complex national, provincial, community, and household level factors that often intersect. Societal barriers that make family access difficult and hinder early childhood development include poverty, employment demands, parental health problems, and limited time and/or resources (32). Families’ ability to access services to support their child’s development is influenced by these societal and community barriers, particularly those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage. Inaccessibility and poor household conditions for early childhood are further exacerbated in single parent families, and among families with working mothers (13,14). Previous research also suggests that early childhood programs may also not be sensitive to the needs of various minority ethno-cultural and racial groups, as children of diverse groups are less likely to participate (15,16). Early childhood programs and services may also be unaffordable, or it may be difficult for families to find safe and affordable transportation to a site (16,17). Therefore, ensuring families have equitable access to Pre-Primary and other programs and/or services by understanding their current experiences with the early childhood system will inform policy and program action to redress the achievement gap that can start in early childhood.

***High quality early childhood education is required to redress the achievement gap; this includes recruitment and retention of trained early childhood educators in delivery of Pre-Primary.*** Access to high quality early childhood education has demonstrated the fostering of child development and the reduction of social or economic inequities by ensuring that all children have the opportunity to develop early learning skills (18). High quality means age-appropriate curriculum and learning opportunities, positive relationships, equitable family access to community services and most importantly, training and compensation for educators (19–21). This also implies the interest and availability of a well-trained and compensated workforce. Previous research of students in post-secondary ECE training programs

found less than half plan to work in the sector post-graduation; a further decline in intentions to continue working directly with children five-years post-graduation has also been noted (22,23). Given the established relationship between level of education and training with measures of program quality, the need to understand the goals and expectations of the future workforce is strong (24–27). Some leaders speculate that the professional status of early childhood education has an impact on the recruitment and retention of trained ECEs into quality programs (28,29). However, little data exists on how students in ECE/CYS training programs perceive the professional status of Early Childhood Education, and the impact that professional status has on a student’s intended career choices. Because the recruitment and retention prospects of future ECEs for the Pre-Primary programs is initiated in training institutions, a foundational understanding of the needs and trends of current students will inform the DEECD, Region Centres for Education/CSAP and training institutions as future generations are recruited.

## Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research was to provide formative information to support the implementation of Pre-Primary by elucidating the perceptions of potential workforce participants and the experiences of families with young children. Two objectives were explored:

1. To understand families’ experiences with Pre-Primary, their motivations for participation (or non-participation) and their needs for other supports for early childhood development.
2. To describe the perceptions of post-secondary students in Early Childhood Education (ECE)/Child and Youth Study (CYS) programs on the changes in workforce opportunities through Pre-Primary as well as their expectations of employment opportunities and career path options post-graduation.

## What did we do?

### Focus Groups

The researchers used focus groups to describe families’ experiences with the Pre-primary Program, their motivations for participation (or non-participation) and their needs for other supports for early childhood development. Families with children eligible for the Pre-primary Program during the 2017-18 or 2018-19 school year were eligible to take part. Children were eligible if they lived within the catchment of a school that offered the Pre-primary Program and if their child turned 4 before December 31 of the respective year.

Seven communities across Nova Scotia were chosen with support from the Early Years Branch (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development) to represent diverse communities across the province. An initial contact was made within communities to assist with the recruitment of families (e.g., with Pre-primary Programs, resource centers and local community organizations). Representatives within communities provided guidance on how to best approach families. Recruitment posters and handouts for families (Appendix A) were distributed based on the recommendations from community partners. The researchers also offered an option for participants to take part in individual interviews based on the recommendation of community partners.

Once families expressed interest, a date, time and location for a focus group or phone interview was organized based on the preference of families. Families were asked to sign a consent form before the

focus groups and interviews commenced. Focus groups/interviews were audio-recorded and lasted about 30-60 minutes. If families were not comfortable with being audio recorded, notes were taken instead. During the focus groups, the researcher used probes to identify issues related to access to programs and services, and asked for participant recommendations for changes to policy and practice, therefore, assisting in identifying opportunities to better support families in their communities.

Once data was collected, the researchers transcribed the audio-recorded focus groups and interviews verbatim, de-identified the data, and then imported them into Nvivo Version 12 Software for analysis. Notes made throughout the interviews and focus groups were also transcribed and imported. The transcripts and notes were analyzed, and initial codes were created. These codes were later used to identify overarching themes and ideas related to the focus group and interview content.

### Student Survey

An online survey was developed for post-secondary students in Early Childhood Education/Child and Youth programs to learn more about their perceptions on the changes in workforce opportunities through the Pre-primary Program as well as their expectations of employment opportunities and career path options post-graduation. The survey was first available for completion online through a secure, university-based platform from March 2018 to April 2018. The online survey link and leaflets were disseminated to the program leaders of the Mount Saint Vincent University Child and Youth Study program as well as Nova Scotia's Early Childhood Education training programs that hold a Mount Saint Vincent/Child and Youth articulation agreement. Research Assistants completed brief visits to the Child and Youth Study program courses to hand out leaflets and introduce the survey to students. Program leaders at the other training programs distributed the survey and/or leaflets to their program students.

In order to increase participation in the survey, the survey was circulated also available for completion online from September 2018 to November 2018. Cross-tabulations were generated using the data collected from both surveys in order to determine whether the two surveys could be combined. Results indicated no significant differences between the participants of Spring 2018 and Fall 2018; therefore, the data from both surveys were combined. From the combined survey data collected, response frequencies and cross-tabulations were generated and explored. These findings are presented in the following report.

## What did we find?

### Focus Groups

Overall, four communities were represented out of the seven communities that were recruited. The researchers used different strategies to connect with all communities, but despite repeated in-person visits, community meetings, phone calls and emails, the research team struggled with recruiting families to take part in the research. Out of the four participating communities, there was one interview and three focus groups, which represented a total of 15 participants. Although there were fewer communities represented in our research, the participating communities and families were diverse (in terms of geography and ethnicity). Families that took part also provided insightful information regarding the Pre-primary Program and spoke to the strengths and challenges of the program.



Most families that took part did not access the Pre-primary Program, which was a goal of this study, to better identify factors that may influence access to the program. This also complements our ongoing Pre-primary Program evaluation which has focused on families that already attend the program (see [https://www.ednet.ns.ca/earlyyears/earlyyears\\_centres.shtml](https://www.ednet.ns.ca/earlyyears/earlyyears_centres.shtml)). The following is what we found in relation to understanding families' experiences with the Pre-primary Program, their motivations for participation (or non-participation) and their needs for other supports for early childhood development.

### *Accessibility*

The Pre-primary Program is designed to be an inclusive, safe and accommodating program, easily accessible to families in the appropriate catchment area respective to each school site. Families had differing opinions regarding the accessibility of the Pre-primary Program. Many families expressed difficulties with transportation and that the Pre-primary Program did not fit their work schedule due to the lack of before and after care options. One family member expressed that the lack of transportation inhibits families from accessing the program, and suggested that this may limit participation in the program.

*"It's hard with the transportation because, a lot of people just can't get their kids there...with their schedules, a lot of kids you know all the other kids get on the bus but they can't so it cuts down a lot of the attendance."*

One family member also mentioned that a lot of families have work schedules that do not match up with the Pre-primary Program hours. They added that transportation was difficult for families that do not have access to a vehicle, especially in the colder months.

*"Yeah and that's what I find especially working here there's a ton of people that don't fit into that category like they just cannot make it work. Especially in the winter months like if you were walking your kids to school like that"*

Families also spoke to the hours of the program not matching up with their everyday routine. Several families expressed that a before and after care program would help them with participation. One family member expressed that because of her work schedule, she would need to call on another family member to pick her child up if her child was enrolled in the Pre-primary Program.

*"And as for me sorry—sorry [laughing] it was either send her there and then look for someone to take her out or just keep her in daycare."*

Another family member spoke to how shift work made it difficult to enroll her child. She said that she preferred child care because she would rather send her child to a program that worked well with her schedule, making pick up and drop off times easy.

*"Okay. So I [pause] I find it hard that it doesn't work like with my hours. Right? That's number one for me why it doesn't work for me is because I'm not off till three thirty I work shift work as well in a nursing home. So it just really does not work for me my boyfriend works until five so we're still having to pay for care we have to pay for transportation like it's not, I'd rather send her to a facility where she—where it works with our schedule. Yeah that's like my big red flag. Yup."*

Families then spoke to the idea of after care, stating that if the Pre-primary program had after care, they would enroll their child due to a more accommodating drop off and pick up time.

*"After school care one hundred percent I'd put her in tomorrow. Yes. Hundred percent I'd put her in"*

*"That would be awesome [after care program] for my work schedule too. That would be incredible."*

### *Worthwhile*

Families spoke to the positive aspects of the Pre-primary Program. Some families reported that entering their child into Pre-primary would result in the adoption of skills such as language acquisition and socialization.

One family who immigrated to Canada said that enrolling their child in the program would give them more opportunities to learn English through their peers rather than television programs. Another family member mentioned socialization to be an important aspect of the Pre-primary Program. They said that being in the program would give her child the opportunity to socialize and engage with other children.

*"But the children are very happy —to be with other kids at the school have more socialize and engage with other kids"*

Some families spoke to the play-based philosophy of the Pre-primary Program. The program was established to facilitate learning during the early years and to do so in a safe and caring, play-based environment that promotes the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development of all children. Several families expressed their acceptance of the play-based approach, stating that learning through play was the best way for a child to learn. One family member expressed that play-based learning helped her child stay interested and engaged. She further described that her daughter learned best through hands on learning.

*"I think you have to you gotta keep them interested I think that's the best way for kids to learn through play."*

*"my youngest daughter needs play-based... that's how she learns that's what she needs...\_\_\_\_\_ (child's name) needs the play-based and I think that's the only way she's ever gonna [sic] learn hands on"*

Exposure to new, nutritional foods was identified as another benefit to the program. One family member said that they enjoyed the provided snack portion of the program, stating that it opened her child up to new foods. Even if she was not eating them, she was still being exposed to new nutritional opportunities.

*"it was nice that they provided snacks because it offered foods that—it gave them more exposure cause after a while when they don't eat foods you stop offering them but this school kept offering these foods even though she didn't eat them she [laughing] still saw them so we provided lunch but they provided a snack which was nice."*

The program was also an opportunity to support families who could not afford child care. One family member mentioned that when they moved to Nova Scotia, they were not in a position to support their child financially through childcare. She said that she searched for other programs in the community that would help support her situation and ended up hearing about the Pre-primary Program. Although surprised that a program for four-year olds was offered five days a week, she decided to enrol, expressing that it worked for her financial situation and worked for her daughter as well.

*“We moved out to Nova Scotia and we were once again in a position where I couldn't pay for preschool so we went looking for a library programs and other things that I could get my daughter into cause she was going to be into that—that age group and then I got the emails about signing up for Pre-primary and I'm like "okay sure!" Full—expecting it not to be a full day five days a week and yet when I got there to sign up its full day five days a week I'm like “really? At Pre-primary? Okay?” and so we jumped in with two feet and just she loved it. Absolutely adored it.”*

Another family member said that her child loved the Pre-primary Program and what it offered. She spoke to how her child exhibited excitement and enthusiasm after spending a day at the program. She added that her child made friends and was able to participate in birthday parties and further socializing opportunities.

*“But it was nice to have the transition being able to drop her off and she'd come out of the classroom so excited and you'd help her get her stuff on and she'd be jabbing about her day and everything that she did so that was always nice to—to see and she made friends and went to birthday parties.”*

### *Misconceptions*

There were some families had misconceptions about the structure of the Pre-primary Program. One family member said that she found out about the Pre-primary Program through the newspaper and when she went to speak to the school about it, she did not receive the information she needed to feel comfortable enrolling her child. Another family member thought enrollment in the Pre-primary Program was similar to school, presuming that daily attendance was mandatory. One family member specifically noted that she may have enrolled her child if she knew it was not mandatory.

Several families explicitly expressed their lack of awareness related to the use of the play-based approach within the program. Two families thought that joining the Pre-primary Program meant their children would be following the school schedule and would be more structured. One family member thought the program would be more structured and academic, without an emphasis on play.

*“Yeah I have another opinion because I think that children they start very early in Canada I think that five years old it's also very early for children to start the school start you know like to be most of the time in the class to discipline they're still kids they need to play”*



## Student Survey

### *Sample Demographics*

A total of 148 students responded to the survey, with the majority having indicated that they are attending Mount Saint Vincent University (50.7%) or the Nova Scotia College of Early Childhood Education (32.4%). Other respondents indicated attending the Nova Scotia Community College (13.5%), Université Sainte-Anne (2%), or the Jane Norman College (1.4%). Survey respondents were asked the length of the program they are completing, of which 50% indicated they are completing a less than four-year program and 50% indicated they are completing a four-year program. Throughout this report, the responses of those who indicated they are completing a less than four-year program and those who indicated they are completing a four-year program will be compared.

Of the 148 survey respondents, the majority indicated that they identify as female (96.6%) and that they belong to the age categories of under 20 years old (20.3%) or 20 to 24 years old (41.9%). Twenty-six respondents indicated that they identify as Indigenous, with the majority specifically identifying as Non Status (8.1%), First Nation (5.4%), Métis (2.7%) or Inuit (1.4%). When asked to identify the ancestry with which they most identify, survey respondents most frequently identified as being of European descent (58.5%), a descent which was not presented as an option to the question (13.5%), Acadian descent (11.5%), or Asian descent (8.8%). The majority of respondents indicated that they were born in Canada (80.4%) and that the language most often spoken in their home was English (85.1%) or a language that was not identified in the question options (12.2%). Of those who left comments after indicating that they speak a language that was not identified in the question options, this language was most often indicated to be Korean.

### *Sector Plans/Entering the Sector*

When asked whether early childhood/child and youth was their first choice of program, the majority of survey respondents indicated 'yes' (79.1%). Comparing respondents participating in programs of varying lengths, respondents completing a four-year program were more likely to indicate that this was not their first choice in program (25.4%) compared to those completing a less than four-year program (18.3%).

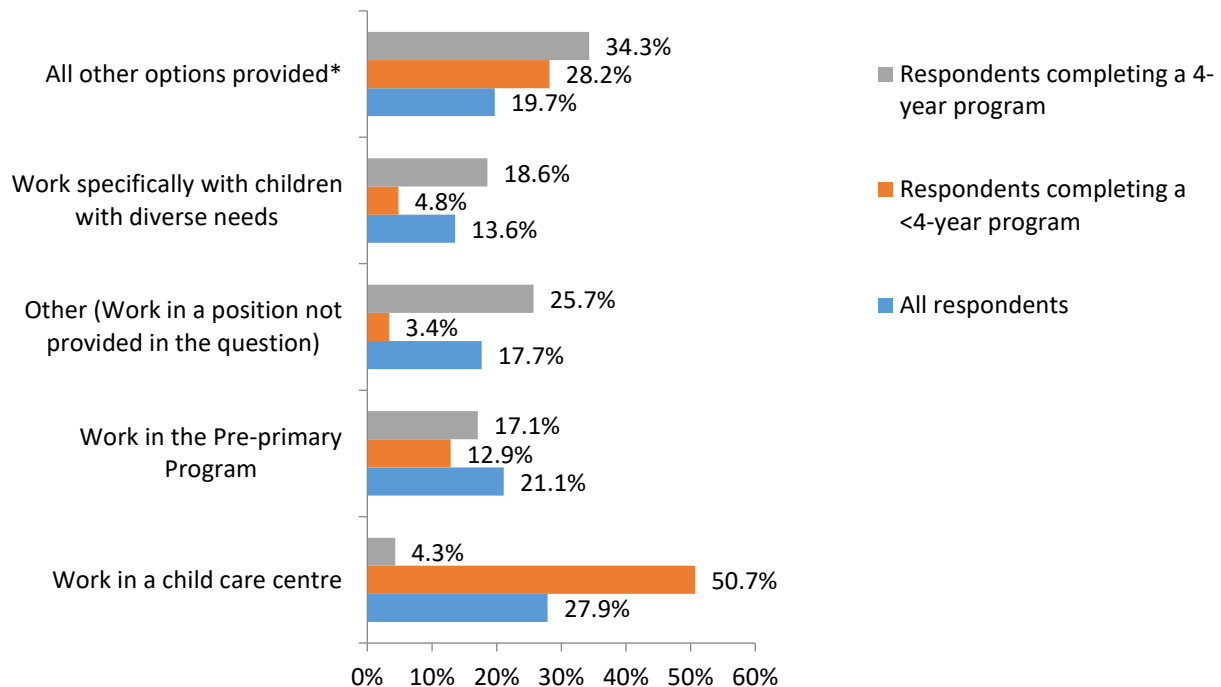
When asked questions regarding their future plans, 54.7% of those who responded to the questions indicated that they plan on engaging in post-secondary studies, with the majority of these respondents indicating that they plan on enrolling in a program in education (33.3%), in another program in early childhood education/child and youth program (25.9%), or 'Other' (another program not provided in the question's options) (38.3%). For those who indicated 'Other', comments indicated this most often included social work, child life, occupational therapy or speech language pathology. Respondents currently completing a less than four-year program were more likely to indicate that they do not plan to continue their studies following their current program (57.7%) compared to those completing a four-year program (32.4%).

Aside from asking about their future study plans, survey respondents were also asked about their future works plans including what type of employment they hope to have following the completion of their program and what they hope to be doing five years from now. Only 2.0% of survey respondents indicated that they do not plan on working following completion of their program. The majority of respondents indicated that they would like to work in a child care centre (27.9%), in the Pre-primary

Program (21.1%), or 'Other' (in a position not provided in the question) (17.7%). Of those who indicated 'Other', comments indicated that this most often included working as a teacher in the school system, as a child life specialist, or in early intervention.

Respondents who are completing a less than four-year program were more likely to indicate wanting to work in a child care centre (51.4%) or in the Pre-primary Program (27.1%) than those completing a four-year program (4.4%; 17.6%). Respondents completing a four-year program were more likely to indicate 'Other' (26.5%) or working with children with diverse needs (19.1%) than those completing a less than four-year program (7.1%; 10.0%). Respondents completing a four-year program also showed more variety in preferred work plans as they were the only individuals who indicated wanting to work in a child care agency/resource and referral program (2.9%), in a family resource program (4.4%), in a related early childhood education/care program not previously mentioned in the question (5.9%), or in a related youth care/education program (16.2%).

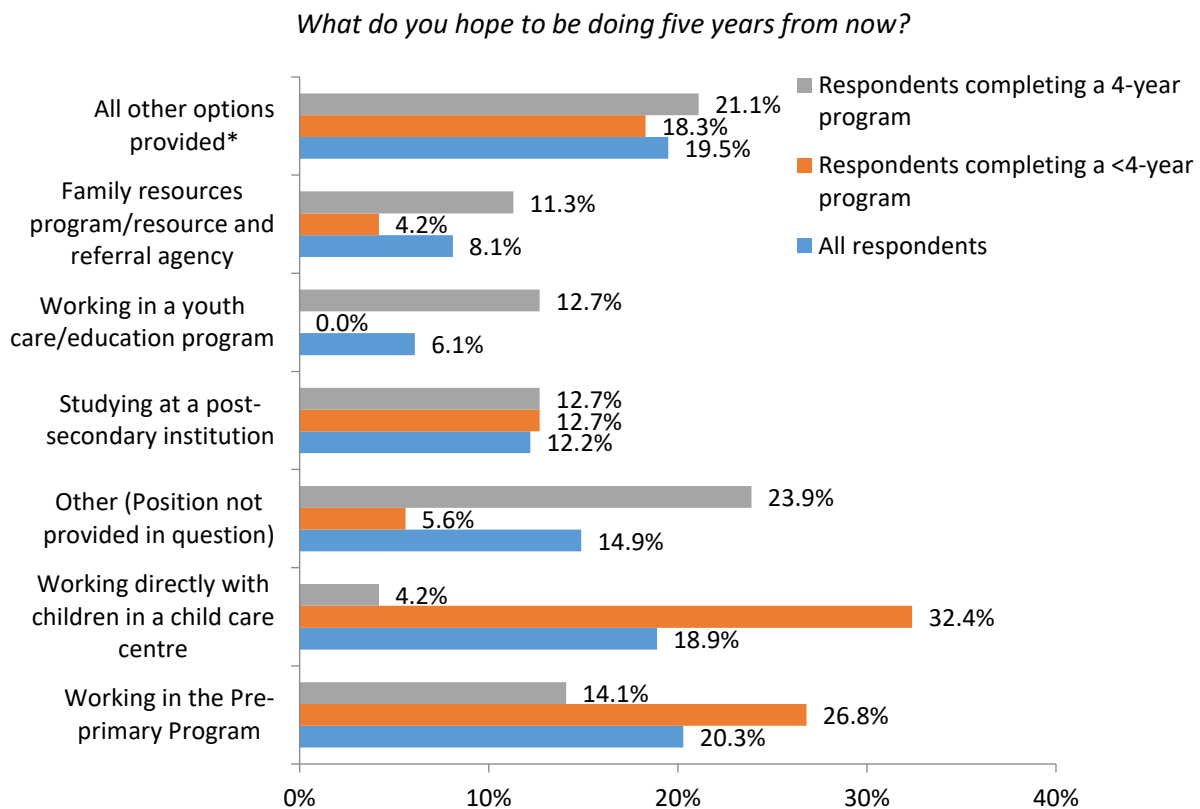
*What are your preferred plans for work after this program is finished?*



*\*'All other options provided' includes not planning to work, working in family child care as a regulated caregiver, working in a family child care agency/resource and referral program, as a classroom assistant in the school system, in a family resource program, in a related early childhood education/care program not previously mentioned, or in a related youth care/education program.*

Looking forward to five years from now, only 1.4% indicated that they hope to be working in a field unrelated to early childhood education or youth care/education. The majority of respondents indicated that they hope to be working in the Pre-primary Program (20.3%), in a child care centre working directly with children (18.9%), 'Other' (in a position not provided in the question) (14.9%) or studying at a post-

secondary institution (12.2%). Those who indicated 'Other' mostly commented that this included owning their own centre, working as a child life specialist or in another position in a hospital setting, working as a social worker, or working in early intervention. The respondents completing a less than four-year program were more likely to indicate that they hope to be working in a child care centre (32.4%) or in the Pre-primary Program (26.8%) than those completing a four-year program (4.2%; 14.1%). Those completing a four-year program were more likely to indicate 'Other' (23.9%) or that they hope to be working as a certified teacher in the education system (15.5%), in a youth care/education program (12.7%) or in a family resources program/resource and referral agency (11.3%) than those completing a less than four-year program (5.6%; 2.8%; 0%; 4.2%).



*\*'All other options provided' includes working as a supervisor in a child care centre, in a preschool centre, as a regulated child care provider, as a classroom assistant in the school system, or in a field unrelated to*

Only 4.7% of survey respondents indicated that they hope to be staying outside of Nova Scotia following completion of their program. Of those who indicated that they hope to be staying outside of NS, most comments indicated wanting to live in Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta or another country such as Korean, China or Bermuda. Of the 141 respondents who indicated that they hope to stay in Nova Scotia, the majority indicated wanting to stay in Halifax (72.3%).

### *Perceptions of the Field*

Survey participants were asked in an open-ended question to reflect on how much they expect to earn when they graduate. Of the 121 respondents to the question, the majority commented expectations

that spanned between \$17-25 per hour. A smaller amount of comments indicated that some respondents expect to make more than \$25 per hour and some expect to make less than \$17 per hour. Multiple respondents commented that they were not sure what to expect to earn when they graduate and that pursuing their future employment was not necessarily about how much they would earn.

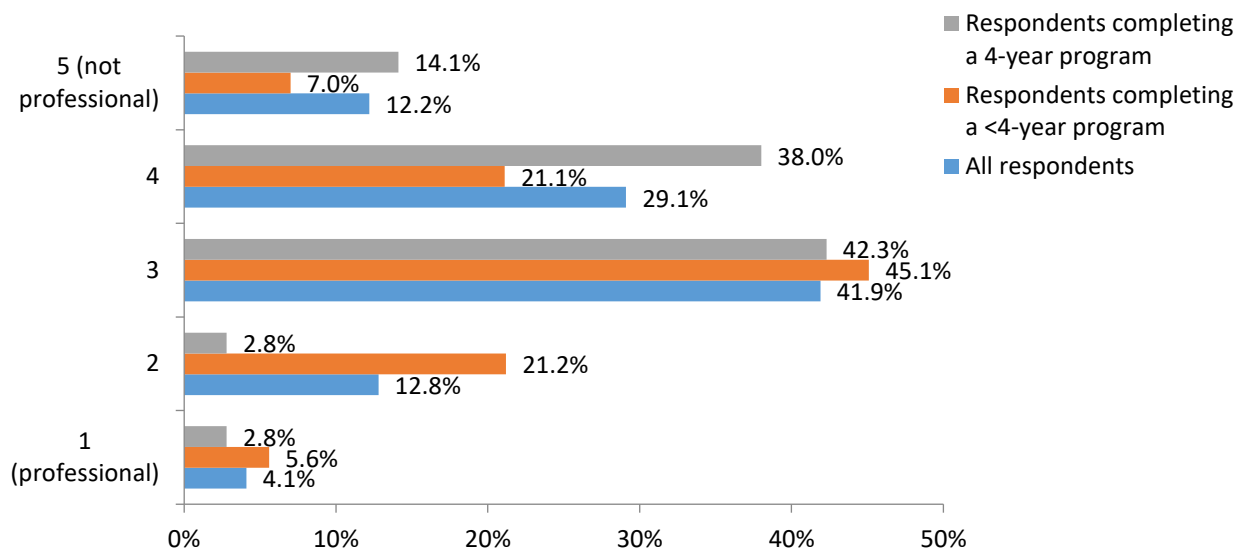
*“No specific earnings just want to get a job I love working with children”*

*“the money does not matter”*

*“I’m not sure. I’m not worried about it, I’m thinking more about if the children in my classroom will like me”*

Survey participants were asked to rate how the public views the early childhood/child and youth field as a profession on a scale from 1 (professional) to 5 (not professional). Of the 148 respondents, those completing a four-year program were more likely to indicate ratings that lean toward the unprofessional end of the scale (94.4%) compared to those completing a less than four-year program (73.2%). Overall, the majority of respondents provided a rating of 3 or above (83.2%). The majority of provided ratings do lean towards the ‘not professional’ end of the scale rather than the ‘professional’ end of the scale.

*On a scale of 1 to 5, how do you feel the early childhood/child and youth profession is viewed by the public?*



Respondents were asked to further share their thoughts around how the public views the field as a profession. Of the 148 survey respondents, 55% left comments. Most of those who left comments specifically noted that the field is seen as “glorified babysitting”. Other comments suggested that they felt the field is viewed as “unimportant”, “easy”, and “women’s work”. Some respondents who commented also offered suggestions as to why the field is viewed in these ways, often indicating that it is because the general public simply does not understand the field and what it entails. Some people commented that, despite these set-backs, the professional view of the field is improving.

*"I believe that we are coming into a time where more people are seeing the importance of this profession, however we are still a long way from where we want to be. Some people still consider daycare as babysitting and do not understand why a degree is important when working with children."*

*"I don't believe the general public always understands or values the amount of education, intention, and energy that is put into this field and related ones."*

*"People perceive us as babysitters and lower than "actual teachers". People believe that our job is an easy job and anyone can do it, or choose to do it because it's an "easy" course. I strongly do not believe that we are valued and taken seriously in this chosen profession."*

*"All too often I hear Early Childhood Educators be referred to as "babysitters". I think many still think of it as "women's work" and that those working with children should do so simply for the love of it."*

*"I feel like it's a mix of people thinking it's just babysitting and people knowing it's important for the future of the child"*

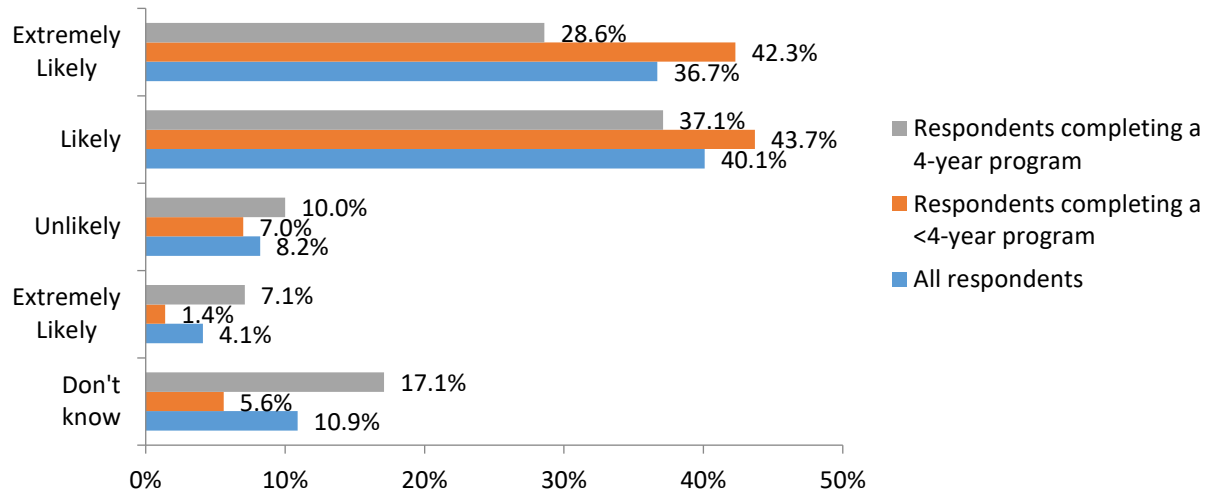
*"I feel there are mixed reviews about the early childhood profession. Much of the public do not recognize the knowledge and skill required which in turn degrades their view of importance in the profession."*

*"Most of the comments I receive are along the lines of, "Why would you go to school for four years to be a babysitter?"*

*"I think the perception is changing, however I feel most people still think of ECEs as "daycare workers" who play and change diapers all day instead of educating both children and families."*

Survey participants were asked to reflect upon the changes that have been happening in the early childhood sector over the previous six months with the introduction of Pre-primary Programs in elementary schools across Nova Scotia. When asked how likely they think these changes are to influence their future education and workplace the majority of survey respondents indicated that that is was likely (40.1%) or extremely likely (36.7%). Respondents completing a less than four-year program were more likely to indicate that the changes were likely (43.7%) or extremely likely (42.3%) to influence their future education and workplace than respondents completing a four-year program (37.1%; 28.6%).

*A lot of changes have been happening in the early childhood sector over the last 6 months with the introduction of pre-primary programs in elementary schools across Nova Scotia. How likely do you think these changes will influence your future education an*



Based on comments left by survey respondents, there are mixed opinions about the whether the introduction of the Pre-primary Program will influence their future positively or negatively. Many respondents commented that the introduction of the Pre-primary Program have made them hopeful and they are looking forward to pursuing work in the program, believing the program will increase the amount of opportunities for trained early childhood educators. Alternatively, some respondents commented that they are worried that the introduction of the Pre-primary Program will lead to childcare centres losing children to the program, resulting in fewer positions available to trained early childhood educators in these settings and even eventual closers of centres.

*“It will provide me with more work place opportunities as well as learning opportunities.”*

*“I would love to work in pre-primary, and I think it opens a lot of doors for ECEs.”*

*“There will be less jobs in childcare centers and it will drastically alter the childcare facilities that exist.”*

*“I think more jobs will open up and more people will know about it and have an interest in it.”*

## Limitations

### Focus Groups

This study represented a population of 15 families across four of the seven target communities in Nova Scotia. Repeated research with a larger sample would help to more accurately understand the perceptions and experiences related to the Pre-primary Program. The purpose of qualitative research is not to produce results generalizable to the population and it is important to note that the majority of



our findings reflect the families that did not participate. Therefore, it was difficult to discuss the Pre-primary Program in detail with families who did not access the program.

The majority of the participants were interviewed using a focus group format. This approach may have made it difficult to understand why different perceptions about the Pre-primary Program existed. Facilitating just one on one interviews rather than focus groups may have made it easier to receive more insightful information about how and why families had certain understandings about the program.

### Student Survey

Having used a survey method, the data collected could have been influenced by less desirable factors associated with self-report measures such as social desirability bias and inaccurate reporting (i.e. reliance on respondents' memory, influence of respondents' mood at time of survey completion). The sample size accrued for the current study was also relatively small, decreasing the generalizability of the study results to the larger population. It is also important to note that the sector of early childhood/child and youth is under constant change, therefore repeated surveys of this kind will be required in order to accurately reflect students' perceptions and expectations on workforce opportunities and career path options post-graduation at any given time.

## Conclusions

### Focus Groups

Overall, the majority of this report reflects the opinions of a diverse sample of families, the vast majority who did not enroll their child into the Pre-primary Program. Families recruited for the study included individuals across Nova Scotia, including communities outside of the Halifax Regional Municipality. Families spoke to the benefits of the program but felt that it was not accommodating their current schedule and transportation needs. The one family member who did access the Pre-primary Program commended the Pre-primary Program on its impact on their child. For those who did not attend, families still spoke highly about the play-based philosophy and skill acquisition such as socialization and language. Some families did have misconceptions regarding the program such as mandatory attendance and program structure. Several families expressed their lack of awareness related to the use of a play-based approach. Additionally, two families thought that joining the Pre-primary Program meant their children would be following the school schedule and would focus on more teacher-directed learning.

### Student Survey

This student survey provides insight as to which study and work plans are most common amongst students in this field, as well as differences between students completing a less than four-year program and students completing a four-year program. Students completing less than four-year programs typically indicated that following completion of their current program they plan to work in childcare or the Pre-primary Program. Although childcare and the Pre-primary Program were both similarly common choices for respondents completing a four-year program, these students were more likely to indicate pursuing further education and work in fields such as social work, child life, or teaching. Students completing a four-year program also tended to show greater variety in future work plans by being more likely to select options such as working in Early Intervention or in family resource programs.

Regardless of program length, students indicated that they hope to stay in Nova Scotia, specifically Halifax, with very few people indicating that they wish to go to another city, province, or country. Most

of the students indicated that they expect to earn between \$17 and \$25 per hour when it comes time for them to enter the workforce. Students who responded to the survey perceived that the field is largely viewed as unprofessional. They indicated that the field is not understood and not viewed as important, with early childhood educators being considered babysitters. Respondents often indicated that the on-going changes in the sector, including the addition of the Pre-primary Program, will likely influence their education and work plans. Most of the respondents who left comments expressed that this will be a positive influence by providing more work opportunities.

## Next steps

Infographic summaries of the family focus groups and student survey will be distributed to the participating communities/institutions (see Appendix B). Results from the family focus groups and student survey will be presented at the Inter-University Research Network (IURN) Spring Symposium meeting. Two additional research publications will be created to build on the results from this initial report. Focus group data from this report will be combined with results from an additional report looking at the perceptions of families who did access the Pre-primary Program. Data from both these reports will be combined to provide a bigger picture of families' experiences with the Pre-primary Program, their motivations for participation (or non-participation).

Furthermore, responses from the student survey around how the field of early childhood/child and youth is viewed by the public highlights a need to provide a platform for those studying and working within the field to advocate the importance of their work and what it entails. Routine availability of a similar survey to students would be ideal in order to continue capturing their perceptions and expectations on workforce opportunities and career path options post-graduation as the sector continues to evolve.

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You are invited to take part in a research study at Mount Saint Vincent University.

We want to hear from you if you have a child that was eligible for the Pre-Primary Program for the 2017-18 or 2018-19 school year. You can take part whether or not you decided to enroll your child in the Pre-Primary Program.

**Join us for a 60 minute focus group or interview on:**

- Your experiences with the Pre-Primary Program
- Your reasons for taking part (or not)
- Other support you need for your child/children



Childcare & refreshments will be available during the session. Participants will also receive a gift card at the session for their time.

**Contact Us**

To get involved, contact us at (902) 457-6553  
or [CRCEarlychildhood@msvu.ca](mailto:CRCEarlychildhood@msvu.ca)

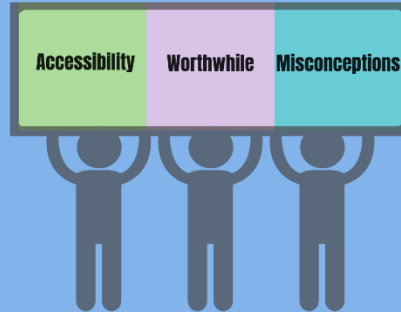
## Appendix B: Infographic summaries

### “Addressing the achievement gap through Pre-Primary: Exploring families’ experiences.”

#### WHAT WE FOUND



15  
Participants across Nova Scotia



#### Accessibility

*“It’s hard with the transportation because, a lot of people just can’t get their kids there...with their schedules, a lot of kids you know all the other kids get on the bus but they can’t so it cuts down a lot of the attendance.”*

Families had differing opinions regarding the accessibility of the Pre-primary Program. Many families expressed difficulties with transportation and that the Pre-primary Program did not fit with their work schedules. Therefore, enrolling their child in programs with flexible pick up times (i.e. child care centres) was more accommodating.



#### Worthwhile

*“But it was nice to have the transition being able to drop her off and she’d come out of the classroom so excited and you’d help her get her stuff on and she’d be jabbing about her day and everything that she did”*

Parents spoke to the positive aspects of the Pre-primary Program. Four parents reported that entering their child into Pre-primary would result in the adoption of skills such as language acquisition and socialization. Families spoke to the play-based philosophy of the Pre-primary Program. Four expressed their acceptance of the play-based approach, stating that learning through play was the best way for children to learn.



#### Misconceptions

*“But yeah I do— now that you told me though that they –there’s not a mandatory schedule I may actually think about putting her in maybe”*

Parents expressed their perceptions around the Pre-primary Program and their understanding of the various aspects. Parents had different perceptions about what the Pre-primary Program was and what it offered. Five parents had misconceptions about the program such as mandatory attendance and teacher-directed learning.



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## ADDRESSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP THROUGH PRE-PRIMARY: EXPLORING FUTURE WORKFORCE EXPECTATIONS TO SUPPORT FUTURE IMPLEMENTATION



### SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

- 96.6% female
- 17.6% identified as Indigenous
- 85.1% English as first language
- 62.2% indicated being 24 years old or younger

148  
STUDENTS



72.3%  
INDICATED THEY  
WANT TO STAY IN  
HALIFAX.

### FUTURE WORK PLANS



27.9% WANT TO WORK  
IN CHILD CARE

21.1% WANT TO WORK IN  
THE PRE-PRIMARY  
PROGRAM

Aside from wanting to work in child care or the Pre-primary Program, the majority of remaining responses indicated wanting to work in another field such as teaching, child life specialist, or early intervention.

<4-year program student: more likely to indicate wanting to work in child care or the Pre-primary Program overall.

4-year program students: more likely to indicate wanting to work in the other fields as previously mentioned (i.e. teaching, child life). They also demonstrated more variety in future work plans. For example, they were the only ones to indicate wanting to work in family resource programs or related youth care/education programs.



### PERCEPTIONS OF THE FIELD

Earnings  
Most participants indicated that they expect to make \$17-25/hour.



#### Changes in the field with the introduction of the Pre-primary Program

Most participants indicated that the current changes in the field will likely influence their future education and workplace. These changes were mostly indicated to be positive, including increased job opportunities for trained ECEs.

<4-year program students: More likely to indicate that the current changes in the field are likely to influence their future education and workplace.

### FUTURE STUDY PLANS

54.7%  
PLAN ON ENGAGING IN  
POST-SECONDARY STUDIES



Majority of post-secondary study plans included enrolling in a program in education, another program in early childhood education/child and youth program, or 'Other' (i.e. social work, child life)

4-year program students: more likely to indicate planning to engage in post-secondary studies overall and in specifically other fields such as social work or child life.

How participants feel the early childhood/child and youth profession is viewed by the public



Majority of participants' ratings indicate that they feel the field is viewed as unprofessional.

Participants often commented that the field is viewed as "unimportant", "easy" and "women's work", which they often described as likely being due to the public not understanding the field and what it entails.

4-year program students: more likely to indicate believing the profession is viewed as unprofessional by providing a rating of 3 or above.

"I DON'T BELIEVE THE GENERAL PUBLIC ALWAYS UNDERSTANDS OR VALUES THE AMOUNT OF EDUCATION, INTENTION, AND ENERGY THAT IS PUT INTO THIS FIELD AND RELATED ONES."

Participant quote retrieved from survey.

SURVEY  
RESULTS SUMMARY  
PROVIDED BY:



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