

Peer Mentoring for Early Childhood Educators: Building Capacity and Leaving a Legacy

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Have you heard about the province-wide Peer-Mentoring Project for Early Childhood Educators in BC? The purpose of this project is to support the ongoing professional development needs of beginning and experienced early childhood educators. Specifically, it aims to expand the current infrastructure of support for both new and experienced early childhood educators, with an aim to slow the number of ECEs who leave the field. The goal is to build the capacity of ECEs, supporting their ongoing professional development needs, as well as increase their levels of teacher-efficacy and their confidence in their own abilities as an educator. This project, funded by the Ministry for Children and Family Development through Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre, is a partnership with Thompson Rivers University in collaboration with ECEBC.

This Peer-Mentoring Project is an action research project where participants are involved in sharing their experiences through a variety of means, such as reflective writings, online conversations, focus group meetings, interviews, and online surveys. Through the creation of artifacts, such as a professional video and professional permanent displays, we aim to leave a legacy of what ECEs experiences are and how communities of practice can support the ongoing professional identity needs of early childhood educators.



Peer-Mentoring Project facilitators at the orientation in August 2019.

In British Columbia, where this research is launched, there is an urgent need to study ways to support early childhood educators in the early years of their careers, due to devastating rates of attrition.

History

This Peer-Mentoring Project is based on previous research with early childhood educators throughout BC, and is deeply connected with the local and provincial early childhood education field. This has been an intentional choice made by me (Laura), the principal investigator of this research, as I have wanted to work directly with early childhood educators, believing that if I want to support the ongoing professional development needs of early childhood educators, I should go directly to them to find out what

they need and want. I have also worked at the local and provincial levels with ECEBC.

My doctoral research focused on the needs and experiences of beginning early childhood educators in BC. This research was motivated by the startling statistic from ECEBC that 50% of early childhood educators leave the field within the first five years of work (Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia, 2012). From this research, early childhood educators identified the work as being both overwhelming and deeply satisfying, the induction support as haphazard (meaning they could not count on receiving support through mentoring and/or professional development), and finally, educators endorsed the idea of a program of support for all new educators (Doan, 2016).


From this research, I developed peer-mentoring projects for both new and experienced educators as a pilot study (Doan, 2019). This has included peer-mentoring through a community of practice, where educators learn from each other and have access to: online support, access to faculty, visits to early learning programs, and professional development based on the needs of the group.

Early childhood educators who took part in this work reported a greater connection to the ECE community. They learned new skills and knowledge through professional development that was responsive to their needs, and they had increased confidence in both giving and receiving mentoring.

Current Project

This project seeks to build on what is already present, so utilizes the current structure that is present through the existing individual ECEBC branches across the province of BC, of which there are 19. The postdoctoral fellow, Soon Young Jang, has joined as the project manager, and we have three graduate research assistants. Currently, we have 17 peer-mentoring groups in the following communities: Terrace, Bulkley Valley, Dawson Creek, Prince George, Quesnel, Campbell River, Comox, Port Alberni, Westcoast, Nanaimo, Southern Gulf Islands, Victoria, Vancouver, Kamloops, Central Okanagan, Northern Okanagan, and the West Kootenay. Each peer-mentoring group takes place within a community of practice, and includes up to 12 ECEs (e.g., six beginning; six experienced) and one or two facilitators. The facilita-

Are you interested in supporting a fellow Early Childhood Educator?



Peer-Mentoring Project
For Early Childhood Educators in British Columbia

Elements Of Project:
Peer-Mentoring;
Online Support; and
Professional Development
within a Community of Practice

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Postcard for the Peer-Mentoring Project.

tors have been instrumental in this project. In total, we currently have 20 facilitators and 196 early childhood educators. An orientation for facilitators took place in August at Thompson Rivers University. This was a wonderful time to be together, to be able to introduce the project, and to build relationships with the facilitators.

About the Project

The project itself includes peer mentoring, online support, and access to professional development through a community of practice. Individual peer-mentoring groups get together face-to-face, once a month. This is a time for building relationships and learning from each other. This may include a guest speaker, depending on the group's interest. The idea behind the professional development is that it is offered within the community of practice, where groups are meeting together over time, as opposed to a one-time workshop. This allows educators the opportunity to revisit and to continue the dialogue,

through future group meetings, in pairs, and through the online platforms. An important component of the peer-mentoring community of practice is the individual members' practice of confidentiality. This is something that was discussed at the initial meetings, and participants signed confidentiality agreements. Past participants who took part in the pilot project have highlighted the importance of having a safe place to share openly about practice issues.

In addition to the monthly face-to-face group gatherings, ECE pairs have the opportunity to meet weekly, either face-to-face, online, or through the telephone. We have used a peer-mentoring model, as new early childhood educators acknowledged that they had value and have things to contribute in a mentoring relationship. By using a non-hierarchical approach, we hope that learning will occur for both new and experienced early childhood educators.

Each peer-mentoring group has a private online platform, where

members can post and engage in discussion. Facilitators post weekly provocations and educators have the opportunity to engage with the posts, and to post their own questions, thoughts, or ponderings. Educators who were part of the pilot project identified the need for a closed online platform where participants could connect whenever they have time.

Outcomes of the Project

The main desired outcomes of the project include:

- Expand the current infrastructure of professional development support for new and experienced early childhood educators in British Columbia.
- Build the capacity of the peer-mentoring program, including the number of facilitators, training sessions, and locations in which sessions are offered.
- Use online platforms within a community of practice, as a means of connecting with each other and supporting each other.
- Improve access to the training for Indigenous populations.
- Improve access to the training for ECEs in rural or remote communities.
- Identify promising practices in supporting the ongoing development of ECEs and their retention in the profession.
- Create a documentary video and a professional permanent display to both capture and disseminate

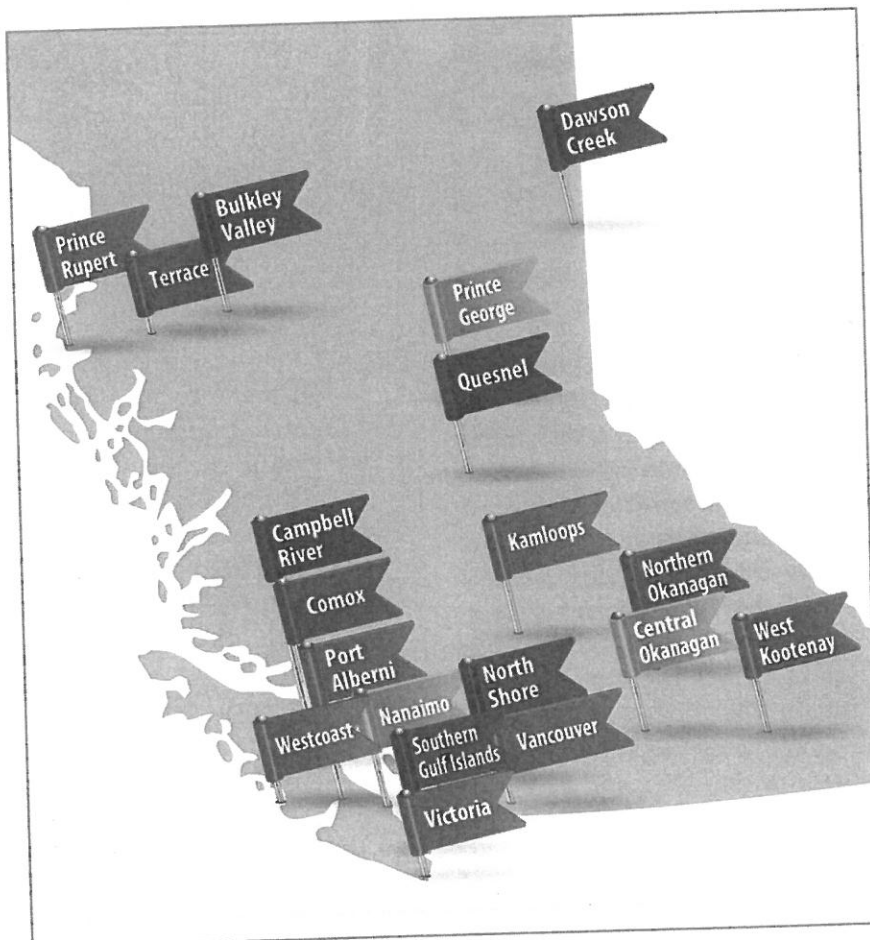
the participants' experiences and findings from the research.

Research on peer mentoring with beginning and experienced ECEs is highly relevant given the current context in British Columbia and in Canada. This project seeks to understand the key issues related to supporting the ongoing development of ECEs; therefore it is necessary to hear educators' stories using their own words and reflections. The creation of dissemination products from their stories, such as a professional video and professional permanent displays, journal articles, and conference presentations will not only position ECEs to be active participants in the research but also provide educators with powerful tools for professional identity. In addition, the rich narrative accounts of the ECEs will provide recommendations for effective peer-mentoring projects. In the absence of structural peer-mentoring supports provincially, this research project will put supports for new early childhood educators in place, so that in their time of need, they can get the support they deserve. Through the ongoing professional development support, this project will also enhance the experiences of not only ECEs but also children and families who are working with these professionals.

Next Steps

We are just beginning to analyze the data that are coming in. While we can't share results just yet, we can say that we are encouraged to see the mutual support educators are experiencing, through the peer-mentoring group gatherings, peer-mentor pair times, and online

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The locations of the communities of practice across the province.

Pedagogists and the ECPN,

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platform. We look forward to being able to share the results of this project in the future.

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From the words of Pam Preston, executive director of Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre, the goal of this project is to both "build capacity and leave a legacy."

We would like to end with a quote from an early childhood educator, a participant from a recent peer-mentoring group:

"...one of the reasons why ECEs burn out so quickly, they are overworked and they are not valued. And I think that peer mentorship ... having those constant valuing comments and support, it would sustain us a lot in this field."

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