

# The Power of Connection: An Induction Support Pilot Project for ECEs in Kamloops

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**Y**ou have probably heard the startling statistic that close to 50% of beginning early childhood educators leave the field within the first five years of work (ECEBC, 2012). While there are many reasons for this, as an instructor in the post-secondary system, I have chosen to focus my work on supporting new educators while encouraging the ongoing professional-development needs of experienced educators.

Based on research done with beginning early childhood educators in British Columbia, I developed a pilot induction support project for educators in the Kamloops area. Induction refers to the time when early childhood educators are introduced to the field of early childhood education. Induction activities may include professional development, observations, feedback on practice, and mentoring (Piggot-Irvine, Aitken, Ritchie, Ferguson, & McGrath, 2009).

The key findings from this initial study were that the work is overwhelming yet deeply satisfying; induction support is haphazard; and new educators want an induction program that includes mentoring or peer support, observations, feedback, and professional development.

Four theories have helped to inform my work: adult learning theory (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson,

2012), professional identity development (Katz, 1972; Vander Ven, 1988), communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and teacher efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Knowles,

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Holton, and Swanson's (2012) adult learning theory provides a theoretical context on how adults learn and, more specifically, what motivates them and how they can be taught in a way that meets their needs. From this theory I learned the importance of educators receiving professional development when they are motivated or have a need for the learning. The theories of professional identity development put forth by Katz (1972) and Vander Ven (1988) recognizes that developing professional identity takes time. For me, this means that educators should receive ongoing support beyond

the post-secondary system. Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice theory asserts the idea that learning takes place within communities of practice, not only within the individual. Therefore, this study was set up to include the idea of learning within community. Teacher efficacy, which comes from Bandura's (1997) work, refers to the beliefs one has about their own ability as a teacher or educator and is related to why some educators remain in the profession and why others choose to leave.

The project involved the following aspects: professional development (based on what participants wanted), peer-mentoring, visits to early learning programs, faculty support, and online support. The study took place between June 2016 and March 2017 and involved 22 BC certified ECEs in total: 7 beginning ECEs (5 years or less), 3 moderately experienced ECEs (5 to 7 years), and 12 experienced ECEs (7 to 29 years) from 8 different early learning programs. Participants took part in online surveys, focus groups, and interviews.

Based on participants' requests, I was able to offer the following professional development: how to support children and families experiencing separation or divorce; how to be a mentor to new students and staff; how to give feedback; leadership (how to be a team leader); how

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to support toddler development in a safe environment; and health and safety (allergies and use of EpiPens). Peer-mentoring activities included an introductory meeting, an email listserv, a peer-mentoring café, face-to-face meetings, and support in finding a peer-mentor.

Based on participants' feedback, the three most effective aspects of the project were professional development, peer mentoring, and community connections. Three themes emerged from the interviews and focus groups: awareness, connection to community, and increase in knowledge and skills. I've gathered some of these quotes below (the italics are mine).

By *awareness*, I mean awareness that one can call on their peers, that one can be a mentor (my abilities), of the needs of new students and educators, and of the value of peer mentoring.

"In my own personal work situation, now that I'm a little bit older and more experienced, I'm realizing that, you know, I can be a mentor, but I can also be mentored. And I like that. We can learn from another, and I think that is something to be really intentional about."

"I often feel like I don't want to bother people because usually those extra things have to be done on our own time, and getting to know those people [in the pilot project] and knowing they were all interested in mentoring and being mentored helped me to feel more confident to reach out."

By *connection to community*, I mean connecting to people, knowing that one can call on people for help, and being part of a community of support.

"I think that in our field, it's really important to have connections with other educators and especially outside of your workplace. I think it's important to have other perspectives and opportunities to connect with people."

"I was opening up my own business and [through the project] had support from other more experienced directors of administrators."

By *increase in knowledge and skills*, I mean an increase through responsive professional development and opportunities for dialogue and networking.

"I really enjoyed the professional development, because Laura really listened to what we wanted and she followed through on what we were asking."

"The professional development and especially the group discussions are resulting in talking about and implementing more positive ways of guiding certain behaviours."

With regards to teacher efficacy, participants identified isolation and a negative work environment as factors related to teacher efficacy and spoke of the importance of having a community of support that can offer a different perspective.

"I think that over time you start questioning yourself, like, I'm not good enough, or am I doing this right? Or you know, if you have somebody coming from above you, sort of squishing you, you sometimes start losing yourself, thinking, "I'm not that good." And in the meantime, other people are looking at you like you are amazing! . . . One of the reasons why ECEs burn out so quickly [is that] they are overworked and they are not valued. And I think that peer mentorship

will [help]. Having those constant valuing comments and support—it would sustain us a lot in this field."

As I look to the future, I want to explore whether or not teacher efficacy, community connections, and mentor efficacy can help to sustain practice and avoid burnout. I am now in the process of developing a peer-mentoring project that will involve up to 50 beginning and experienced early childhood educators. Based on recommendations from participants, the project will involve greater online support with a secure forum for discussion, and live streaming and video recording of professional development for better accessibility.

I am deeply thankful to the early childhood educators who took part in this study. In addition, I want to acknowledge the financial support from Make Children First Kamloops and Thompson Rivers University.

I know that many early childhood educators in British Columbia and beyond work very hard to advocate on behalf of all early childhood educators. Let us continue to persevere.

"You can become very . . . feel defeated after a while . . . it begins your burnout. It eats away at your confidence as an educator . . . So I think having a community like this, and I say this for younger educator friends of mine, who I know are excellent educators but just the position they are in and the things they are dealing with from the higher-ups . . . to have a place on Facebook you can go to and say I really need an online hug today."

## References

- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York, NY: W. H. Freeman.

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