

Reflections on the Peer-Mentoring Project for Early Childhood Educators in British Columbia

Laura K. Doan, Friday Bailey, Amanda Kopetski, Rachel Lanphear, Nora Mejia, Cari Rawling, Alex Robertson, and Hannah Schwartzentruber

In May of this year, we were looking forward to sharing some of our experiences in Peer-Mentoring Project at the ECEBC Conference. When the conference was understandably cancelled due to the pandemic, we decided to turn our thoughts to paper, and share in a different way. What follows are some initial findings from the Peer-Mentoring Project for Early Childhood Educators in BC, along with some reflections from three facilitators and four peer-mentors.

Background of Project

The Peer-Mentoring Project for Early Childhood Educators in British Columbia took place between September 2019 and March 2020. The project was built on the current structure that is present through the existing individual ECEBC branches across the province of BC, of which there are 19. There were 17 peer-mentoring groups in the following communities/regions: Terrace, Bulkley Valley, Dawson Creek,

Prince George, Quesnel, Campbell River, Comox, Port Alberni, West-coast, Nanaimo, Southern Gulf Islands, Victoria, Vancouver, Kamloops, Central Okanagan, Northern Okanagan, and the West Kootenay. Each peer-mentoring group took place within a community of practice, and included up to 12 ECEs (six beginning; six experienced) and one or two facilitators. The facilitators have been instrumental in this project. In total, we had 20 facilitators and 200 early childhood educators.

Peer Mentoring Project
for Early Childhood Educators in British Columbia

The purpose of the Peer Mentoring project is to support the ongoing professional development needs of beginning and experienced Early Childhood Educators.

17 Groups in 17 BC communities were visited

200 Early Childhood Educators were involved

20 Skilled and dedicated facilitators

The project paired up beginning and experienced **Early Childhood Educators** so they could **share their experiences, learn from each other, become part of a respected collective voice,** and build an effective **network of support.**

Among Giants

Through our focus groups and interviews with close to 200 Early Childhood Educators, I feel as though I am walking among giants—educators who have strength, determination, and passion, with deep roots. The photo of this tree captures this thought to me.

LAURA K. DOAN

CATHEDRAL GROVE, BC

This project, funded by the Ministry for Children and Family Development through Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre, was a partnership with Thompson Rivers University, in collaboration with the ECEBC. The purpose was to support the ongoing professional development needs of beginning and experienced early childhood educators. Specifically, this project aimed 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. Through this project, we aimed to build the capacity of ECEs, supporting their ongoing professional identity development needs as well as increasing their levels of educator efficacy. We wanted to build their confidence in their own abilities as educators.

About the Project

The project itself included peer-mentoring, online support, and access to professional development through a community of practice. Individual peer-mentoring groups met together face-to-face, once a month. This was a time for building relationships and learning from each other. This may have included a guest speaker, depending on the group's interest, and each group received funds for this purpose. The idea behind the professional development was that it was offered within the community of practice, where groups are meeting together over time, as opposed to a one-time workshop. This allowed educators the opportunity to revisit and to continue the dialogue, through future group meetings, in pairs, and through the online platforms. The individual communities of practice had autonomy about what they

chose to do in terms of professional development, and the hope was that this would enable educators to identify and focus on their own motivations or interests, and encourage educator efficacy.

An important component of the peer-mentoring community of practice was 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 (and subsequent projects) 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 had the opportunity to meet weekly, either face-to-face, online, or through the telephone. We used a peer-mentoring model, as new early childhood educators acknowledged that as new ECEs, they still had value, and have things to contribute in a mentoring relationship. By using a non-hierarchical approach, we hoped that learning would occur for both new and experienced early childhood educators.

Each peer-mentoring group had a private online platform where members could post and engage in discussion. Facilitators posted weekly provocations, and educators had the opportunity to engage with the posts, and to post their own questions, thoughts, and 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.

This province-wide Peer-Mentoring Project was an action research project where participants were involved

in sharing their experiences through a variety of means, including 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, our hope was 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. Due to devastating rates of attrition in BC, there is an urgent need to study ways to support early childhood educators in the early years of their careers, .

What follows is a look at the initial themes from the weekly reflections, along with reflections from facilitators and peer-mentors.

Peer-mentors wrote about the benefit of having a peer-mentor.

Connection and Collaboration

Cari Rawling, Facilitator in the Quesnel Peer-Mentoring Group



Cari shared this about her experience as a facilitator:

“Connection, that was the most important piece for me as a facilitator for the Peer-Mentoring Project through Thompson Rivers University with Laura Doan. I personally have felt very isolated in my practice as an ECE, and sensed a real disconnect between early childhood educators in my community. The Peer-Mentoring Project brought together 13 early childhood

educators, including me, to build a community and engage in rich discussions. It was amazing to watch from the very first meeting where everyone was noticeably quiet and reserved to the last gathering where there was tons of laughter and conversations! I watched as connections were made and friendships grew! I saw sharing and compassion. I saw common interests develop and a new understanding blossom of how very similar we really all are in our passion as ECEs. The gatherings each month fuelled my desire to connect at a deeper level and many of my participants echoed the same sentiment. It was a really remarkable experience and I often wonder if Covid-19 hadn't arrived just as we were wrapping up would the connection had continued?"

Alex Robertson, Peer-Mentor from the Quesnel Peer-Mentoring Group

Alex wrote about her experience as a peer-mentor:

"Connection. That was what I took away from this program. Not only connection with other early childhood educators in my community, but a connection with my own practice again. Having been in this field for as many years as some of us have been, we can often lose sight of what drew us to this field in the first place,

but by mentoring colleagues new to this field I was able to re-establish my passion for this profession."

Emotional and Psychological Support

Peer-mentors also wrote about the challenges in the ECE field, including burnout, work/life balance, low wage, high turnover, and lack of qualified ECEs. One peer-mentor wrote, "A huge topic that popped up already was self-care and burnout. I was surprised that after only being in the field a full year that this was already a topic my partner wanted to chat about which made me question why?"

Nora Mejia, Facilitator in the Vancouver Peer-Mentoring Group



Nora shared some of her journey as an early childhood educator, and her experience as a facilitator in the project:

"When someone asked me why I entered the field of early childhood education, I didn't have an inspirational story to tell. My parents were teachers, and my sister, cous-

ins, aunts and uncles were teachers, so it was the natural path for me to follow. Nothing fancy really.

Some of us may have an amazing story and reasons why we chose this profession. For my mother, there was no other way; she felt it was her vocation. For my father the reasoning was practical; it meant a sure income. For others, our love for children made us want to be around them to help make their worlds better, being a positive influence in their young lives. For those who had children of their own, selecting this career was a clear and practical choice.

We may have answered the question of why we entered the field, but I also wonder what the answer would be if we were to ask years later why we stayed in the field. It is not for the money or the glory. Yet we continue to do our work alongside children, sometimes quietly and always diligently. We are resourceful, but with all the difficulties and hardships we face, it is not easy to stay. We are here because we are stubborn and want to make the emotional and physical spaces to be with children and provide the best we can for them at any given moment. In addition, all children in our programs come attached to a family curiously; they are rich with their own unique life experiences, culture, and family composition, making our work even more complex and beautifully challenging.

Around the five-year mark I felt knowledgeable and experienced, but I was burned out. I was faced with a decision: Should I stay or should I go? And if I go, where to? What will happen to my children?

I know I am not the only educator who has faced this decision.

"It [the Peer-Mentoring Project] expanded their support network greatly, giving them hope for the future of their careers in the early years field. It encouraged them to stay instead of switching paths now when we need them the most."

—Nora Mejia

I knew then that if I could help support other educators the benefits would spill over and improve children's lives while they were in our care. The choice was clear, but it took me away from learning and growing along with the children.

For me there is nothing like sharing my professional life with like-minded people, those who understand me as an educator and can relate to my struggles while, at the same time, challenge me to explore my biases and stretch my growing edge. They are people who have the same goals as I do in creating a community in which we want to live with others where children are free to be themselves and continue to love learning by exploring their environments to become those who will reshape the world.

My experience as a facilitator for the Peer-Mentoring Project in Vancouver provided opportunities for educators to be part of an extended support group, proving extremely successful in preventing burnout and alleviating the many stresses related to caring for and guiding children. I witnessed their resilience as I saw firsthand how these early childhood educators opened their hearts and minds to each other, sharing ideas, thoughts, fears. They also shared their homes and offered a listening ear without passing judgment. It expanded their support network

greatly, giving them hope for the future of their careers in the early years field. It encouraged them to stay in the field instead of switching paths at a time when we need them the most."

Supporting Each Other

Peer-mentors received support from each other regarding their own educator efficacy (or confidence as an educator).

Rachel Lanphear, Peer-Mentor in the Vancouver Peer-Mentoring Group



Rachel shared her experience as an early childhood educator at the 5-year mark.

"I remember during one of my classes in the Early Childhood Education program at Langara College, a teacher stated 'In five years, most of you will not be working in this field.' I also remember how excited and nervous we all were to get our first jobs 'on the floor' with the children in various daycare centres across the Lower Mainland.

Looking back, this statement made by one of my teachers was true. I have a core group of friends that I met during my year in the ECE pro-

gram, and we still connect with each other through phone calls and texts, on social media, and occasional visits. Although we all lived in Vancouver during the program, we are now scattered across the Lower Mainland in Victoria, Ucluelet, Vancouver, and Richmond. Out of the six of us—only two are still currently working "on the floor" in child care centres five years later.

I found out about the Peer-Mentoring Project at a crucial point in my career in the fall of 2019. I had just reached the five-year mark working as an early childhood educator in an infant/toddler centre, and I was beginning to feel the effects of burnout, staticity, and was unsure where I was heading in my career path. I remember walking into the room for the first time after being invited to be a part of this research project, and seeing the faces of 10 other early childhood educators from all over Vancouver working in all different types of settings and programs. I didn't realize how much I needed another educator to connect with, share stories and resources with, and feel inspired by until I met with my peer-mentor for the first time.

Although many of us work as part of a team of early childhood educators, we don't always connect with everyone we're working with, and sometimes it's hard to get advice or simply vent to the educators we're surrounded by eight hours a day. Meeting with my peer-mentor weekly from September 2019 to February 2020 didn't feel like something that I had scheduled into my calendar, but instead it felt like meeting with a friend who understood my job and the stresses that might occur, who had been in the field for 10 years and had advice for almost

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—Rachel Lanphear

every situation I encountered, and who genuinely valued, appreciated, and supported me. There were no objectives or criteria for our meetings—and we often ended up getting dinner after work or grabbing a coffee together, and she even invited me into her home to hang out. Through this research project, I felt like I was able to get to know my peer-mentor as well as the other educators and my facilitator, Nora, on a personal level. We gained each other's trust, talked about our hardships and dreams, laughed together, and sympathized with each other when someone came to a meeting after a tough day at their centre.

Even though I remembered those words my teacher had spoken five years earlier, I didn't realize how pivotal this time in my career was, and how much of an impact this Peer-Mentoring Project has had on who I am as an early childhood educator and where my path would lead. Being a part of this research project supported me to gain confidence in myself, and also made me feel acknowledged and respected by my peer-mentor, the other participants in my cohort, my facilitator, and the lead investigators of the Peer-Mentoring Project. This support system pushed me to apply for a new job in the field as a supervisor of a child care centre, and has given me inspiration, energy, and passion to continue to work as an early childhood educator. It has also renewed my hope that we, as educators, will begin feeling more valued and respected as important pillars in the early childhood education system throughout BC by our government and society. I hope one day I can also be a support and mentor for another early childhood educator when they may need it the most."

Sharing Pedagogical Ideas and Resources

Peer-mentors shared pedagogical ideas and resources with each other, related to the Image of the Child, attachment and belonging, the BC Early Learning Framework, documentation, and more.

One peer-mentor shared, "We discussed slow pedagogy and thought of ways of slowing down to really be in relationship with children. We thought about which time-consuming responsibilities we might be able to let go of in order to be fully with each child."

Amanda Kopetski, Peer-Mentor in the Quesnel Peer-Mentoring Group

Amanda Kopetski shared here experience as a peer-mentor:

"I had the amazing opportunity to be a part of the peer-mentoring project. We got paired up with another ECE and were to connect with each other and share. At first I was a little nervous about being with someone I did not really know and sharing my life, especially my struggles. As each week passed this meeting became more meaningful and something to look forward to. We would eat lunch and discuss what was going on in our professional and personal life. I really needed this.

We would also meet in large groups monthly. Our facilitator would have things for us to do and discuss but we all found ourselves more in need of supporting each other. We would bring up things and get everyone's opinions! This seems so important and honestly there was never enough time. I bet we could all sit together for hours and not stop talk-



Amanda and her son.

ing. Everyone cherished this time together.

I think every ECE should experience this. We all need to come together as a community and support each other. We are not in a game to see who wins or loses. We are in a game of life and everyone should want everyone to succeed. I have come to appreciate everyone as we are in this for the same reason.

This project really opened my eyes to how important supporting each other really is. I never really knew who my fellow educators were, and now I have a relationship with many. I respect them all as we have the same goals!"

Helping to Sustain Ongoing Professional Identity Development of ECEs

Laura K. Doan, Primary Investigator for the Peer Mentoring Project

Research on peer-mentoring with beginning and experienced ECEs is highly relevant given the current

context in BC and in Canada. This project sought to understand the key issues related to supporting the ongoing professional identity development of ECEs, therefore it was 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 educators to be active participants in the research, but also provide educators powerful tools for professional identity. In addition, the rich narrative accounts of the ECEs will provide recommendations for effective peer-mentoring projects in the future. In the absence of structural supports provincially,

this research put them in place, so that in their time of need, early childhood educators could get the support they deserve. Through the ongoing professional development support, it was hoped that this project would enhance the experiences of not only ECEs but also children and families who are working with these professionals.

In every one of the 17 communities that I visited, I encountered dedicated and passionate early childhood educators. This research helped to uncover what sustains early childhood educators. The Peer-Mentoring Project gave early childhood educators something they are not used to having: time together. Through the model of a community of practice, which removes the

This project demonstrates what is possible when we support ECEs in the way they should be supported.

hierarchy, ECEs gathered together once a month. Outside of the group face-to-face gathering, peer-mentor pairs met together once a week in a variety of ways.

Our greatest resource are our people, the early childhood educators. We have such strong resources in the new and experienced ECEs. When we consider the working conditions, they have shown resilience and adaptability.

Friday Bailey, a facilitator for the Terrace Peer-Mentoring Group, and Hannah Schwartzentruber, a peer-mentor in the same group, created this image to describe their experiences.



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| SEED | An invitation to structure connectivity and create meaningful relationships to strengthen ourselves and the work we do. As we grow, we drop seeds, which creates new opportunities. |
| FRUIT | Our sense of being, as ECEs, was impacted by participating in this project. |
| GROWTH | Connections were created and deepened among participants. |
| POLLINATION | Discussions among participants, pollinating one another's ideas. |
| BLOSSOMS | Gratitude and a sense of appreciation for the opportunity to participate in the project. |
| EXPERIENCE | Developing a sense for when to lean in and when to sit back. Sharing our stories. |
| NURTURING | Food, coffee, honorariums, gifts, support. |
| TIME | Participation in the project took place over several months allowing participants to engage at their own pace. |
| COMMUNITY | Our participation in this project was shared with the general public in our town. |
| SPROUT | Concepts inspired by the project became embedded into practice by participants. |
| CLIMATE | Monthly gatherings to extend our practice and develop community. |
| SUN | Partnerships to enhance personal experience in the project and nurture personal growth. |
| RAIN | Online platform created to share, communicate, ask, connect, listen, and learn. |
| ROOTS | Inquiry and curiosity. |
| SEED | Invitation to participate was offered. |
| SOIL | Laura shared her research with us and created an opportunity for growth. |

Peer Mentoring Project
for Early Childhood Educators in British Columbia
Submitted by Friday Bailey & Hannah Schwartzentruber



ECEs in this project said their involvement in the project itself helped to sustain them, to keep them in the field. Others shared how their participation in this project helped to give them the confidence to pursue other opportunities, like applying for the pedagogist position within their communities. One educator said, “This project was what kept me from leaving. I was really disillusioned and frustrated. I felt very isolated, and I would think, ‘I can’t do this.’” However, through the project, she connected with another early childhood educator in her community, one with decades of experience in the field. The educator said, “We could come together and mutually support one another. I would say we built a friendship, but it was more than that. It was a confidential space, and there was no judgment, just acceptance.”

This project gave us a window into what it would be like if ECEs had regular time to meet in a safe space where their needs were cared for. One peer-mentor described the project this way, “The Peer-Mentoring [Project] gave us a space, and an intention, a structure to come together and share our individual journeys and our different experiences.”

**“Our time together
‘filled my cup,’ each sip of
tea warming my insides.
When my tea mug was
physically empty, I felt
refreshed mentally.”**

—Chelsea, Peer-Mentor

With 200 ECE participants and 20 facilitators, there is much more to share. We have created a professional video and an exhibit, featuring the voices of the educators in this project. I hope to share the professional exhibit when it is safe to do so. In the meantime, you can check out the project website for updates, and our professional video: ecepeermentoring.trubox.ca

To all of the early childhood educators and facilitators who took part in this project, know that I am deeply thankful for your involvement. Thank you for sharing your thoughts, experiences, and passion for the field.

Dr. Laura K. Doan is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, where she teaches in the Early Childhood Education and Master of Education programs. Laura is the primary investigator for the Peer-Mentoring for Early Childhood Educators in BC Project.

Friday Bailey is a passionate ECE living in Terrace. She is also a student of child and youth care. She feels fortunate to be a part of a large network of powerhouse advocates for children and youth.

Amanda Kopetski is an early childhood educator in Quesnel BC, and has over seven years of experience. She is the outreach consultant for the Child Care Resource and Referral Centre, Pop-Up Play facilitator, and a resource parent with the Family Institute of BC.

Rachel Lanphear is the supervisor at Huckleberry Daycare, an infant/toddler centre at UBC Childcare Services. She has worked in the field of



Dr. Laura K. Doan

ECE for almost six years with infant/toddlers and 3-to-5-year-olds.

Cari Rawling is an ECE with over 27 years of experience. She is the child care and education consultant for the Quesnel Child Care Resource and Referral Centre, a StrongStart educator for School District 28, and a provincial ECEBC board member.

Alex Robertson is the owner of Little Pioneers Childcare Centre in Quesnel. She has worked in this field for the past 20 years in all forms of programs and with children of all ages.

Nora Mejia, B.Ed, ECE, has worked for Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre as a professional learning program coordinator since 2007. She prepares and delivers professional development to early care and learning professionals on a wide range of topics.

Hannah Schwartzenruber is an early childhood education assistant, practising at a small centre in Terrace, where she is finishing her diploma part time.