
Mentorship as a Strategy to Address Recruitment and Retention in the Early Years Sector

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Many of us have heard the startling statistic that up to 50% of beginning early childhood educators leave the field within the first 5 years of work (ECEBC, 2012). Could mentoring be one part of the answer to building capacity within our early childhood education workforce? We argue, yes. This article examines the recent Peer-Mentoring Project for Early Childhood Educators in BC (Peer-Mentoring Project) through the lens of retention.

Imagine entering a workplace where you were formally connected to a supportive person with whom you could share challenges, successes, and wonderings without fear of judgement or repercussions. This person would be able to relate to your experiences, offer guidance, and share ideas and strategies. This relationship would be reciprocal—a safe place to ask questions of each other to challenge thinking and offer moral encouragement. Sounds great doesn't it? You have just discovered the magic of mentorship.

Some countries already provide this kind of support within the job site. In New Zealand, for example, early childhood educators are involved in a 2- to 5-year process of induction and support prior to applying for “fully registered teacher status” (Aitken, et al., 2008, p. 1). Early childhood educators are partially registered prior to concluding the induction process (Doan, 2014). Educators are assigned a mentor who is involved in provid-

ing professional development, observation, feedback, and assessments during a 2- to 5-year period prior to educators applying for fully registered teacher status (Aitken et al., 2008). Early childhood educators viewed the program as being “vital to the profession and to the eventual completion of their teaching registration” (p. 25).

Some of the Reasons Why Early Childhood Educators Leave the Field

In BC, new ECEs graduate from the post-secondary system with specific education and experience in areas such as child development, interpersonal communication, working with families, curriculum planning, and practicum placements. This formal education leads to certification and the ability to work in licensed early childhood settings, but often the first few years are unsettling and can cause a new graduate to question their career choice.

A study of new early childhood educators in 2014 found: a) the work is overwhelming, yet deeply satisfying; b) induction support (access to mentoring, professional development, observations, and feedback) was haphazard, meaning that new educators could not count on getting the support they needed; and c) new early childhood educators think there should be an induction program for new educators (Doan, 2014).

One new educator described her experience this way: “When I walked

in, it was very much ‘sink or swim.’ It was, ‘Here’s the room, here’s the kids, take care of them’” (Doan, 2014).

The reality of the sector is that newly graduated ECEs are often expected to immediately take on roles and responsibilities that include managing groups of children on their own, supporting families, and struggling to find their place among established staff teams. This can be stressful and overwhelming and can lead to new ECEs doubting their own abilities. In addition, with the critical shortage of certified educators, new ECEs may find themselves taking on supervisory roles with partially certified staff. This is not only overwhelming for the educator, but it also has the potential to seriously affect quality in early childhood settings. A new educator shared his experience: “There weren’t staff right there who I could ask for help, assistance, or to remind me of something that needed to be done. It was very much hit the ground running, on your own” (Doan, 2014).

In recent research with educators across BC (through the Peer-Mentoring Project), Laura heard educators speak of the stress of being the only fully certified ECE in the room. A certified ECE may be brand new, yet is expected to take on the leadership role; as they have the full certification, they may become the one ultimately responsible for what goes on in the room when it comes to the ECE Registry. Yet, there may be factors such as age or the fact that

the ECE assistant may have more years of experience. This makes for a highly complex working environment.

One educator from the Peer-Mentoring Project put it this way: "My experience ... is that if you come out of the program, even with just your certificate, and you show promise of having leadership in this field, right away people want to hand you complicated jobs. Right away. Because this field is screaming for educators. We know we need more. You can't get sick without your program being affected."

Opportunities Through Mentoring

A mentor relationship is a valuable tool for early childhood educators in that it can address the challenges facing those new to the field. Experienced educators can take on supportive roles, encouraging and assisting new ECEs; they can be a safety net of sorts. When new educators are paired with those with more experience, they feel supported and are better able to face challenges. They become increasingly comfortable in their new roles and feel confident as they put into practice all that they have learned. What a contrast this is to being thrown into a leadership position or a role where one is isolated and left to "sink or swim" (Doan, 2014).

In her research, Laura has found that through peer-mentoring within a community of practice, educators increase their connections in the ECE community, and increase their mentor and educator efficacy, their confidence in their abilities as an educator and a mentor. This then helps educators to sustain their practice and avoid burnout. In the re-

cent province-wide Peer-Mentoring Project, there were multiple layers of support for early childhood educators: they received support from their peer-mentor, their facilitator, group members, and the greater ECE community. And this support happened at monthly face-to-face group meetings, weekly meetings with their peer-mentor, and private meetings.

One educator who participated in the Peer-Mentoring Project shared:

Yes, if I had something like this [the Peer-Mentoring Project], right when I finished, it would have made a huge difference ... I finished and I just got thrown in, and I was the only one in that centre with the certificate. So I was like, 'Okay, I can do this', but they don't really prepare you for, [being] here by yourself. That's probably why we're losing 50% of our ECEs in the first 5 years. Because in 5 years you're so burned out. You can barely ... you can't try anymore. After 5 years if you're doing it by yourself for that, do or die.

And it is not just new early childhood educators who can benefit from peer-mentoring through communities of practice. Experienced ECEs can benefit from current research and pedagogy that recent graduates bring to their position. Both can engage in a mutually beneficial reflective practice partnership. For the new ECE, this can help confirm their career choice and for experienced educators it can reignite their passion for the field.

An experienced ECE who recently took part in the Peer-Mentoring Project shared her experience this way:

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 the 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. (Doan et. al, 2021)

Educators Need to be Supported, Seen, and Acknowledged

The work of an early childhood educator can be very isolating. Fifty-two percent of educators in a study across BC reported receiving no feedback or very little during their first year of work (Doan, 2014). And 45% reported receiving no observations or very little, during their first year of work. One peer-mentor from the Peer-Mentoring Project said,

I want to stay in this field. I love ECE and I will champion it ... I'm told all the time that I do a wonderful job and I'm doing so great. I ask myself, how do you know? Nobody comes down and I think in here, they never see me during the day.

The need to be seen, supported, and acknowledged is particularly relevant for educators who provide family-based child care. One peer-mentor spoke in favour of peer-mentoring within a community of practice for those working in family child care:

I think that it would help women running the family day care licence on their own to make

them feel like they're part of the team because I think that they feel really isolated. And when they have a different kind of licensing setup, it almost segregates us—even though we're all kind of doing the same thing—because [family-based child care providers] may not have their actual certification, but they're running wonderful little programs ... and they're still licensed. So I think it could be really beneficial to connect a lot of the smaller companies together.

Support for All Early Childhood Educators

With all the complexities and uncertainty of our sector, it is reasonable, if not expected, that all educators will feel overwhelmed from time to time. But what if a consistent stream of support was available? What if there was someone to turn to—a trusted colleague with whom you could share your frustrations, concerns, and joys? This would not necessarily be someone you worked with each day; in fact it may be more helpful for it to be someone at arms-length from your daily work—someone with similar experience and education who had first-hand knowledge of what you were facing. How might that change things for you? Could this be an opportunity for you to de-compress, to get a different perspective or lens on your work? Charlene had the opportunity to take part in the Peer-Mentoring Project, and that is that is exactly what happened for her.

As a manager, Charlene often finds herself feeling not only overwhelmed, but frustrated and sometimes lonely. Having the chance to talk to someone else who under-

stood her was a game changer. Not only did Charlene and her peer-mentor become active listeners for each other, they provided affirmation, ideas, and strategies for each other. It felt good to be a part of a reciprocal, professional relationship.

The professionalization of mentorship is critically important. Without consideration for confidentiality, professional standards, and ethics to guide the partnership, the potential exists for the pairing to become negative or ineffectual. Ultimately each peer-mentor should be striving to encourage the other to be the best educator that they can be. It is also important that mentor partnerships be intentional and formalized in some way, and there are many ways to do this. Peer-mentoring within a community of practice can be very helpful in solidifying the mutual respect and intentionality that should be present in the peer-mentor relationship. For example, within the community of practice, each voice is valued and respected, and learning happens from within the group. In addition, in the Peer-Mentoring Project, a peer-mentoring model was used, as opposed to the traditional mentor/mentee approach, where the mentor is the expert and the mentee is the protégé or novice. New early childhood educators in previous research acknowledged that they had value and have things to contribute in a mentoring relationship (Doan, 2014). By using a non-hierarchical approach, it was hoped that learning would occur for both new and experienced early childhood educators.

Early childhood educators in BC who took part in the Peer-Mentoring Project, voiced feeling respected

and valued for the time they put into the project. With funding from the Ministry of Children and Family Development, through Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre, Laura was able to acknowledge peer-mentors for their time by offering honoraria. Further to this, it was understood that the time invested in the Peer-Mentoring Project was a form of professional development. One educator shared,

All of us applied [to the project] without even knowing there would be an honorarium. We all genuinely wanted to do the program and have the opportunity ... A lot of us have second jobs and so just feeling like our time is valued.

Another educator put it this way:

Being part of this project has emphasized to me how hungry ECEs are for meaningful work and support. Being paid for our time on this project I think has really made a difference. The money is nice, but I think that the feeling of respect and the sense of importance that the project afforded through both financial and supportive measures, helps the participants to make the time and effort to stay engaged. It feels like we have really only scratched the surface, and it would be so valuable for more educators to have these opportunities on an ongoing basis.

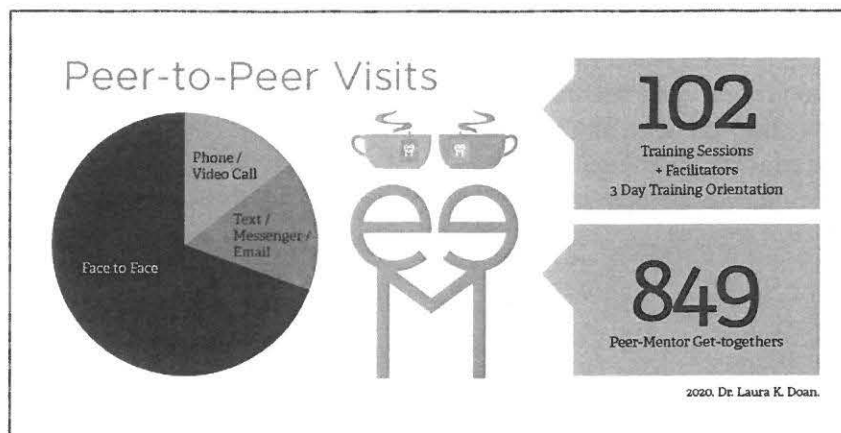
An educator wrote this in her reflection: "Feeling heard, acknowledged, and valued was so meaningful! I would love for this project to continue and to be a part of it." Participants of the Peer-Mentoring Project have shared what was useful about the project, and these aspects will

be important to consider in future peer-mentoring initiatives.

Charlene thinks that when educators, new or seasoned, feel supported and connected they will be more likely to feel satisfied in their job—that is what she experienced. Investing in and believing in each other are powerful ways to maintain our current workforce. This is a relational sector and ECEs are good at relationships. It just makes sense to invest in relationships with each other, which only makes us stronger in the end. Charlene also thinks that an important part of any new mentorship initiatives moving forward would be the formal connection to the ECE Registry or Ministry of Children and Family Development so that paid professional development hours would be an expectation.

About the Peer-Mentoring for Early Childhood Educators in BC Project

Individual peer-mentoring groups met together face-to-face, once a month, within a community of practice. This was a time for building relationships and learning from each other. Sometimes these meetings included a guest speaker, depending on the group's interest, and each group received funds for this purpose. 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 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 image shows the number of peer-to-peer visits in BC during the Peer-Mentoring Project, which took place between September 2019 and March 2020.

this would a) enable educators to identify and focus on their motivations or interests, and b) encourage educator efficacy (educators' confidence in themselves). In addition to the monthly face-to-face group gatherings, peer-mentors had the opportunity to meet weekly, either face-to-face, online, or through the telephone.

One educator who took part in this project, shared her experience this way:

So it's not about surviving, you come to work, and you're like, 'okay, it's another day, I can do it. I'm here though'. But you're actually thriving and you have the enriching connections and conversations ... I think our people are going to talk about time a lot ... they're so curious about how to find time if we want to honour children's time with their materials and with one another, we also need to honour our time with one another as well, to have that rich conversation. So we need to practice the same as if we want children to honour their time, but about our time, right?

So this project really gives people, honours their time, I think.

Another educator said:

So I found that being part of this really helped me connect to somebody as a mentor that I wouldn't have had ... For me, I found it was really good timing too, because I was looking for something to be connected to, I was like 'do I get on the board?' like I needed to be immersed in strong women, strong leadership ... just empowered people that are passionate about the same things that I'm passionate about.

The peer-mentoring relationship was an opportunity for educators to connect on both a personal and a professional level. Educators reported sharing things that were happening in their personal lives and their professional lives. And educators talked about everything, from their local early learning programs and community to provincial initiatives (such as the BC Early Learning Framework), as well as issues at the national and international levels.

An important aspect of peer-mentoring is being responsive to your peer-mentor, and meeting them where they are at on any given day. One educator shared her experience of being with her peer-mentor:

Today a chunk of my time was spent listening. My peer-mentor needed to talk and I was happy to lend an ear. And really was just that. I didn't try to offer solutions, because, honestly it's a tough one. Her staff have been looking at tons of solution based strategies and have done a phenomenal job of supporting her in this particular situation. It is just hard. And I feel she needed to share. Afterwards she reflected that it helps to just hear it all out loud.

Refreshment Through Peer-Mentoring

One educator said she felt refreshed after spending time with her peer-mentor:

I am finding I am really needing to prioritize my self-care so that I can be there for everyone around me at work and at home. This type of meeting [with my peer-mentor] and discussion can be a form of self-care. Even though I might feel exhausted after a long day I did feel refreshed after meeting with my peer-mentor. I didn't realize, especially with my new position where I am working with others who aren't in the ECE field, how much I love to connect with my peers ... I think the biggest thing for me recently has been burnout/lack of self-care in my life and how I am trying to still figure out

how to juggle everything in life. It was nice to be heard and to know that I am not alone.

Another educator shared:

Having the chance to sit down and meet with my peer-mentor was, honestly, like a breath of fresh air. After recently graduating and only a month into my new job as a preschool teacher, I have found myself very isolated due to mental health reasons. As well, I don't have a very good support system within my team at my new job ... I'm looking forward to this upcoming week with her because I already have a few notes written down in my note book so that I can ensure that I get her advice on a few items.

Connecting with Other Educators

We are connected, yet sometimes our systems or structures create silos where we are individuals and feel alone. As Charlene shared, she felt alone, isolated, in part due to the leadership role she plays. Other educators are physically isolated from other early childhood educators as they work in family child care, for example, where they are the only educator. And then there are educators who do work with others, yet feel isolated, due to the way the program is run administratively, or the lack of relationship and trust with the educators in the room. Peer-mentoring within a community of practice brings people together, breaks down barriers, and lowers resistance. It also has the power to bring collective efficacy, the belief that as a group of educators you have the ability to make a difference for children, families, and educators.

An educator from the Peer-Mentoring Project shared:

I always appreciate hearing that I am not alone (when our group or my peer partner and I meet.) ... We are able to connect, share, and find the good or the light at the end of the tunnel during some tough times ... I also heard someone in the group at our last meeting use the term "waiting place," and it really hit home for me. I feel that's exactly where I have been lately, but I wasn't able to put into words or figure out exactly what this place is. It is moments like these I find networking and connecting with other people in my field of work so important.

Within the individual communities of practice, and within the peer-mentor relationships, individual educators are valued, respected, and cared for. Issues discussed, whether personal or professional, are weighty, and confidentiality and a commitment to professionalism are huge, as is a desire to support educators with mutual acceptance. Brené Brown writes of the difference between belonging and fitting in: "Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn't require us to *change* who we are; it requires us to be who we are" (Brown, 2010, p. 25). Educators in the Peer-Mentoring Project spoke about the difference between attending a workshop compared to a meeting with the community of practice. Within the community of practice, where guidelines were established and trust was formed, educators found they belonged. One educator put it this way: "When you come together, it's

creating a space for vulnerability, which I think is important ... You can't really share that you might have a different opinion from someone if you don't feel safe being vulnerable."

Another educator shared:

[As a mentor] I'm not going to fire you. Or I'm not even going to be judging you or critiquing you. There's much more freedom in being able to reflect honestly with what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling, what I've observed, with not worrying that I'm stepping on anybody's toes.

We think there is more to be explored when it comes to ensuring belonging versus striving to fit in.

Peer-Mentoring Helps with Stress and Mental Wellness

One educator in the project shared:

We continued on discussing the topic of feeling stressed in our practice and how stress can often alter these values that we hold true. In thinking of this, my peer-mentor posed if I always think about stress in a negative way, which really made me think about the short-term aspect of stress and how these topics can affect my values as an educator. It made me reflect on the things that make me feel stressed and ways I can turn it into something positive instead of overthinking and become overwhelmed in my practice ... Meeting with my peer-mentor is not just great for my professional career but for also talking through personal issues through mental health. As educators it's important to take care of ourselves so that

we can deliver the best care possible to the children that we see day in and day out. But taking time to care for ourselves is hard. I know it is for myself, who beyond burnout also struggles with mental health issues. It's been a blessing to have these meetings.

Another educator in the project shared it this way: "We have nothing to give if our *own* cups are empty."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said,

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.

While Dr. King was speaking about our mutuality (the sharing of a feeling, action, or relationship between two or more parties) related to injustice, we believe there is relevance for early childhood educators with respect to our need to support each other in becoming fully who we ought to be as early childhood educators. It is our hope that individuals and groups within our sector will continue to strive for opportunities for all early childhood educators to thrive, finding fulfillment in their chosen profession, and we believe that peer-mentoring is a vital tool for this to happen.

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