

Investigation of the Professional Needs of Professional Early Childhood Educators

Executive Summary

by

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Early Childhood Education plays an important and long-lasting role influencing overall student success in classrooms for many years, regardless of socio-economic standing or disciplinary focus (i.e., literacy or numeracy). The impact of Early Childhood Education is considered so significant that Ontario has a policy framework detailing efforts to address Early Childhood Education. Furthermore, in 2007 Ontario created the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE), a self-regulating professional body for Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs). Professional Early Childhood Educators (ECE) in Ontario belong to the CECE and are mandated by their college to engage in a cycle of Continuous Professional Learning (CPL).

Project Purpose

This project was designed to constructively clarify how professional development is occurring within the profession, investigate the types of professional learning that ECEs seek, what they believe they need, and their conceptions of professional learning as it relates to their work environments. While the vast majority of respondents belonged to the CECE, there were some exceptions such as unregistered child care sector workers. This summary refers to all project participants as ECEs in a general way as opposed to in a regulatory sense.

Process

An electronic survey was constructed to assess the overall status of ECEs regarding professional learning in conjunction with some descriptive details. The final question on the survey invited participants to self-nominate for an interview. The interview included questions which triangulate with the survey as well as open-ended questions to solicit more details about professional learning. Interviews were conducted using video conferencing since the COVID-19 pandemic prevented face-to-face interviews. The research process was reviewed and approved by the Nipissing University Research Ethics Board.

Limitations

The research found many, but not all, ECE participants were able to articulate their professional learning needs. In this respect, the project research interviews may reflect the views of the most academically inclined ECEs. Similarly, the survey we conducted as part of this research may have been completed by members who feel the strongest connection to the profession and were willing to take time to answer open-response questions in writing.

The project may also be constrained by other factors: its focus on professional learning and by seeking participants through a CECE newsletter and social media groups. The respondents were all female, which reflects a "profession dominated by women" (Ho, n.d.). It is also suspected,

though not known for certain, that the project lacks representation of indigenous and black ECEs or ECEs from other visible minorities.

Findings

ECEs are very engaged and put forth considerable efforts to fulfill their mandate to care for children in a professional manner. They are knowledgeable, capable, and working in a complex environment that can be very stressful, meeting the needs of children in their care, first and foremost. ECEs are generally responsive to the spirit of the CPL, fulfilling the requirements of the CPL and workplace training, and are pursuing professional learning in a plethora of ways.

Two overarching concerns emerged from the research. The first is associated with professional learning pathways and the second with structural relationships that support professional learning.

Pathways

Pathways issues arose with ECE professional learning possibly because the CPL is a one-size-fits-all approach. While the CPL is open and allows considerable choice, it is fundamentally arranged as a minimum level of updating to keep current. While this satisfies a minimum level of oversight it is a passive approach to representing professionalism. For example, the most experienced ECEs expressed difficulty finding genuine learning opportunities for their CPLs because running workshops and mentoring did not count toward personal CPLs. Furthermore, the CPL lacked mechanisms for advancement or transition after years of service. One suggestion is for the CECE to provide oversight of programs that allow mentorship, leadership, and training-provider credentials to be recognized through the CPL. For example, an ECE with a mentorship credential would be allowed to provide mentoring and have that count toward their CPL. Obtaining such a designation could contribute to resolving some of these issues.

Structural Relationships

The CECE can play a pivotal role in supporting professional learning by nurturing structural relationships among the major elements of the child care landscape through regulatory oversight that is visible and clear to the actors in the field.

Child care centres, schools, individual providers, and community-based charitable organizations would benefit from a direct relationship with the CECE. For example, CECE oversight could provide them with information on how workplaces can appropriately support the CPL. This could be accomplished by clarifying issues such as the relationship of the CPL to workplace training, appropriate professional representation of ECEs, and/or a critical examination of issues of access to community resources.

Three examples below illustrate situations across the child care and early childhood education sector where CECE clarification would support ECE professional learning.

Some child care centre supervisors are in an awkward position regarding the CPL. They offer training, but ECEs are uncertain about whether it counts toward the CPL. At the same time, goals are set individually by ECEs and are not necessarily shared with employers. Discrepancies arise at other times when employers take a more active role in providing assistance, such as CPL advice, to their ECEs but frame it as hard and fast rules as opposed to encouraging the self-guided aspect of CPL.

In schools, some ECEs face challenges to their professionalism as a result of inadequate representation. There is less evidence of employers interpreting the CPL, but there are workplace challenges to professional development that are not simple matters of advocacy. For example, the ECE and teacher in kindergarten classrooms are supposed to function as a team, but planning professional learning to build that relationship seems to be rare. We heard of many issues that are not regulatory in nature and consistent with the use of advocacy.

Individual, home-based ECE child care providers face unique challenges. They benefit when they can use community resources but are hindered by basic barriers such as transportation of children (we heard an EarlyON centre is not on a bus route which makes it functionally inaccessible) and a shortage of cost-effective, asynchronous learning opportunities.

Conclusion

Increased visibility and clear CECE regulatory oversight could identify and clarify numerous workplace and professional learning issues for ECEs and play a pivotal role in supporting ECE professional learning.

We would like to thank everyone who participated or played a role in getting the word out regarding our research. This brief summary shows the very general picture of what we found. A detailed report of this research is 46 pages long and will be disseminated through conference presentations and publications.