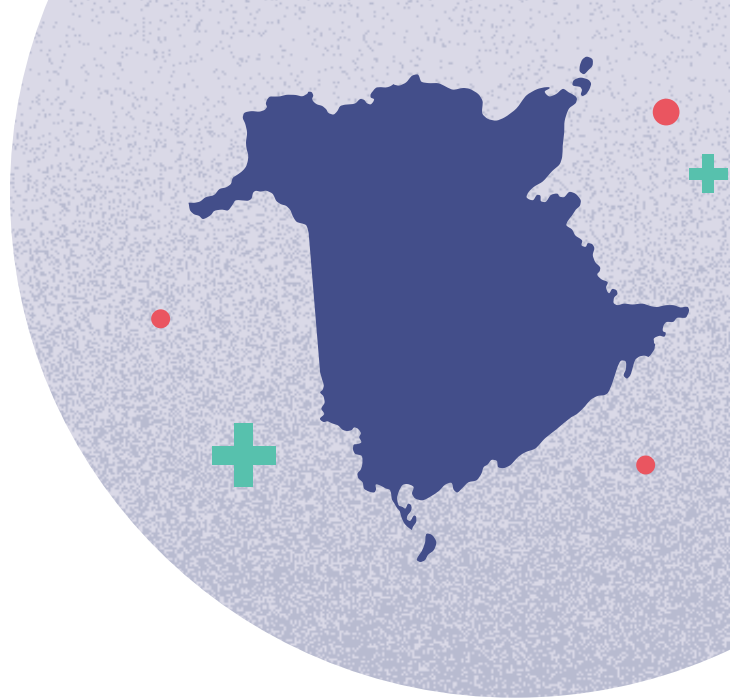




Early  
Childhood  
Education Lab



This booklet includes an overview  
of the prototype tested by the:

## New Brunswick Anglophone team as part of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Training Lab.

The NB team chose to tackle the lack of support for those who help educators plan their career and advance their education. Four provincial teams worked with an embedded design coach from the NouLAB team to design, implement, and evaluate a field prototype of their social innovation concept. A prototype is a preliminary model of something from which other forms are developed; a representation of a design idea used to get feedback and generate learning. Live testing of prototypes was conducted during spring and summer of 2023, and evaluation was conducted in May/June 2023.

To find summaries of the other three prototypes, their key findings and recommendations can be accessed at:

<https://ecelaboepe.ca/> or email [innovate@noulab.org](mailto:innovate@noulab.org).

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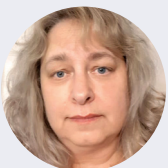
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## The Challenge

Operators often perform both administrative and pedagogical roles when managing their Early Learning and Childcare Centres (ELCCs), but the recent additions to administrative requirements has increased the administrative workload. This has led to longer times spent in front of a computer and less time being on the floor to support educators; oftentimes leading to work being completed on nights and weekends. The result is higher stress levels and feelings of burnout in the role, and has also exacerbated feelings of isolation, whether within centres or with the wider sector.

The New Brunswick Anglophone team focused on addressing the limited opportunities and spaces for operators to meet, connect and support one another. There is currently no provincial ECE sector association in the province, and operators often rely on informal relationships with one another to learn more about how to get updates and navigate changes in the sector. Team NB reflected on the benefits that previous operator-focused initiatives - such as the Director to Director program - have had on both their work and motivation. Director to Director was a program implemented by the New Brunswick Association for Community Living (now Inclusion NB) and funded by EECD which brought operators together once a month to mentor one another, access resources and create a network of support.

The team decided that creating a safe space for connection and sharing would be a good starting point to bring operators together to discuss the challenges they face and offer/receive support, with the aim of improving their leadership performance in their ELCCs. One of the main challenges to this concept is the difficult misstarts of bringing operators together in the past, which has been further impacted by the absence of a central voice for the sector and affected relationship development and trust-building, whether between operators or with the government.



# The Prototype

## Development and Learning Goals

The New Brunswick Anglophone prototype is a Peer Support Cohort for Directors. The broader vision was of a province-wide network of directors and ECEs that would come together to have facilitated discussions about the sector. The team highlighted the importance of having someone to host the discussion and ensure that the conversation is generative and supportive to the development of the directors' leadership challenges.

We designed this prototype and the prototype test to examine the elements of greatest risk in the concept: finding a qualified facilitator; recruiting an adequate number of participants; maintaining interest in the sessions; and ensuring the discussions are constructive.

The prototype was designed to be a six-session cohort moderated by a facilitator. The sessions would be semi-structured and provide a space for directors to get to know each other, discuss challenges, share solutions, and feel heard and supported.



### The questions that this concept seeks to address are:

- 1 Is there an interest from directors in connecting to their peers?
- 2 Does the performance, leadership and motivation of directors improve when given the opportunity to meet and connect with their peers in the sector?
- 3 Does the format of a facilitated peer support cohort help or hinder the workload that directors face in their role?
- 4 What is the potential for directors to self-organise and continue the peer format without external support?

The last question was formed based on our research findings on the lack of formal directors-led initiatives that have occurred in New Brunswick. Many programs that bring directors together (such as past associations and the Director to Director program) often relied on government funding and often lost momentum. This prototype seeks to explore the potential for directors to self-organise, and to identify what support is needed to ensure that future initiatives can achieve more impact, longevity, and lead to trust building over time.

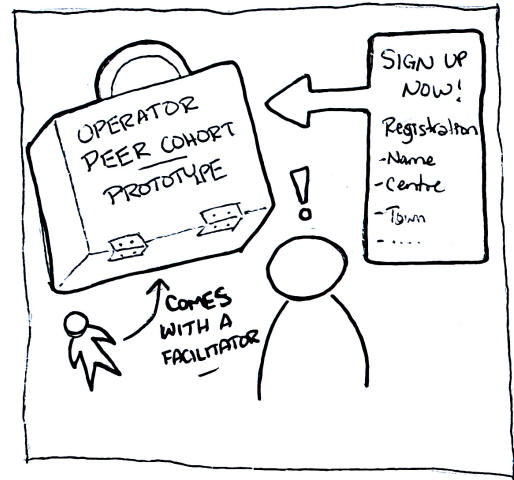


## Prototype Test

A facilitator was recruited who is external to ECE but had prior experience within the sector. We contacted many stakeholders whom we had previously spoken to via interviews or the previous round of the lab, and presented CVs and proposals to the NB team who determined which candidate to recruit.








The Peer Support Cohort was tested in the Anglophone South School District (ASD-S) with the goal of recruiting between 12 - 15 directors. Participants were invited to register for the cohort through an online sign-up sheet, which was emailed to all ELCCs in the ASD-S through the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's (EECD) district manager.

In the span of 24 hours after the registration form was sent from the district manager, 11 directors had already signed up to take part in the cohort. At the registration deadline, one week after the form was launched, there were 20 directors in total who got in touch about taking part in the cohort, indicating an interest in the concept.



Concept development sketches produced during a workshop with the New Brunswick team

### Of the 15 Directors that were invited to participate:

 <b>5 Directors</b> are in a <b>Rural</b> Context  <b>10 Directors</b> are in an <b>Urban</b> Context	 <b>11 Directors</b> had <b>over 5 years</b> experience  <b>4 Directors</b> were in the position for <b>less than 5 years</b>	
 <p><b>5 Directors</b> mentioned they were struggling to <b>balance</b> their pedagogical and administrative roles</p>	 <p><b>4 Directors</b> said they were doing well to <b>balance</b></p>	 <p><b>3 Directors</b> said their ability to <b>balance</b> depended on the time of year, with busier times creating a larger volume of work</p>

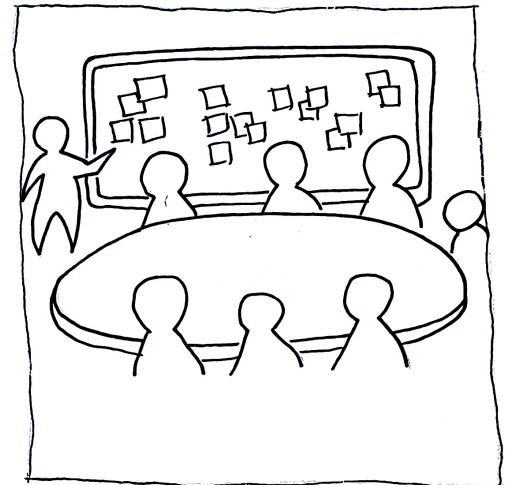
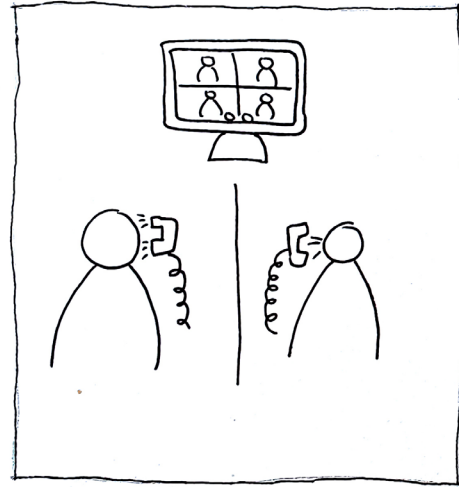
The cohort consists of six meetings set to take place between May 2022 to January 2023. Each meeting would be three hours long and take place in the evenings. The first introductory meeting took place in the ECE Living Lab on the campus of New Brunswick Community College (NBCC), and the second meeting was organised at the centre of a participating director. Participants had expressed interest in seeing the spaces of their peers, and so it was decided that future meetings will rotate between the ELCCs, with the aim of allowing directors to visit each other's centres and learn about how different educational spaces are set up.



## Summary of First Two Meetings

Thirteen of the 15 directors who were invited to the cohort took part in the introductory session on May 25, including one person who joined remotely via Zoom. The aim of this first session was to set the tone and foundation for the cohort. There was some initial hesitation as directors introduced themselves and set out their expectations. A key point that participants agreed was crucial to the success of the sessions was confidentiality, and avoiding using names where possible. A workbook was distributed to help them keep track of the meeting discussion. After the session, notes about the discussion were sent out along with a survey and a contact list. One of the participating directors created a Facebook group for the participants to stay in touch and continue the conversation outside of the sessions.

Nine directors attended the second session. Those who did not attend stated that the end of June was a busy time because it is the end of the school year, and were not able to take part. Some of those who did attend said that the second meeting felt more relaxed as directors became more familiar with each other, and the facilitator was better able to structure the conversation around the directors' needs. Many participants were also happy with the constructive nature of the conversation, which gave space to discuss ideas and strategies.



Concept development sketches produced during a workshop with the New Brunswick team

*"I think everyone's really appreciating having people to bounce ideas off of and talk to and get ideas."*

- Participating director



# The Test Findings

## Prior Experiences of Peer Support Were Variable

In keeping with what we saw in the literature and field research, most of the directors had little to no experience with peer support, especially newer directors or those who came to New Brunswick from other provinces. The existing Facebook group of owner-operators in the province - one of the few spaces that currently exists for networking - was mentioned as being mismanaged and negative, rather than being a helpful resource.

## Self-Organisation and Initiative

Many directors have said that they have gotten in touch with one another outside of the sessions, with one stating that she is helping to mentor a younger director. Others have shared their intention to contact their peers, but noted that with the busy time of year it has been difficult to achieve. Many have also joined the Facebook group or are intending to join.

## Flexibility in format

While some participants were happy with the three-hour evening format, some felt that there wasn't enough time to discuss all the topics they wanted to cover in detail. One director proposed a weekend retreat to replace the remaining four sessions, with other directors supporting this idea.

## Overcoming Barriers to Connecting as Peers and Cultivating Emerging Leaders

Despite stating that a lack of time and trust are barriers to meeting their peers, most of the directors who took part in the cohort made the effort to take part in both sessions because of the value they saw in meeting up. Many of those who signed up for the cohort were motivated by the idea of coming together as directors to discuss common challenges and share information with one another. One director stated that she wanted to support the new generation of directors and share her knowledge.

*“I’m trying to get some younger directors involved so they can start taking over the reigns...”*

- Participating director

Most of the directors signed up for the cohort because they wanted to learn how other centres are run, in order to learn new ideas that they can apply to their own centres. Being able to meet and make connections with other directors was another expectation.

*“I’m hoping that it will inspire me to keep going and not be done. Cause I’m pretty close. “*

- Participating director



## Coming Together Enabled Bigger Picture Issues to be Discussed

Many participants were initially interested in discussing recruitment and retention challenges during the sessions, but a wide range of topics were brought up which exceeded that scope in only two sessions. From this, it can be inferred that bringing directors together generates a more encompassing 'big picture' view of the sector and its needs, and generates discussions on systems change.

*"I thought that I was gonna be more like just a listener, but I've actually been pretty forward with questions that I have had and being able to help other people as well. So it's been nice."*

- Participating director

Among the main topics discussed during the sessions include: challenging behaviours (both parents and children), government regulations, quality improvement plans and creating a work-life balance. Session topics were decided by participants during the session and with guidance from the facilitator.

## Increased Job Motivation

Many directors have mentioned that their attendance in the cohort has improved their motivation, in particular because it was encouraging to know that they are not alone in the struggles that they face in the role.

*"It's nice to get with directors who are going through the same struggle and just having that person to talk about challenges with and brainstorm how to handle it. I'm looking forward to the next session."*

- Participating director

*"It kind of puts a little pep in your step the next day when you come to work just knowing that I was around [similar] people, and this is gonna work."*

- Participating director



## | Pedagogical-Admin Balance

Many participants have noted that they have not yet seen any impact to their pedagogical and administrative balance. The main reason for this was attributed to time, and that it was too soon to see any impact. One director stated that the cohort has added to the pressure of creating a balance, but that she would continue to attend because she saw the importance of attending. Many directors are optimistic about seeing an impact as the sessions progress.

Some of the more well established directors have used the cohort as a space to share ideas and techniques on achieving a work balance, and one participant said that she has already noticed a difference after applying some of the ideas to her work.

*"...just knowing that it's okay to not answer your phone at eight at night...or answering emails, and knowing that other directors aren't doing that makes me feel better that, you know, it's okay..."*

- Participating director

## | What We've Learned So Far

The overwhelming response from the director's peer support cohort was positive, with most directors intending to attend the remaining four sessions. The connections that have started to form between participants, and the creation of a Facebook group, offers initial indications that peer support among participating directors will continue after the end of the prototype. Another key element of success has been the presence of the facilitator, a role whose importance was emphasized by the New Brunswick Team from the start of concept testing.

## | Early Indicators of Impact

The majority of directors said that the two sessions met their expectations in terms of being able to connect with other directors and have a space to discuss topics of importance to their role. Many participants have said that they are looking forward to the upcoming sessions.

*"It was really nice to bring a group of us together and that we were able to make those connections and chat about challenges and things like that. I did find it very useful in kind of just bringing all of our voices together."*

- Participating director

*"I've really enjoyed it so far. I think once we had our initial meeting and [it was] clarified what it should be, that is what it has been. And I think long term, if it keeps going, I could see the benefits for sure."*

- Participating director

The test period of two sessions did not offer enough time to see any meaningful impact on the performance of directors, particularly as it took place during a busy period at the end of the school year. The process of building trusting relationships requires long term commitment which cannot be easily tested in a short-term prototype test. However, this cohort has shown that a peer support format has strong potential to begin that process, and any impact will be made clearer at the end of the sixth session in January.



## What's Next

Four more sessions are set to take place between September 2023 to January 2024. A meeting with the prototype team and government decision-makers is planned for February to share longer term learnings of the prototype. During this period we will also be able to better assess the self-organization capacity of the directors who have taken part.

Future iterations of this prototype should ensure that a strong facilitator is present to host the directors, manage the diversity of the group and ensure that different capacities are taken into account. There should be a time balance between discussing 'big' topics and allowing directors time to 'chat' with one another. The format should also incorporate some flexibility, and offer weekend retreats as an opportunity for directors who want more time to discuss and provide some distance from their day-to-day role.

A cohort of this type should also incorporate a mentorship element. The most notable impact seen in this test has been the benefit that younger directors have gained, through more insights and guidance from those who have a wealth of experience in the sector. Most importantly, future initiatives must take into account the time needed to build lasting relationships between directors and to ensure the continuity of this work.

