



Early
Childhood
Education Lab

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

*Prince Edward Island
team as part of the
Early Childhood Education
(ECE) Training Lab*



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 summer and fall of 2021, and evaluation was conducted in December 2021.

- *To find summaries of the other three prototypes, their key findings and recommendations, the full report can be accessed at:
<https://xn--eclab-labope-lhb.ca/> or email innovate@noulab.org.*

The Prince Edward Island team was made up of **Jacinta Andrews**, Educator, Little Wonders Early Learning Centre; **Elizabeth Jeffery**, Operator, Little Wonders Early Learning Centre; **Monique McLean**, Education and Lifelong Learning Early Childhood Development; **Jennifer Nangreaves**, Executive Director, Early Childhood Development Association of PEI (ECDA); **Susan Ashley**, Holland College. Others in the ECE sector were recruited to take part in the prototype programs and give feedback.



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The PEI team chose to focus on the gap in the ECE career ladder for experienced educators with higher levels of certification. The team developed a prototype of a Centre-Mentor Program, which combined whole-centre mentorship training with peer-selected educator mentors supported by an ongoing mentorship Community of Practice. The combination of mentorship training and peer support had a positive impact on ECEs' aspirations to advance their careers through training. ECEs reported an increased sense of confidence among peers to ask questions and to discuss challenges they're having in the classroom. Centres with full staff participation reported a positive change in conversations happening between staff.



Prototype Descriptions

Prince Edward Island: Embedded Mentorship



The Challenge

Through the lab's discovery and ideation process, the team from PEI realized that there is a gap in the career ladder for experienced, motivated educators with higher levels of certification.

These ECEs, known in our project by their persona as the Expert Learners, are passionate educators with leadership potential who don't currently have a path to career development that keeps them working directly with children. Instead, these bright and accomplished ECEs find career advancement, higher pay, and better working conditions in jobs outside of ELCCs. Losing this expertise on the floor hinders centre's ability to effectively mentor and train new educators, and shrinks the leadership supply of potential directors, thus applying further pressure on the overall quality of the field.



Prototype: Centre-Mentor Program

The PEI team sees these experienced, motivated educators as a leverage point to influence the quality of ECE across the province through their potential ability to motivate and support their less-qualified peers to gain higher certification. To activate them, the team developed a mentorship program concept that creates a new embedded mentor-educator role within centres. The concept includes whole-centre mentorship training, a new job description and pay grade increase for mentor-educators, and a new area of professional development around mentorship available to the entire sector, including a peer support network and ongoing Community of Practice for mentor-educators. In the fully realized vision of this program, the embedded mentor-educator role would work collaboratively with centre directors and PEI's team of provincial coaches to share pedagogical leadership in their centre, and provide support to other ECEs as they learn on the job, connect theory to practise, and develop their careers.

Key questions that framed the development of the PEI prototype included:

- ▶ What kinds of mentorship learning and peer support will meet the needs of educators at each centre?
- ▶ How might we structure a program to provide real career growth opportunities for ECEs that allows them to continue direct practice with children?
- ▶ How might we create a replicable program that increases quality across the field in PEI despite differences in certification levels among centre cohorts?
- ▶ How might we activate the Expert Learners as a resource in the ECE system to support skill development and retention of educators with fewer credentials or less experience?

The PEI lab team was able to draw on a collective institutional memory as they developed the prototype to test their concept. They had identified mentorship as an area of focus for their concept because they thought it effectively brought together the needs and capabilities of both the Expert Learners and the educators who could benefit from gaining higher certification. However, they knew the history of previous attempts to start up mentorship programs in the province, none of which had lasted.

Some of these were because there wasn't sufficient buy-in from the sector or clear benefits to participation, and one promising program was shut down due to funding cuts unrelated to program performance. Based on this history, and the team's desire to shift working culture in the sector toward educator recognition and empowerment, the PEI team decided to take a new, centre-based approach to mentorship, creating an innovative process for identifying and activating mentor-educators.

The prototype tested three core elements of the PEI team's mentorship concept:

- 1 A mentorship learning opportunity to develop the whole centre staff as a learning cohort, delivered through a half-day workshop with ECE mentorship consultants Anne Marie Coughlin and Lorrie McGee Baird
- 2 An anonymous peer nomination process in which educators could select 2-3 fellow educators to continue mentorship learning and take a stronger mentor role in their centre
- 3 Two Community of Practice sessions with the mentorship consultants, in which the nominated mentor-educators from each centre came together in one group to exchange peer learning and reflection on mentorship practice



Key Findings

Four early learning and childcare centres participated in the prototype test, which included the half-day workshop, the peer nomination process, and the Community of Practice sessions. Pre-participation and post-participation interviews were conducted with a director and at least two staff from each centre, for a total of 24 interviews. In intake contacts and pre-interviews, we asked about the current staffing situation and needs for skill development at each centre, participants' personal interest in mentorship, current certification level, and expectations about what participants hoped to gain from taking part in the prototype test.

In pre-interviews, we learned that educator participants were eager to deepen their skills in mentorship, particularly around mentoring students from the college during their practicums. Many expressed the hope that mentorship training would increase cooperation, peer support, and skill sharing among educators. They anticipated that mentorship training might increase their time management skills, interpersonal skills, skills in giving constructive feedback, and help build a better culture of professional support at their centre for current and future staff.

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We have high expectations for new hires but no formal way to help them onboard to our high standards and then they don't stay, so it would be great to meet them where they are. ”

- PEI Educator

In the post-prototype interviews, we asked participants to reflect on their experience of the prototype, what was missing, and to assess potential impacts, including:

- ▶ Does mentorship participation increase interest in gaining higher ECE credentials among low-credential ECEs?
- ▶ Does mentorship participation increase interest in remaining in the ECE sector among high-credential ECEs?
- ▶ What are the impacts on staff attitudes and mentorship activity of a peer-nomination process to select mentors?
- ▶ Do the benefits of participation indicate that this program would be valuable to other centres?

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Mentorship Participation Influencing Increased Interest in Certification and/or Career Development

Every educator interviewed reported that the mentorship workshop and subsequent peer support activity at their centre had a positive impact on their aspirations to advance their career, many through taking more training. Two educators reported that they have gained interest in taking certification to become directors. One educator with basic qualifications reported that she was motivated by the mentorship workshop and experience as a peer mentor to take the accelerated course to achieve her Level 2 certificate.

“I plan on taking the accelerated course to get my 2-year certificate. It is something I have been working towards but making it easier to mentor helped me seriously consider it.”

- PEI educator

One educator was so impacted by the career reflection prompted by participating in the prototype that she “took a leap of faith” and applied to become an ECE learning manager at a local college, and in this new role will guide students toward their Level 3 certification.

Mentorship Participation Impact on Attitudes and Practices

Educators reported an increased sense of confidence among peers to ask questions and discuss challenges they’re having in the classroom. Several reported a sense of shared purpose or positive challenge that has helped galvanize collaboration and provided something to work toward together. Many educators discussed greater empathy for others and a new understanding of what mentorship means.

“I thought of a mentor as a bossy person telling everyone what to do and I didn’t want to do that. But I learned it was more about modelling good behaviour and asking good questions. It has given me more patience with adults – before I had patience for children but not for adults. It has changed me a lot.”

- PEI educator

“It has opened up a deeper conversation. Our director provides a lot of autonomy and we talk about it and she asks questions, but this helps us think about our values and beliefs and how that impacts our practice. This has been the big discussion at our centre in the last few weeks. Asking why we do the things we do. This has been helpful.”

- PEI educator

Three of the directors we interviewed reported a positive change in the content of conversations happening between staff, including more constructive exchanges about education practice, more openness to different educator styles, and increased comfort with asking questions.

“Before [conversations with educators] were like ‘Am I doing this right,’ and it switched to ‘I am thinking about doing this – how can I do it better? There seems to be a little shift. Is there more room to go? Yes, but there has been a definite shift.”

- PEI director

“They are going to each other for feedback and coming to me less. I LOVE that they are going to their coworkers. I am in my office all day, they know the place from the floor better than I do, so it is great that they are going to each other. They chat a fair amount more than they used to.”

- PEI director

Among all centres, positive results from participation correlated with high percentages of staff participation in the workshop. Despite the low impact reported from one centre with low staff participation, educators from those centres still reported positive personal impacts on their practice and attitudes. This finding reveals that in future mentorship programs it will be important to create conditions for full staff participation to reap benefits to the overall centre work environment.

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Benefits of Participation in Prototype Indicate Value in Continued Development of Concept

When asked in post-prototype interviews if the full mentor program concept would be beneficial to centres, every respondent answered yes.

“It would be fantastic. [The mentor could be] a safe person [to talk to] so if people were struggling with something they could step in, observe, say what you have seen is happening, and make suggestions for change. It would take a lot of weight off the directors.”

- PEI educator

“I think it would be very positively impactful for everyone. I think what is missing in the whole sector is just a little bit of guidance on the floor. Because you get into trouble on the floor and don’t know what to do or try to do the same thing.”

- PEI educator

Some educators and directors raised concerns around the design of the peer nomination process, indicating that it was difficult to nominate someone without knowing their interest in serving in a mentor role. Other educators reported a positive experience with peer nomination, citing how the anonymous nomination process allowed those with quieter leadership styles to be selected as mentors. Directors gave feedback that they wanted to be more involved in selecting mentors.

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What's Next

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I feel like I understand the role and the concept, but how will we [the peer mentors] be able to apply this role, and will our director be helping us? How is it gonna apply in real life? What are the supports as we start applying [what we've learned in our community of practice]? ”

- PEI Educator

Results from this prototype test strongly suggest that interest in mentorship is high among educators and centre leadership, and that peer mentorship embedded in centres has potential to positively impact educator intention to remain in the sector, and help educators overcome barriers to taking certification training. The next iteration of this concept must test whether a mentorship program and supporting resources can be structured to meet the identified barriers to educator participation in training for higher credentials. Further prototype development should investigate:

1 *How might an embedded mentorship role be structured to create more flexibility in staffing without sacrificing quality of care and early learning?*

Such flexibility is needed to allow educators to blend work, private life, and increased time demands for mentorship work – both by mentor and mentee. Flexibility would mean that centres can cover necessary time spent in mentorship and training without reducing educators' pay and reduce the overwhelm of too much work / too little time that pushes educators into a survival mentality instead of a mindset of reflective practice.

2 *How might a new embedded mentorship role create opportunities for career advancement and practice development for ECEs of all certification levels?* Impacts must be measured of this new role on a) retention of highly qualified staff, b) activation of low-credentialed staff toward upskilling, and c) the ability of ELCCs to attract new ECEs into the workforce.

In the short duration of this prototype, we were able to test the impact of the PEI mentorship concept on interest and motivation for career development and training. To fully evaluate the relationship between sustained mentorship support, educator recruitment and retention, and increased participation in training for certification, centres will need a longer test to measure these impacts over time. For example, the next iteration of this concept could test mentorship capacity and career development impact on barriers to training and retention through prototyping a 50% centre mentor / 50% educator role embedded in 5-8 centres in various geographic and demographic areas of PEI. The expanded mentorship prototype could be tested in each participating centre for 2 years, which would include rolling out mentorship training to those centres and supporting the Community of Practice for centre mentors for the duration of the prototype. Additionally, testing and further development is required to prototype a business model for the mentorship program that could weather the known challenges facing such a program for the PEI ECE sector.