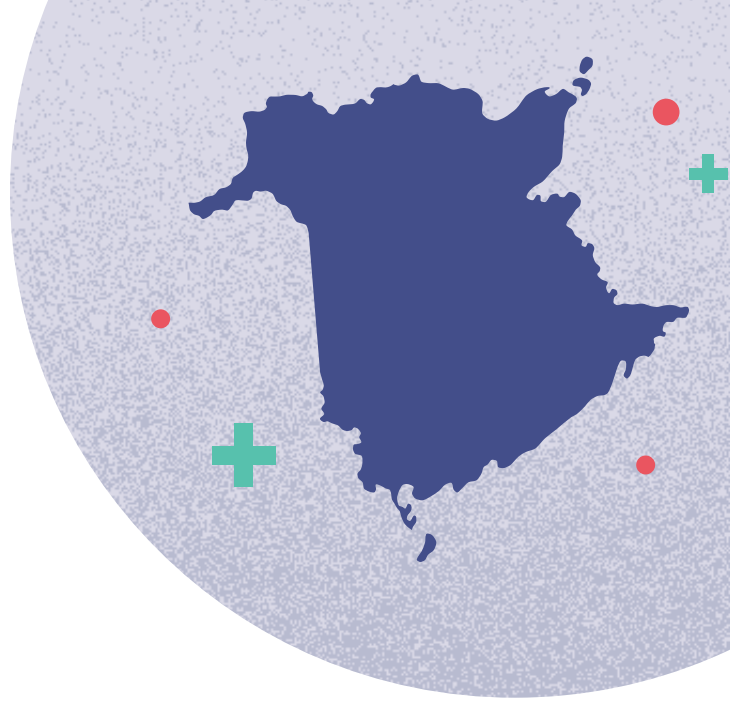




Early  
Childhood  
Education Lab



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.

The PEI 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).

## + The Team



**Kim Gillis**

*Holland College*

Instructor



**Megan McPhee**

*ECDA*

Professional Learning  
Coordinator/Assistant  
Executive Director



**Jaime-Lynn Mosher**

*Rainbow Beginnings*

Owner / Operator



**Monique McClean**

*Education and  
Early Years*

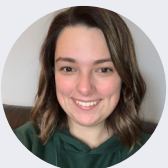
Manager of Early  
Learning and Child Care



**Kati Smallman**

*Wee the West*

Owner / Operator



**Maddy Jeffery**

*Mighty Oaks*

Educator



## The Challenge

The PEI team recognized that leadership is an important driver of both program quality and thriving working conditions for Early Childhood Educators, yet many Directors haven't had leadership or management training to support their roles as leaders. Additionally, although many Directors have gathered valuable experiential leadership and management learning through their roles, they still find gaps in their knowledge and a lack of support for developing those role-specific skills.



In testing the team's concept with potential participants and learning professionals, we learned that many Directors have advanced capabilities around self-reflection for learning development through their pedagogical training, however they called out the need for a community or partner to provide accountability for learning goals and to support action on reflection. Directors we spoke with said they would benefit from sharing ideas and understanding concepts in practice with others in similar roles. Finding time for leadership reflection and learning, making trusting and constructive connections with other leaders, and opportunities to get updated, contextually-relevant information on leadership topics were also identified as opportunities to support Directors' leadership development in PEI.





## The Prototype

Responding to the need to support Directors in leadership learning, and the findings from concept testing, the PEI team decided to field test a **Leadership Learning Buddy** prototype for Directors.



The prototype included three main components:

- 1 **pairs of Directors** engaged in learning together,
- 2 **coaching** to support the pairs through **self-evaluation** and **goal-setting**, and
- 3 a series of prototype **cohort meetings** bringing the pairs together.

### Prototype Participants

The field test was conducted with six pairs of Directors, twelve (12) in total. All but two participants were recruited at the Early Childhood Development Association (ECDA) Spring Conference in Charlottetown. Half of the pairs were matched by the participants themselves, and the other half were matched by the prototype team. Matches were made based on factors including centre proximity, years in ECE, and learning goals expressed in pre-interviews.

Participants ranged in leadership experience from 1 year to more than 20 years. Eleven of the participants had the title Director and one had the title Supervisor. One quarter of the participants worked in ratio in their centres in addition to their leadership duties. Leadership learning experience ranged from no leadership or management training to current enrolment in university-level management courses. Several participants reported having taken leadership professional learning opportunities through ECDA, and two were also enrolled in a new in-depth leadership course offered by the Association.

A member of the PEI Lab team agreed to serve as the Leadership Learning Coach for the prototype. Kim Gillis, a member of faculty in ECE at Holland College, is an established and respected educator and researcher in the PEI ECE community.

The coaching role was also a learning opportunity for Kim, as she hadn't undertaken this type of coaching yet in her career. To prepare, Kim took a three-day leadership coaching certification course based in Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner's Leadership Principles<sup>1</sup>. This training enabled Kim to weave together research-based approaches from the disciplines of ECE and management studies, which the PEI Lab team had identified as an important dimension of the coach role.

<sup>1</sup> Kouzes, J. & Posner, B. (2017). Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI), 5th Edition [Measurement instrument]. Wiley.  
Prototype



## The Prototype Process

At the start of the prototype, each Director participated in a 30 minute baseline interview with the PEI team's design coach to understand participants' learning goals, their leadership learning experience, and how they currently engage in activity around themes of collaborative leadership, self-reflection, and feedback. After the interviews, the Leadership Learning Coach welcomed the participants with an email introduction and access to an online self evaluation module.

Self-care was an important learning theme in the prototype. To support this, the coach approached the preparation and interactions with care. She scheduled an in-person half-day session with each pair, and organised a calm and focused environment for the sessions, away from the distractions of participants' workplaces. The coach provided each participant with learning materials, a journal for reflection on leadership, and refreshments.



During each session, the coach guided the pair through reflection on the results of their self evaluations. The evaluation surfaced participants' strengths and learning opportunities, and presented them in text summaries and charts. The coach facilitated the pairs as they discussed and set learning goals based on their self assessments.



Participants who had not been able to complete their self assessments before the coaching session were encouraged to speak about their strengths, learning goals, and leadership challenges during the session. All participants were encouraged to come away from the session with at least one concrete goal that they could work toward in the coming months. Those who had not completed their online assessments were supported to do so through additional communication with the coach, and ultimately all participants completed their assessments and received their results.

After the initial session, the pairs contacted each other through email and messaging apps. All pairs had at least one follow-up contact after the coaching session. Some of the pairs had met in person again by the time post interviews were conducted, and all expressed intentions to meet again. The most often reported contact frequency was approximately once every two weeks. Some pairs set specific dates for followup based on actions tied to their learning goals. The coach continued to contact the pairs periodically to provide resources discussed in the session, and offer follow-up meetings to support the pair connections as needed.

Cohort meetings were designed to provide monthly opportunities for the pairs to come together as a group to share practical ideas, support each others' reflection on learning goals, and discuss leadership concepts. At the time of evaluation, the first cohort meeting had been held, and seven Directors were able to participate.





## The Test Findings

*“It was a good fit.”*

*“The connection with my buddy has been great.”*

### All twelve (12) participants completed the core prototype actions of:

- Leadership self evaluation
- Leadership learning goal-setting
- Discussing learning goals and leadership challenges with their buddy
- Participating in leadership coaching session

The most-cited challenge to successful engagement in the prototype was the busy time of year when it took place. Most centres were balancing end of school/ beginning of summer program transitions, including Pre-K graduations, staff vacations, starts of summer programming, and grant applications and reports.

### The Value of a Buddy

When asked about the overall experience of the prototype, participants discussed the relationship with their buddy as the most prominent positive outcome. The most often-reported benefits of the buddy relationship were:

- Accountability to goals
- Ideas for new leadership tactics and approaches
- Feedback on leadership practices

*“That accountability piece is so huge when somebody’s checking in to be like, ‘Hey, did you do that?’ You’re much more apt to be like, ‘Yeah, I did.’ The follow through is more consistent, because you want to be able to tell that person that you did follow through on your goals.”*

### Cultivating trust, deep reflection, and personalised growth

Participants contrasted the buddy relationship to other types of supportive peer groups. The intimacy of having just one other person giving feedback and listening created a sense of trust and allowed for openness. The other differences noted in contrast to gatherings such as courses and larger peer meetups were:

- a. the focus on self-initiated goals rather than information or problems, and
- b. the foundation created in getting to know each other more deeply through sharing the self-assessment results.

*“I’ve always had people that I can go to, but it’s so easy for them to say, just do this, just do that. When it’s not necessarily who I am or what I feel like I can do.”*

### Transforming learnings into practice

One participant who is enrolled in a university leadership course talked about the prototype as a means of bringing those ideas into their practice more concretely. Another who is participating in an in-depth leadership course offered through ECDA described being able to bring reflection from the coaching session into those discussions.

**In their buddy communications and meetings, participants reported that they had or were planning to:**

- share examples from practice, including policies and handbooks,
- follow up on each other’s goals,
- share self-reflection on learning goals,
- listen to each others’ concerns and challenges, and
- offer feedback and ideas.



## I Intricacies of Buddy Pairings

Buddies who paired from the same organisation reported different benefits and challenges arising from participation than those who worked in different organisations. Some benefits for colleague pairs included better working relationships from new awareness of their colleague's strengths and the ease of organising meetups. They also were able to observe each others' implementation of new strategies and tactics, which they could then use to make decisions together. One pair was able to make a leadership decision based on their work together in the prototype that has implications for increasing their ability to deliver a new summer program, resulting in expanded access to summer childcare in their community.

*"We've always had a really strong relationship and talk quite often, so it's been great to kind of have that time carved out, just because you get busy."*

Challenges that arose from pairing with colleagues included conflict in setting learning goals that had implications on each others' work, and a lack of fresh perspective to address persistent challenges.

Based on the post-prototype interviews, participants reflected that the most important elements for productive buddy dialogue are to have a mix of complementary leadership learning goals and experiences. Overall, buddies who paired from different organizations reported more benefit from fresh perspectives, even between centres with very different profiles and between Directors with different roles. Imbalances arose in the value of the buddy relationship when one member of the pair had a learning goal on a topic that their partner didn't have experience or knowledge to share about, and that their partner wasn't also engaged in learning about. Based on this finding, either complementary experience on a topic or a shared learning goal could be criteria for matching pairs in the future.

Despite the variation in "fit" among the buddy pairs, all pairs reported deriving enough value from the connection that they planned to continue their connection beyond the prototype. The cohort meetings were brought up by pairs who experienced imbalances as a way to fill this gap in buddy fit.

*"That connection piece is so, so big and the buddy that I'm connected with, our centre environments are very different."*



## Leadership Coaching Approach and Actions

While the buddy relationship was the focus for participants, they also reflected on the value of the coaching and how the self-assessment set the stage for the learning conversations that followed.

*“When we met with Kim and she brought us the result of [the self assessment], it was easier for me to choose what I wanted to work on and build off of my own answers. That’s what I felt was really good about it.”*

**The qualities that participants cited as contributing to the value of the coaching experience included:**

- the coach’s wealth of knowledge in ECE,
- skilled facilitation for establishing positive buddy relationships,
- Asking guiding questions for deeper reflection,
- Providing resources tailored to the participants’ learning goals,
- Being available and responsive to participant needs, especially in balancing work obligations with participation

## Emerging Impacts of the Prototype

Participants reported tangible impacts on Directors’ quality of life and leadership practices.

Learning goals that participants expressed in pre-interviews included improving time management, delegation skills, conflict resolution, and understanding different personalities. They also sought support in balancing multiple roles and gaining confidence as a leader. During the prototype, learning goals were refined and supported with planning and action, and new goals were created through learning about others’ goals, strengths and challenges.

When asked if the prototype experience met their learning goals, every participant discussed some leadership learning that they had gained. When asked if it met their expectations, participants answered equally yes and “I didn’t know what to expect.” Two participants expressed that it was too early to make an assessment.

### Policy Changes

Several participants discussed plans to implement centre policy changes as an outcome of their experience in the prototype. They reported that they had more ideas for ways to change their policies, and that they felt more accountability and confidence in their ability to execute these changes.

*“It was definitely a big eye-opener and I was just like, you know, I have many plans for September but here are some things that I could start right away and see how it goes.”*

*“We’re actually going to send each other our parent handbooks and our staff personnel policies. And then once we get them, we’re gonna look at what I like about hers and what she likes about mine that we might be able to steal from each other. And then how, how to go about implementing them.”*





## **Mindset Shifts**

Some participants reported experiencing a mindset shift from looking for deficits to seeing and amplifying the good. One participant said that this produced a calmer attitude. “I’m actually being able to sit in the rooms with them, talk to them, have conversations with the children and just kind of relax and enjoy myself with them.”

*Participants reported feeling more grounded and purposeful in their leadership practices. “[The process] helps you focus on the areas that you need to put a little more effort into.”*

One Director took their first vacation without checking in to see how it was going at the centre.

*“I mean we hired them, we trust and believe in them. So I think I need to give that message and emphasize that a little bit more.”*

## **Increased Confidence**

Participants reported confidence to participate in sectoral leadership conversations, and to reach out for support from other leaders

*– “It’s giving us confidence too to reach out to other leaders when we had a question and not kind of thinking like, are we the only ones?”*





## What's Next

Cohort meetups will continue into Autumn 2023, and the current buddy pairs will continue indefinitely to support each other through self-directed learning and reflection. Overall next steps include figuring out how to incorporate this information into PEI's existing learning systems (or to change the systems) in ways that are sustainable and purposeful.

**All nine (9) participants who participated in post-prototype interviews stated that based on their experience they would make the decision to participate again. Some suggestions they gave for revisions or improvements to the prototype design included:**

- Change the timing to February or March, so that leaders have more time to reflect and attend in-person meetings
- Provide more guidance and additional resources for self-reflection on goals and learning
- Refine the buddy matching process to increase fit
- Explore smaller group sizes such as 3-5 to increase the potential for shared goals and complementary experience while keeping communication open and accountability manageable
- Support buddy learning for Educators as well as Directors
- If there were a cost attached, keep it affordable
- Currently in discussions with the PEI ECE Lab team, as a form of informing and providing next steps for the field test learning.
- Plans involve sharing at the Fall Conference through partnering with the Early Childhood Development Association.





In future iterations of this prototype, we recommend that learning pairs should be matched based on at least one of following criteria:

- Each buddy has complementary experience on a topic that the other buddy is interested in exploring through their learning journey
- Both buddies share at least one high-priority learning goal

Figure 1: Example pairing decisions using an experience and interest rubric for assessing pair fit

Match	experience and goals	
Director 1	experience with leadership topic A	interest in learning about B
Director 2	experience with leadership topic B	interest in learning about A

Match	experience and goals	
Director 1	experience with leadership topic D	interest in learning about C
Director 2	experience with leadership topic E	interest in learning about C

Not a Match	experience and goals	
Director 1	experience with leadership topic A	interest in learning about C
Director 2	experience with leadership topic E	interest in learning about F

Making matches in this way would require identifying learning goals and relevant experience as part of the intake process.

Overall, this field test indicates that there is value in developing the prototype through future iterations, or through seeding the insights gained in this field test into other ECE leadership programs being developed in PEI. The results indicate this model offers leaders access to personal insights for growth, caring and sustainable forms of accountability for one's personal leadership goals, ongoing dyadic communication bringing intentional discussion of one's learnings from other contexts, and enables leaders to more reliably and successfully translate theory to practise. Any one of these prototype aspects could be explored for further application in the PEI ECE sector.

*"I'm really hoping that there'll be more leaders wanting to take it and learn more from it."*

*"I think there's so many more people that could benefit from it."*

Reference:

Kouzes, J. & Posner, B. (2017). Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI), 5th Edition [Measurement instrument]. Wiley.