

# It's Time: Making the Case for Ongoing Funding for Communities of Practice Programs that Support Early Childhood Educators

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## Introduction

*“Developing a stronger relationship with my local peers is something I know will sustain me through the challenges in my work, where I previously felt alone...”*

—Early Childhood Educator, Peer Mentoring Program, survey response



Amber & Peer Mentoring Program crew-ECEBC Conference 2023

For the last several years, Amber, who is the project coordinator for the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO), and Laura, who oversees the Peer Mentoring Program for Early Childhood Educators in BC, have met regularly to share ongoing learning through the two community of practice (CoP) programs that we are involved in. Our times together are rich, as we find synergies between our two programs, despite the fact they take place in very different parts of the country. Last year, we co-authored the article, “Communities of Practice in BC and Ontario: Sharing Our Stories Across Canada” (Straker & Doan, 2023). In this article, we highlighted the impact of our two programs, including the increase in leadership, educator efficacy (confidence), and professional identity development, as well as helping educators to be sustained in their practice and avoid burnout. We also shared about the impact of our

coming together as two colleagues. We are very different people (from the outside) but are both educators who share the same commitment to the work, a commitment that we became more inspired by and connected to through each of our conversations. While we met to share the impact of our programs, we found community, connection, and joy—similar to what the educators in our programs experience through connection.

In this second co-written article, we continue to share the stories of our two programs, but this time, a year later, with even more data and a different context now that the Canada-Wide Early Learning Child Care Agreements are in place, we push for programs like ours to be firmly embedded into professional associations across Canada with ongoing funding. What follows is a discussion on the context, thinking about the Canada-Wide Early Learning Child Care Agreements, sharing about the importance of ongoing funding, and action steps for early childhood educators and policymakers.

## Context in British Columbia and Ontario

The Peer Mentoring Program for Early Childhood Educators in BC is in its third year of continuous funding. After a one-year hiatus, the program began again in 2020 during the pandemic. In the second year, educators were anticipating the move from the Ministry of Children and Family Development to the Ministry of Education and Child Care. In our third year, educators have received an additional wage enhancement from the provincial government. In addition, there is recognition for those educators who have additional credentials, such as Infant and Toddler Educator and/or Special Needs Educator. What this has meant is that educators who are part of a peer mentoring CoP have someone to talk to, share with, and get

mutual support from—no matter what is happening in the child care landscape in BC, or in their professional life. And this makes a significant difference. As one educator shared: “It takes away the isolation ... especially when you’re first starting out and the uncertainty. I wish this group had been around when I first started out...” (Doan & Mughal, 2023). In a program survey in May 2023, 68% of participants reported that the Peer Mentoring Program made a difference in their ability to stay in the field and 97% reported seeing themselves staying in the field (Doan & Mughal, 2023).

In Ontario, Communities of Practice at the AECEO were launched in 2016 with the idea of creating space for educators to come together in community and advocate for decent working conditions and professional pay. In Ontario, the College of Early Childhood Educators provides oversight and practice standards for educators while ultimately working to protect the public’s interests. (To be called an early childhood educator in Ontario, one must be registered with the College of ECEs.) The AECEO is the sector’s professional association in Ontario, and it supports the early learning workforce through community building, professional learning, and policy recommendations and reflections. The AECEO created communities of practice as a direct way for early childhood educators to be the driving force and a united voice for the early learning work. In 2021, the Building Leadership and Learning Communities project expanded this original work, creating additional CoPs around the province and adding relational province-wide groups. Much has happened in this time including the after-effects of the Covid-19 pandemic leaving the early childhood sector in its worst workforce crisis yet, the signing of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreement in 2022, the creation of a wage floor for registered early childhood educators in 2023, and the announcement of a minimal increase to that wage floor for 2024. Similarly to the Peer Mentoring Program in BC, AECEO Communities of Practice provide a space for those involved in the early learning sector to come together to talk, share, and find support in their work and lives.

For both provinces, our research has found that the CoPs serve as a place where educators can find mutual support, respect, and care. It is a safe enough place for educators to be able to ask questions, share ideas, advocate, listen, provoke, and grow. In a field where there seems to be so little time for gathering with colleagues, these communities create a structure where authentic sharing can happen. This is a place where educators can walk alongside one another, cheering each other on, being the voice that says, “I see you. I hear you. I’m here for you.”

In BC’s Peer Mentoring Program 2023 survey, 96% of participants reported an increase in learning through participation in the program. One educator put it this way: “I would not know about the new [BC] Early Learning Framework without this program. It’s given me insight into supporting children in early intervention in a different way” (Doan & Mughal, 2023). Reflecting on the Peer Mentoring Program, and where we are today, with 32 peer mentoring CoPs across the province, with over 300 early childhood educators, and 42 facilitators, Laura is reminded of the significant impact of the Early Childhood Educators in British Columbia (ECEBC), the professional association representing early childhood educators in BC. The Peer Mentoring Program has been a partnership between Thompson Rivers University and ECEBC, and we truly would not be where we are today without ECEBC.

Members and leads of Ontario Communities of Practice report similar feelings and outcomes as those in the BC program. Over 90% agreed that their involvement has impacted them professionally and “*frequently listed learning, making new connections with other ECEs, and building a sense of community as ways that the CoP had impacted them*” (Matthews et al., 2023). The CoPs are spaces where educators build a sense of belonging, sharing things like, “*It provided me with confidence in my role as a REECE. It also provided me with a sense of community I didn’t have before.*” We are grateful to the funders who have continued to support the 10 communities of practice, 19 leads, over 120 core team members, and thousands of constituents across Ontario. The primary purpose of Ontario’s AECEO is to support ECEs, and that is exactly what the CoPs do, they provide a space where educators “realize that other people [are] experiencing the same things. And that [they] have support from individuals who will be there to help if needed” (CoP member).

## Thinking about the Canada-Wide Early Learning Child Care Agreements

The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreements have had a drastic impact across Canada. They have provided an opportunity to create a system in which early learning and child care is valued, and most importantly, those who provide the care and learning in this sector are respected for the pedagogical skills and knowledge and emotional intelligence and ethical care they bring to these roles. With British Columbia being the first province to sign their agreement with the federal Canadian government and

Ontario being the last, we have seen various methods that provincial governments are taking to implement the new system of child care in Canada.

A Canada-wide child care system has the potential to disrupt the current market-based system where educators have been subsidizing the costs of child care with their low wages and precarious working conditions into a system where educators are fully valued and recognized for the incredible work they do. The early learning sector was left broken after the Covid-19 pandemic. Early childhood educators worked without pause through emergency child care to provide safety for children while parents went to work. Already a crack in our system, the challenge of retention in the sector has since become one of the greatest retention crises that has ever been seen. Early childhood educators are leaving the field in droves all across the country. While often seen as a recruitment and retention challenge, we know that students are entering post-secondary institutions to become ECEs. However, they are not staying in the field. Ontario's College of ECEs 2021 membership data demonstrates that "members who work in licensed child care are twice as likely to resign their membership after just three years of membership compared to those working in education or another employment setting" (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2021). While we know that addressing the underlying systemic issues of professional pay and decent working conditions are ultimately needed to truly begin addressing the retention issue, we also know that programs such as the Peer Mentoring Program in B.C. and the Communities of Practice in Ontario are integral in the building of a system that supports educators and a profession that is not just a job, but a career.

## **Importance of Ongoing Funding with Programs Firmly Embedded into Professional Associations**

I believe this program is invaluable and needs to be accessible to all ECEs. This program creates relationship, which is at the heart of what we do and has a many layered trickle-down effect on our lives, both professionally and personally. I believe the reconnection that I am experiencing being a part of this program has made my professional career more meaningful because it feels good to make a positive difference in someone else's life. I feel purposeful and valued. (Early childhood educator, Peer Mentoring Program, survey response)

Can you imagine with us, a time when across Canada, every early childhood educator would have access to a community of practice, a place where they find community, trust, value, and respect? Where ECEs stay in jobs that become careers and feel a deep sense of belonging to the sector? Communities of practice are effective in supporting professional identity development, reflective practice, educator well-being, leadership, educator efficacy (confidence), and retention (Wenger, 1998). In a Peer Mentoring Program survey in 2023, 78% of participants reported increased leadership through participation in the program. One educator shared, "Interacting with experienced educators has really helped me develop leadership skills. They have shared valuable insights into how to handle daily tasks in the daycare setting, which has been truly enlightening for me. Thanks to their guidance and mentorship, my leadership capacity has grown substantially" (Doan & Mughal, 2023).

The current system does not allow all educators to experience community like this. Educators have inequitable access to opportunities for ongoing, self-directed, and meaningful relationship-building, mentorship, and learning across Canada. In most cases, it is a matter of where you live, who your employer is, and what the province or territory has prioritized for the workforce. This inequity must be remedied. All educators, no matter where they work, deserve the opportunity to engage in communities that care with and for them, and all children, no matter where they live, deserve the opportunity to be cared for by a well-supported educator.

We argue for these programs to be firmly embedded within professional associations across Canada and for these programs to be funded. It's time for Canada to recognize the importance of early childhood educators and to do so in a tangible, ongoing way. It is through the professional associations who are deeply connected to the ECE community that this can be made possible. One CoP member through the AECEO shared, "I have found that this CoP has really helped me to feel a part of the community in a way that I don't know that I would have had access to otherwise." Throughout the pandemic, early childhood educators heard about how they were "essential." In the announcement of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care plan, they were called "the heart of the system." Educators are still waiting to see changes in policy, practice, and funding that reflect this sentiment.

## Action Steps

The change we need is **clear: consistent and permanent public funding to professional associations to create opportunities for all educators to experience communities of care and belonging to contribute to retention, recruitment, and a thriving and well-supported profession.**

We believe it is important for early childhood educators, child care workers, professional associations, researchers, government leaders, and policymakers to work together. When we work individually, in our silos, we are only able to see things from our own perspective, but when we join with people who come from different perspectives, we start to have a more fulsome picture. Margaret Mead said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has”, and we believe this is true.

Are you an early childhood educator? Do people in your community know the issues you are facing? Are you part of a CoP? If so, this may be a place where you can come together, in collective action. We hope that you will join us to strengthen the collective voice for positive change. How can you do that?

- Share your story with families, the community, government leaders, policymakers.
- Join your professional association to contribute to building a collective voice and a better future for your profession.
- In Ontario, you can learn more at [www.aeceo.ca/](http://www.aeceo.ca/) and contact us at [info@aeceo.ca](mailto:info@aeceo.ca)
- In BC, you can learn more at [www.ecebc.ca](http://www.ecebc.ca) or find out more information at [www.ecepeermentoring.trubox.ca](http://www.ecepeermentoring.trubox.ca) or [peermentoring@tru.ca](mailto:peermentoring@tru.ca).

Are you in government or are you a policymaker? We invite you to be part of ongoing dialogue and collaboration so that we might work together, to make a difference for children, families, educators, our communities, and our society. How can you do that?

- Ensure that you are aware of what is going on in early learning in your community.
- Build relationships with key stakeholders in the ECE community, including early childhood educators, ECE leaders, and ECE professional associations.
- Listen to ECEs and community members about what they need to thrive in your community.

Whatever your role, we encourage you to have a conversation. Let those around you know how important this is. Share your values and invite allyship. Reach out to the professional association in your area and get connected. Stay in touch and check out our websites and social media platforms where we share upcoming actions and events as well as current research and information that can be shared with family, friends, networks, government officials, and funders.

## Hannah’s Story

Finally, we would like to share Hannah’s story. Hannah had been part of the Peer Mentoring Program for several years. During this time, she has moved to different communities in BC to pursue her career in early childhood education. With each move, Hannah has found a local Peer Mentoring CoP waiting for her. Recently we found out that Hannah is moving again, and we were delighted to see that a new Peer Mentoring CoP was starting in her area. Hannah’s journey, experience, and story represent what we want for all early childhood educators in every part of Canada: the opportunity to be part of a CoP, with educators who come together to walk the path together, in whatever community an educator happens to live in.

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