



Building Leadership and Learning Communities:

Roadmap to Strengthening the ECE Workforce

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What is the Building Leadership and Learning Communities project?

The Building Leadership and Learning Communities (BLLC) project at the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) aimed to strengthen the ECE workforce by connecting, supporting, and empowering Early Childhood Educators in Ontario. This project had two main focus areas; creating and supporting Communities of Practice (CoPs) for educators across Ontario and implementing a new professional learning (PL) model to reach more educators across the province. Through these two areas, we have supported early childhood educators (ECEs) sense of belonging, well being, professionalism, leadership capacity, pedagogy, and practice with children and families.

Our goals for this project were to:

1. Engage the ECE workforce in CoPs in order to build relationships, mentorships, support systems, and address feelings of devaluation and isolation.
2. Strengthen advocacy for Decent Work and Professional Pay by building leadership of the early childhood workforce in the advocacy movement.
3. Increase self-efficacy of and support the ECE workforce by delivering meaningful, ongoing Professional Learning that is responsive to their needs, interests, and supports their work in communities.
4. Promote the work to sector allies in Ontario, other jurisdictions, the provincial and federal government, and share how the project was a sustainable and meaningful way to support the workforce.

CoPs are geographic or allied networks where ECEs can share their challenges and strengths, create peer and mentorship relationships, and engage in professional learning and advocacy. They are spaces focused on relationship building, and create opportunities for collaboration, connection, and care. In an AECEO CoP, we strive to disrupt typical power hierarchies, welcoming everyone from the early learning and child care sector. They are spaces to find like-minded people, those who “get it”, and to care out loud with allies who share your values.

PL at the AECEO was an experience that was meaningful and interesting, as well as accessible to our community. We did this by developing a model that was driven by and for ECEs specifically. Our sessions focused on supporting educators, disrupting the status-quo by intentionally pushing against dominant discourse, and moving away from eurocentric ways of thinking. These sessions aimed to decolonize spaces, disrupt colonial knowledges, and to make space for historically and presently marginalized voices that are infrequently prioritized in professional learning.

Our vision was clear: to build and support communities to connect and empower ECEs. Our CoPs are a way to connect ECEs through networking, and the PL model connected ECEs through intentional learning, with both focusing on creating spaces for community and relationship building amongst ECEs.

How did we make it happen?

The AECEO's mission is to build and grow an ECE-led movement so that ECEs can participate in and influence positive change for children, families, communities, and themselves. The AECEO's perception of the ECE is someone who is highly knowledgeable, valuable, experienced, and worthy. The educator is always put first in our work. It was clear then, that in this project, we must continue to centre the voice of the educator, listening and incorporating their feedback; we must work to provide spaces for ECEs to share their experiences and stories; and we must create opportunities for continual learning and questioning. Our work would not be done only for ECEs but also with and by ECEs. By creating multiple spaces and opportunities for engagement, we felt more capable to meet people where they felt most comfortable.

Communities of Practice



CoPs provide a space for educators to simply be together, a novel idea for a sector of chronically overworked individuals. It was important for us to communicate this intention and to set the expectation up front that CoPs were not a place that required additional labour from ECEs. In recognizing the systemic burnout in the sector, it was crucial that participating in a CoP did not require anything beyond what ECEs voluntarily offered. Joining, participating, and being yourself was enough. In working to launch each new CoP in the project, we shared this goal with potential leads: there was not anything specific to accomplish within the community, except to provide space to come together, have open and honest discussions, and to connect the community with a focus around advocacy for decent work and professional pay. A monthly honorarium was offered for this work. Meeting regularly was suggested to the group leads to support relationship building, and many CoPs arranged monthly, bimonthly, or quarterly gatherings. As the leads began to bring together their communities, we quickly recognized the many different ways that these communities became involved. Some groups have concentrated their efforts on writing and sharing their stories through articles and presentations, some have had in-person gatherings, there have been guest speakers, special topic discussions, town halls, movie nights, picnics, reading groups, and many community meetings to learn, share, and be together. Each group participated in national and provincial advocacy campaigns in ways that worked for their communities. Through all of this, we have continued to follow the feedback of the educators and of the leads of each group who are listening to and surrounded by their communities. Our role was to support whichever direction the CoP was hoping to take and provide suggestions, feedback, mentorship, and guidance along the way.

building power through knowledge sharing	
providing workshops and webinars	writing articles for publications
hosting guest speakers	participating in focus groups
presenting in conferences	hosting reconceptualist reading groups
building power through community and relationships	
ongoing community check ins	community picnics, films, and games/crafts events
specific coffee and conversation chats	tabling at professional development days
international student virtual cafes	outreach events hosted at individual centers throughout the region
building power through engagement with decision-makers	
creating social media advocacy challenges	town halls
letter writing/signing campaigns	conducting deputations at city hall
meetings with city officials and MPPs	media engagement
press conferences	speaking at rallies
participating in AECEO summer campaigns as well as provincial, national, and international days of action.	

We intentionally created space to bring the leads of each group together to share and collaborate. This was done by facilitating monthly meetings hosted by the AECEO where leads came together to hear and learn from one another. In this space, we have also had the opportunity on two occasions to connect with facilitators of a similar program in British Columbia, connecting and sharing our experiences across the country. A highlight of our provincial meetings was our retreat. AECEO staff and CoP leads were invited to an in-person weekend of collaboration, connection, community building, reflection, strategizing, and planning together. This weekend highlighted exactly what the CoPs aim to do: build relationships, mentorships, support systems, and address feelings of devaluation and isolation. It was truly an incredible weekend.



Professional Learning

Throughout the project, the AECEO PL has become a transformational professional learning model. The aims of PL in this project were to be responsive to ECEs needs and interests, and support their work in communities. We curated PL that was meaningful and interesting, and chosen by the educators who would be participating. Our first step was to consult the sector and find out what topics ECEs wanted to learn about, what would be meaningful, and in what ways could we disrupt the status quo of traditional ECE PL. We consulted with the members of our CoPs and the wider ECE community to develop a list of key topics and guiding values. These values guided our choices and work when presenters approached the AECEO with offers to share their expertise, or when the AECEO reached out to ECEs to gauge their interest in sharing with our community.

For each PL session, we discussed the proposed content and ensured that it was created specifically with the needs and interests of our community in mind; that it matched our values. Overall, sessions were meant to meet educators where they are, to lead with compassion and care, and to provide ideas for educators to then incorporate into their own individual contexts. Knowing that so many ECEs in Ontario are unable to take paid time off the floor to participate in professional learning, we intentionally scheduled sessions to occur well after traditional working hours so that educators had time to return home and join.

AECEO Professional Learning Values
ECE focused
Strengths based
Challenging dominant discourse
Inclusive and accessible

Further, the PL sessions were never longer than 1.5 or 2 hours to make sure that ECEs were not required to attend late into the night. We hosted the majority of sessions online so that ECEs across the province could attend, and were able to offer sessions for free which removed financial barriers to participation. We used these funds to ensure that American Sign Language interpretation and live closed captions were available at each session, and to work with participants individually to meet their accessibility needs. Each step in the preparation of our PL sessions was thoughtfully planned and the impact on ECEs was always considered.

Throughout the sessions, there were opportunities for participants to connect and share their learning together. We provided further opportunities for community and relationship building, for educators to discuss their learning, and for participants to reflect on the impact of their own learning on others around them. This was achieved through break out rooms in the session, an online documentation resource to share and reflect (ie.,Padlet), and follow up sessions focused on further conversation and connection on the topic. These spaces were guided by a team of AECEO Facilitators, who developed relationships with participants and became a community themselves, working together to ensure that everyone involved was able to connect and contribute to their learning.

AECEO 2023 Virtual Provincial Conference

At the culmination of year 2 of the project we hosted the 2023 AECEO Provincial conference. After 2 years of working alongside educators and learning from the delivery of professional learning sessions, our community came together in an event that truly highlighted the values in which we work. This event was by educators, for educators. As part of our planning process, we invited our community to participate in a conference committee, which consisted of educators from across the province and across the sector. We were very intentional in the space that was created for the conference committee, taking the time to get to know each other, gain trust, and ensure that everyone was treated with kindness and was respected for their ideas. Everyone was there for the same reasons: to support each other, collaborate together, and create an experience that would not soon be forgotten.

With the values of the AECEO and the BLLC project in mind, the committee decided that this conference would be about the educator as a holistic person and focus on their psychological well being. Again, we followed our values and made choices with early years professionals at the center. Early Years Professionals was used specifically in this space to ensure that everyone working in the early years could see themselves represented; this was not just for ECEs but for everyone who works in early learning. This conference was an opportunity for educators to come together in community, to connect with others, to feel a strong sense of belonging, and to engage in learning that focused on educator well being together. This conference was by ECEs, for ECEs in every facet of its design and delivery. For example, ECEs created and planned the conference, ECEs presented at the conference, and ECEs and all early years professionals and allies participated in the conference.

We Raise Each Other Up:

ECEs Building Leadership + Learning Communities of Joy, Curiosity, and Hope



We also recognized that many ECEs may not identify with or see themselves as conference presenters because they are often positioned as the receiver of knowledge and expertise, and not necessarily the producer of knowledge. This is especially true for ECEs who are working directly with children and not holding leadership positions. We sought to expand ECEs' sense of self and identity, and consulted the sector to get a better understanding of the barriers that were in place and for their recommendations of supports that would enable ECEs to present at our conference. The results of our consultation were that typical academic requirements such as abstracts of written research papers should not be required for presentations to be accepted. This enabled presenters to express their interests on the topics that were meaningful to them without the pressure to conform to traditional academic formatting. There was a flexibility in the model of knowledge sharing where many forms of experience and expertise were valued. There were also multiple types of presentation styles to choose from, from individual presentation/webinar style, panel presentations, and salon discussion-style rooms. We held information sessions, individual support meetings, provided written support via email, and held a professional learning session dedicated to supporting ECEs to become presenters. Anonymized conference proposals were submitted by potential presenters, and they were reviewed, considered, and decided on in a blind review by the conference committee. Individual emails were sent to every person who applied with personalized feedback about their proposal, explaining why it was accepted or rejected. The conference also hosted an online gallery with various types of work submitted (for example poems and visual art) and an evening of the conference was completely dedicated to topic based conversation lounges and speed networking.

The project connected the work of the CoPs and the PL in multiple ways. Many of the CoP members were regular participants or facilitators of PL sessions, and some of these facilitators became conference committee members. There was also intentional crossovers with professional learning that was dedicated to CoP members, such as the Digital Storytelling Mini Course hosted in the Fall of 2022. During this series, CoP members were invited to learn a new storytelling method while sharing the impact of their participation in their CoPs. This mini-course highlighted the main goals of our project work: to provide opportunities for ECEs to share their stories, talk about their experiences, come together in community, and build lasting relationships.

Lessons Learned

We have learned many lessons that have impacted our project and the way we will continue on into the future of our work. The main lesson has been to always listen to the community we are working to support, and to the people who we are most trying to impact, because they know what they need the best. It was never up to us to decide how to best support ECEs in Ontario because ECEs in Ontario know what they need. It is our responsibility to listen, stand up, and follow through in whatever ways we can, to support them.

Through our listening, we have adapted the way we do our work. Following every professional learning session that we hosted, we shared a survey to check in with participants and get their feedback about ways to improve the way we work. Through these surveys, we found that participants wanted more time for conversations, and so we made this a focus in future planning. They wanted to continue the conversation after the event was over, and so we created an online space to write and share. They wanted to continue the learning and to dig deeper into topics, and so we curated resources and further reading to be shared. We heard that the timing of our sessions worked well, and so we continued to schedule sessions in the evenings. We also took time to intentionally check in with our team of facilitators following each event, where we learned that they enjoyed working with partners to facilitate breakout room discussions. We used the rose, bud, thorn format: sharing our roses (the parts we felt went really well), our thorns (the parts we thought could have gone better), and our buds (our hopes for next time) to debrief after every session.

Our listening allowed us to tailor our events specifically to our community, to create sessions that were meaningful, interesting, and supported their work. This resulted in our work at the AECEO being supported as well, highlighting the reciprocal, circular nature of mutual learning and growth.

We also continue to learn through our experiences supporting the CoPs. In our experience, we have found that it makes sense to first approach people who are already active in the sector and in their communities, to bring people together who are doing this work. We have learned that we cannot dictate what should work for a community, but only work with each group on an individual level by listening to the strengths and needs of the leads and the group. Through connecting with groups in other provinces, we also learned that having co-leads for CoPs is beneficial because working in pairs increases confidence and capacity. We have implemented this approach in several of our CoPs and have found similar results.

Overall, we have learned that ECEs appreciate being recognized, respected, and valued for the incredible work that they do, and for the incredible people that they are. Providing opportunities and spaces for educators to come together in community, build relationships, and be outwardly recognized and cherished led to feelings of belonging and support and addressed devaluation and isolation.

What has been the impact?

CoPs and our PL model provided spaces where educators could truly feel a sense of belonging. They supported confidence building, leadership skills, mental health, well being, and connection to community, all leading to increased retention in the field. When structures such as these are put in place, educators are given the time and space to connect with one another and to intentionally reflect on themselves, their work, and the impact they have on their communities.

Through this project, we have connected with thousands of educators across Ontario, linking our ECE community together through conversation, learning, and connection. We have reached nearly 5,700 participants through professional learning, and connected with over 4,000 individuals through CoPs. Our network and community continues to grow, our collective voice continues to become stronger, and we continue to stand up and support one another. Along with the participants and individuals involved in each respective type of engagement, there has been a massive impact amongst those working to create these environments, including the CoP leads, the PL facilitator group, the conference committee, and PL and conference presenters.

Through surveys completed by CoP members, we heard about the impact that participation had on these members. One CoP member shared the following: "It provided me with a confidence in my role as an RECE. It also provided me with a sense of community I didn't have before."

90% of survey respondents stated that their involvement has impacted them professionally, and nearly 85% have been impacted on a personal level. One CoP lead shared their perspective: "... the relationships that we've built continue to carry on outside of the group as well."

Participants reported that feelings of devaluation and isolation were being addressed: "I feel camaraderie, it just feels like other people who knows you. You know when you don't have to say anything they just got it. And also, there's a lot of encouragement. They remember you. We give each other strength."

Another shared how connecting with others was a powerful reminder: "I am able to connect with others - share my experiences and know that I am not alone - I have an enhanced sense of belonging."

As we have worked to build leadership in the advocacy movement, one of our CoP leads shared their perspective about how to begin building an even larger community: "People want to be involved in advocacy, but they need to be sort of brought to there in a way that feels safe."

By joining community groups such as these, participants have opportunities to practice their skills in a supportive environment. One CoP lead shared that their community members have been uplifted in positive ways through engaging with our work: "Some of our members have done press conferences with [government leaders], they've been in the news, they've gotten jobs in some of the advocacy organizations." This demonstrates how our support has led to new opportunities and advocacy actions throughout the early years sector in Ontario.

PL participants shared that sessions have been responsive to their needs, interests, and supported their work in communities: "Absolutely love the virtual webinars you have been offering. They are meaningful and so timely - I love the opportunity to think and reflect with new perspectives."

93% of our year 2 survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that, "the session today deepened [their] learning and encouraged [them] to rethink pedagogy and ideas" and one participant shared: "I was able to apply different perspectives into my practice and expand my knowledge in the process."

A highlight of the PL series is that just over 80% of all presenters over three years have been RECEs. Sessions have also included small break out room discussions guided by a team of facilitators, in which facilitators have gained a further sense of community: "I felt disconnected from the ECE community. And these facilitations and webinars helped me regain that connection and maintain it."

The 2023 AECEO Provincial Conference had its own impact, in large part due to the work of the conference committee, who came together over several months to think, dream, and plan. One committee member shared their experience: "I guess the best thing that I enjoyed about being part of the committee was the networking opportunities and being able to connect with so many different people within the sector, from so many different geographical areas as well as different like roles and responsibilities in the field, too."

A presenter at the conference highlighted the community aspect and support that was provided: "Incredible experience. I am so grateful for all the support the AECEO team provided to ensure the speakers felt prepared and well supported. It was a much more inclusive, and caring community experience in comparison to other conferences."

There were over 900 participants that joined us at the conference. One shared about their positive experience: "It was amazing. I felt such a strong sense of community. Despite the challenges within the sector I felt inspired and comforted knowing that there is a wonderful support network for ECEs."

Why does it matter?

The experiences facilitated by the AECEO and discussed in this report are the types of experiences that are needed for early years professionals in Ontario, exemplified by the positive comments and feedback outlined above. We are affirmed in our values and work when we hear participant comments such as: "(I have) increased confidence, a sense of belonging, and hope for the future of the sector."

We know we need to be doing more of this work because ECEs need and deserve this now more than ever. Amidst the decline of the publicity of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ontario-Canada Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreement was signed. This is one of the most exciting advances for the ECE field of our generation. However, CWELCC and the COVID-19 pandemic have also provided a context in which the workforce crisis has been exacerbated. We have seen an unprecedented number of ECEs leaving the field in droves due to lack of decent wages and working conditions, and new graduates of post secondary programs either not entering the field at all or leaving the sector shortly after entering. ECEs deserve to feel supported, they deserve to have vibrant, healthy communities. They deserve to have their needs heard and understood, and to be valued, respected, and recognized for the incredible work they do.

The current level of staff shortages have led current programs to close rooms, adding to already incredibly lengthy waitlists for families awaiting care, many thousands of names long. The introduction of CWELCC has dramatically increased the demand for child care but there are not enough spaces for even 1 in 4 children in Ontario. Now is the time to care about ECEs the way that they have been caring for children, families, and communities.

What is necessary for this to be sustainable?

What makes our work possible is the dedication of ECEs and their in-depth knowledge of the sector. The most challenging part of this work is that ECEs are overworked, underpaid, undervalued, and advocacy has not typically been included or supported in their regular responsibilities. Due to this context, and the lack of sustainable funding options for non-profit organizations, the incredible work we have accomplished during the BLLC project has not been scalable or sustainable.

A necessary first step to sustaining this work would be providing professional wages and operational funding that provides decent working conditions for ECEs in Ontario. Further, centralized organizations such as professional associations like the AECEO should be fully funded and memberships should be provided to all RECEs in Ontario. If this were the case, involvement with CoPs could be an embedded, accessible part of the ECE experience. This would enable our transformative PL model to continue past this project life cycle. The AECEO continues to devote our resources to building and strengthening the workforce while supporting the collective voice of the ECE profession. We work directly with those in the sector to truly understand their needs and what supports would be beneficial. In times of chaos, upheaval, and uncertainty, such as our current context (one of the worst workforce crises we've ever seen), professional associations should be consulted now more than ever for retention strategies because we recognize the value in belonging, well being, community, and care.

A further step to make this work sustainable would be for the Ontario government to take up the policy recommendations shared in the Roadmap to Universal Child Care in Ontario, co-authored by the AECEO and the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC). Lacking this, we dream of a time when the AECEO has the resources to expand the work we will be leaving behind at the close of the BLLC project. Until that time, we will continue to work with ECEs in Ontario to realize our vision of an equitable child care system. We will continue to gather, to strengthen our collective voice, to raise each other up, and to advocate to be supported in our work. We will continue to envision an Ontario early years system that values educators. Although this chapter of the project has now come to a close, we remain steadfast in our mission, grounded in our values, and more committed to the ECE workforce than we have ever been. We are grateful for the learning this project has provided, and look forward to continuing our journey with our next project iteration. Thank you to everyone who has been involved for your continued support.



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Stay connected & support the AECEO!