

Building Leaders From Within: An Open, Networked Approach to Early Childhood Educator Leadership Capacity Development

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Abstract

Early childhood education has been identified as a key federal and provincial government priority in Canada with over 8.4 billion dollars being invested over 2021-2026 (Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2018). Included in this significant investment are a variety of funding vehicles aimed at reducing childcare costs to \$10/day or less; the development of an operational funding model, wage grid, pension and benefits; the identification of career progression pathways and continuing education requirements, and the creation of new childcare spaces. With only 20% of families having access to a licensed childcare space in BC and the province having only one half of the needed number of early childhood educators (ECE), it is critical that this has been identified as a key area of importance both provincially and nationally.

Across Canada, ECE is dominated by female workers (96%) and includes a disproportionate number of visible minority workers (21%). Of the 302,000 child care workers in Canada, one third are immigrant or non-national workers (Charters & Findlay, 2021). This is a challenging sector; it is demanding, emotional work with a high rate of employee attrition and burn-out, all within a competitive environment for employees, particularly in rural and remote areas (Authors, 2025). This project aims to address the critical need for leadership capacity in British Columbia's rapidly expanding early learning and child care sector. Leveraging diverse partnerships and multiple networks, we worked with thought leaders, practitioners, providers, government, and academics to better understand the existing leadership modalities, the key leadership priorities, and the areas needed for innovation to lead and manage quality early childhood programs in British Columbia, Canada. This led to the creation of eight open educational resources (OERs), three courses and a micro credential. Work is still underway to build an undergraduate certificate. To best understand how ECE's could use the OERs, we initiated a design-based participatory action research study to investigate how education in Early Childhood Education Leadership (ECE-L) can be expanded through the use of these resources. It is the intention that this research project will contribute to a networked "playbook" of implementation ideas for the ECE-L OERs to facilitate wider use and adoption across BC and beyond. This research study shares the OERs created and reports on initial data from one research site, a school district based early learning program.

Keywords

Early childhood education, leadership, open education, networked learning, design-based research

Background

According to the Ministry of Education and Child Care, approximately 3,000 early childhood education (ECE) programs currently operate across British Columbia. These programs span a diverse spectrum of service types, from in-home family care and not-for-profit centres to for-profit corporate childcare settings. Certification for ECE professionals is offered by more than 40 post-secondary institutions, including public, private, and fully online providers. These programs are required to align their curricula with the BC Child Care Sector Occupational

Competencies. However, despite the availability of certification, the province faces a significant shortage of licensed ECE programs and qualified educators. As a result, many new graduates are stepping directly into management roles—such as directors or operators of ECE centres—with minimal practical experience beyond their practicum.

Over the past two years, the provincial government has invited ECE providers to participate in the \$10/day childcare initiative, beginning with 50 pilot sites and expanding to more than 200. While childcare providers have long needed essential small business competencies—including finance, grant writing, contract management, reporting, human resources, ethics, change design, leadership, staff retention, family engagement, and communication—many still lack proficiency in these areas. As the government increasingly takes on the role of program funder, providers must adopt more robust operational and reporting practices. However, issues of lack of an educated workforce, rigid licensing and regulatory requirements, and lack of ECE’s willing to take on leadership positions in centres have hindered the ability of many centres to open their \$10/day programming.

The Ministry’s current efforts to establish a wage and salary grid and develop career pathways in the ECE sector must include dedicated routes for managers and directors. Currently, targeted training for these leadership roles is notably absent. In attempt to contribute to this gap, an initial ECE-L project funded by BCCampus resulted in dialogue sessions with thought leaders, practitioners, providers, government, and academics to better understand the existing leadership modalities, the key leadership priorities, and the areas needed for innovation to lead and manage quality early childhood programs in British Columbia. This resulted in the formation of a network of professionals that used pedagogically informed digital tools to foster connection and community consistent with the description of networked learning environments used by Goodyear, et al., (2024) and NLEC, (2020). The input of this network was invaluable to the resulting product, a single 32 hour open educational resource (OER) that was creative commons licenced to ensure it could be openly shared and remixed by ECE’s as they worked to incorporate it into their practice and share their revisions across their networks. A networked approach to building leadership capacity grounded in relationships, co-creation, and community is consistent with the British Columbia Early Learning Framework (2019) which shapes professional learning in the province.

Building on the developing network of ECE professionals and the tools connecting them, a subsequent ECE-L micro-credential project funded by the Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills expanded on this work and saw the creation of seven, 32 hour online openly licensed OERs. The ECE-L courses are self-paced, asynchronous online courses accessible to any ECE educator who would like to learn more around the topics of ECE leadership. They are also able to be remixed, reused, and repurposed by others (organizations, individuals) with attribution. Assessment consists of self-assessment, reflections, and automated quizzes and when combined, the courses can stack into a micro credential and/or an undergraduate certificate. The titles of the OERs include: The Leadership Essentials of Governance, Finance, and Human Resources, Centre Management in Early Childcare and Education, Relational Leadership, Connecting Deeply for an Inclusive ECE Environment. Based on feedback from providers spanning the range of settings and program types in early childhood, there was both a desire to understand how other programs were using the ECE-L OERs in their setting and some very innovative ideas and approaches to how the OERs could be incorporated in the work of capacity building with staff.

Working with one school district, this current research project investigates ECE engagement and contribution to the ECE-L network as they use the [ECE-Leadership OER’s](#) in their work both individually and collectively. This instance is an initial case study of using the ECE-L OERs to build leadership capacity of ECEs in action and to investigate how the use of the OERs and playbook shapes the evolving networked learning practices at the school district. The intention is by doing so to create and contribute to the development of a “playbook” of use cases for larger scale implementation across the province. By highlighting the intentional co-creation and open sharing of these “playbook” use cases, this project attempts to embody and investigate the definition of Networked Learning as “involving a process of collaborative, co-operative, and collective inquiry, knowledge-creation and knowledgeable action, underpinned by trusting relationships, motivated by a sense of shared challenge and enabled by convivial technologies” (NLEC, 2020, p). In addition, due to the current evolution of networked learning environments beyond formal learning settings and systems, this project provides an example of the role of informal networks play in facilitating ongoing, professional learning and support leadership capacity development.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this project: How might early childhood education centres incorporate OER's focused on ECE-Leadership to build leadership capacity? Secondary questions include: What could be a vision for a ECE leadership capacity building? What supports do ECE centres require to build leaders within their centre? How might building capacity in ECE-L assist centres in achieving their vision? What changes are needed in the current [ECE-L OER](#) content to support the vision of ECE centres as networked learning spaces? What is working well that we can build on?

Methods

Using a participatory action research orientation (Kemmis, 2008; McIntyre, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2006) and a case-based ethnographic research approach (Mirriam, 1988; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009), this project worked in partnership with a school district as they launched their new early childcare centre (Oct 2025 – June 2026). Participants included the school district's ECE administrator and up to 5 early childhood centre staff. Data collection included monthly design conversations. The researchers drew upon reflective thematically analyzed data (Braun and Clark, 2006; 2012; 2022) to examine the research questions and sub-questions and will report out on preliminary findings in May 2026.

Summary

The action research project intends to inform the development of a “playbook” of implementation ideas for using the ECE-L OER's to assist in building leadership capacity in early childhood education centres. The initial themes identified in the case study will be presented and fed forward into the network of programming and staff professional learning decisions in the research site ECE centre as well as inform the capacity building approach for ECE leaders for the Ministry of Education and Child Care. The edits gathered from the design conversations will improve the ECE-L OER's and associated micro-credential offered. In addition, this research will increase awareness of these open resources, begin to create a network of ECE centres who contribute to imagining the possibilities by adding to the “playbook” of use cases. and build partnerships for future implementation pilots. Central to viable networks is the notion of value for membership. By having the playbook that is iterative, practical, and co-created by practicing ECE's in the network, it is the hope that it can contribute to building the skills and capacities of leaders in the ECE sector in general.

While we are early in the process, having reflected on the development of the eight OERs and beginning the research we have noted the relevance of networked learning. By building and continuing to develop a network of engaged practitioners interested in expanding opportunities to support leadership in this sector, we have found that it surfaces both processes and practices that can support and hinder navigation of complex early childhood education system, with often convoluted, and sometimes contradictory policy frameworks. The process of learning together, allows us to question and build the system simultaneously.

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