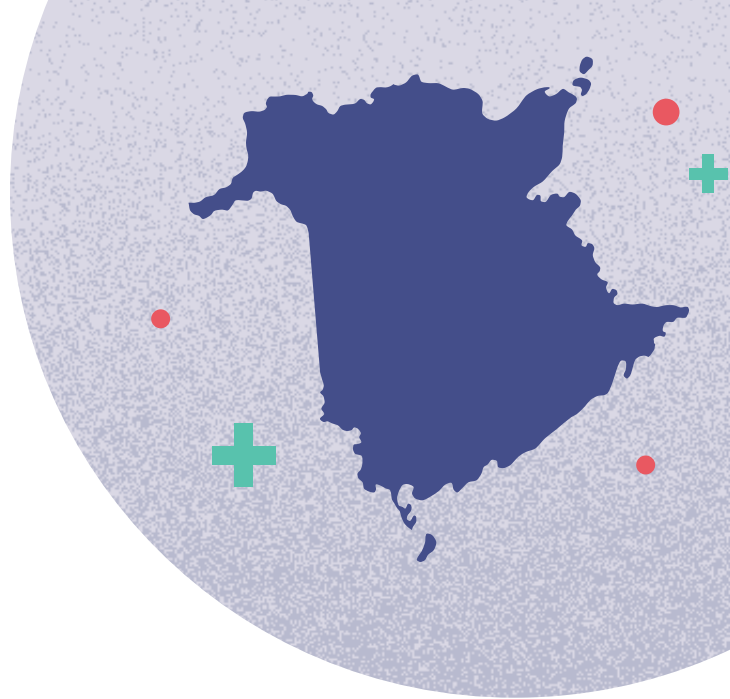




Early  
Childhood  
Education Lab



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

## New Brunswick Francophone team as part of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Training Lab.

This booklet includes an overview of the prototype tested by the: New Brunswick Francophone team as part of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Training Lab. The NB team chose to tackle the lack of capacity within centres for pedagogical support for educators on the floor. 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).

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The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Future Skills Centre or the Government of Canada.



## + The Team



**Vicky Fraser**

*Director*

Service de  
garde L'Envolée



**Marie-Pier Caissie**

*Director*

Petits Passereaux



**Carole LaValley**

*Associate Dean, Early  
Childhood*

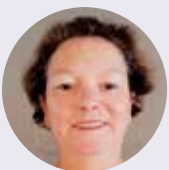
CCNB



**Jonathan Nowlan**

*Instructor*

CCNB



**Céline Cormier**

*Early Learning  
Consultant*

EECD



## The Challenge:

### Limited capacity for pedagogical support for ECEs on the floor

The New Brunswick Francophone team felt compelled to dig into the challenges directors face in balancing their administrative responsibilities while providing responsive and continuous pedagogical support for their early childhood educators (ECEs). In this round of the lab, the team was most interested in exploring how we might build capacity for pedagogical leadership within centres so that ECEs get the pedagogical support they need in a format that can accommodate the distinct strengths, challenges, and contexts of participating ELCCs.

With this in mind, the team developed the initial concept of having a dedicated ECE resource person specialised in pedagogical leadership, per centre. Given that training opportunities are currently in development by EECD and by NBCC, to address the lack of formal pathway for educators and directors to learn pedagogical leadership skills both at the EECD and NBCC level, this was also a timely opportunity to gain new insights on what could benefit this type of training. For this reason, the team chose to field test a Community of Practice for peer nominated ECEs as a way to build pedagogical leadership within teams. A peer nomination process was used to select pedagogical leaders as a feasible option for field testing over a short period of time and to provide opportunities for ECEs to make this decision for themselves. This process was used during the PEI prototype of the last round and received positive feedback.



## The Prototype:

### Centre Based Pedagogical Leader and Community of Practice

The blue sky vision that informed the concept developed by the New Brunswick Francophone team is that every centre has a dedicated pedagogical leader working on the floor who would be available and qualified to support directors and ECEs in developing pedagogical leadership skills. The initial concept emphasised the need for this role to be clearly defined, and understood by ELCC boards, directors and staff.

#### This includes three 'must have characteristics':

- 1 That the pedagogical leader would spend the majority of their time supporting ECEs on the floor and a smaller percentage of their time doing prep and checking in with ECEs and the centre director on staff/child learning goals and needs.
- 2 Secondly, this role would be separate from an administrative position in order to build more trusting and supportive relationships that don't fall into management or HR related dynamics at the same time.
- 3 And third, the pedagogical leader position would not be prioritized as a sub or fall into ratio, when ECEs are absent.

During the groundwork stage of this round of the lab, we came across a few francophone centres that had established team lead positions within their centres that had varying responsibilities but never quite matched the criteria above. That being said, one centre director on the team was in the process of establishing an ECE support position within her centre much like a pedagogical leader as understood by the design team. For the most part, the role of pedagogical leadership in centre-based ELCCs is largely played by Directors themselves.

The goal behind the prototype was to determine the interest, experience and impact of building pedagogical leadership capacity within centres so that educators/directors can have the support they need to ensure quality early childhood learning and care services.



## Prototype Test

To test the concept, the team decided to train interested participating centres on Pedagogical Leadership and provide additional learning opportunities for up to 2 ECEs per centre through a Community of Practice (CoP). The CoP offered a peer support network involving 1 coach and peer nominated leaders from various centre types as a platform for sharing ideas and dialogue, while alleviating the need to add additional responsibilities on centre directors. This format was established with the hope of answering the following learning goals.

### Key Questions:

- Does a community of practice for ECE leaders based on reflective practice, continuous learning and shared leadership support capacity building in pedagogical leadership amongst centre staff?
- Does the prototype create more awareness of the barriers and enablers to support ongoing pedagogical leadership within centres?
- From both ECE and director perspectives, what is the level of awareness and interest in building pedagogical leadership capacity within centres?

## Format

Five centres from each of the three main francophone school district zones (DSF-NO; DSF-NE; DSF-S), responded to an open call for applications and were selected by representative pedagogical agents from EECD to participate in the prototype. Each centre received a half-day training on pedagogical leadership<sup>1</sup> for at least 50% of their team. This initial workshop focused on reflective practice, questioning why we work the way we do and how to support early childhood ECEs in relation to each centre's vision, culture, principles and curriculum framework. Next, participating ECEs were invited to nominate their peers, to join a CoP on guiding teams through pedagogical leadership in practice. In total, 9 ECEs from 5 different centres participated in the two CoP sessions.

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<sup>2</sup> From the CoP workshop: A Pedagogical Leader is possibly someone who accompanies educators with intentional, thoughtful practice; Facilitates learning through dialogue, reflection and questioning (questions can be more valuable than answers); Creates spaces for dialogue and collaboration on what really matters; Nurtures a way of being every day, based on values rather than rules.



## CoP Approach

All workshops were held online and facilitated by Dominique-Ann Boisvert, a Prescott Russel centre quality coordinator for ELCCs based in Ontario with over 35 years experience in the field, including coaching ECEs, pedagogical leads and directors in francophone minority contexts.

The CoP workshops were inspired by Lorrie Baird and Anne Marie Coughlin's *Creating a Culture of Reflective Practice: The Role of Pedagogical Leadership in Early Child Programs*. This was informed by the pre-interviews and the findings of the PEI prototype from round 1 of the lab. Participants were introduced to the books core themes: Working from a place of values and vision; Building strong relationships; and Seeing and supporting strengths and competencies.

Workshops were discussion based and facilitated in a way that meets participants where they are at and using this as an entry point for the following session. ECEs who took part in the CoP, got a first hand experience with this format as an example of reflective practice and collaborative inquiry. It is a space where ECEs can discuss and find ways of exercising their values and moving towards a common vision both individually and with their respective teams. Having multiple ECEs from various centres and parts of the province allowed for a new opportunity for sharing experiences, ideas and reflections.

Pre-participation and Post-participation interviews were conducted with Directors and at least 2 staff members from each centre, for a total of 16 interviews. Prior to the initial workshop on pedagogical leadership and the peer-nomination process, we asked about experiences with mentorship, peer-support, learning needs and what participants hoped they might gain from participating in the field test, both personally and from an ELCC perspective.





## Participant Profiles

### *Peer support and reflective practice*

Reflective practice, or dedicated time to think and question why ECEs work the way they do in ECE contexts, generally took place informally, during nap time or early morning. Specifically, 2/5 centres expressed having dedicated prep hours and 2 centres expressed having no-prep or formal reflection time at all. 3/5 centres had monthly meetings, and one centre showed intentional practices dedicated to reflecting as a team using the curriculum framework and making space for shared decision making on a monthly basis.

Participants had minimal to no formal or informal mentorship experience. In general, ECEs learn by observing over time, sometimes with guidance from a more experienced ECE.

*“We have an employee in training, but we also have ten children or 20 children, depending on our ratios that we also have to manage. So the reality is often we just have to say, follow us, follow the ‘beet.’”*

-CoP educator

With the exception of one centre, who has been under strain with a vacant director position and an interim admin team for 5 months, participating ECEs expressed feeling highly supported within their teams and mentioned the Directors as the person they turn to most for support and guidance. At the same time, Directors mentioned feeling stretched in terms of being able to provide the individualised support their staff might need. Within the constraints of their existing operational demands, it is next to impossible for 1 director to respond to the varying needs and supports that are requested by different ECEs at any given time.

*“By the time I meet parents, fill out forms, assist with a crisis, write reports on top of meetings... We’d like everything to be perfect everywhere, but then, we can’t give the quality of being on the floor, of being able to support ECEs in their work.”*

-Participating Centre Director

### *Learning needs and interests*

During pre-interviews, many ECEs expressed being open and willing to learn anything. For some it was hard to articulate specific learning topics or areas where they could use extra support. Participating Directors and ECEs hoped that the Pedagogical Leadership workshop and CoP sessions would help with communication skills, including having difficult conversations between staff. One of the learning areas that came up most often was how to better support children with learning disabilities and special needs. Many expressed hoping the training would support ECEs in taking more initiative and create more understanding that decision making doesn’t always have to come from the same person(s). Participants were also hopeful that through the CoP they would gain new ideas and tips from ECEs in different contexts.



## Key Findings

In the end, the prototype had an impact on centre attitudes and practices. Having a CoP facilitated by an expert in pedagogical leadership, provided an empowering experience, where space was created for ECE's to be heard and share their voices. ECEs spoke about how the experience as a whole was validating and contributed to boosting confidence both in themselves and in their teams.

*“It really boosted my confidence. Because, at first, I wasn’t sure I wanted to do the training, but all the other girls were like, yeah go for it, I see you in there... You’re always there to listen to us, you always give us good advice! You know, they really gave me good feedback. After I went to the training, I don’t regret doing it because now I think I see myself in the right place.”*

-CoP educator

The importance of being heard comes up frequently when discussing learnings and reflecting back on the experience. There was a lot of appreciation shared to take the time to listen to ECEs perspectives- a lens that isn't always considered or given priority in this type of work. One Director noted how having the space to be heard during the CoP sessions, but also in the pre-interviews may have been the greatest impact. She wished her whole team could have experienced being interviewed or part of the CoP and noted how even those who could not participate in the end were impacted by the process.

*“I think it’s important to have discussions with you and to feel listened to or to be asked questions. It’s an important step to take. Because if we take the time to listen to them and ask their opinion, they feel like, hey I’m actually important, I’m being listened to.”*

-Participating Centre Director

This sentiment was also felt by the CoP facilitator, Dominique-Ann who noticed, in the short span of time we had, that some ECE's started to feel like they have a voice and that there are small changes they can start to implement in their centres. She noted how educators are quick to recognize how every child is unique and has their own set of strengths, and questioned:

*“How often do educators see themselves in this same light? How often do we take the time to talk about our strengths and challenges and say that we have the capacity and competence to make change from where we are?”*

-CoP facilitator.



## Increased awareness of personal and peer strengths

Following the initial training on Pedagogical Leadership as well as the 2 CoP sessions, ECEs noted how they came to realize that they have certain assets on the team. For example, being able to connect and work well with children who have different learning needs or validating how their practices and approaches are aligned with their new understanding of what pedagogical leadership is all about.

*“When I come back from training, I tell my colleagues about what we’ve seen and they’re proud of it. Because we’re realizing more and more as we do the training that we’re all doing a little bit of it, like it’s not just me, the other educators are doing it too, and we realize that we’re really a great team, we help each other out a lot, we respect each other”.*

-CoP educator

When prompted to reflect on if there were any changes in practice over the last two months, ECEs mentioned talking about intentionally working with a strength based approach. One Director prompted a meeting with the team, to discuss learnings so far and a deeper reflection was had on how working with our own strengths and interests can also impact the development of children as well. Similarly, it was brought up how important it is to validate and lead with positive feedback and ensure new ECEs are aligned with the centres vision and values.

*“When we started discussing the effects of how we have had a lack of administration [a vacant director position for 5 months], “I take it to heart, to be able to train new staff and make sure there is alignment, that they have a positive onboarding. So instead of confronting them with ‘Ok, they’re not doing their job’ I’m going to value them and then I’m going to tell them they’re doing a good job -because there’s nobody who’s going to tell us and then I’m going to make sure that they know when they are on the right track.”*

-CoP educator



## Improved communication and reflective practice

The field test experience allowed educators and directors to notice the power of meeting together as ECEs to share ideas and to gain new perspectives. Having a CoP made up of ECEs from different contexts and of different levels of experience was also beneficial.

Many ECEs spoke about new conversations being sparked, about values or about new initiatives that they will start to implement. One centre mentioned they are in the process of speaking to their board about having time to meet as a team on a monthly basis so that they can have dedicated time to discuss what is working, what is not and how they can improve.

*“Sometimes you don’t ask for help, you don’t want to be a bother. But in meetings, everyone can have their say, a person who needs help can talk about it so others who are there can continue to support or help find solutions. It takes a meeting, because in a day, you don’t have all the time in the world to talk to the person either, you’ve got your group, the other has her group.”*

Feeling more confident in how to give feedback and support team members that were having a hard time, was also something that was mentioned frequently in post-interviews. Being more diplomatic or finding a way to support colleagues without being judgemental or making them uncomfortable was a learning point that came out of the discussion based learning. Participants noted how often improving communication starts by taking a moment to pause and reflect. Being able to think back to when you were new in the field, understanding what you would have needed in terms of information and what could have been said to help you become a leader in society.

*“In being a good leader, what does it mean to have a good conversation with someone? Like making them feel understood, knowing what you can do as a person to make the other person feel comfortable talking? You know, it’s a lot about communication”.*

-Participating Centre Director



## Operational Impact and Potential

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, when asked about the potential impact of having full time pedagogical leaders in centres. While ECEs are highly appreciative of the pedagogical support that is offered at the government level, they also recognized how their plates are full and to see someone for short bursts of time, a few times a year is not enough. This is especially true in a sector that often experiences high turnover and a lot of changes from one year to the next.

### *A weight off ECE's shoulders*

ECEs commented on the impact of having someone there to observe, to get to know exactly what you need and support you in getting the appropriate materials or pedagogical resources that could be transformational. With a pedagogical lead, there would be a qualified person to act as a bridge between directors and ECEs, so that there is a smoother process and less burden on ECEs to advocate for what they need.

In a child's life, waiting a day, or a week let alone months to get the intervention they need can have a huge impact on their development, as well as the ECE who is trying their best to support. ECEs who participated in the prototype were grateful for their director's support, while also recognizing that it shouldn't be their main role, to have all eyes and ears everywhere at once. This brings us to the prototype's impact on adding to high quality early learning and care.

*“Just having someone there to say what do you need? What do you need in your group? Don't worry about it, I'll take care of it, I'll take on the work to say no, this class, they need this, it could help them in such and such a way, for such and such a reason”.*

### *Improvements to Centre quality & safety*

Overall, both educators and directors concluded that having continuous support for educators on site, would lead to better centre quality and care. They spoke of the roll as being a second pair of eyes and hands that would be more in tune to respond to where there is the greatest need. Often more experienced ECEs are challenged with having to support new ECEs all while managing their own groups, but having a more available and dedicated resource person to observe and respond appropriately might also lead to better onboarding and less turn over.

*“It's about going where the child's needs come first in the daycare and always with the goal of supporting ECEs to do that. Can you imagine what it would do for quality? Because we all get that ELCC are about helping children to learn, to become strong members of society, but if we're understaffed and the staff are exhausted.. Well, we're losing good people who are going to change fields, so you're affecting that too... by having someone there who's dedicated to making sure staff are supported, it's going to change your entire perception of your work in the end.”*

-Director



*“By having a pedagogical lead at all times, we could start off on the right foot with our new employees and guide them in the right way: Show them our values, our principles, and not having to rely on administrators to take on this role, because they’re already overloaded, and there’s already a workforce shortage in the sector.”*

-CoP educator

## **What we’ve learned**

Both educators and directors felt like the field test had a positive impact, but that it would take much longer than 2 CoP sessions to develop a practice in pedagogical leadership. What the process did provide was a better understanding of pedagogical leadership as something that can be cultivated within ELCC teams. There was an appetite to continue and recommendations for a similar style training to be made available for qualified ECEs that might be interested in playing this role within their centres.

In addition, we learned that leadership in the context of early learning and childcare services requires a specific type of skill sets that are aligned with a child centred approach. The approach used in the CoP based on reflective practice, a shared vision and values as well as a strength based approach were all key in supporting ECEs to see themselves as competent and capable practitioners that can make a difference in the lives of their colleagues and the children they work with.

One centre in particular flagged from past experience, how this role cannot be conflated or merged with another administrative position or a floating educator that would end up replacing absent ECEs. Similar to the blue-sky vision that the NB francophone team developed, field test participants also brought up the recommendation for such a role to be understood at all levels of the organisation, including boards in order to maintain its integrity and true purpose. Additionally, having a similar foundation and understanding at the highest level of decision making may also ensure that pedagogical leadership can have an impact at a systemic and policy level as well.



## What's Next

The Pedagogical Leadership Coach will organise a session on her experience and observations from the Community of Practice Workshops with the 'agentes pédagogiques' and other EECD stakeholders.

A share-back with the Francophone team and government decision makers is planned for the fall to discuss findings and potential next steps.

Something to explore further is how 1-1 mentorship opportunities might further enhance the demonstrated value provided by the CoP. Having a stream tailored to directors was also a suggestion the Coach brought forward to consider. Lastly, efforts should continue to secure a French version of resources such as having an equivalent to the reflective practice handbook which was not available. Efforts should be continued to obtain translation rights or find an equivalent alternative to have the materials available in French.

