

## **Evaluation of Leadership Pilot Project: Impact & Sustainability Executive Summary**

The following is a summary of the *Evaluation of Leadership Pilot Project (LPP): Impact & Sustainability* report provided to the College of Early Childhood Educators (the College) by researchers Goranka Vukelich and Cathy O'Toole of Conestoga College<sup>1</sup>. The focus of this evaluation was to assess the impact and sustainability of the College's Leadership Pilot Project. Specifically, the evaluation team was interested in gauging the impact this project had on participants' knowledge and skill development; change over time in roles, responsibilities and professional learning choices; and improvement in status, confidence and ability to give voice, as measured at a point in time two years following the completion of the project.

The Leadership Pilot Project was evaluated against the following project objectives:

- a) Integrate the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* into continuous professional learning program focusing on building leadership capacity in the ECE profession.
- b) Foster leadership and management capacities of registered early childhood educators in order to improve quality in early learning and child care.
- c) Create a network of College members who as leaders are committed to integrating professional standards and quality improvements into their practice.
- d) Obtain feedback from a cadre of RECEs regarding the development and implementation of College CPL program, resources and processes.
- e) Enhance the status of the ECE profession.

The LPP was carried out from August 2013 to May 2014, and included 31 registered early childhood educators (RECE) as participants. Twenty-five of the participants acted as mentees and six acted as mentors. All 31 engaged in 80 hours of leadership related professional learning that included a variety of activities such as an opening retreat and symposium; closing retreat; modules of study delivered via distance learning that focused on five themes (participatory leadership; pedagogical leadership; facilities management; human resources; and fiscal responsibility and governance); self-directed learning; and a practicum experience.

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<sup>1</sup> The evaluation was carried out by the identified researchers who were not engaged in either the development or delivery of the project.

## Literature Review

There is continuing interest in early childhood leadership at the local, provincial, national and international levels. There is also continuing debate and confusion as to how to define leadership, how to describe leadership practices and how best to engage educators in developing leadership capabilities.

Kate Thornton and her colleagues propose six factors that have contributed to this confusion. These include the general low profile of leadership in ECE; lack of an accepted definition or common understanding of leadership; confusion between leadership and management terminology used in the sector which emphasizes management over leadership; newly qualified, less experienced educators taking on leadership positions; lack of emphasis on leadership in the early childhood sector by the Ministry of Education; and lack of leadership development programs (Thornton, Wansbrough, Clarkin-Philips, Aitken & Tamati, 2009).

Leadership in the early learning and child care (ELCC) sector has been described in many ways. Gillian Rodd (2015) writes that leadership is about having ability to provide vision and communicate that vision; develop a team culture; set goals and objectives; monitor and communicate achievements; and facilitate and encourage the development of individuals. Parallel to this, Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) add that leadership practices include identifying and articulating a vision; ensuring shared understandings, meanings and goals; effective communication; encouraging reflection; monitoring and assessing practice; commitment to ongoing professional development; distributive leadership; building a learning community and team culture; encouraging and facilitating genuine family and community partnerships; and striking the balance between leading and managing. An additional component of leadership emerging through literature is related to the significant changes in the way we conceptualize and support learning of young children. This component is informed by research and the increased emphasis to enhance quality and influence organizational change through pedagogical leadership (Andrew, 2009; Spillane, 2005; Wenger, 1998).

In her research and writing Elizabeth Stamopolous (2012) invites the early learning sector to consider reframing the notion of leadership and to integrate professional knowledge with a focus on an improved professional identity in order to build a leadership culture across the entire sector. In a complementary fashion, the team at the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership present a focus on whole leadership for the sector to consider that emphasizes pedagogical and administrative leadership (Abel, Talan, Masterson, 2017).

In their seminal work on leadership Clarke and Murray (2012) challenge the traditional notions of leadership bound by hierarchical position and title and present a paradigm that takes the leader emphasis out of leadership and focuses on capacity building of all in the sector. Finally, Scrivens (2003) writes that we spend too much time chasing one definition for leadership and that the only way to move forward is to embrace the notion that there are many ways to be a leader and that the concept of leadership is context specific.

While we may not have precise clarity regarding these factors at this point in time in our history as a sector, we do have a selected body of worthwhile research and literature we can draw on that adds significant value to advancing this important conversation. Unequivocally, all of that research and literature points to the importance of investing in advancing this work as our ELCC sector is undergoing massive transformation and is in need of leadership and leaders.

In Ontario, we are fortunate to have a committed regulatory body, the College of Early Childhood Educators that has recognized the importance of focusing on developing leadership capabilities for this sector through a process that is intentional, meaningful and responsive. To that end, the College created and delivered a Leadership Pilot Project with the goals of introducing participants to new information, creating networking opportunities with colleagues across the province, and developing leadership skills.

### **Methodology Used to Collect and Analyze Data**

All 31 original participants of the College's Leadership Pilot Project received an email invitation to participate in this study. Of those, 15 self-selected to participate. Each participant was emailed questionnaires to fill out and return and each participant engaged in an interview. While feedback was solicited on a number of components of the LPP, it is important to recognize that module feedback was the primary source of data.

The evaluation team developed a three component process to gather feedback from participants. The first two components were in the form of questionnaires that were sent to participants to fill out and return prior to the implementation of the third component which was a semi-structured interview that took place over the telephone or in person. These semi-structured interviews included two purposes. Firstly, they clarified and teased out information reported through the two questionnaires and secondly, they included guided questions. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed for ease of analysis.

The first component was the Descriptive Participant Background Questionnaire that included a series of questions about participants' professional background at three separate points in time:

- 1) prior to participating in the Leadership Pilot,
- 2) immediately following the completion of the Leadership Pilot, and
- 3) at the time of answering the questionnaire (2 years following the completion of the Leadership Pilot Project).

Specifically, questions focused on the following:

- highest credential obtained,
- years in workforce and type of employment,
- number and type of professional learning activities experienced,
- reasons for engaging in professional learning,
- participation and role in work, committee and initiatives, both within the workplace and external to the workplace.

The second component was the Module Questionnaire that elicited specific feedback from participants regarding the benefits and usefulness of each of the five modules of the Leadership Pilot Project related to information learned and delivery approach used. In addition, for each module, they were invited to describe what they learned that was most useful to their ongoing professional growth as a leader, and why, and to describe how they are using what they learned. Finally, each participant was invited to describe experiences and activities they found to be most effective and why.

The third component was an individual interview with each participant that followed a semi-structured format and took place either in person or by telephone. Using information reported through the Descriptive Background Questionnaire that had been filled out by each participant and sent in prior to the interview, the individual interviews clarified information and explored how career trajectories, committee work, professional learning decisions and improvements in status may have been linked with participation in the Leadership Pilot.

The individual interview component also included guided questions that were designed to elicit additional information about the modules, how participants' knowledge and skill development had changed, and the impact of that knowledge and skill development in carrying out their practices within the organizations in which they worked and within the professional systems to which they were connected. In addition to describing impact of modules, participants were also invited to describe their most memorable experience in the Leadership Pilot and to identify any changes to the way in which they carried out responsibilities as a result of having participated in the Leadership Project.

Finally, all participants were invited to provide the evaluation team with any samples of their work that they believed had been impacted by their participation in the LPP. They were encouraged to describe the nature and depth of that impact and connect to specific examples of their experiences through the Leadership Pilot.

## **Summary of Key Findings**

There are a number of results that have been uncovered through this impact study and they have been described in detail in the report. The following section focuses on a summary of key findings as identified by the evaluation team. These key findings have inspired the recommendations.

- 1) Engaging in a project that focused exclusively on leadership had an impact on a number of aspects of participants' professional lives that was sustained over time:
  - The pursuit of additional credentials:
    - 26% of research participants initiated ongoing education opportunities as a result of participating in the Leadership Pilot Project and have obtained or are in process of obtaining additional credentials.

- A change in employment held:
  - 47% of study participants changed the type of work in which they were engaged moving into areas with added responsibility in some way either as new or expanded positions of consultant, instructor, community educator, and/or administrator.
- A change to participation in committees both inside and outside of work:
  - 80% of the participants reported a change in the type of committee they participated in both within their workplace and external to their workplace,
  - 67% reported changes to roles performed on committees within their workplaces and external to their workplaces moving from roles of observer and member into roles they described as “leadership roles” of facilitator, presenter, leader, and secretary of committees.
- A change to type of professional learning engaged in:
  - Participants reported an increase in the number of professional learning activities (from 20 to 26) and an expanded range of activities that now included symposiums, committees and annual general meetings,
  - Increase in the number of participants attending conferences and participating in formal programs immediately following the project and even greater increases in formal programs, reading professional material, mentoring others and webinar participation two years following the project.
- A change to participants’ reasons for engaging in professional learning
  - Immediately following LPP, increase in participants engaging in professional learning for personal interest, self-awareness, networking and learning from others and decrease in engaging in professional learning because it was required by the workplace,
  - Two years following the LPP, increase in engaging in professional learning for the pursuit of quality and best practice program improvement and for the training and mentoring of others and no reporting of engaging in professional learning because it was required by the workplace.
- The influence of initial implementation of Continuous Professional Learning program
  - Participants appear to have transitioned through a professional learning journey that moved from engaging in professional learning with a focus on self to a focus on the development of others or the development of the profession.

- 2) Participants' discovery of leadership as an accessible concept not connected with title or position contributed to an increased sense of empowerment and confidence that impacted a number of professional decisions over time.
- 3) Expanded knowledge of pedagogical leadership was impactful for participants.
- 4) Covering management topics in a way that disconnected participants from leadership was not effective.
- 5) Participants continued their learning through organically emerging communities of practice.
- 6) Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) has the capacity to play a critical role in leadership development.
- 7) Self-selected learning opportunities were translated into leadership development experiences by participants.

### **Interpreting the Findings**

A significant number of the components experienced by participants through the College's Leadership Pilot Project appears to have had a positive impact on their career trajectories, involvement in professional committees, and professional learning decisions. Many of these impacts were sustained over time. In interpreting these findings, we propose that these positive impacts were not as much influenced by any one specific individual component of the LPP, but more so by the unique combination of essential ingredients that may have created the conditions for the development and nurturing of leadership.

We propose that chief among these ingredients may have been the discovery that leadership is a participatory concept not connected with title or position and therefore accessible to many. This powerful concept was introduced and reinforced in the first module on participatory leadership and was translated by these participants into an increased sense of empowerment and confidence that wove its way into a number of their professional decisions regarding the pursuit of academic credentials, changes to the way in which they carried out their responsibilities at work and in the community, as well as their approach and reasons for professional learning.

This idea is consistent with leadership literature in early learning as evidenced by the work of Kagan and Hallmark (2001) who argue that all practitioners in the field have the capacity to share their knowledge, insights and experiences with others and need to recognize they hold the potential to be role models and mentors to others. Linda Lambert (2002) takes these ideas further and suggests that leadership in the early learning sector is a reciprocal and participative process that should be presented as both a right and a responsibility of all those within an organization, while Rodd (2013, p. 13) "insists that every ECE can choose to become a leader by demonstrating increased competence in their work; by becoming a crucial

friend to colleagues; by supporting the development of others, including children, families and colleagues; and by acting as an ambassador and advocate for their profession”.

Echoing some of the same ideas, Elizabeth Stamopoulos (2012) introduces the concept of professional identity into the leadership conversation. She maintains that the sector would benefit from a space that nurtures strong professional identity in those who work in the sector adding that “competence breeds confidence”. Both Stamopoulos (2012) and Clark and Murray (2012) identify a code of ethics to be an essential element of nurturing a strong professional identity in the early learning sector.

A strong professional identity has been highlighted in early learning literature by others as an essential element requiring attention and cultivation. Moss (2006) and McGillivray (2008) remind us that the professional identity of those who work in the early learning sector is a complicated process that develops slowly over time and is influenced by a number of personal and professional factors, including the value that others in society place on the work we do. With a view to developing strong professional identity through pre-service and in-service professional learning, Langford (2008) and Vukelich (2014) both caution those who participate in the education of educators to be thoughtful and selective in the resources they choose and the learning strategies they create for their potential to contribute to a strong professional identity. In addition, Henderson (2016) argues that the cyclical process of learning, acting, and reflecting, is intricately connected to one’s sense of professional identity and can be nurtured through professional learning.

Casting a broader view on leadership, Hargreaves and Fink (2004) assert that in order to be sustainable in any organization, leadership cannot be left to single individuals. Other educational sectors that have moved away from leadership models where one person is identified as the leader with all the power and accountability to participatory or collaborative leadership models that draw on different opinions and beliefs and expertise throughout the organization report greater levels of success and satisfaction. They indicate increased productivity and increased levels of commitment of individuals across the organization (Kezer, 2001).

In their seminal work on leadership specific to the early years, Rory McDowall Clark and Janet Murray (2012) call for a new model of leadership development in early learning that focuses on a shared, participatory leadership approach that invites all those in the sector to see themselves as contributing to leadership. These authors maintain that “by taking the leader emphasis out of leadership it no longer lies in the domain of the few, but becomes something we can all engage in, raising confidence, utilizing skills and expertise and encouraging mutual responsibility” (2012, p. 123). They further maintain that leadership development in the early learning sector is a process that includes autonomous responsibility, reflective integrity, and shared interdependence. Shared, rather than positional leadership has also been identified by Krieg, Davis and Smith (2014) as an impactful approach for the early learning sector to consider. Such a shared leadership approach would value shared decision-making and the strength of learning from each other.

Echoing these ideas, the findings of this impact study suggest that the focus on pedagogy and learning through the LPP not only provided new and meaningful information to participants but seemed to inspire confidence and propel leadership. That participants of this study reported that of the five modules they learned the most from the Pedagogical Leadership module is not nearly as interesting as that they seemed to use their deepened learning about pedagogy for leadership development. They confirmed that they shared information and resources with others for the purpose of “helping others understand pedagogy by modelling, examining, digging deeper and mentoring” and “working with others to help them challenge the status quo”. These participants appeared to transition from learning to leading in a natural, organic way. We therefore propose that this unique phenomenon of the combination of learning and leadership could be harnessed through the Continuous Professional Learning program to build leadership capacity in the sector.

This link between learning and leadership experienced by the participants of this study has been established through research and literature (Brown and Posner, 2001; Henderson, 2016; Clark and Murray, 2012) with “change” as the common denominator. Clarke and Murray (2012) further argue that the link is even more pronounced in organizations that have learning as their foundational purpose. This is certainly true of the early learning sector in Ontario that has been invited to embrace critical and reflective pedagogy as its core business. For RECEs, it may be that learning is leading, and leading is learning, an idea supported by Henderson, who claims that “learning is a kind of leadership” (2016, p. 8).

This unique relationship between leadership and learning coupled with the “passion of care” often associated with those who work in the early learning sector has been described by Clark and Murray to provide the perfect environment for principled leadership to take place. They explain that “passionate care for furthering the well-being of children is an ethically active, professional orientation, not a domestic concept of care” and if nurtured, could create a sustainable basis for leadership (Clarke and Murray, 2012, p. 31). We propose that the College’s Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, if elevated by the profession as the central filter through which professional decisions are made could become the fuel that nurtures a sustainable basis for principled leadership in the early learning sector.

Participants’ enthusiasm regarding their reported revelation that leadership is not connected with position or title may be linked with their lack of expressed interest in the modules related to management (Facilities management; Human resources, employment standards and labour relations; & Fiscal governance). We consistently heard from these participants that they did not connect with information shared through these modules as they did not see themselves in that work. While effective management is an essential aspect of running effective organizations, Clark and Murray (2012) caution the sector in presenting leadership and management as interchangeable as it becomes confusing, limiting and inaccessible to many. Such a close connection between the two concepts implies that any interest in leadership equals interest in moving into administration, a reality not necessarily embraced by all who work in early learning and one that may constrain leadership opportunities for the sector. This idea is supported by the recent work of Henderson (2016) who claims that the evolution of the early years’ sector includes shifting from notions of leadership framed around ideas of managing to new forms of leadership.

The lack of expressed interest in the three modules related to management may also be explained by the way in which they were presented. Effective learning for adults has been described as “situational” that welcomes previous knowledge and experience, and creates space and opportunity for collaboration, reflection and meaning making (Billet, 2009; Keating, 2006). It requires authentic opportunities for learners to initiate and contribute ideas that connect to their work in meaningful ways. The absence of a balanced approach to presenting and performing administrative functions may result in ineffective understandings and disconnected practices (Abel, Talan, and Masterson, 2017). With a specific focus on professional growth in early learning, Fleet and Patterson (2001) indicate that constructivist-inspired models of adult learning acknowledge the unique contributions of individuals’ previous knowledge and pave the way for new and meaningful understandings.

The participants of this study seemed to respond positively to constructivist-inspired delivery approaches as they reported higher satisfaction and meaning-making through group discussions, reflective activities, and self-selected practicum experiences and portfolio development opportunities where they had greater control and input. These experiences are supported by research that describes effective professional growth as “spirals of engagement” that challenge ideas, support reflection, and advance growth (Fleet and Patterson, 2001, p. 8). These participants reported that they continued their learning through organically emerging communities of practice they formed on their own to share and engage in ideas and concepts that were of interest to them, their practice and their professional growth. Communities of practice have been described by Wenger and his colleagues to be powerful agents of learning as they not only deepen knowledge and understanding, but also build strong relationships among people, create a sense of belonging, a spirit of inquiry, and sense of purpose and confidence (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002). These participants also appeared to have maximized these self-selected learning opportunities and translated them into leadership development experiences.

## **Recommendations**

In making the recommendations that follow, we draw on three key sources: findings from this study; relevant leadership literature; and our observations of some of the transformational shifts underway in our sector.

The early learning and child care sector in Ontario has experienced a number of transformational shifts that have impacted almost every facet of the field. Some of these shifts have included the creation of the College of Early Childhood Educators; the migration from one provincial Ministry to another; the introduction of RECEs into the public education system through Full-Day Kindergarten; the updating of legislation and policies; the modernization of accountability systems; a heightened focus on brain development research and its connection to early learning; and the implementation of a provincial curriculum framework.

On many levels, these shifts require RECEs to engage in professional decision-making at new and elevated levels; to collaborate with others in new and deeper ways; and to advocate for the value of early learning as a significant contributor to healthy communities. These shifts also invite RECEs to re-examine their capabilities and practices in new ways; re-define their relationships with the research and documents that inform their profession; and strengthen their voices in influencing their own destiny.

Kagan and Hallmark (2001) argue that as a sector we must change our own reality and to be our own advocates for leadership and Clark and Murray (2012) invite the early learning sector on a journey of defining their own meaning of leadership and leadership development rather than only looking to theories and models of other professions in order to find a good fit.

The following recommendations are for the College of Early Childhood Educators, for their review and implementation as they determine.

- Reconceptualize leadership as capacity building for the sector rather than skill development for the select few.
- Develop a conceptual framework for leadership development that builds on the strength of the sector and cultivates conditions for leadership.
- Collaborate with early childhood education programs in colleges and universities across the province to develop leadership capacity through communities of practice.
- Highlight the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice as a pivotal cornerstone to leadership development.
- Integrate leadership throughout all experiences in any future leadership development programs.
- Adopt a holistic delivery approach in future projects that engages participants to generate issues of interest and maximize impact and sustainability.
- Encourage leadership development through the CPL process.

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