

The Evolution of Professional Learning for RECEs in Ontario

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Professional learning is an integral part of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) landscape. Decades of research have identified that the learning and ongoing professional learning of early childhood educators and staff is a critical element in the provision of high quality ECEC. As regulated professionals, registered early childhood educators also have ethical and professional responsibilities to enhance their practice and gain new skills and knowledge to cope with the ever changing needs of children and families. In the context of Ontario's ongoing agenda to 'modernize' child care and the broader ECEC sector, increased attention has been devoted to the professional learning of the ECEC workforce resulting in significant changes in this area.

In times of such immense change it is important to stop and take stock of what is happening, where we have come from and where we would like to be. This article aims to begin to map out the changing landscape of professional learning for ECEs in Ontario in order to assess the 'state of' professional learning and identify outstanding issues or questions. A brief look back at the history of professional learning and ECEs will provide some of the context for evaluating a number of structural changes that have taken place to support a more formalized professional learning infrastructure in ECEC. An overview of current developments in Ontario will highlight the significant changes impacting the professional learning landscape and a review of what we know about how professional learning is being organized, supported and delivered across Ontario is included. Further questions for research, policy and practitioners will be presented in the conclusion.

Ontario's Early Years Policy Framework (2013) highlights that high quality programs and services require that, "early years professionals must be knowledgeable, responsive, and reflective, and continuous professional learning opportunities should be encouraged" (p. 7).

Professional learning and ECEs: A brief history

ECEs have a rich and unique history when it comes to professional development and what is now increasingly being conceptualized as continuous professional learning. For many years ECEs have made professional learning a priority out of their own convictions without the broader systemic mandates or resources to necessarily facilitate it. ECEs' commitment to ongoing learning was highlighted in the *You Bet We Still Care!* (2013) survey of early childhood educators working in licensed child care centres. The majority (87.9%) of early childhood program staff respondents participated in some form of professional learning within a one year period (Flanagan, Beach & Varmuza, 2013). The main reason cited was the need to keep current in their field. This was despite the fact that the survey identified minimal increases in compensation (compared to 1998) and less than half of the ECEs surveyed received financial support and paid time off to participate in professional learning.



As a profession that has only recently seen the formalization of the specific characteristics and structures of a profession, ECEs and the surrounding community played a critical role in building the infrastructure, resources and opportunities to provide and participate in ongoing learning on a voluntary basis from within the profession. As the professional association, the AECEO played a key role in nurturing this 'grassroots' approach to continuous professional learning that involved thousands of members, their thousands of volunteer hours, and tremendous amounts of creativity and resourcefulness to provide the meaningful and relevant professional learning that was needed to develop the ECE profession. At the organizational level the AECEO introduced certification and facilitated hundreds of conferences and events to support continuous professional learning and professionalism more broadly, but it was members who sustained and enhanced these opportunities in their local communities. These members were and are ECEs who believed passionately in their profession and in the need to participate in ongoing learning.

Multi-service agencies, community colleges, local resource centres and municipal governments also played a critical role in building the professional learning infrastructure that we see today in Ontario. Mostly based in the non-profit community sector, these groups developed and sustained professional learning programs and resources largely out of their own initiative. These organizations provided an invaluable asset to their community and played a critical role in enhancing the ECE profession and supporting quality in ECEC programs. This approach, however, also meant that at times some communities were left behind in cases where there was no one to take the lead role or provide the resources to establish this type of support. Left to the voluntary sector, like so much else in ECEC, outcomes and opportunities for ECEs and the programs they provided varied considerably across the province.

Current developments in Ontario

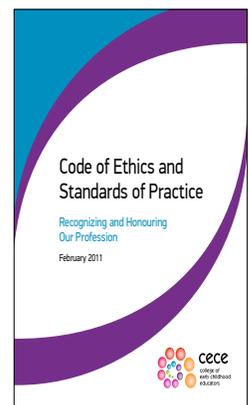
There have been a number of significant changes in Ontario that have altered the professional learning landscape for ECEs. Taken together, these changes indicate the creation of a systemic professional learning infrastructure that has the potential to support all ECEs to participate in accessible and consistent continuous professional learning. These changes include both the building of formalized structures of a “professional system”, as well as the acknowledgement from governments and policy makers that ECE is in fact a profession with a specialized set of knowledge, skills, values and responsibilities.

—The College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) and Continuous Professional Learning (CPL)

The establishment of the College of Early Childhood Educators under the *Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007* (ECE Act) was a milestone in the development of a professional system for ECEs in Ontario. The College led to the formalization of some of the key elements of professional status including a scope of practice defined in legislation, entry to practise requirements, and a Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice that all RECEs are held accountable to.

In 2012, the College Council identified as one of its five strategic priorities, “the implementation of a continuous professional learning (CPL) requirement that both supports member competency and encourages a culture of life-long learning”. The knowledge, skills and values relevant to the early childhood education profession are continually evolving and expanding. In order to promote high standards and quality assurance within the profession, RECEs who contribute to the early learning and care of young children must themselves be engaged in high quality continuous professional learning.

The *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (2011) states that ECEs “value lifelong learning and commit themselves to engaging in continuous professional learning to enhance their practice” (p. 11) and that they “are current in their professional knowledge” (p. 19) and “access current evidence-based research and are able to transfer this knowledge into practice. They are aware of the need to enhance their own learning in order to support both children and families. ECEs demonstrate their commitment to ongoing professional development by engaging in continued learning.” (p. 21).



The recognition that continuous professional learning is important to members of the early childhood education profession is not a new idea. ECEs have always found ways to enhance their knowledge and skills. Learning has always been viewed as part of the role. What has changed, however, is that the early childhood education profession is now a self-regulated profession. As a regulatory body, the CECE must transform the concept of professional learning from something that members of the profession “just did” into an institutionalized construct with specified requirements of members.

Friedman (2012) defines continuing professional development as “the means by which professions across the world ensure that their knowledge and skills remain up-to-date and relevant to changing needs and environments.” (P. 1). He suggests that members of regulatory professional bodies engage in continuous professional learning for three reasons. These reasons include:

- what they just do
- what they ought to do morally as a proper professional; and
- what they ought to do strategically to maintain the confidence of clients, patients, employers, government, the media and the general public.

In September 2014, the CECE launched the Continuous Professional Learning program. The overall purpose of the CPL program is to enhance the capacity of members to integrate the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* into their professional practice as they engage in continuous professional learning. Member participation in a CPL program demonstrates that early childhood educators

are held accountable for engaging in ongoing education and, by doing so, serve and protect the public interest. While member participation in the CPL program is voluntary at this time, the CECE continues to work with the Ministry of Education (EDU) to create a CPL regulation under the ECE Act which would make participation in the CPL program mandatory for RECEs.

Continuous Professional Learning: Fostering Leadership Professionalism and Accountability

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFDmRvEMMAc>

— Focus on leadership in ECE

In their report *Investing in Quality: Policies, Practitioners, Programs and Parents* (2007), the Best Start Expert Panel on Quality and Human Resources Panel identified “support for directors and supervisors to develop the expertise required to manage programs, mentor staff, and work with parents and other services in the community” (p. 21) as a key building block for quality early learning and care. Following the release of the report, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) provided funding for the development and implementation of a program for child care directors and supervisors “to address the need for administrative and leadership training that would be accessible, affordable and impactful” (Ressler et al., 2015). As a result, the Mentoring Pairs for Child Care program was collaboratively developed with child care providers, colleges and other organizations offering early learning and care training programs or courses, MCYS licensing staff and policy analysts. Two cohorts from across the province participated in the program in 2009 and 2010. Although there was evidence that participants in the Mentoring Pairs program experienced a positive shift in attitudes and activities associated with leadership and professionalism, and that there was evidence of improvements in classroom quality, administrative knowledge and professional practice, funding for the program was not continued.

More recently, the Ministry of Education also recognized the need for strong leadership in early childhood education for ongoing quality improvement. Funding was provided to the College of Early Childhood Educators in 2012 to design a Leadership Pilot project, which focused on pedagogical and administrative leadership of RECEs. Another step taken by EDU in 2014 was to expand the Early Childhood Educators Qualifications Upgrade Program to include a Leadership Grant for the professional development of RECEs in leadership positions and for those aspiring to become supervisors in early childhood education.

To continue to promote an awareness and understanding of the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* and to encourage participation in the CPL program, the CECE will launch a second Leadership Pilot (LP) in September 2015 for RECE supervisors in licensed child care. A key objective of the project is to involve the LP participants in creating linkages in the broader early learning and child care community through existing networks, professional learning committees or quality assurance programs. This will be accomplished in part with the support of a Community Liaison selected by participating municipal child care service managers (CMSMs/DSSABs).

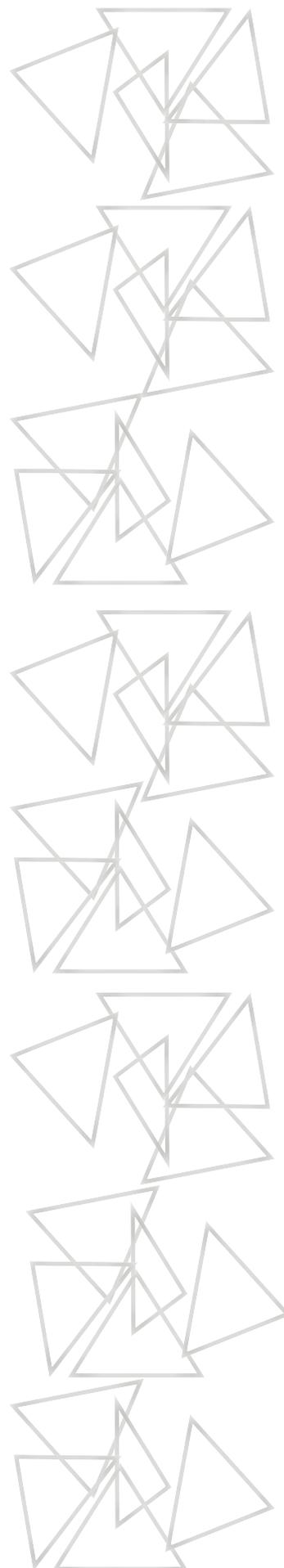
— Curriculum/pedagogical frameworks

Developing and applying an overarching curriculum/pedagogical framework reflects the fact that ECEC is a specialized field of work and it is guided by collective values, theories and beliefs about early learning and care. Policy research indicates that an overarching philosophy and curriculum framework are key elements of a high quality ECEC system.

Since 2006, Ontario’s early learning curriculum framework (also known as ELECT) has guided early childhood professional practice. Although the use of the curriculum framework was not mandated, the ECEC community embraced the document and began implementing it through individual program initiatives, municipal quality assurance programs, and by making the framework the focus of available professional learning. While ECEC programs and ECEs have historically worked within many well developed curriculum models, including High scope, Emergent Curriculum and Montessori, ELECT was designed to enhance these approaches and to stimulate on-going discussion amongst ECEs regarding their values, theories, and beliefs about early learning and care. As well, ELECT highlighted ongoing documentation and reflection as a key area of ECEs’ professional practice and further established the formalization of these practices across a variety of settings.

ELECT both required and promoted increased professional learning as the field rose to the challenge of understanding and applying the document. The use of an overarching curriculum framework also began to bring the diverse and sometimes disconnected ECEC programs, particularly in the licensed child care sector, together through a collective vision of children, ECEC and the work of ECEs. However, the implementation of ELECT was once again left to the volunteerism of the sector resulting in uneven leadership, infrastructure and access to the resources to implement the framework across communities.

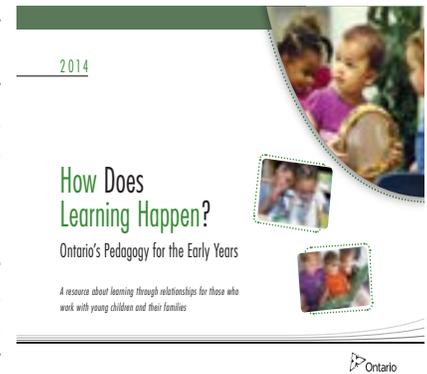
Following the gradual transfer of responsibility for child care from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to the Ministry of Education in 2010, the newly established Early Years Division began developing supporting documents for ELECT. These [online resources](#) provide concrete tools to support ECEs to work within the overarching framework and established a greater focus on research



as the foundation for reflection and practice. ELECT was also one of the key documents that informed the *Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten Program (Draft version)*, merging the approaches and philosophy of early childhood education with the school-based Kindergarten Program that existed at the time.

In 2014 the province released *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* as a follow up to ELECT. This time around the provincial government has been highly involved in introducing and promoting the framework to the ECEC community. The province has held several provincial and regional events to support the ECEC community to better understand the new document and encourage them to begin the process of implementation. The document is intended to support practice across the spectrum of programs where RECEs work including licensed child care, family resource programs and early intervention.

The implementation of *How Does Learning Happen?* will also become mandatory for licensed child care programs through regulation. In early June 2015, details were released about the first phase of regulatory changes that will take effect when the new child care legislation, the *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014* is proclaimed on August 31, 2015. A supporting document for providers and parents outlines that new regulations will require that, "every licensed [child care] provider must have a program statement that is consistent with the Minister of Education's Policy Statement that sets out *How Does Learning Happen?* (HDLH) as the framework to guide programming and pedagogy. HDLH reflects the province's view of children as competent, capable, curious and rich in potential. It is grounded in current research in early child development and provides a positive framework to support children and families" (Ministry of Education, p. 6-7).



— Government funding for professional learning

Part of the province's work around child care modernization included a new funding formula and funding guidelines for municipal government child care service managers. The province now allocates money for professional learning in the licensed child care sector through capacity building funding. The funding guidelines outline that capacity building "is intended to support professional learning and development opportunities that build the capacity of licensed child care operators, supervisors, program staff/caregivers, home visitors, home child care providers and non-profit volunteer board members to support the provision of high quality programs for children ages 0 to 12" (Ministry of Education, 2015. p. 59). Many organizations and the provincial and local governments were already receiving and/or contributing public funding to professional learning, however, this funding has become more clearly defined in the new guidelines.

Dedicated public funding provides the opportunity to establish 'system-wide' consistent and sustainable professional learning opportunities for ECEs across the licensed child care sector. This is a significant development in the child care sector and for ECEs who have historically carried much of the organizational, financial and time pressures of professional learning. The funding guidelines provide flexibility to use the capacity building funding to meet needs at the local level and encourage collaboration with other programs in the sector including family resource programs, full-day kindergarten and community colleges. Importantly, funding can also be used for "release time and overtime to support staff in participating in professional learning and development opportunities and/or to cover travel costs to support attendance at professional learning and development opportunities" (Ministry of Education, 2015. p. 61). The guidelines also encourage local service managers to prioritize funding for programs that have limited access to professional learning opportunities.

— Full-day kindergarten

The implementation of full-day kindergarten for all four and five year olds in the public education system has created significant change for ECEs and the broader early learning and care sector. Approximately 10,000 RECEs are now working in Designated Early Childhood Educator (DECE) positions in the full-day kindergarten program. As part of a teaching team with Ontario Certified Teachers, these RECEs are working within the public education system and a well-established professional structure that is expected to provide greater access to professional learning opportunities. As employees in the education system, DECEs are also mandated to belong to a union (they are currently unionized with a number of unions in the education sector) which may also enhance their access to, and paid time off to participate in, professional learning.

All RECEs are accountable to the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*, and are therefore ethically and professionally responsible for continuing their professional learning; yet, there are often limited connections for professional learning between ECEs working in the full-day kindergarten program and those working in licensed child care and other family and child support programs. Currently it seems that two parallel systems and approaches to professional learning for ECEs are being cultivated in these two areas of the ECEC sector. Unique working environments of ECEs often warrant diverse approaches and content for professional learning. However, opportunities for collaboration between ECEs from these different programs are needed to move towards building a collective sense of belonging and professional identity, and further developing ECE professional networks and communities of practice. Employers, government and other sector supports could help facilitate this potential for greater integration across the system. Joint professional learning with RECEs in full-day kindergarten and RECEs working in the extended day programs for full-day kindergarten is the most obvious opportunity to begin or enhance this collaboration.

Evolving focus on professional learning

Given the current developments in Ontario there has been significant movement at the local level to build on existing professional learning structures and enhance the quality of, and access to professional learning for ECEs. These shifts have integrated the established organizations, networks and approaches that have built up professional learning in their communities over the past decades with new initiatives and support from provincial and local governments. In some cases new networks have been formed or established organizations have stepped up to take the lead in facilitating a more systemic approach to professional learning. The role of local CMSMs and DSSABs has been critical during this time of change as they manage the public funding and need to identify how these funds will equitably and efficiently support the specific community and fulfill the objectives set out in the funding guidelines.

Local and organizational approaches to professional learning

The ECEC sector has an exceptional opportunity right now to capture the evolution and potential impact of professional learning for ECEs in the context of ongoing regulatory and policy changes in Ontario. This next section marks the beginning of a possible and necessary long term endeavour to gather examples or 'stories' of professional learning on the ground in communities across Ontario. Given the role of local government and the diverse characteristics and histories of each community, the professional learning landscape looks a little bit different around the province.

In some cases the stories are the result of very intentional and planned approaches to new resources and quality assurance requirements for example, while in other cases ways of focusing on professional learning through leadership and mentoring for instance, have evolved organically from within the community and are more recently being formalized and supported at a local system level. In some communities large multi-service agencies are able to provide 'in-house' professional learning to their employees as well as providing it to the broader community. In other regions it may be collaboration between multiple organizations and government.

In this time of change collecting these stories provides a great opportunity to learn from and collaborate across regions. The following stories provide a snapshot of what these might look like and who and where they might come from.



Progression of professional learning through quality initiatives: "Raising the Bar on Quality (RTB), a community strategy for early learning and child care brought about significant change in terms of professional involvement and continuous professional learning. Developed and introduced by Affiliated Services for Children and Youth (ASCY) in Hamilton in 2002, the program was adopted by many other Ontario regions and today, RECEs working in any one of the 20

Raising the Bar areas are committed to annual and ongoing continuous professional learning. Communities such as Hamilton that had pre-existing opportunities for professional learning saw an increase in engagement, and what might best be described as a cultural shift from attending to professional learning as required, to full participatory engagement by RECEs at all stages in their careers. In more spread-out rural communities, the changes brought about by the implementation of RTB were even more significant, where prior to RTB, many RECEs worked in isolation from their professional peers, without access to professional learning including subject areas that are essential to practice such as first aid and CPR. The community collaboration involved in planning for RTB led to the development of professional learning planning committees that focused on building capacity for local facilitation and successfully advocating for funds to support access to professional mentors and learning opportunities for all of their RECEs and child care staff."

Lois Saunders, RECE, Project Manager
Affiliated Services for Children and Youth (ASCY)

Resource development to support staff professional learning: "London Children's Connection (LCC) is a multi-service organization and large employer offering child care and other programs and services for children and families. LCC was looking for alternatives to professional learning that wouldn't necessarily require staff to be out in the evening. A team was tasked with creating an online portal where staff could connect with colleagues throughout the organization. The development of the portal was also inspired by staff who wanted: to see other program settings and activities with children in action; to enhance connections between staff and keep the conversations going after attending professional learning opportunities; and to get ideas from colleagues and LCC's professional development team rather than get overwhelmed by the vastness of the internet as a search tool. It is a safe place for staff to post pictures and stories about their programs, ask for advice, find out what resources are available in the resource library, register for workshops and generally learn more about the organization."



Katie Stortz RECE, Professional Development Coordinator, Early Years
London Children's Connection



Community collaboration to support professional learning: “In 2013, Child Development Resource Connection Peel (CDRCP), the Region of Peel and Sheridan College were looking to build the capacity in the early learning and child care sector in Peel. As a result, the *Reflective Practice: Enriching Early Learning and Care Birth to 3.8 years* course was developed to support educators in diverse early learning and child care environments. The focus of the course was to assist participants in developing strategies to consider in their practice

and apply individualized professional goals related to current research and changes in early childhood education. Through a family-centered framework, educators focused on refining skills specific to working with young children. They were given the opportunity to network and co-learn alongside their peers. These connections provided unique opportunities to hear different perspectives and learn about alternative approaches, which in turn allowed them to examine their daily practices. Relationships were established and flourished, as educators reflected on their learning experiences. In the end, at a showcase event, participants reflected on and shared their learning with the community. Testimonials highlighted some of the following: participants gained a better understanding of play-based learning and the ELECT principles; they learned more about self-reflection; for others it took their career to new heights, reigniting a passion for their work with children, and changed the climate in the workplace.”

Sara Ammar RECE, Manager, Quality Initiatives
Child Development Resource Connection Peel

Reflecting and moving forward

Reflecting on the significant changes that have occurred in the last several years highlights how the early childhood education community has once again stepped up and embraced new ways of working and thinking in terms of professional learning. The increased attention to professional learning is supporting the growth of a comprehensive professional learning system to support ECEs and enhance the quality of programs for children and families. The examples of local approaches to professional learning demonstrate a vibrant, diverse and innovative sector and profession. As with our approach to teaching and learning with children, we must be in a continuous state of reflection and evaluation that will ultimately lead to more change and the positive growth of this vital aspect of the ECEC sector. This reflection presents us with some critical questions about the way forward.

The relationship between professional learning and program evaluation

This article only begins to highlight some of the considerations for monitoring and assessing this major systemic change across the province. What do we know and what would we like to know? Do we know what has been working really well so far? Who is providing PL and what does it look like? Where are the gaps?

As Friedman (2012) suggests, in terms of evaluating program impacts on individual ECE professional learning, assessment processes and strategies used should highlight links between the move from:

- Doing to learning
- Gaining knowledge to changing attitudes
- Changing attitudes to changing behaviours
- Changing behavior to changing practice
- Changing practice and outcomes for themselves as RECEs and those affected by their services.

As a collective, how could we use an adaptation of Guskey’s (2000) five critical levels of professional development to monitor and evaluate the effect of initiatives, programs and activities focused on professional learning of ECEs? Put in the context of ECEC, Guskey’s five levels of program evaluation include:

- Participant reactions to professional learning
- Participant learning
- Organization support and change
- Participant use of new knowledge and skills
- Impact of learning on children, families and early learning and care programs.



— Leading through change

In the next year we can expect to see new regulations for the licensed child care sector under the *Child Care and Early Years Act* and a regulation could be passed under the ECE Act requiring participation of RECEs in the CECE's Continuous Professional Learning program. Within these changes we can expect a continued shift in moving from a traditional view of professional development (e.g. workshops, conferences, courses) to a broader concept and spectrum of professional learning (e.g. learning while in practice, communities of practice, use of technology, action research, mentoring, etc.). Mandatory CPL will require a robust and sustainable system of diverse professional learning opportunities to ensure that ECEs experience the appropriate conditions to meet these obligations and see the benefits from the CPL process for both the children, families and colleagues they work with and themselves. Professionals, organizational and system stakeholders at every level in ECEC have to play a role in supporting the transition into a CPL program which is purposeful and meaningful, and meets a variety of needs, interests, learning styles, geographic, cultural and language diversity.

In her recent book, *Leading Change in the Early Years: Principles and Practice* (2015), Jillian Rodd identifies learning and leadership as fundamentally linked in effecting change, "with leaders holding particular responsibility for stimulating collective learning in colleagues. Competent leadership is viewed as a catalyst for collaborative learning because it inspires enquiry, stimulates dialogue and debate, advocates reflection, encourages creative and innovative thinking, supports construction of meaning, and subsequently the development of better practice." (p. 132).

Full implementation of *How does learning happen?* and supporting regulatory requirements will require ECEs and other program staff to engage in on-going professional learning to fulfill the stated goals of critical reflection, pedagogical documentation and collaborative inquiry. These goals will also require working conditions that allow for the type of in-service professional learning and child-free time that is necessary to facilitate these practices. In her review of educational preparation and professional development for Alberta's early learning and care workforce, Langford (2014) indicated that,

"As jurisdictions implement curricular resources to guide and enhance pedagogical practices, early childhood educators are increasingly required to understand, interpret, use and reflect on these resources as part of their professional practice. With a general shift towards an understanding of children as more capable in their learning than previously understood, these resources raise the expectations for early childhood educators and require them to take on more demanding pedagogical roles" (p. 11).

Moving forward, the continued evolution of professional learning for ECEs will require:

- recognition of the individual, organizational and system challenges;
- an understanding of change and how to plan for and facilitate it;
- effective communication, collaboration and leadership among the various ECEC stakeholders at all levels; and
- evaluation and research on the impacts of professional learning for ECEs, future resource and policy development, and quality outcomes for children, families and communities.

It will take leadership at all levels to determine and advocate for the appropriate and fair working conditions that will enable the full benefit of these significant system and program changes.

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