

ABSTRACT

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR MENTORSHIP ROLES: FINDINGS FROM MENTORS WHO SUPERVISED STUDENTS DURING THEIR FIELD PRACTICUM

by

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Early childhood education (ECE) in Ontario is a rapidly changing profession. Although most Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) readily find employment after they graduate (City of London, 2014; R.A. Malatest & Associates, 2017), they are plagued by limited resources, such as (1) lack of recognition for their professionalism, (2) minimal networking and professional learning opportunities, and (3) low pay to support them in their roles (Doherty, Friendly and Beach, 2003). Despite these challenges, the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) that regulates RECEs expects them to have a solid understanding of child development and to be skilled in documenting and interpreting children's learning as they communicate expected developmental milestones to parents.

To alleviate the stress associated with entering such a demanding profession, all ECE programs in Ontario require field placements in early childhood education centers to help students move from theory to practice. During placement, each ECE student is paired with a mentor who is employed as an RECE at that location. In London, Ontario, these RECEs are referred to as agency mentors. Of all the responsibilities entrusted to them, the mandate to mentor ECE students during this field placement is perhaps the most demanding expectation that RECEs face, and it has yet to be adequately explored within empirical scholarship.

Currently, the ECE field is facing a crisis: turnover is high and the need for more providers is great. Moreover, the field lacks clarity on the definition of mentorship and what is needed to prepare and support RECEs for these roles, a situation that the government of Ontario has not adequately anticipated as part of its mandate. This situation has been reported to feed poor morale and to fuel more attrition in the RECE workforce (Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario, 2016; Halfon & Langford, 2015). As a result, many early year's centers find themselves unable to accept students during their field placements.

With these challenges in mind, a qualitative study was conducted to better understand agency mentor's ($n=25$) perceptions of their work with ECE students assigned to their community-based child care centers during the students' six-week field practicum. Data sources included pre-and post-experience surveys, summaries of small group discussions and a feedback questionnaire during a professional learning workshop, and weekly reflective journal entries completed by agency mentors. Using a constant comparison approach (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2004), coding yielded themes about their intentionality, communication practices, professional learning goals, collaboration, and reflective practice.

It became clear from the pre-experience survey that they were intentional about their mentoring although the focus of their priorities came into more clarity as the research evolved. Having time to work with others in the professional learning workshop allowed participants to articulate and reflect on their practice. Further, their strategies and discussions changed as they collaborated as mentor-mentee and reflected on personal practice. Agency mentors indicated that being mindful of their daily interactions when communicating with students' can support mentor personal development and positive mentor-mentee relationships. Findings have implications not only for the profession but also for the institutions that prepare and regulate RECEs.