



**Discussion Paper: A Dialogue on Professional Learning for
Registered Early Childhood Educators**

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Introduction

For over 60 years, the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) has provided professional growth opportunities to early childhood educators in this province. As an organization the AECEO has made significant contributions in the areas of training, public awareness, certification, equivalency, networking, professional development and recognition for the profession.

In 1989, the AECEO spearheaded the establishment of a Legislative Recognition Committee to advocate for the implementation of a professional regulatory body for ECE professionals in Ontario. Almost 20 years later, and as a result of the commitment and dedication of countless AECEO member volunteers, the Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007, was finally enacted and the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) established. Since the inception of the ECE Act, the AECEO has continued to support registered early childhood educators in navigating and transitioning within the changing landscape of the profession. Working alongside sector stakeholders, the AECEO has helped to shape the new and evolving vision for the sector.

In continuing its mission to support registered early childhood educators, the AECEO has undertaken this discussion paper on professional learning. The purpose of the discussion paper is to initiate an on-going dialogue about what makes professional learning opportunities of the highest quality. We regard this discussion paper as a dynamic document open for member engagement, conversation and critique. We invite AECEO members and the wider early childhood education and care (ECEC) community to respond to the paper.

Current landscape

A significant number of registered early childhood educators already regard professional learning as a vital part of their professional practice. The “You Bet We Still Care Study” reported that the majority 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.

Since 2006, Ontario's early learning curriculum framework has guided early childhood professional practice. The framework is designed to stimulate on-going discussion amongst registered early childhood educators regarding their values, theories, and beliefs about early learning and care and to provide these professionals with the pedagogical tools for rich early learning environments which reflect the framework's vision and principles (Langford, 2012).

In the Ministry of Education's *Modernizing Child Care in Ontario Discussion Paper* (2012) the government states that one of its objectives is "to develop tools, resources and training opportunities to support child care operators and caregivers as they implement...quality initiatives" (p. 10). More recently, the province's *Early Years Policy Framework* (2013) states in the context of their guiding principle on high quality programs and services that "early years professionals must be knowledgeable, responsive, and reflective, and continuous professional learning opportunities should be encouraged" (p.7).

The College of ECE is currently undergoing a process to develop a continuous professional learning program to document its members' accountability and adherence to the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice mandated for the profession. As stated in their consultation paper, "Continuous Professional Learning Program Development Process":

As a regulatory body, the College 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. The continuous professional learning construct will include expectations for members outlined in government legislation and College by-laws, policies, practices, programs and compliance mechanisms (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2013, p. 2).

The current CECE program proposes a means by which members can document their professional learning using a self assessment and reflective model that reviews a member's "recent professional learning activities, performance reviews, changes in relevant legislation, policy and procedures or other information relevant to ... (an individual's) continuous professional learning" (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2013, p.6).

However, "professional learning activities" are not defined by the CECE in the above mentioned document. Currently, professional learning activities accessed by registered early childhood

educators range from single or multi-session workshops to educational and professional credentials such as certificates, diplomas and degrees. Professional learning activities are currently being delivered by a host of various organizations and institutions in the province, including, but not limited to, the AECEO, OCAAT Colleges, Universities, unions, and large multi-service employers. The wide array of activities, deliverers and formats presently available, creates a need to establish clear criteria to help identify professional learning opportunities of the highest quality.

Points for Discussion

I: Professional development vs. Professional learning

Traditionally, the term “professional development” has been seen as a one-time or “one-day-one-stop” only activity, that is, workshops and conferences in which the participant is a passive consumer of information. Loughran (2010) states that:

“traditional professional development is often linked to the implementation of some form of educational change by doing something to teachers, that is, telling us about the change and expecting it to then be carried out. In this way mandated changes are presented, we are trained in those changes in terms of technical requirements (sometimes as simple as re-labeling existing curriculum and practice) and then we are expected to implement those changes” (p. 200).

In contrast, Loughran (2010) maintains that professional learning “carries an expectation that we are able to bring our expert judgement to bear on how change might best be implemented in our own context and practice” (p.201). “Professional learning” is then viewed as a range of on-going activities in which early childhood educators are actively engaged in the processes of assessing and reflecting on their own learning and practice. In this model, learning becomes a back and forth interaction between practicing and thinking about practice that is supported by multiple stakeholders across the different stages of a professional’s career (Urban, 2008).

The College of ECE is proposing a continuous professional learning (CPL) framework for RECEs to adhere to as part of their renewal of membership criteria.

II: Guiding Principles

The College of ECE has a Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice document to which all its members must adhere. The CPL as proposed is a tool in which its members are to reflect and

document their professional learning. It does not outline accepted principles for professional learning to guide delivery or identify accepted institutions that will deliver it. The open-ended nature of this tool makes it imperative that guiding principles be established to ensure that the professional learning opportunities accessed by the individual RECE will allow her/him to successfully meet the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice of the profession.

III: Coordination of Services

The current fragmented delivery of professional learning by various stakeholders catering to the different stages of a professional career makes it difficult for individual registered early childhood educators to navigate and find professional learning of the highest quality.

IV: Wages and working conditions

The willingness of registered early childhood educators to keep abreast of their profession or the importance of on-going professional learning is not in question in this discussion. However, according to the “You Bet We Still Care” study, hourly wages of program staff in all provinces and territories from 1998 to 2012 increased by 5-50%, with the exception of Ontario as the only province in which hourly wages decreased (Flanagan, Beach & Varmuza, 2013). The study also reports that in 2012 fewer staff reported access to paid preparation time, financial assistance and paid release time for ECE-related professional learning than in 1998.

The increasing demands of the profession in the past decade are incongruent with the financial compensation and working conditions faced by registered early childhood educators.

AECEO Recommendations:

I: On Professional Learning vs. Professional Development:

The AECEO supports the use of the term, “professional learning”, rather than “professional development” because of the implications of life-long learning, self-reflection and active engagement on the member’s professional growth (Edwards & Nutall, 2009). It also implicitly denotes an understanding of oneself, and encourages interaction and reflection with others (peers, leaders, families, public), which promotes professional growth and learning.

II: On Guiding Principles

The AECEO believes that professional learning for registered early childhood educators should be guided by the following principles:

- Supports active participation
- Critically identifies, evaluates and challenges thinking about daily practice
- Poses questions about values and beliefs regarding why we do what we do and what we want for children, families, communities and society
- Introduces new and relevant ideas and topics
- Creates and supports a critically reflective community of practice that reciprocally interacts with the changing needs of children, families and society
- Promotes a sense of professionalism
- Easily accessible and affordable
- Delivered using a broad range of informal and formal strategies or activities
- Delivered using a range of formats including face-to-face, hybrid (combination of face-to-face and on-line), and on-line
- Promotes collaboration between all professionals who work in different early childhood education and care settings (i.e. child care, full day kindergarten, family support programs)
- Engages participants in reflection regarding their daily practice

III: On Coordination of Services

AECEO recommends a coordinated effort by all providers to enhance the content and delivery of professional learning activities. The AECEO proposes to work with providers in Ontario to be a clearinghouse of all professional learning activities that reflect the principles outlined above.

AECEO members can access this on-line clearinghouse to fulfill the CECE's program of "self-directed learning and personalized decision-making around enhancing their professional practice" (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2013, p.5).

The AECEO can also offer training in creating, building and updating a portfolio, which includes a self-assessment tool, professional learning plan and a record of programs, activities and/or

strategies undertaken by the RECE. The College of ECE (2013) has identified portfolios as “a tool that assists members in being accountable for their own continuous professional learning” (p. 23).

For many years, the AECEO has provided a certification process and a significant number of AECEO members are currently certified. Moving forward, the AECEO is considering developing a program in which members are assessed and certified through an e-portfolio.

IV: On Wages and Working Conditions

AECEO recommends that a professional learning framework be designed within a coherent early childhood human resources policy that provides sufficient funding and ensures adequate compensation and favourable working conditions to enhance the capacity of RECEs to undertake professional learning.

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