LEADing the way in Early Childhood Education and Care Through a Mentor/Protégé Program

Tina Bonnett and Krista Ly

Tina Bonnett is a faculty member in the School of Community Studies at Fanshawe College in London, Ontario. Her master's work focused on the interconnectedness between primary care and infant-educator attachment relationships. She has recently published a research study focusing on transformations that unfold for early childhood postsecondary students who engage in field work abroad. She is currently completing a doctorate in education with a vision to explore the linkage between leadership and infant specialization. Email: tbonnett@fanshawec.ca

Krista Ly is a fourth-year student in the honours bachelor of early childhood leadership degree program at Fanshawe College. She actively participated in the data collection, analysis, and writing of this study as a research assistant secured through a SSHRC grant. Krista's capstone research project has a similar theme and is titled *A Qualitative Study Investigating the Role of Mentoring Programs Among Novice and Seasoned Educators in an Early Childhood Education and Care Environment.*

Mentoring is an approach utilized by many professions because it has been deemed to be advantageous, most notably for entry-level practitioners, those in search of career advancement, and students engaged in service learning. Research exploring elements that inform meaningful mentor/protégé relationships in the Canadian childcare sector is, however, lacking. This qualitative research study seeks to unearth attributes that influence a formal mentor/protégé experience. Fourteen professionals participated in a one-year program in Ontario. Applied thematic analysis was employed to explore journals, focus group discussion transcripts, and researcher field notes. Predominant themes uncovered include structures that support the pairing, reciprocity, outcomes, goals and motivators, and recommendations for delivery of future mentor/protégé programs.

Keywords: mentor; protégé; mentoring programs; qualitative research

Research exploring mentor/protégé programs for professionals in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) domain is an area of study that is gaining increasing attention. Scholarly literature identifies benefits and challenges associated with mentoring across varying professions (Eby & Lockwood, 2005). Literature focusing on the most fitting and advantageous contributors to mentoring in the early childhood sector is limited, however. Granted that many ECEC organizations are incorporating mentoring into their professional practice repertoire, it is essential that elements that effectively foster meaningful mentor/protégé relationships are appraised to gain a deeper understanding of these elements. Practice grounded in research and a movement toward continuous learning for early childhood educators also warrant examination in the context of mentor programs in early years settings. Developing a concrete understanding of mentor/protégé initiatives for both those new to the field and seasoned practitioners who are seeking advancement in their early childhood career has potential to bestow positive benefits for the ECEC sector.

Related Research

Mentoring is a widely explored topic, both as general concept and in linkage to diverse occupations. As previously noted, a modest body of research focusing on ECEC and mentoring exists. Review of mentor/protégé literature for this study therefore concentrated on the preservice teacher. Formal mentoring, as in the case of this research study, is described by Eby and Lockwood (2005) as an "organization's initiated efforts to match mentors and protégés" (p. 443). The seminal work of Kathy Kram (1985) suggests that mentorship exists when there is a relationship between a younger adult and an older, more experienced adult, whereby the more seasoned individual supports the younger to navigate the adult and work worlds. Wong and Waniganayaka (2013) purport that "mentoring is a facilitated process involving two or more individuals that have a shared interest in professional learning and development" (p. 163). Particular knowledge, skills sets, and characteristics have been found across literature to be associated with mentorship. Angelina Ambrosetti's (2014) proposition that mentoring is a complex and individualized process is a consistent theme proposed by scholars.

The relationship between a mentor and a protégé has been noted to be at the heart of the mentoring experience. Many factors can influence a mentor-protégé relationship, including having emotional support, open communication, adequate feedback, someone to

turn to when in need of advice, and compatible personalities (Gilles, Carrillo, Wang, Stegall, & Bumgarner, 2013). Reciprocity is an idea that is beginning to surface in literature. According to Pavia, Nissen, Hawkins, Monroe, and Filimon-Demyen (2003), mentorship should consist of a collaborative, bidirectional relationship where both partners learn from one another. Some literature also suggests that mentoring should be considered as a necessary component of an educator's role, not as an additional task to their existing workload. Mentoring should be viewed as an important responsibility and provided with adequate allocations of resources and time (Morrissey & Nolan, 2015).

Mentoring has been discovered to provide various benefits for both the mentor and the protégé. Mentoring can help to support seasoned educators to stay in the field by validating and confirming their experience, expertise, and knowledge (Cummins, 2004). Administrative practice, classroom global awareness, leadership, and professionalism have also been connected to mentor/protégé relationships in director training programs (Ressler, Doherty, McCormick, & Lomotey, 2015). Mentoring has been linked to encouragement, guidance, and support for the novice practitioner, and it has been found to empower and validate skills and expertise in professionals (Cummins, 2004). Research also suggests that mentoring relationships can reap benefits for postsecondary students in field practicum settings in areas of satisfaction, commitment to their academic program, and scholastic performance (Blake-Beard, Bayne, Crosby, & Muller, 2011).

Challenges in mentor/protégé programs have also been identified. For example, Jackie Walkington (2005) asserts that although mentoring provides many proven benefits, mentors may encounter barriers due to the various roles they are required to undertake. It may be challenging for mentors to effectively balance their workload with providing their protégés with adequate time, resources, and support. The ability to dedicate time and energy to mentoring another educator (Puig & Recchia, 2008), the short duration of programs, whereby mentors are unable to gain comfort in their roles (Pavia et al., 2003), unclear expectations and role confusion (Walkington, 2005), inadequate communication (Graves, 2010), lack of continuous feedback (Izadinia, 2015), and lack of compatibility (Hellsten, Prytula, Ebanks, & Lai, 2009) have also been deemed to negatively influence the experience. In an effort to eliminate or minimize these challenges, Ambrosetti (2014) recommends preparation training whereby clear expectations are set, roles and responsibilities are defined, possible outcomes are discussed, and strategies to actively engage in the experience are explored in advance.

While these findings are important to note, little is known about the mentor/protégé experiences in early childhood education and care. As such, this study is aimed at elucidating mentorship programs in this expanding field.

Research Design

A qualitative case study was conducted to investigate elements that effectively influence meaningful mentor/protégé relationships in an ECEC environment. This body of research sought to uncover (1) the elements that best foster meaningful relationships within the early childhood educator mentor/protégé pairing, (2) if and/or how the mentoring program enhances knowledge base, skill set, and professional and/or personal life in any capacity, and (3) recommendations for future mentoring programs within ECEC environments.

Lev Vygotsky's (1980) social constructivist theory was the theoretical framework used to analyze this study, integrating three foundational concepts. Referencing Vygotskian theory, Graves (2010) proposes first that knowledge is constructed by learners (protégés) who are often novice educators. Protégés carry their personal attitudes, values, and beliefs, which are influenced by their individual experiences. Second, learning involves social interaction, which is a significant component of constructing knowledge. The interactive processes that occur between a mentor and protégé are essential, not only to the protégé's learning, but to the mentor as well. Third, learning is situated in particular frameworks. For mentors and protégés, learning occurs within the setting of a mentoring program or classroom using an active learning approach. Kerka (1998) validates the function of an active learning approach, stating that mentors, "functioning as experts … provide authentic, experiential learning opportunities as well as an intense interpersonal relationship through which social learning takes place" (p. 4). Walkington (2005) mirrors this notion and suggests that having opportunities to collaborate and co-learn with a mentor enables both mentors and protégés to engage in feedback and reflection. Receiving feedback builds confidence and promotes trusting and supportive mentor/protégé relationships.

Methods

Recruitment

This research study was initiated when a community college was asked to partner with a local childcare organization to gather and

analyze formal data for the initial one-year trial of the LEAD (learn, encourage, accomplish, & determination) mentor/protégé program. A foundational goal of this study was to formally analyze the structure of the newly designed mentor program, with intent to strengthen future delivery. A primary motivator to establish this program was to support professionals new to the field, as well as those who aspire to move into leadership positions. This study did not focus exclusively on mentorship as a means of initiating novice practitioners or as a path to career advancement, but instead saw mentorship as a richer and deeper experience for all ECE professionals. Opportunities to engage in dialogue surrounding pedagogy, current practice, and quality in delivery of care and education were an additional focus. Aiming to promote and strengthen relationships among educators was a central objective in this mentoring program. The LEAD program purpose statement incorporated concepts such as retaining professional staff, continuous growth and learning opportunities, strengthening of program quality, development of professional relationships, and individual career growth and development. The potential to share a solidified mentor/protégé model with other nonprofit organizations within the community was a secondary goal of this mentor program and research study.

Institutional ethics approval was obtained prior to recruitment of participants. A letter of informed consent defining the focus and boundaries of the study was reviewed and signed by all participants. Early childhood educators (ECEs) were invited to participate if they (1) were currently employed by the childcare centre that partnered for the project (2) had formally applied in writing, on their own initiative, to enroll in the one-year LEAD mentoring/protégé program at the childcare centre, (3) had been screened by the childcare centre's mentor/protégé committee and deemed as a fitting candidate for the LEAD mentoring program, and (4) were in sound employment standing with the childcare centre.

The childcare organization that partnered for this study has five locations across southwestern Ontario and employs approximately 100 full-time employees. A total of 14 participants, which represents all ECEs in the initial implementation of the LEAD mentor/protégé program, committed to engage in the research study. Seven participants were in the role of mentor and seven were in the role of protégé, thus culminating in seven pairings. All participants were female, ranging from 22 to 49 years of age. Employment in the ECEC sector varied from to one year to 25 years. Duration of employment with this specific childcare organization ranged from two months to 24 years, and participants held varying roles, including executive director, supervisor, and newly hired staff working directly with children and families. One participant was actively enrolled in an early childhood diploma program at a community college, 12 participants had obtained an ECE diploma, and one participant possessed a bachelor of arts degree. All participants attended training sessions throughout the duration of the one-year project. Areas of focus for the training included observation and documentation, human resources, engagement, relationships, self-reflection, goal setting, and performance reviews. Evaluation of these sessions was not a part of this research study; however, participants did reflect spontaneously on these group sessions in their journals.

The principal investigator of this study is a Fanshawe College Honours Bachelor of Early Childhood Leadership (ECL) faculty member. A fourth-year ECL student was hired, via a SSHRC grant, as a research assistant. Data sampling in this study was purposive. Data were acquired from diverse sources of evidence to enrich rigour. Data collected included reflective journals, transcripts from semistructured focus group discussions, and the principal investigator's field notes. Participants also completed a demographic questionnaire at the onset of the study.

Reflective Journals

Each of the 14 participants were issued a journal at the launch of the program. Mentor and protégé journals were different in content and structure. Journal content was developed to prompt documentation and dialogue between the mentor and protégé surrounding topics such as early childhood pedagogy and philosophy, practice and ethics, goal setting and action planning, and leadership values. Early-childhood-based literature and case studies were also embedded in the journals. Both structured and nonstructured self-directed journal reflections were incorporated.

Focus Groups

Two 55-minute focus groups were conducted at the end of the one-year study. One focus group was held for mentors and a separate one for protégés. Both groups were asked the same five questions. Focus group questions were developed to explore (1) why the participant applied to partake in the program, (2) initial anticipated outcomes of the mentor/protégé experience, (3) elements that proved to be helpful in the role of mentor or protégé, (4) if and/or how the mentor/protégé program experience enhanced knowledge, skills, and personal or professional life, and (5) recommendations for future delivery of the mentor/protégé program.

Principal Investigator Field Notes

Field notes of the principal investigator, gathered as unstructured journal entries, were analyzed. Documentation commenced at the onset of the study and continued for the full duration of the one-year trial of the LEAD mentor/protégé program. Field notes included information gathered at collaborative meetings held with the principal researcher, research assistant, and administrative members of the affiliated childcare agency.

Data Management and Analysis

Reflective journals completed by all 14 participants were collected at months 3, 6, 9, and 12 of the one-year project. The two focus group discussions, which totalled 110 minutes, were manually transcribed by the principal researcher (36 pages). Approximately 43 pages of field notes were also reviewed. Applied thematic analysis (ATA), whereby induction is utilized to "identify and examine themes from textual data in a way that is transparent and credible" (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012, p. 15), informed the examination of data in this study. ATA was deemed as a fitting methodology to conduct this research study because it values the perceptions, feelings, and lived experiences (Guest et al., 2012) of the mentor and protégé.

Upon collection of mentor and protégé journal data at month 3, the principal investigator and research assistant manually coded the data to uncover themes that resonated across the samples. Three themes were initially identified, with two supplementary themes added at the third collection of journals at month 9. A total of five themes, which proved to transpire across all four journal collections and both mentor and protégé focus groups, were explored to contribute to cumulative findings of the study. The five themes are as follows: (1) structures to support the pairing; (2) formal acknowledgement of reciprocity in the mentor/protégé relationship; (3) positive outcomes; (4) transparent articulation of goals and motivations to enroll in the program; and (5) challenges and recommendations. These five themes are discussed below.

Findings

Each of the mentor/protégé pairings shared insight into what made these relationships particularly meaningful. They were also able to identify solutions to potential relationship deterrents.

Structures to Support the Pairing

The first theme that emerged related to the program structure. Many of the participants brought attention to structures of the LEAD program they found beneficial. Specifically, time to meet, journalling, application and matching, maintenance, and formal acknowledgment were identified. The most prominent structure that emerged was the importance of preplanned dedicated time for the mentor and protégé to meet. Participants disclosed that time to meet in their individual mentor/protégé pairings, as well as in a large group including all 14 participants in the program, was critical to relationship development and to personal and professional growth. A formal orientation unfolded at the first meeting and was reported to be a time of increased clarity surrounding the LEAD mentor/protégé program. These group meetings continued for the duration of the one-year study, on average once per month. One mentor shared:

> *For me it was the time away from the childcare program spent with coworkers at our monthly mentoring days. To be able to be in a small group setting and listen to others and share my own stories helped me to validate my mentoring role.*

Another participant echoed this notion in the mentor focus group when she described an interaction that unfolded in a mentor/protégé group meeting:

> *You could see the warmth, you could see the pride, you could see the friendship, and it was just wonderful. Those group times where everyone came together, there was no level, at least I didn't feel it, and it might be unique to my position, but I didn't feel that there were any levels at all. I just saw caring and friendships, relationships.*

A focus on all seven pairings coming together on a monthly basis as a full group, as opposed to individual meeting time for each mentor/protégé pairing (which was noted to occur in varying increments in each pairing, ranging from weekly to monthly), proved to

be instrumental to the participants in this study. A blend of structured early-childhood-based content and unstructured time for both mentors and protégés to discuss relevant challenges and successes also transpired as relevant to this theme. Off-site meeting places, which included the local public library, city hall, coffee shops, affiliated childcare sites, and an outdoor park, were acknowledged as environments that promoted the individual pairings and full group mentor/protégé relationships.

Another structural element identified as one that fostered the mentor/protégé relationship was journalling. Participants reported that in the initial stages of the program the mentor and protégé journals supported pairings to connect and discuss topics relevant to early childhood education and care. The inclusion of both prescribed journal tasks and blank journal pages with no predetermined content was reported to be useful in the formative stages of the program. In later phases of the program, when mentor/protégé relationships were established, the open journal format was found to be the preferred method to process the experience. Flexibility to document journal reflections using diverse formats such as handwriting, word processing, or voice recording was additionally noted to be a factor that contributed to meaningful use of the journals.

The application process to enroll in the LEAD mentoring/protégé program also surfaced as a structural element that contributed to the cultivation of the mentor/protégé experience. In focus groups, participants described the application and matching of mentors to protégés as an effective procedure. Prior to formally applying, prospective applicants were issued an information package containing content surrounding the purpose, objectives, and training involved in the program. Typical characteristics of mentors and protégés, an outline of the selection process, key elements of successful mentor/protégé relationships, and procedure if a fit was not found to exist in a mentor/protégé pairing were supplemental components of this package. Each participant's formal application was reviewed by a mentoring committee comprised of leaders and front-line educators at the agency, as well as community representatives, and this process was deemed by participants to be an effective strategy to match mentors and protégés. The use of a feedback form for applicants who were not chosen to participate as a mentor or protégé in the program was identified as a necessary component of the application process.

Maintenance of the mentor/protégé relationship at the conclusion of the one-year program cycle was addressed by participants. Some mentors and protégés communicated in the focus groups that they desired ongoing contact with their partner and intended to continue to informally maintain their connection. Some participants shared that they had begun the process of setting up social media tools to ensure that they could sustain the relationships they had developed with their counterparts, as well as with the full group of 14 participants in the LEAD program. Participants also communicated that they intended to include the next cohort of pairings in their social media group so that they could answer questions and offer guidance about the program.

Formal Acknowledgement of Reciprocity in the Mentor/Protégé Relationship

Program structures that allowed participants to formally acknowledge and discuss reciprocity in the relationship presented as a consistent theme. In journal entries and focus groups, both mentors and protégés expressed the importance of intentional recognition of the relationship as being mutually beneficial. A mentor reflected:

> *My preconceived notion was I was going to give background of the company and be able to help her get acquainted to the centre, where I had the exact opposite experience. I feel that a lot of times I was able to go to my protégé and she was my mentor. We really have a good connection. We are always back and forth asking for different input, and she is able to offer me just as much as I was able to offer her.*

Other mentors and protégés reaffirmed this notion as they articulated how they switched roles, helped and supported one another, and solved problems together. Participants shared their belief that deliberate recognition and discussion exploring how mentor/protégé relationships can be mutually beneficial is key to the framework of a program of this nature.

Positive Outcomes

Positive outcomes of the program were evidenced in journal entries, focus groups, and the principal investigator's field notes. Participants voiced that the program enabled them to grow in both personal and professional respects. Leadership skills, time management, ability to self-reflect and journal, better listening skills, being more tactful and assertive, and a more solidified understanding of the history and vision of the childcare organization were elements of this theme unearthed. An increased sense of confidence was confirmed to be the most commonly reoccurring concept in this theme. A mentor communicated in a journal entry:

> *Personally I feel that I have grown into my mentor role and could describe my growth as a progression*

> *from coworker to a listener and confidant. I am a sounding board for my protégé, a safe place to vent. Hopefully I had some valuable advice and gave her self-confidence.*

A protégé mirrored the idea of increased confidence when she reflected on some of her personal growth:

> *I believe that I had a great relationship with my mentor and I felt comfortable coming to her with any struggles I encountered. I gained confidence in myself through this relationship because my mentor believed in me and praised my successes. Having a mentor made me push myself professionally in ways that I wouldn't have pushed myself.*

Relationship building between those in leadership positions and front-line staff also surfaced in the study. Protégés disclosed that having opportunities to connect with mentors who held management roles at the centre strengthened their understanding of the organization and reduced their apprehension about interacting with those in leadership positions. A protégé disclosed that in interacting with the executive director (ED) in the monthly mentor/protégé meetings,

> *people got to see us (protégés) when we opened up, and we got to see her (the ED) open up. She is human, just like the rest of us. She holds this leadership role and has confidence in a lot of the things she spoke to us about.*

This quote demonstrates the value of leaders and newer or less experienced employees having opportunities to interact and develop relationships in a mentor/protégé program.

Transparent Identification of Motivations and Goals To Enroll in the Program

Another theme that arose was clear identification of motivations and goals for all who enroll in the program. Participants articulated that understanding their partner's rationale for becoming a mentor or protégé was an essential, yet sometimes overlooked, facet of the program. Participants had various goals and motivations, including a desire to advance in the company, develop relationships, set and attain goals, offer or receive knowledge or experience, gain a deeper understanding of the childcare organization, become better acquainted with policies and operating protocols, enhance confidence, and learn about diverse pedagogical approaches. Both mentors and protégés suggested that having familiarity with their counterpart's anticipated outcomes and aspirations for the mentor/protégé program was critical to their success or lack thereof. One participant, when sharing her ideas around goal setting in the mentor focus group, revealed:

> *I thought that (formal goal setting) was what my protégé was seeking out. That is where I was going, and it took about two and a half months to realize that wasn't her focus at all. It was totally something different.*

This participant extended this idea by sharing that until she and her protégé developed a clear understanding of one another's vision of the program, their relationship did not develop to its potential.

Challenges and Recommendations

The final theme reflected solutions to challenges identified by the mentor/protégé pairs. Various barriers surfaced in the data, including ambiguity about roles and responsibilities, the need for a supply educator to cover mentor and protégé meeting time, and re-pairing for those whose partnership ended prematurely due to maternity leave or other circumstances. To overcome these challenges, participants recommended more comprehensive information in the orientation session focusing on roles and responsibilities, preplanned meeting time with predetermined coverage by a supply educator, and a formal system for repartnering when partnerships terminate prematurely. Participants in the focus groups also proposed that the centre could purchase a validated technology pairing program to complement manual matching of mentors with protégés. Participants endorsed performance appraisal reviews as a venue to discuss potential the fit of educators for the mentor/protégé program. Participants felt strongly that pairings should not be made between members where one member of the dyad has supervisory responsibility, such as performance appraisal, for the other.

Although self-reflective journals were highly regarded, participants recommended the following measures to strengthen the journal component of the program:

1. The use of two journals: one to be utilized collaboratively in mentor/protégé meetings and one to record personal thoughts surrounding the mentor/protégé experience.

2. Matching journals for mentors and protégés.

3. Fewer prescribed journal entries and more self-directed, open journal entries.

4. Clearly framed dates of completion for the prescribed elements of the journal.

5. Formal training and/or review of competencies associated with self-reflection and journal writing.

6. Secure and confidential storage of journals.

A final recommendation related to lack of collegial support. Participants expressed frustration and sadness with educators within the organization who did not enroll in the mentor/protégé program and who lacked interest in the experiences of those who actively participated in it. A protégé ruminated: "When I come back I am excited. Not everybody will share my excitement because they're not at that place or they don't care."

Other participants confirmed this notion and verbalized their struggles with colleagues who did not demonstrate an appreciation for the work, time, and dedication they offered to the mentor/protégé experience. Participant recommendations to buffer these effects included increased promotion of the program and continued collaboration with participants who experienced the benefits of the program and who held positive energy around the mentor/protégé initiative. Participants disclosed that they believe some of the lack of enthusiasm is based on an absence of active involvement in the program, which they felt is likely to shift as more educators have opportunities to enroll in this initiative in subsequent years.

Limitations of the Study

The most significant limitation that arose in this study was the premature termination of the relationship of one of the pairings due to a participant moving away from the area. Another participant received fewer opportunities to interact with her mentor because the mentor was on temporary leave. A second limitation was mentor and protégé disclosure, at the month 9 interval, that reflective practice training was needed. Some participants shared that documenting in their journals led to discomfort because they had not received formal training in their postsecondary studies or had not journalled for an extended period of time and felt they lacked currency with what and how to document using a reflective practice model. If this information had been disclosed earlier in the study, training sessions on reflective practice could have been integrated into monthly meetings and the experiences of the pairings might have been enhanced.

Discussion

Findings of this study highlight specific elements that influence meaningful mentor/protégé relationships in an ECEC environment. It is critical to first note that this study's concept of mentoring differed from Kram's (1985) seminal characterization. The concept of mentoring as being tied to the ages of the mentor and protégé was irrelevant in this study, because in some instances the protégé was older than the mentor. Wong and Waniganayaka's (2013) philosophy, which suggests that mentoring is a facilitated process where two or more people hold a mutual interest in professional learning and development, resonates as being aligned with this study. The inclusion of personal growth that may transpire for the mentor and/or protégé may warrant consideration, however, because it is not embedded in Wong and Waniganayaka's philosophy. This prompts query regarding whether traditional definitions of mentoring continue to resonate as relevant in current practice and mentoring initiatives.

As anticipated, this study found that mentoring programs can prove advantageous for both novice and seasoned practitioners. Benefits validated in other studies, such as reciprocity (Pavia et al., 2003), enhancement of expertise and knowledge (Cummins, 2004), increased confidence (Walkington, 2005), and leadership skills (Ressler et al., 2015) were also identified in this study. Challenges such as lack of time to commit to the program (Puig & Recchia, 2008) and unclear expectations (Walkington, 2005) were also confirmed in this research. Short program duration, which was reported by Pavia et al. (2003) to influence participants' comfort in the mentor or protégé role, did not surface in this study, likely due to the one-year length of the program. Inadequate communication (Graves, 2010), lack of emotional support, inadequate feedback, not having someone to turn to, and incompatible personalities (Gilles et al., 2013) did not

emerge in the data analyzed. The importance of preparatory training for both mentors and protégés, as recommended by Ambrosetti (2014), was validated in this study. The centrality of training in reflective practice and journal writing in the preparatory phase of a mentoring program was highlighted by research participants.

This study is distinct in the early childhood sector because mentors and protégés were not paired by status. Participants included the executive director, supervisors, seasoned practitioners, and practitioners new to the field or organization. Novel to this study are themes embodying the importance of mentor/protégé experiences away from the childcare centre, the desired blend of structured and nonstructured journalling opportunities, and the recommendation to enhance traditional methods of pairing with technology tools designed to match mentors with protégés. The desire for opportunities for pairs to informally maintain their connections and ECEs' aspirations to learn more about the history and vision of the childcare organization are also findings unique to this study. Protégé disclosures that the mentoring program supported them to feel more comfortable and connected to the ECE management team prompts further consideration in relation to the multitude of benefits that are associated with mentoring programs. Participants' intentional focus on reciprocity within the mentor/protégé relationship also requires deeper consideration.

In reflection of this study, it may prove valuable to investigate whether findings translate across other ECE environments or other professional disciplines. Further research may also be warranted with the childcare organization affiliated with this study, involving a different cohort of mentor/protégé pairs. All of the participants in this study were female. Given that Blake-Beard, Bayne, Crosby, and Muller (2011) propose that gender can impact mentor/protégé outcomes, further research is needed to understand these effects. More fundamentally, further research is essential to determine how mentorship programs impact the quality of early childhood education and care in Canada.

Conclusion

Early childhood education and care in Canada is becoming increasingly recognized as a vocation that utilizes mentor programs to enhance the practice of early years professionals. This LEAD mentor research study is unique in that no other studies, to our knowledge, expressly explore factors that foster effective mentor/protégé programs in the early years sector. Overwhelmingly, research participants endorsed this formal mentorship program and were able to concretely articulate how it impacted them in diverse ways. This study also posits strategies to minimize challenges that may surface in mentor/protégé relationships. The vision of this article is to enhance an uncultivated domain of research, specifically facets that strengthen mentoring programs in ECEC environments, with the ultimate intent to enrich the experiences of children, families, and early childhood professionals.

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