
From Isolation to Inspiration: The Transformative Power of Communities of Practice in Early Childhood Education

Kathreen Riel

What if professional learning could be more than a way to improve practice? What if professional development met us where we are and nurtured us to become more alive in body, mind, heart, and spirit? So often, professional learning is framed as a means to an end, where the goal is to acquire tools to manage challenges, fix problems, or improve outcomes. What we're learning is that early childhood educators yearn for something deeper. They are looking for connection, meaning, and encouragement that supports their whole being as well as their practice.

Connection, belonging, and relating are how we grow and succeed. Our work is vital and important, and takes so much heart. When we get to gather together and relate, we are recharged and encouraged.

—Community of practice participant

Early childhood educators often carry so much. They carry heavy responsibilities, including the needs of children, the weight of changing policies and systems, and constant pressure to do more. Their deepest longing isn't always for answers. Sometimes, it's for the space to feel steady again, inspired again, and held in a community where reflection, shared experiences, and growth are possible. These needs reflect a growing awareness in the field that

meaningful professional growth cannot be isolated from our well-being, our relationships, and our lived experiences.

The opportunity to gather and share openly with fellow educators, my peers, has had a very big impact on who I am today as an educator. There is something so special about being able to be vulnerable, honest, and open about the work we do and having others completely understand, empathize, and encourage each other.

—Community of practice participant

Since 2019, the ECE Professional Development Bursary Program has supported 82 communities of practice across British Columbia. The Bursary Program was established through the Early Learning and Care Agreement between the Province of British Columbia and the Government of Canada and is administered by Westcoast Family Centres Society. The Bursary Program provides the necessary financial support for community of practice organizers to offer multiple learning sessions over

several months. Meeting over a longer period of time allows educators to return to questions, circle back to conversations, and deepen understandings together, rather than being rushed toward predetermined outcomes. During these sessions, educators have gathered to explore a wide range of inquiries that respond to the realities of their lives and work. These include questions of care and identity, approaches to ethical practice, and ways to renew connection with children, colleagues, and community. Whether exploring the Early Learning Framework, reading a variety of books and articles, or using art as a tool for dialogue, participants have created spaces for reflection, relationship, and transformation.

I often still feel (on the inside) like a "green" inexperienced educator—that what I say floats into the air like vapour. Through conversation, dialogue, and networking, I hope I can start to accept and see myself the ways others apparently see me.

—Community of practice participant

The Bursary Program's support for communities of practice is a purposeful strategy to apply the values of the Early Learning Framework into relationship-based professional learning. The Early Learning Framework encourages educators to reflect on their professional identities and engage with uncertainty and change. Communities of practice create space for this depth of exploration. They offer opportunities to sit with the discomfort of not knowing, to revisit long-held beliefs, and to share practice-based reflections in a supportive setting. These learning environments are grounded in curiosity, openness, and accessibility, and are shaped by the educators who participate in them.

Unlike conventional forms of professional development, communities of practice are locally led by educators who plan sessions in response to emerging ideas and questions from participants. This grounded and contextual approach aligns closely with the Early Learning Framework's emphasis on responsive practice and community-based learning. Rooted in daily experiences with children and with each other, these communities of practice create space for inquiry that is dynamic, relevant, and deeply connected to the realities and struggles in early learning and care.

An important part of the Bursary-supported model is the mentorship provided to community of practice organizers. Organizers meet regularly with an experienced community of practice mentor to debrief after each session, reflect on what emerged, and plan for the next gathering. These mentorship conversations offer support, an expansive perspective, and guidance that help

organizers respond to the evolving needs of their group while staying grounded in the values of relational learning and reflective practice.

It's really disrupting. For most of us, what we grew up knowing or believing or what we were taught ... it's realizing that what we were taught and what we know was not the truth or the truth wasn't shared.

—Community of practice participant

Communities of practice have also become critical spaces for addressing topics such as colonial histories, systemic inequities, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. The Bursary Program supports these efforts not only financially but also relationally by encouraging communities of practice to draw on diverse local histories and community representatives and to create environments where vulnerability and complexity are welcomed.

This community of practice has helped me not only grow as an educator, but also helped me recover from severe burnout through connection and consistent inspiration.

—Community of practice participant

Early childhood educators describe communities of practice as one of the few spaces where they feel both professionally engaged and personally restored. These gatherings offer

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more than opportunities to share strategies. They become places of belonging where educators slow down, listen deeply, and find resonance in one another's experiences. In the context of a demanding and often isolating profession, these groups offer space to be heard without judgment, to speak honestly about struggles and hopes, and to feel genuinely supported.

Every time I leave a community of practice meeting, I feel happy, understood, and I do a lot of self-reflection. It is helping me become a better person, team member, and leader.

—Community of practice participant

Connecting with both new and experienced early childhood educators provided a valuable sense of community and mutual understanding. These connections fostered a space where I could reflect, learn, and grow alongside peers who share similar values and challenges.

—Community of practice participant

These communities become places where educators reimagine who they are and why their work matters. Through sharing stories, engaging in critical reflection, and having vulnerable conversations, participants revisit their values and reconnect with the deeper commitments that drew them to the profession in the first place.

I think so much of the conversations that we're having... it's just like reminding you how to be human on a whole other level.

—Community of practice participant

This kind of sustained, relationship-based learning is rare in early childhood education, where time and resources are often limited. The Bursary Program has played a critical role in making this format of learning possible. By financially supporting facilitation costs, resource materials, travel expenses, and catering costs for educators to gather, the Bursary Program has reduced financial as well as personal barriers and helped foster caring and meaningful engagement among educators.

Being part of this group helped me see things differently—not just in my work, but in myself. It gave me space to slow down, reflect, and be more inten-

tional in how I show up every day.

—Community of practice participant

Feedback from community of practice participants shows that these gatherings offer much more than professional development. They are spaces where relationships deepen, identities are explored, and educators find strength, healing, and courage. Participants describe communities of practice as places where they feel genuinely seen and supported in both their professional roles and personal lives. Communi-

ties of practice create the conditions for transformation by encouraging honesty, empathy, and a willingness to listen and learn together. In doing so, these communities of practice are building learning cultures rooted in compassionate care, complexity, and connection.

To find out more about the Bursary Program, visit eceprodbursary.org

Kathreen Riel is the project manager of the ECE Professional Development Bursary Program

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