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Enhancing Professionalism and Quality Through Director Training and Collegial Mentoring

by Glory Ressler, Gillian Doherty, Tammy McCormick Ferguson, and Jonathan Lomotey

Authors' Bios

Glory Ressler, BA, has been supporting the early learning and care sector in achieving its professional, programming, and organizational development goals for over 20 years. She codeveloped and managed the Mentoring Pairs for Child Care program and has also led several integration research initiatives in Ontario. Glory taught at the postsecondary level for over ten years and is also a well-known and respected conference presenter and trainer. She is currently the director of Mothercraft's College and Community Data Group. In 2011, she was appointed eastern Canadian national representative to the World Forum on Early Care and Education. Email: glory.ressler@mothercraft.org

Gillian Doherty, PhD, was the research consultant for the Mentoring Pairs for Child Care project. She has been involved in child and family issues for over 30 years in a variety of roles, including director of policy services for the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. She was the project director and one of the principal investigators for the "You Bet I Care!" project and was also the principal investigator for two major projects conducted by the Canadian Child Care Federation: the Partners in Quality project and the Training for the Delivery of Quality Early Childhood Development, Learning, and Care Services project. Gillian has published one book and many policy and research articles related to early childhood development, programming, and service delivery. Email: g_doherty@sympatico.ca

Tammy McCormick Ferguson, ECE, BA, has been a leader in early learning and care for the past 27 years. She was the founding executive director of the Early Childhood

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Community Development Centre, leading its growth and development for 20 years. She codeveloped Partners in Practice Canadian Mentoring model, and codeveloped and led Mentoring Pairs for Child Care. She has also codeveloped a framework that defines the role of owners and boards in child care and has been involved in various other initiatives to advance child care in Canada. In 2012 she was awarded the Canadian Child Care Federation's National Award of Excellence. Email: htpd2@hotmail.com

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Abstract

Several studies report an association between administrative and program quality. Research also indicates that effective program administration requires a director with leadership as well as management knowledge and skills. This paper reports on the evaluation findings and lessons learned from a training program, Mentoring Pairs for Child Care, which combined a formal curriculum to enhance administrative and leadership knowledge and skills, a collegial learning and mentoring process, and activities related to professionalism. The 340 graduates of the 2010 program showed definite pre-post improvement in their self-reported attitudes and activities associated with leadership and professionalism. Furthermore, the pre-post global classroom quality and administrative knowledge and professional practice in a subsample of participating centres also improved. These findings suggest that the program was effective and provide some insight into policy and professional learning.

Most of the research to identify predictors of good quality centre-based child care has focused on adult-child ratio, group size, teacher general education, and teacher early childhood education (ECE) training. Similarly, much of the training discussion about enhancing childcare centre quality “has been about the professional development of teachers and not about those who supervise them” (Ryan, Whitebook, Kipnis, & Sakai, 2011, p. 12). Yet several studies report that childcare directors’ leadership skills and administrative practices have a significant impact on classroom quality (Bloom, Rafanello, Eisenberg, & Talan, 1998; Bloom & Sheerer, 1992; Lower & Cassidy, 2007; McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, 2010a, 2011; Phillips, Howes, & Whitebook, 1991). Furthermore, the Best Start Expert Panel on Quality and Human Resources (2007) indicates that the single most critical factor affecting the quality of early learning and care programs is the knowledge, skills, and stability of the early childhood workforce. The panel made a recommendation (2.2) to invest in the knowledge, skills, and competencies of early learning and care directors, supervisors, and pedagogical leaders in Ontario (Best Start Expert Panel on Quality and Human Resources, 2007).

The Mentoring Pairs for Child Care (MPCC) program was specifically developed to meet the need for administrative and leadership training for childcare directors and supervisors that was accessible, affordable, and impactful. Its development, implementation, and evaluation were funded by the government of Ontario as part of a strategy to address gaps in accessible administrative and leadership training and thereby assist in enhancing the quality of the province’s childcare centres. The program was collaboratively developed in 2008 through consultation with childcare providers, community colleges, and other organizations offering early learning and child care training courses or programs and provincial government childcare licensing officials and policy analysts. It was implemented in Ontario in 10 communities in 2009 and 28 communities in 2010. The research reported on in this paper focused on the 2010 cohort of MPCC graduates (n=340) and the extent to which that year’s program enhanced (a) graduates’ administrative practices, (b) classroom global quality in the graduates’ centres, and (c) graduates’ professionalism.

It should be noted that by the time the 2010 MPCC program was being implemented, the participants were also experiencing significant changes to the service delivery system and practices in Ontario. These included the impacts of phased-in full-day kindergarten, the development of Best Start Child and Family Centres and Parent and Family Literacy Centres, and the transfer of childcare licensing and other child and family services and projects (including MPCC) from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to the Ministry of Education. While initially there was some concern about the capacity of the administrators in the 2010 cohort to complete the program given all the other changes they were facing and needed to implement or address, 340 of the original 403 participants (84.6%) graduated. Most of those who left the program did so for

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reasons such as a change in employers or their own or a family member's illness. The participants who completed the program anecdotally reported that through the information, ongoing peer support, applied collegial learning, and guidance, the MPCC program was an aid in responding to the changes and resulted in both individual professional and organizational improvements.

The Mentoring Pairs for Child Care (MPCC) Program

Mentoring Pairs for Child Care was implemented with two cohorts (2009 and 2010). In total, 542 childcare administrators (e.g., directors and supervisors) completed or "graduated from" the program. The program consisted of introductory training followed by 11 months of scheduled 3-hour classes, as well as additional independent study, assignment, and presentation requirements. This approach successfully combined (a) a formal curriculum to increase director administrative knowledge and skills, (b) a mentoring component emphasizing peer support and collegial continuous professional learning processes, and (c) activities to enhance director professionalism.

The parameters for the design of MPCC were established by the funder's stipulation that the program (a) be accessible in all parts of the province, (b) use an administrative curriculum that was accepted by all the community colleges on the project's advisory committee, and (c) establish mentoring relationships among participants.

Accessibility was addressed by providing local, no-cost part-time programs in 28 areas across the province, with both francophone and Aboriginal-specific programs offered, along with compensation for some travel and staff back-fill costs. Web-based meeting software and live streaming were occasionally used to engage remote participants who were unable to attend the in-person study group due to inclement weather or other travel barriers.

The content requirements of the program were addressed by using the occupational standards for child care administrators developed by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC; 2006) as the foundation for the curriculum, supplemented with articles, case studies, and activities related to leadership, professionalism, and administration theory and practice. It should be noted that, in Ontario, administrative standards and professionalism are currently defined, promoted, and regulated through the College of Early Childhood Educators. Members use the protected title "registered early childhood educator" (RECE) and their professional practice is accountable to the College's standards of practice and code of ethics and enhanced through reflective practice and continuous professional learning. However, at the time that the MPCC program was being developed, the College's standards of practice and code of ethics were not yet in place. The ECE profession in Ontario and other Canadian provinces and territories was primarily guided by the required level of **Canadian Children**

education, the Child Care Human Resource Sector Council's occupational standards, and other provincial and local policies, guidelines, and practices, including the Canadian Child Care Federation's (n.d.) code of ethics.

The 2006 version of the occupational standards for child care administrators, which was developed with the assistance of practitioners from across Canada, broadly defined the acceptable professional behaviour and the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for competent practice by childcare centre directors. Its widespread acceptance as a definition of director professionalism at the time supported its choice as the basis of the MPCC course content, which included the following areas of study: child development and care, human resources, finance, facilities, family and community relations, and governance. The MPCC advisory committee added an additional area of study, information technology, to the program curriculum. Finally, the Canadian Child Care Federation's code of ethics was built into the program's orientation training and its reflective leadership journal exercises.

The program also was designed to accommodate local needs and expertise and respond to the changing context within the early learning and child care system. The first cohort of MPCC groups in 2009 readily incorporated community-based knowledge and priorities and emerging sector issues and expectations within the assigned curriculum and processes. This occurred again in 2010 with the cohort reported on in this article, and suggests that the mentoring, peer support, and continuous professional learning processes used in the MPCC program could potentially be successfully adapted to accommodate the changing local needs and expertise in a variety of communities.

To facilitate the mentoring relationship-building process, participants with less than five years of administrative experience as a director or supervisor were matched with a more experienced participant from the same geographic area as their mentor. In addition to geographical location, mentor/mentee pair matching took into account application form information such as the length and type of childcare-related training, the area in the occupational standards that mentors felt most competent in, the area that mentees most wanted to work on, and the teaching style preference of mentors and learning style preference of mentees.

Program Delivery

Local facilitators, all of whom had college instruction and childcare education and/or management experience, were hired by the respective college in their geographical area according to standard criteria outlined in a position description. Each facilitator was responsible for delivering the program in their area and regularly reporting on attendance, participant progress, implementation challenges, and program adaptation and outcomes. The facilitator's role was to ensure that the specified processes and materials were used in each training session and to assist participants in analyzing the content they had

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reviewed, discussing the implications for practice, assessing their own skill/knowledge level in that area, sharing best practices and resources, and integrating new insights on management, leadership, and professionalism into their daily practice.

The 2010 facilitators attended two days of preliminary preparation that was delivered by the MPCC program manager and returning 2009 facilitators; it included orientation to MPCC, the facilitators' role, and the training materials and processes they would use. This preliminary training emphasized how to use the mentoring and collegial learning processes and materials to develop a continuous professional learning culture within their study group by assisting participants in assessing their strengths and needs, planning for improvement, sharing information, best practices, and resources, and reflecting on practice. In order to further assist with planning and implementation, all facilitators were provided with a summary of their mentoring study group's self-reported strengths and needs prior to beginning the monthly process. This information was based on aggregated application questionnaire responses from the participating directors in each area.

Participating childcare directors received 21 hours of preliminary preparation across three days during the first month of the program. This included (a) an orientation to the MPCC program; (b) an introduction to key concepts such as leadership, mentoring, reflective practice, career development, and systems thinking; (c) a review and discussion of the eight principles in the Canadian Child Care Federation's code of ethics; and (d) a review of the training processes and content they would be using. Those participating directors designated as mentors received an additional seven hours of training in building mentoring relationships and facilitating reflective practice.

The directors and facilitator in each area formed a study group, which ranged in size from 6 to 22 participants, and held 11 monthly 3-hour study group meetings. Participants were also required to engage in additional independent study and meet assignment and presentation requirements. Each meeting focused on one topic area from the occupational standards or information technology. The curriculum content was briefly introduced by the facilitator and then explored more fully through a variety of directed exercises (e.g., case study, article review, cause/effect analysis, expert guest speaker / additional training). Participants were then asked to use a self-assessment and planning tool to identify their strengths and weaknesses in the topic area and develop an improvement plan.

Participants used telephone and email exchanges, site visits, research, and review of provided material to address their improvement plans between the study group meetings. Progress was documented and shared with their mentoring partner and study group. They also worked with their mentoring partner or other members of their study group on issues and resources related to the areas of study covered (e.g., pedagogical

guidelines, policy development) and their required presentations to the group and community. Finally, mentoring pairs were expected to complete, exchange, and discuss their reflective leadership journal entries on a regular basis throughout the training. Leadership- and ethics-related exercises were provided each month and time was built into each study group for mentoring pairs or groups to discuss their journal reflections. While not formally analyzed, it was anecdotally reported that this work helped to inform the monthly self-assessment and planning exercises and the overall professional development and practice among participants.

As this process was repeated monthly throughout the year, mentoring relationships and a local culture of collegial continuous professional learning were developed, which was sustained by all groups for at least 12 months after the program formally ended. Each study group developed and implemented a sustainability plan that expanded their focus to the community's professional learning and development, often partnering with and integrating their processes with existing local networks and quality initiatives. Many graduates also went on to assume new leadership roles at the local and provincial levels.

Program Evaluation

The outcome evaluation results reported on in this article pertain to the 2010 cohort only. A two-pronged evaluation strategy was used with the participants consisting of (a) on-site completion of Talan and Bloom's (2004) program administration scale (PAS) to measure administrative quality, and Harms, Clifford, and Cryer's (1998) revised early childhood environmental rating scale (ECERS-R) to evaluate global program quality; and (b) three self-completed questionnaires, one based on the occupational standards, the second on previously identified effective mentoring attitudes and predispositions and professional and leadership practices that contribute to reflective practice, continuous learning, and enhancing program quality, and the third on graduates' perceptions of the extent to which MPCC contributed to their professional development.

The PAS (Talan & Bloom, 2004) includes 25 items arranged in 10 subscales: (a) human resources development; (b) personnel cost and allocation; (c) centre operations; (d) child assessment; (e) fiscal management; (f) program planning and evaluation; (g) family partnerships; (h) marketing and public relations; (i) technology; and (j) staff qualifications. The final subscale (staff qualifications) was not used in this study due to difficulties converting American terminology for teacher training to that used in Canada. Administration of the PAS requires on-site observation of one or more classrooms, a follow-up interview with the lead teacher(s), a tour of the facility's indoor and outdoor program areas and any space designed for family or staff, an interview with the director about administrative policies and practices, and a review of administrative documents to verify the information provided. Each PAS item is ranked using a 7-point scale, with 1

representing inadequate, 3 minimal, 5 good, and 7 excellent. Although the PAS is relatively new, it has been used in other published childcare research (Lower & Cassidy, 2007; McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, 2010a).

ECERS-R (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998) has 43 descriptors arranged in 7 subscales: (a) space and furnishings; (b) personal care routines; (c) language/reasoning; (d) activities; (e) interactions; (f) program structure; and (g) parents and staff. Administration of the ECERS-R involves observation in one or more classrooms supplemented by an interview with the lead teacher regarding items which could not be observed, such as the children's nap time. Each descriptor is ranked using a 7-point scale, with 1 representing inadequate, 3 minimal, 5 good, and 7 excellent. A revised version of the ECERS-R by the same authors was released in 2005. The ECERS-R has been used in several large studies, including the Canadian "You Bet I Care!" study (Goelman, Forer, Kershaw, Doherty, Lero, & LaGrange, 2006).

Before the start of the 2010 MPCC program, a subsample of 10 of the 28 participant study groups that represented a range of community types (e.g., urban, rural) and regions in the province was developed in consultation with the advisory committee. All the centres in this subsample were invited to participate in the pre-post on-site evaluation. Participation in the MPCC evaluation activities was voluntary, so agreements for the on-site observations, document review, and interviews with centre staff needed to be obtained from the participating director and the lead teacher in the room to be observed. Initially 71 centres agreed to participate in the evaluation. However, for reasons such as an influenza outbreak, scheduling difficulties, and director illness or absence for another reason, it was only possible to do both pre- and post- program observations and interviews in 57 (80.3%) of these centres.

Each of the 10 data collectors hired to conduct the on-site evaluation activities had at least a two-year college diploma in early childhood education and several had a BA in child studies or a related discipline. The average length of professional experience in the field was 20.4 years with the range being 9–40 years. All observers signed an observer confidentiality agreement and, before conducting the pre-MPCC evaluation, attended three days of training that included establishing inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater reliability was tested again shortly before the post-test observations were done. In both instances, a minimum standard of at least 80% was achieved by all data collectors on all tools being used (range 80–100%).

The pre- and post-MPCC observations in the 10 subsamples each required a full day in the centre and involved direct observation in a classroom, a follow-up interview with the lead teacher, a tour of the facility's indoor and outdoor program areas and any space designated for families or staff, an on-site interview with the participating director

about administrative policies and practices, and a review of administrative documents to verify the information provided.

Additionally, shortly after the end of the program, all of the 340 MPCC graduates were asked to complete two questionnaires that had been developed to assist MPCC to match mentees with mentors and which they had previously completed when applying to MPCC: the occupational standards questionnaire (OSQ; Doherty, Ferguson, Ferguson, & Ressler, 2008a) and the mentoring attitudes and predispositions questionnaire (MAPQ; Doherty, Ferguson, Ferguson, & Ressler, 2008b).

The OSQ consists of 54 statements based on the required knowledge and skills in the CCHRC 2006 occupational standards for child care administrators (e.g., “I have a solid understanding of how best to promote young children’s development”). Respondents are asked indicate their agreement level with each statement using a 4-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. There is also a box beside each statement that respondents can tick if they found the statement difficult to interpret.

The MAPQ consists of 26 statements based on the characteristics found to be associated with effective mentoring in early learning and child care by the Canadian Partners in Practice mentoring program (Ferguson, Ferguson, Singleton, & Soave, 1999) and other childcare mentoring programs (Bellm, 1997; Whitebook & Sakai, 1995). Each of its 5 subscales pertains to a specific type of mentor behaviour, as follows: (a) “respectful accommodation” refers to simultaneously respecting and accommodating individual differences; (b) “empathetic listening” refers to active listening based on genuine attempts to understand the speaker’s position; (c) “reflective practice” refers to reflecting on one’s own practice and its impact and then making any changes indicated and also using reflection as part of problem solving; (d) “continuous growth” refers to valuing one’s own growth and that of others, for example, through keeping one’s knowledge and skills up to date; and (e) “support and recognition” refers to valuing the contributions made by others and both supporting and acknowledging them. This questionnaire also asks respondents to indicate their agreement with each statement using the same 4-point scale as used in the OSQ questionnaire and has a box beside each statement where respondents can indicate that they found the statement difficult to interpret. Both questionnaires were pilot-tested with 242 directors before MPCC began, after which adjustments were made to each statement identified by 5% or more respondents as being difficult to interpret. When these two questionnaires were used with the study group, fewer than 5% of the respondents rated any of the statements in either the French or English versions as difficult to interpret.

Graduates were also asked to rate the extent to which participation in MPCC had supported their professional development and leadership skills by completing a post-program professional development questionnaire. This questionnaire asked them to rank

the extent to which they agreed with each of a series of possible outcomes (e.g., “I have a better understanding of the dual role of manager and leader”) using a 4-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. There also is a box beside each statement that respondents can tick if they found the statement difficult to interpret.

The Effectiveness of the Training Model

Administrative Practice and Classroom Global Quality

The 57 graduates of the 2010 program who participated in the on-site evaluations showed definite pre-post improvement in their administrative practice, as measured by the PAS ($t_{57} = 4.31, p > .001$) and in the global quality of their centres, as measured by the ECERS-R ($t_{57} = 3.32, p > .01$).

The greatest improvement in administrative practices occurred in those areas where directors have the most control: human resources development, use of technology, and marketing and public relations. Moderate improvement also occurred in the areas of fiscal management, program planning and evaluation, and family partnerships. Little change was found in the personal cost and allocation subscale, which includes salary and benefits, or in the child assessment subscale. Given that good administration is one aspect of the professionalism associated with program quality, and that some PAS subscales also reflect leadership capacity, these improvements are notable.

The pre-post global quality improvements of graduates’ classrooms occurred in 4 of the 7 ECERS-R subscales, namely space and furnishings, personal care routines, activities, and provisions for parents and staff. There was little change in adult-child interaction, which had already obtained a score of 6.0 out of a possible 7.0 in the pre-training assessment. The lower impact of MPCC on classroom quality compared to centre administrative practices is to be expected given that the link from director administrative training to classroom quality is indirect via the training’s impact on the director’s leadership.

Leadership and Professionalism

The 153 MPCC graduates who completed the occupational standards questionnaire (OSQ) showed overall improvement, as indicated by an increase in their total OSQ score, and felt that they gained the most confidence in their knowledge of and skills related to managing their centre’s finances, the program’s overall facility, and, to a lesser degree, in developing and maintaining good relationships with children’s families and their community.

As anticipated, the extent of these perceived gains was reported at a higher level by mentees. The mentors reported greater confidence, but not to the same extent, in finances, facilities, human resources, family and community relationships, and governance standards.

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A higher post-program mentoring attitudes and predispositions questionnaire (MAPQ) score indicated improvement, and the mentees and mentors as a group felt that their empathetic listening, continuous growth, support and recognition of others, and reflective practice had been enhanced by their participation in MPCC. However, virtually no change had occurred in their respectful accommodation of individuals' differences.

The mentees reported feeling that their mentoring skills had improved the most in regard to the use of reflective practice, encouraging continuous growth, and supporting and recognizing the contributions of others. Mentors reported a definite enhancement of their empathetic listening skills but no significant gains overall or in the other types of mentor behaviours.

The complete OSQ and MAPQ questionnaires are presented in the appendices of the final outcome report ([Doherty, 2011](#), available at http://www.mentoringpairsforchildcare.org/userfiles/final_outcome_report_may2011.pdf)

Table 1 indicates that the majority of respondents believed that MPCC had enhanced both their professional and leadership skills.

Table 1. Graduates' assessment of the impact from participating in MPCC, mentees and mentors combined.

Variable	Questionnaire Statement	Strongly agree or agree (n=171)
Professionalism	I have solidified a personal philosophy of early childhood education to set goals and guide my practice.	92.4%
	I have gained knowledge of and confidence in seeking out various types of information.	94.7%
	I intend to seek out opportunities to further my formal education in early learning and child care.	85.7%
	I have a broader understanding of the issues facing child care.	93.0%
	I have begun to advocate for quality ELCC or increased my involvement in this activity.	76.6%
	I feel more confident in my director role.	88.8%
	My ability to analyze social issues that may affect the well-being of children has improved.	90.0%
Leadership	I have a better understanding of the dual role of manager and leader.	95.9%
	I have learned strategies that will enhance my ability to problem solve.	95.3%
	My communication skills, such as active listening and giving and receiving feedback, have improved.	94.2%
	I feel better able to provide pedagogical leadership for my staff.	92.8%

Summary

Changes to the early learning and childcare sector in Ontario occurred or were planned during the 2010 MPCC program. The associated need to address and/or implement the changes added additional issues related to professional development for the MPCC participants. The requirement to complete the evaluations within three months reduced the time for director training to trickle down to frontline staff. Nevertheless, the above findings related to administrative practice and centre classroom quality suggest that participation in MPCC was still effective in enhancing graduates' professionalism by increasing their managerial and leadership knowledge, use of good administrative

practices, and ability to engage in peer-supported continuous learning. The self-completed online questionnaire results suggest that graduates felt more professionally connected, confident, leadership oriented, knowledgeable, and skilled upon completing the program. Table 2 below provides the pre- and post-test mean scores, t-values, and levels of significance for all evaluation tool results reported on in this article.

Table 2. Pre- and post-test scores on reported MPCC evaluation tools, mentees and mentors combined.

Scale	n	Pre-test mean	Post-test mean	t-value
Global classroom quality (ECERS-R scores)	57	4.6	4.9	3.32**
Administrative practice (PAS scores)	57	2.8	3.3	4.31***
Administrative knowledge and skills (OSQ scores)	153	165.2	182.5	9.09***
Mentoring attitudes and predispositions (MAPQ scores)	153	83.5	87.0	4.85***

p < .01 *p < .001

Discussion

The evaluation of the MPCC program was neither intended nor sufficiently resourced to meet rigorous research standards. Furthermore, a comprehensive search yielded only two examples of rigorous evaluation conducted on similar administrator training programs (McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, 2010a, 2010b). That being said, improvements in pre- and post-program scores and anecdotal reports from MPCC seem to support previous research findings linking effective administration and leadership with program quality and suggest implications for both training policy and an effective process for developing professional childcare administration and leadership practices.

Limitations of the MPCC Evaluation

The most rigorous evaluations of an intervention such as a training program, and thus those with the most reliable findings, share certain characteristics: they have a large enough sample of subjects consisting of randomly selected people who share certain key characteristics; from the sample, an evaluation group that receives the intervention and a control group that does not are formed; and both groups are evaluated with the same instruments before and after the intervention and their results are compared.

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MPCC was unable to meet these rigorous evaluation standards due to the realities of having to use a voluntary sample and the limits on the availability of program and evaluation funding. The self-selection and voluntary participation of the directors and their centres resulted in a small sample, which meant that the MPCC participants may not have been representative of all Ontario childcare centres but only those whose governing body and participating director were the most self-confident and committed to program quality. The funding limitations restricted MPCC to using only a single-group pre-post design rather than comparing the findings from both an intervention and a control group, and doing evaluation of classroom quality in only one classroom per centre instead of two or more. Also, the program was not able to seek information about other possible variables that may have enhanced director professionalism, leadership, and classroom quality in the graduates' centres.

Return rates for self-completed questionnaires at or below 50%, such as experienced by MPCC (44.7–50%), are common and make it impossible to tell the extent to which the questionnaire findings represent the opinions of all who were asked to respond. Second, even if a self-completed questionnaire obtained a 100% response rate, it is impossible to ascertain the extent to which the answers are accurate. This is especially true when subjective, personal information is sought.

Given these limitations, it is not possible to conclusively state that the apparent gains made by the MPCC graduates, their practices, and their classrooms were the result of the program and not some other variable (e.g., extra training and support to the lead teacher and classroom involved in the pre-post evaluation, or a participating director having received additional leadership and administration training). They do, however, seem to support the research linking administrator professionalism with program quality, and resulted in both changes to self-assessed knowledge and attitudes and observed practice.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The pre-MPCC sample finding of low administrative quality, combined with ongoing changes within early learning and child care systems across Canada and several studies which report that directors' leadership skills and administrative practices have a significant impact on classroom quality (Bloom, Rafanello, Eisenberg, & Talan, 1998; Bloom & Sheerer, 1992; Lower & Cassidy, 2007; McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, 2010a; Phillips, Howes, & Whitebook, 1991), seem to indicate an urgent and ongoing need to address director leadership and administrative abilities at both the policy and individual learning levels.

Furthermore, the limited evaluation findings of post-program improvements combined with self-completed questionnaire responses and anecdotal evidence on the continuing impact of MPCC on graduating directors and their programs and communities

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suggest that the program can be adapted to differing content and applied to emerging issues. As such, it offers insight into how peer support and collegial learning could be used to enhance professional learning and practice, which is important to quality programming.

MPCC staff and partners anecdotally reported that the MPCC program seemed to work best when mentoring relationships were developed and then focused on practical knowledge and skill development and when relevant and achievable plans and goals were identified through individual and group learning, self-assessment, and reflective practice and then implemented with collegial support. Several other implementation elements unique to MPCC were considered to be important to the success of the program:

- foundational skills training and sufficient time/opportunities to build strong, supportive, and collaborative relationships (pairs and groups)
- both pair and larger group mentoring relationships (e.g., learning and growth for both mentors and mentees at the one-on-one and group levels)
- well-understood mentoring and peer support guiding principles and processes
- ongoing community development activities, particularly in the areas of needs assessment, evaluation, policy and regulatory changes (e.g., systems thinking) and participatory leadership
- practical, focused use of widely accepted content along with tools and exercises designed to build knowledge, assess needs, plan for improvements, and report back on results
- resourcing and scheduling to compensate for schedules, back-fill staffing needs, and other travel and material-related costs
- a supportive sponsoring organization or coordinating body and, for groups, a designated facilitator with access to administrative support

Childcare administrators can develop mentoring relationships focused on identified development needs within informal training environments, including senior leadership and management teams, community networks, and quality assurance and professional development committees.

However, policy is required to provide training and continuous professional learning opportunities, such as those discussed in this article, which enable directors to continue to work full time while participating in effective training that is at low cost to both funders and directors/centres. Other possible policy directions might include training directors in the use of reliable and validated evaluation tools that capture data on accepted indicators of quality, professionalism, leadership, and practice standards; supporting more rigorous research in this area; and linking continuous professional learning and quality

enhancement planning to reporting requirements and access to resources (e.g., funding). For example, in Ontario the College of Early Childhood Educators is currently providing a reflective-practice continuous professional learning process and related resources to its members, and this initiative is anticipated to inform an upcoming new regulatory requirement for their registered early childhood educators in the near future.

Consideration also needs to be given to compensate through government funding directors who have completed administration and leadership programs commensurate with their knowledge and skills and also to provide resources allocated to documenting and sharing knowledge and best practices with less experienced or aspiring staff. These steps could assist in mitigating any retention issues that may arise from ongoing demands on administrators to implement significant changes in policy and practice across Canada and might lessen attrition due to migration to better opportunities or early retirement.

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