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Authors' Bios

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All of the above authors were part of a research team that recently completed a project to facilitate action research initiatives developed and implemented by early childhood educators in early years centres on Prince Edward Island.

Abstract

Recent international, national, and provincial interest in early childhood education, evidence of the positive impact of the early years on society and on learning later in life, and local government-generated reports inspired the study "Play in Early Learning Programs: Beliefs, Practices, and Professional Development." This research was generated by the Early Childhood Development Association of Prince Edward Island in collaboration with the Research in Early Child Development team at the University of Prince Edward Island. This paper reports on the fourth and final phase of this research study, in which four early years centres on Prince Edward Island participated by developing and implementing an action research plan. Findings of this phase suggest how action research impacts early childhood educators' practices, both personally and professionally, and how early childhood educators developed leadership skills and a sense of belonging to a community of learners during the action research journey.

Keywords: *action research, child-minders, early childhood, professionals*

The Early Childhood Development Association of Prince Edward Island, in collaboration with the Research in Early Child Development team at the University of Prince Edward Island recently carried out a research study entitled "Play in Early Learning Programs: Beliefs, Practices, and Professional Development." This study was influenced by recent international, national, and local interest in early childhood education; evidence of the positive impact of the early years on society and on learning later in life; and local government-generated reports (e.g., Flanagan, 2010) and subsequent provincial initiatives (Prince Edward Island Preschool Excellence Initiative, 2010). The study consisted of four phases, all focused on the role of play in early childhood programs, with the fourth phase culminating in several action research projects being implemented in early years settings. This paper reports on this particular phase of the research study, in which four early years centres (EYCs) on Prince Edward Island (PEI) took part in planning and implementing an action research project of their choice in their own centre. The findings of this phase are discussed, with particular emphasis on how action research impacted early childhood educators' (ECEs) practices both personally and professionally, and how ECEs went through the stages of learning during their action research journey.

Context of the Project

Throughout the project, there was evidence that the ECEs who were participating in the action research projects were going through changes in their personal and professional development as ECEs. Most of them held a diploma in early childhood care and education. The curriculum supporting this diploma promotes an emergent curriculum approach and focuses on the significant role of play and the learning environment to a child's learning and development. Participants repeatedly expressed the belief that their involvement in the action research projects impacted their practice with the result that they now had (a) an affirmation of their

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values and beliefs in early childhood pedagogy; (b) an increased awareness of play-based pedagogy; (c) an increased communication with fellow staff, colleagues, children, and parents; (d) a better understanding of how to make children's learning visible; (e) knowledge of how to connect play-based practice to learning outcomes in the new *PEI Early Learning Framework* (Flanagan, 2010); and (f) a growing recognition that their personal resilience and self-efficacy had been enhanced. As ECEs, their experience in these projects reinforced a strong belief in themselves and in the work they do.

Stages of Learning

As early as 1940, Abraham Maslow proposed four stages of learning: unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence, conscious competence, and unconscious competence (Chapman, 2012). Maslow argued that persons going through a change or a learning curve went through these phases until they mastered the task they were doing. In the unconscious incompetence stage, the learner is not aware of the existence or relevance of the particular skill set. In the conscious incompetence stage, the learner becomes aware that, by improving their skill or ability in a particular area, their effectiveness will improve. When learners move on to the third stage—conscious competence—they are able to perform the new skill reliably, but with a deliberate focus and concentration. The skill is not "second nature" or "automatic" to them. Moving on to the fourth and final stage—unconscious competence—the skill becomes so ingrained that it enters the unconscious part of the brain and becomes "second nature" to them.

Complementing Maslow's early theories on progressive change, two other models are relevant in the learning and professional growth of ECEs. Lilian Katz (1972) outlined what she saw as the four developmental stages of preschool teachers: survival, consolidation, renewal, and maturity. In the survival stage, the ECE is able to handle and cope with daily routines and transitions while improving classroom management. With consolidation, ECEs increase their knowledge base and strengthen specific skills. In the renewal stage, ECEs get tired and/or bored with the routine and so they may seek new ideas. The final stage is maturity that enhances professional growth as ECEs have now gained a comfortable level of confidence in their own competence. At this maturity stage, ECEs search for more insight and increased responsibilities within the early years centre (Katz, 1972).

Carol Anne Wien (2008) in *Emergent Curriculum in the Primary Classroom* hypothesized four stages of understanding and becoming an emergent teacher. Through her experiences with the Reggio Emilia approach and emergent curriculum in North America, Wien noticed that ECEs seemed to go through the following stages while transitioning from their current pedagogy to the new emergent one: the challenged teacher, the novice teacher, the practicing teacher, and the master teacher. The challenged teachers like the idea of an emergent curriculum, but at the same time realize that they do not know how to go about it. The novice teachers realize that they are becoming emergent teachers through their actions with the children, but do not really know why they are doing it. When these teachers move on to the

third stage—the practicing teacher—they know that they are now implementing an emergent curriculum in their centres. However, they still have challenges relating to time and staffing, so at times they fall back to traditional ways of teaching. When teachers reach the final stage—the master teacher —they do all that the practicing teacher does, but are now fully committed to the emergent curriculum and manage to find ways and means to overcome challenges. Their main focus is to sense possibilities in the children and to find ways to draw them out so that they can work with the children and expand on these possibilities (Wien, 2008).

While the Katz and Wien models are very similar in structure to Maslow's model, their strength lies in how they are targeted to a more specific audience and how they focus clearly on early childhood pedagogies. These models provide a conceptual framework for the process through which ECEs gain a certain level of professional identity, moving toward becoming researchers of their own practice and away from the widely held belief that ECEs are simply babysitters. Because historically the emphasis was frequently on caring rather than educating, the job of ECE has been viewed as low-skilled babysitting, not "real teaching" (Ackerman, 2006). The Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia (2007) contend that "historically early childhood educators have been less visible and less valued than teachers of older children and … this impacts early childhood educators' view of themselves as potential leaders" (para. 6).

Professional Development and Identity

Early years education has undergone prominent changes in recent years on Prince Edward Island, across Canada, and internationally (Flanagan, 2010; Penner et al., 2011). The traditional role of ECEs is being modified as practitioners are held up to a newly heightened set of expectations regarding their proficiency with child development and the creation of enriching educational environments and experiences for the children in their care (Dalli, 2008; Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009). According to research carried out in New Zealand and England (Dalli, 2008; Simpson, 2010), these expectations bring about a high sense of responsibility and accountability, having moved from the former traditional conceptions of early childhood as a setting for "child minding" to a newly conceived educational environment.

Practitioners within the early years field are being asked to take ownership of this more dynamic role (Dalli, 2008) and the professional responsibilities that go along with a newly shaped identity (Osgood, 2006). Viewing oneself as a professional in the field of early childhood education requires ECEs to be active in their own education and professional development. This conception of being active and engaged in one's education and professional development is crucial in shaping ECEs' professional identity, confidence, and professional practice (Dalli, 2008; Osgood, 2006).

In a survey of 594 ECEs conducted in New Zealand, Dalli (2008) found that ECEs viewed professionalism as "valuable, desirable and entirely achievable" and that professionalism can be attained through a distinct pedagogical style, professional practice and

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knowledge, and collaboration. In taking part in opportunities that promote development, ECEs can broaden and deepen their knowledge of the early years and reflect on their role in order to create sustained change (Dalli, 2008; Osgood, 2006; Sheridan et al., 2009).

Teachers as Researchers

The word "research" has a serious tone to it, and the public often tends to connect it with scientists, academics, laboratories, and experiments. It is certainly not a word commonly used in an early childhood setting. Carlina Rinaldi (2003) contends that "research is not a word with common usage and, above all, it is not a concept that we normally think about putting into practice in our daily lives" (p. 1). ECEs who work in direct contact with children might think twice about referring to themselves as researchers. However, ECEs are asked numerous questions every day by the greatest researchers of all—children—so is what they do not research? Research is about searching for and making meaning, constructing and sharing together the meaning of the world around us, "where the solution to certain problems leads to the emergence of new questions and new expectations, new changes" (Rinaldi, 2003, p. 3). It is a cyclical building on previous experiences and new knowledge. Research in early childhood settings involves learning new ideas, delving deeper into children's interests, and finding that which was not there before (Rinaldi, 2006). Susan Stacey (2009) in *Emergent Curriculum in Early Childhood Settings* argues that research is a process of investigating and studying further in order to reach new conclusions and ideas about children's questions. Stacey proposes that:

> in this type of practice [early childhood settings], we are immersed in data all day long. If we are paying attention to it, recording it, and using it in order to develop new understandings and approaches, then we are engaged in a cycle of inquiry. (p. 129)

Teachers most often engage in action research (Nimmo & Park, 2009). In this type of research endeavour, teachers are active participants in developing their own questions, facing challenges, researching, planning, and implementing meaningful and effective inquiries in their workplaces. Action research is an effective method for conducting research in early years settings. As the research process adopted in this study evolved, it became evident that engaging in action research empowered the participants to think of themselves not only as researchers, but as professionals.

Action Research

Action research (AR) has always been understood as people taking action to improve their personal and social situations (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2009; Mertler, 2006). Researchers and educators also focus on its potential for promoting a more productive and peaceful world order (Reason, 2006; Stringer, 2014). Educational AR is increasingly viewed as a methodology for real-world social change. As Reason and Bradbury (2001) state, "action research is about working towards practical outcomes, and also about creating new forms of understanding, since action without reflection is meaningless" (p. 2). They suggest that AR

emerges over time within a process that connects strongly with members of the community and individuals' developing skills as researchers. At its core, "action research is emancipatory; it leads not just to new practical knowledge, but to new abilities to create knowledge" (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 2).

Knowledge acquisition in formal educational settings is not sufficient to maintain effective teaching of skills and knowledge in the early years (Edwards & Nuttall, 2009; Sheridan et al., 2009) because the environment is constantly evolving and the educator is also maturing and developing as s/he goes through the stages of learning. Therefore, the development of new knowledge in a community of practice is a critical step for ECEs in their work in educational environments. By providing professional development opportunities for deeper learning and reflection, practitioners can take ownership of their own learning and development (Edwards & Nuttall, 2009). When adopting an AR approach to their practice, ECEs develop a reflective approach and are able to pose thoughtful questions and conduct purposeful investigations to find the answers to situations relevant to their everyday work. Through reflection on the outcomes, ECEs may actively create sustained change within their centres (McGuire-Schwartz & Arndt, 2007), leading to a sense of empowerment as they become researchers and professionals in the field (Dalli, 2008; Nimmo & Park, 2009; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Stacey, 2009).

The Action Research Project

The research project "Play in Early Learning Programs: Beliefs, Practices, and Professional Development" was funded by the Early Childhood Development Association of Prince Edward Island. A research plan was developed to explore the beliefs and practices of educators in the early years field, as well as to provide the opportunity for directors and educators to learn how to conduct AR projects within their centres.

Components of the project included (a) the development, dissemination, and analysis of online surveys on educators' beliefs about play in their classrooms; (b) focus groups to discuss the role of play in preschool and primary grade classrooms; and (c) the development, facilitation, and support of AR projects in four early years centres. This article focuses on the AR projects, the methods used, and the findings emerging from the AR aspects of the study.

Methods

The method chosen for this phase of our work was qualitative in nature and utilized an AR approach. Practitioners (educators) in the actual practice setting (early childhood centres) design action research that aims to improve practice (teaching) and increase understanding of the nature of early childhood education practice (Kuhne & Quigley, 1997; MacNaughton & Hughes, 2009; Stringer, 2007). The goal in this project was for the participants—the ECEs and EYC directors in the study (along with the research officers)—to expand their understanding of issues pertinent to the play components of their programs. After deepening their understanding,

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the goal was to create AR projects to explore these issues (Mertler, 2006). The research team's goal was to work with directors of EYCs and together engage their staffs in AR to improve programs and services related to play-based programming in their centres.

We used purposeful sampling to choose the participants for the AR projects (Patton, 2002). The executive director of the Early Childhood Development Association of PEI mentioned five directors from different centres across PEI to the research team who might be interested in the project. The research team approached each director and informed them of the project. Four out of the five directors agreed to take part. Directors of the four EYCs indicated their need to work on improving programs and to support their staffs in making a change. The directors of the four centres, together with 19 staff (18 female and 1 male) were involved in this project.

We held three AR workshops with the participants in March, April, and May 2012. These workshops were developed to (a) build the capacity of the ECEs and directors to conduct their own research projects, (b) to provide professional development on the AR cycle, and (c) to make available to directors and ECEs some opportunities to collaborate and share experiences with other educators. Each of the workshops was held after working hours, on a voluntary basis, and the sessions were structured to provide information and activities that built on the previous workshop, thus scaffolding learning about action research.

Two principal investigators and three project officers facilitated the AR projects. All researchers had past experience working with ECEs. The role of the project officers was to visit the EYCs each week for three to four hours to facilitate and guide the director and staff in developing, implementing, monitoring, and reflecting on one or more AR projects in their centre. The researcher team helped the participants go through at least one complete AR cycle, with three out of four EYCs completing several cycles of the AR process. The project officers visiting the EYCs kept researchers' logs, which formed one component of the data. Four types of data in all were collected:

- researchers' logs of all visits to each EYC

- reflection sheets completed by all participants

- discussion, feedback, and evaluation of the three workshops

- each EYC's final learning story and feedback on the project.

The project officers visited each of the four centres 13 times, for a total of 52 visits over a period of 13 weeks (first week of February until the first week of May 2012). Each project officer was responsible for two centres. They guided participants through the AR cycle by helping educators formulate their research questions, providing them with professional articles about their particular area of inquiry, encouraging the educators to develop strategies to address

their research questions, and, in general, supporting them throughout the process. The approaches adopted by each EYC was unique; each focused on the specific questions and needs of the particular centre. During the first meeting with the project officers, the participants came prepared with a set of concerns they wanted to put forward to them. These concerns had been discussed among them in their centres beforehand according to the needs of the particular centre. It was a process in itself for these participants to agree on the specific, manageable questions they were going to research through this project.

The research questions developed by participants at the four centres are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Research questions of the four EYCs.

Centre A	1. How does a family group setting impact the development and learning of the ol children in the centre? (Evangelou, 1989; Katz, 1995; Reese, 1998) 2. How can documentation make learning through play visible and create a mediu communication with parents? (Goldhaber & Smith, 1997; Schroeder Yu, 2008)
Centre B	1. How would a project approach affect the children's play behaviour in the pre-kindergarten group? (Goldhaber & Smith, 1997; Schroeder Yu, 2008) 2. How can the day be structured to support learning outcomes in the Framework Early Learning?
Centre C	1. What is the purpose of documentation? (Goldhaber & Smith, 1997) 2. How can documentation work in the infant room? (Schroeder Yu, 2008)
Centre D	1. How can literacy be increased in the building and block area? (Bachrudin, 2010 Goldhaber, Lispon, Sortino, & Daniels, 1996) 2. How will changing the environment in the infant room impact their play? (Firlil 1994; Wurm, 2009) 3. How can learning stories be incorporated in the classroom? (Carter, 2010)

We used a colour-coding strategy to analyze the data collected from the researchers' logs, the reflection sheets completed by participants, the workshops, and the final learning stories, outlining similar and recurring themes (Charmaz, 2009). In all of the documentation developed by participants, strong connections were made between documentation for the research projects and the similar approach to the daily documentation of children's work.

Emerging Themes

Six themes emerged from the data analysis, which are discussed below.

1. *Documentation and reflective practice.* Through an analysis of their documentation, directors and ECEs confirmed that they were able to (a) increase their own professional development, (b) better identify children's interests, and, as a result, (c) create a more

emergent curriculum for learning (Penner et al., 2011; Wien, 1998). Documentation also (a) reinforced key elements of play-based learning pedagogy for the ECEs, (b) became a tool to open up a new world of communication with parents, and (c) provided an additional component to the children's language and literacy experiences within the play environments through their display.

2. *Play environments*. "Our play became more child based." Participants reported that children were more deeply engaged in their activities and for longer periods of time. One ECE summed up the feelings of many of the participants at the conclusion of the project when she stated that "the impact [of this project] was more effective teaching." Through these changes to their environment and the skills that improved their abilities of observation and documentation, the majority of the ECEs commented that their practice has become more emergent in nature and that children have more choice over how they learn.

3. *Communication, communities of practice, and confidence*. Communication with families improved, there was an increase in communication among ECEs (within and beyond their early learning centres), and a learning community emerged. This theme also highlights how ECEs developed more positive feelings about their work, felt less isolated, and cultivated positive changes in professional attitudes (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Roach O'Keefe, 2010). In addition, researchers observed an increase in the levels of motivation and confidence of ECEs.

4. *Leadership roles*. ECEs highlighted the critical nature of the support of their directors throughout the AR process. All of the directors involved in the projects allocated time for the ECEs to discuss, document, and implement the changes that emerged as a result of the AR project.

5. *The facilitator, mentor, coach, and teacher*. Within the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood learning in Italy, the "provocateur," or teacher, is known as the partner in learning, the guide who practices the "pedagogy of listening" (Wien, 1998). This is the role that the research team adopted during this action research project—to listen to and be a part of the practice that prompted the questions that ECEs asked about their beliefs and practices surrounding play-based learning and pedagogy. Participants noted that this role was crucial in their learning and professional growth. They appreciated the role of the project officers as they visited each week. The participants felt that they were being held accountable for their actions and progress each time the project officer came to visit. This kept them going forward, knowing that they had someone to guide them along the way.

6. *"I am a researcher."* Participants came to the realization that they now could name the process they had undertaken, and that action research was an important component of their work with the children. They also noted the new knowledge they had learned or skills they had improved, such as using the computer, conducting observations, and developing documentation.

Discussion

The action research component of the research project began to take shape by introducing the four EYCs to the AR project in which they had agreed to participate. In the initial meeting with each centre, a principal investigator and the project officer who would be working closely with the centre met with the director to discuss the AR project, address questions and concerns that could be answered through AR, and explain the role of each member of the research team. Within the first or second visit to the centre, project officers met with the ECEs who were taking part in and working most closely with the AR team. This was because it was not possible for all the educators to take part in the action research at the same time. Project officers were met with enthusiastic professionals who welcomed the idea of a chance to expand their professional practice, but who also had questions and concerns about how the project would play out in their everyday routines within the centres. Most of the participants were nervous about embarking on such a project because they were afraid it would take time away from the children or that it would mean extra work to be done at home. We propose that these participants were at that time in Maslow's unconscious incompetence stage (Chapman, 2012), as yet unaware of the existence or relevance of action research. We could say that they could be located within Lilian Katz's (1972) survival stage of teacher development. Participants were pleased and satisfied with what they were doing, but at the same time they wanted to find ways to improve their classroom management. We might also add that they were "challenged teachers" because they liked the idea of action research, but at the same time they realized that they did not know how to go about it (Wien, 2008).

Reflections from the first workshop that took place about a month after the initiation of the AR project showed that participants were already discovering some changes in themselves and their practices. Comments reflected in the evaluation forms at the end of workshop #1 include the following:

- "Action research is a new way of doing what we already do."

- "Different techniques work for different centres and those needs change over time."

- "We are researchers!"

- "Action research benefits everyone in the centre."

- "Action research is an ongoing process that we can all do at our own pace."

Project officers could already see that participants were going through a learning process as they progressed through the AR project. The progression from stage to stage was often accompanied by a feeling of awakening, of acknowledgment, of agency (Chapman, 2012). Participants were moving on to Maslow's second stage of learning—conscious incompetence. The participants had now become aware of the existence and relevance of action

research and were attempting to use this new skill in their centres. Katz (1972), on the other hand, refers to this stage as the consolidation stage in which the ECEs increase their knowledge base and strengthen specific skills. "Novice teachers," as seen in Wien's (2008) second stage, are now aware of how to go about action research, but they still do not fully understand how it benefits their practice.

The second workshop was offered as work progressed on individual projects in the four EYCs. During this workshop, the project officers noticed that the participants were becoming more willing to take part in the discussions that went on. They also started showing more confidence in themselves and expressed a belief in what they were doing. Some of the comments we collected during workshop #2 highlight the growing perception of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). These comments included the following:

- "Loved the discussions the other centres shared."

- "Just knowing things need to change all the time to find the best way that works for you."

- "Sharing the action research projects with colleagues because we don't get to do that at work."

- "Hearing how other centres will share the action research project with parents."

- "Reassurance we are 'right,' gaining more confidence in what I already know."

- "Sharing with other staff where we are in this project."

Participants could be steadily seen moving to the stage of conscious competence. ECEs started believing in their ability to go through the process of action research, but at the same time still needed to concentrate and think about it in order to perform this skill (Chapman, 2012). This stage is very similar to the third stage in Wien's stages of becoming emergent—the practicing teacher who still needs support to continue with the change. According to Katz's (1972) developmental stages of teachers, the ECEs were now in the renewal stage. Katz contends that "during this stage, teachers are likely to find it especially rewarding to meet colleagues from different programs on both formal and informal occasions" (p. 52). She goes on to say that teachers at this stage are open to professional development such as workshops or focus groups. The participants were now more interested in reading more about their particular research questions and asking themselves how to find a suitable solution and how to implement it in the centres.

As the AR study was coming to an end after 13 weeks of collaboration, learning, and researching between the research team and the participants, it was evident that ECEs and directors in all four centres were feeling more confident and competent in conducting future

action research in their respective settings. This was evidenced in workshop #3 where participants shared the lessons learned from their engagement with the AR process. Representatives from the four centres presented their findings and discussed their new AR cycles. New relationships were formed and a community of practice was developed through participation in this project and involvement in the series of workshops. Participants also shared some of the changes that took place as a result of this project:

- Learning stories were turned into picture books for children to enjoy rather than leaving the learning stories in binders on a shelf.

- Project work was introduced in two of the centres and it proved to be a success, enhancing teamwork and children's enthusiasm in learning through play.

- A babies' room was rearranged in a way that made it safer for them and more spacious so that a larger variety of activities could be offered to this group of children.

- Documentation became purposeful and meaningful to the participants of one centre as they learned new ways of implementing it in a way that was made visible to children, parents, and educators.

- Incorporating literacy in the block area by creating a book depicting the letters of the alphabet spelled out in blocks, and introducing writing instruments and paper in the area. This attracted more children, both boys and girls, into this area. Since the children were more engaged in their play, behavioural problems decreased.

Here are some final reflections that participants shared with the research team through an evaluation form:

- "I have been doing action research for a while but I didn't really know it had a 'formal' name. I learned how to better formulate what I have discovered when researching something."

- "My centre focused on what developmental benefits are there for 4- to 5-year-olds in a family group setting. I was able to learn more about this so to better answer the same question when asked by parents."

- "[I] learned how to become a more reflective educator. [I learned about] the impact documentation has on the children in our class."

- "The importance of reflection about the environment, how changes can affect the children, the educators, and the program as a whole."

- "I needed to learn to take an approach and focus on it. Spending the time on our action research was an asset to our centre! We are much more confident in our documentation!"

- "How much of a second nature action research is even though we are unaware of it. An outside point of view is so beneficial."

- "Now I can tell the parents what the children are learning. I feel now that we can measure their progress of self-discovery and that their journey is easier to document."

The research team could clearly trace the growth and learning these ECEs had gone through, as well as the changes in practice they demonstrated when compared to the beginning of the project. While the representatives from the four EYCs were presenting and sharing their AR journey during the third workshop, it was evident that they were quite confident doing so and that they were now ready to take on another project on their own. By this point, participants had entered the final stage of Maslow's stages of learning—unconscious competence (Chapman, 2012). The skill became so practiced that it entered the unconscious parts of the brain and became second nature for the participants to implement another AR project in their centres. According to Katz (1972), these educators had reached the final stage of development—maturity. ECEs were asking deeper and more abstract questions about their philosophy of teaching and the impact they might be having in and out of the early childhood setting. These educators had begun to explore both their philosophical perspective and their role in assisting change at an organizational level and beyond (Katz, 1972). Educators who have reached the final stage of development are usually ready to take on a leadership or mentoring role (Chapman, 2012; Katz, 1972). These "master teachers" would now be committed to action research and would be confident to do it all over again, on their own this time (Wien, 2008).

Analysis of the data suggested that participants learned the importance of reflection and documentation to support their role as professional ECEs. Taking the time to document their experiences with children, their connection of practice to the expected learning outcomes of their curriculum framework, and their consistent communication with parents about what they were doing with the children became a hallmark of their professional growth and signalled a breakthrough in their awareness of themselves as professionals. Through this action research project and through hands-on experiences, participants learned how important teamwork is in planning and implementing change, how they support and validate children's learning, and how to recognize themselves as researchers and professionals.

The alignment of some of the participants' comments to the developmental stages proposed by Maslow, Katz, and Wien is graphically represented in Table 2.

Table 2. Developmental stages of learning.

	Stage 1	Comments	Stage 2	Comments	Stage 3	Comments	Stage 4	Comments
Maslow	Unconscious incompetence	How do I write up a research question?	Conscious incompetence	Action research benefits everyone in the centre.	Conscious competence	Gaining more confidence in what I already do.	Unconscious competence	I learned how to become a more reflective educator.
Katz	Survival	What is the purpose of all this?	Consolidation	We are researchers.	Renewal	Sharing with other staff where we are in this project.	Maturity	We learned much of a second nature action research is even though are unaware it.
Wien	Challenged teacher	Do I have time for it?	Novice teacher		Practicing teacher		Master teacher	

We found a strong alignment among the three theorists and the growth demonstrated by the participants in this study.

Conclusion

As educators begin to recognize themselves as researchers within their own practice, they are able to find better ways to communicate and collaborate with colleagues, challenge themselves to try new initiatives, enhance their visibility as educators, and remain committed to their work (Nimmo & Park, 2009).

Findings from this study indicated that attitudes toward the early childhood education profession began to shift in the course of the project. Participants were excited about the challenges they faced, and with the tools they had learned through the AR process in hand, they believed their work was important and worth recognition and support. As one ECE said, "There was less wishing and talking, and more doing." Another said there was a new "momentum" and focus to the work with the children.

Directors commented on the transformed collegiality of their staff, who were happier, enjoyed their work more, and were motivated to work together on these explorations as a team. Communication improved among staff members and their work days became easier as they made changes to the work environment. The AR project allowed them to become more confident, reflective educators. It revealed more about their practice, and they realized that, through action research, they could make positive changes in their practice, especially in the learning and working environment.

As a follow-up to this study, some of the participants have organized presentations for the parents of children in their care to inform them of all the changes that had been going on in the EYC and to present themselves as professionals and researchers rather than babysitters.

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Others have presented and shared their action research journey in front of other ECEs at the 2012 province-wide fall conference organized by the Early Childhood Development Association of PEI.

Participants confirmed that they saw a great deal of value in the professional development that occurred during this project, especially in the way ECEs learned new ideas and implemented changes in their practice. Throughout the AR process, ECEs and directors learned with the support of a "provocateur" who helped them formulate questions about their own practice, provided them with professional readings about their particular area of inquiry, and brainstormed with them to come up with an action plan. After the action plan was implemented, they discussed and reflected on the results and decided where to proceed next in their learning and practice.

Directors and ECEs in these four centres have now realized the value and benefits of action research, its strength in supporting professional learning, and how it leads to staff growth and improved play-based activities for children. This study also shows that intense professional learning requires time (for planning, preparation, and reflection), support from external experts (who supply new knowledge, encouragement, and some positive pressure) and commitment and leadership by the EYC director if true and meaningful professional learning and change are to take place.

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