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UNDERSTANDING THE PHENOMENON OF PROFESSIONAL ISOLATION IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SECTOR

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Approval of Dissertation

The undersigned certify that they have read the dissertation entitled

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Submitted by:

Ruth Lindsey-Armstrong

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Dedication

To my husband, Cliff Armstrong, who has always supported my desire for further education despite the time it has taken me away from things; who has been my champion when I didn't think I was smart enough; who once walked by with a sign that said "you can do it" when he saw that I was frustrated; who has listened to me as I pondered my writing for these last five years, who sat close by as I presented my research proposal and silently cheered me on, who celebrated with me and cried with me when I was told I had been successful and could move forward with my research. The support has continued…And to our sons – Kiel and Scott, I love you both more than you know.

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I immigrated with my family from the United Kingdom to Canada in 1969. As a component of my personal work towards reconciliation, I must consider how I fit within the narratives that this country has been built on. This includes acknowledging how my ancestors and lineage have perpetuated the discriminatory values and beliefs this country has been founded on.

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Abstract

My doctoral dissertation considers the phenomenon of professional isolation in the Early Childhood Education sector. Prior to the research study, I reviewed previous inquiries that explored the concepts of quality, retention issues, career satisfaction, and information and communication technologies. Upon completion of the inquiry, I returned to review the most current literature, which over the five years has become more plentiful due to the increase in ELCC research in Canada and beyond. My study considered the lived experiences of professional isolation as communicated by Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) in collaborative interviews. I examined the significance and meaning of their insights and explored the potential of an e-mentoring resource for Early Childhood Educators. The primary finding relates the importance of a broader support network to promote connection through e-mentoring for individual Early Childhood Educators and for groups of Early Childhood Educators within an online Community of Practice. My research inquiry was guided by a phenomenology of practice analysis which I chose because it allowed for reflective practice by all the ECE participants including me. Phenomenology of practice is inclusive, it is participatory, and it facilitated acknowledgement of the voices of Early Childhood Educators, as they expressed their desire to contribute to a research project that had significance to them and their professional allies. By offering Early Childhood Educators the opportunity to share their experiences and contribute to this research project, an understanding of professional isolation and its impact on their career satisfaction has been discovered.

Keywords: professional isolation, Early Childhood Educator, quality, retention issues, career satisfaction, Early Childhood Educators, e-mentoring, Community of Practice, phenomenology

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Abbreviations and Definitions

Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC)	A now-defunct organization that was pan-Canadian and dedicated to the advancement of human resources issues in the childcare sector.
Community of Practice (CoP)	A Community of Practice is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do this better as they interact regularly.
Community of Inquiry (CoI)	Community of Inquiry refers to a framework made up of three interdependent elements in an online learning community: Social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence.
Early Childhood Educator (ECE)	A person employed by a childcare centre to provide care to children, and who has obtained a diploma in Early Childhood Education from an educational institution.
Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC)	Examples of Early Learning and Child Care programs are childcare centres, nursery schools, family childcare homes, and preschool programs.
Information and communication technologies (ICT)	Diverse set of technological tools and resources used to transmit, store, create, share, or exchange information. These technological tools and resources include computers, the Internet (websites, blogs and emails), live broadcasting technologies (radio, television and webcasting), recorded broadcasting technologies (podcasting, audio and video players and storage devices) and telephony (fixed or mobile, satellite, visio/videoconferencing, etc.) (Unesco, 2019).
Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	An approach to qualitative research that aims to make sense of how a person interprets a particular phenomenon.
Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care (MELCC)	The Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care Program, a division of the Department of Families within the provincial government of Manitoba. The MELCC is responsible for licensing and monitoring of ELCC programs in the province of Manitoba.

Nomenclature

Term	Definition
Director	The person designated by the licensee of a childcare program to be responsible for the daily operation of the childcare centre.
Mentor	The term used to describe a more expert peer engaging with a novice by sharing their experience and knowledge within a system of coaching and tutoring, and potentially even providing personal support.
Provisional license	A license that is issued to a childcare program that meets some of the requirements of the Regulation 62/86 of the Community Child Care Standards Act. A provisional license may be issued for a shorter period depending on the requirements that are non-compliant with a regular license. Once the conditions of the provisional license have been met, the childcare centre is eligible to receive a regular license.
Regular license	A license that is issued to a childcare program that meets all necessary requirements of the Regulation 62/86 of the Community Child Care Standards Act. The regular license is issued for a period of up to one year.
Teacher	A person with a Bachelor of Education degree (150 credit hours) or a degree approved by Manitoba Education and Training is required to be eligible for certification.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation research is rooted in my 36-year career as an Early Childhood Educator in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The purpose of this introductory chapter is to present the purpose, goals, and research questions that guided my research study. The rationale for the inquiry provides a contextual background and includes a synopsis of three interrelated themes: quality in Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC); career satisfaction for Early Childhood Educators (ECEs); and ELCC sector retention issues. The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) as a potential strategy to mitigate the feelings of professional isolation of ECEs will be discussed as it intersects with these themes.

As I embarked upon this doctoral journey, I was steadfast on studying professional isolation in Early Childhood Education. The personal, political, and educational investments I have made in the profession of Early Childhood Education have made it a lifelong career and I consider it an honor to be part of such a rich vocation. The field of Early Learning and Child Care is built upon empathy and relationships. These two concepts also guide my path as a mother, a partner, a teacher, a learner, and a mentor. However, the sector experiences a lack of professional recognition, has a history of low pay, and the work of the ECE is often misunderstood. A looming concern about the diversity of the workforce without consideration for training needs, understanding of differences in pedagogies and "the devaluation of care work undertaken predominantly by women from racialized groups is complex and runs through multiple facets of life and society" are additional points of interest (Halfon & Langford, 2015, p. 136). For this study I used a phenomenology of practice approach which I will discuss in more detail later in the Methodological Approaches chapter. The approach was used to explore the

lived experiences of ECEs as I endeavored to gain insight into the phenomenon of professional isolation. Early childhood education is reflective by nature, as ECEs engage with children to co-construct the curriculum within learning environments that are collaborative and dynamic. Arriving at the decision to research from a phenomenology of practice perspective and using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was a logical one for me as IPA is often used in studying marginalized groups (van Manen, 2017). IPA allows for wondering, reflection, and the construction of reality through the exploration of 'lived experiences' (Alase, 2017, p. 9). Stories provide an important resource for not only establishing one's place in the community, for establishing one's identity, and for learning. The learning that occurs in Early Childhood Education is not strictly limited to that of the children involved. In addition, it includes the professional development and education of the Educators themselves. During the research process I frequently paused and reflected on the importance of learning, not only for the children but also for the workforce in this profession. These musings stayed top-of-mind as I immersed myself in designing and implementing my dissertation research.

Coronavirus COVID-19 – The Onset

The onset of the global pandemic Coronavirus COVID-19 in 2020 created a new conceptual understanding of essential services and isolation. The pandemic, while shattering in many ways through the loss of lives all over the world, the devastation of the global economies and the mental health impacts it has had on all the world's citizens, has had some silver linings. It has given us the gift of time for reflection to consider the important things in our lives and has allowed for recognition of marginalized groups of workers such as those who work in personal care with the elderly population and health care professionals. However, Early Childhood Educators have had to continue to advocate for themselves to be recognized as essential in the

lives of families and the larger society despite also being considered a marginalized group of workers. The word *isolation* has become commonplace in most people's lives today due to Coronavirus. However, I argue that ECEs have been and continue to be isolated individually and as a profession. As I moved forward in my dissertation, I explored this concept of professional isolation with the study participants.

Background to the Problem

Professional isolation in Early Childhood Education is a common experience for ECEs, yet under-recognized for ECEs in the Manitoba ELCC sector (Lindsey-Armstrong, 2011). Professional isolation has long term consequences on the quality of ELCC for children and families (Goelman et al., 2006), ECE career satisfaction (Doan, 2013), and on issues of workforce retention (Goelman et al., 2006). There are gaps in the literature that complicate our understanding of these consequences, such as a lack of information about mentorship and occupational standards for ECEs. I will discuss the need for revision and updates of the current version of the Occupational Standards for Early Childhood Educators (2003; 2010) later in the Literature Review. The research inquiry I proposed considered online/remote mentoring (e-mentoring) as a potential solution to professional isolation.

As early learning and childcare services, training, and classification of ECEs, and circumstances related to the human resources sector of ELCC vary in other provinces and places in the world, this research study was located solely in Manitoba, Canada. To contain the extent of research, I focused on ECEs who were trained and who worked in urban and rural areas of Manitoba, Canada. I did not single out First Nations communities. "At present, Manitoba does not necessarily have a formal role in the licensing, regulation or funding of early learning and childcare in First Nations communities" (Friendly et al., 2018, p. 75). "Post-secondary colleges

in Manitoba routinely contract with First Nations communities to offer Early Childhood Education diploma programs that have been customized to meet the needs of each community" (Friendly et al., 2018, p. 75). ELCC programs located in First Nations communities are often under the jurisdiction of the federal government which has its own training requirements for the educators who provide care. As time moves on, more of the ECEs in First Nations communities are accessing training opportunities. However, education funding can be precarious, the prospects of completing the training in a timely fashion, and access to training without the burden of travelling away from home are barriers. Barriers such as these, may offer reasons as to why focussing on strategies to mitigate professional isolation for all ECEs is important. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) defined reconciliation "as an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining relationships" (p. 121). I perceived this research study as an opportunity to offer an act of reconciliation by potentially bringing to light the voices of those who have been historically silenced and left out of the conversation for political reasons, and in recent times mostly due to distance and cost. The field of ELCC is rich with relationships between children and their families, their teachers, their peers, and their communities. These relationships are reciprocal and require accountability. I anticipated that the experiences that would be shared by ECE participants in this study would be important additions to understanding the phenomenon of professional isolation. As a former frontline ECE, I understood how supportive professional relationships are developed, and acknowledged the significance of the mentor-mentee relationship. I recognized that it was my responsibility to preserve relational accountability as I began a process of inquiry with the ELCC community. Within this research project, participants were encouraged to share their experiences of professional isolation and professional mentorship in their workplace, and to consider the potential development of a e-

mentoring strategy, which could be a positive resource for those who live in remote locations including First Nation territories in Manitoba.

In Manitoba, an ECE is "a person employed by a childcare centre to provide care to children, and who have obtained a diploma from an educational institution in a childcare program approved by Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth" (Government of Manitoba, 2005, p. 11). In the literature reviewed, the title of ECE and Teacher are often used interchangeably, however, the work roles and education for ECEs differ from that of a teacher employed by Manitoba school divisions. According to the Manitoba Regulation M.R. 115/2015, "a Bachelor of Education degree (150 credit hours) or a degree approved by Manitoba Education and Training is required to be eligible for certification" (Government of Manitoba, 2015, p. 9). The difference in training requirements has been a long-standing argument for variations in remuneration and professional recognition of ECEs as compared to teachers (Harwood et al., 2013). In addition to working in ELCC settings, ECEs have filled the need for Educational Assistants (EAs) in the school system, creating competition for services of those trained in ELCC. The benefits for being an EA instead of in an ECE role are shorter workdays, time off during divisional holidays and regulated professional development days. While the remuneration rates for ECEs and EAs are comparable if they are calculated over a similar number of hours worked in a year (Table 1), the perception of EAs earning higher salaries remain.

Table 1

Comparison of Early Childhood Educator (ECE) and Educational Assistant (EA) Salaries

Early Childhood Educator Salary Range	Classification	Educational Assistant Salary Range	Classification
19.33-24.16	ECE II or III	25.60 – 30.80	EA 1
15.46 – 19.33	ECE in-training	22.55 – 26.15	EA 2
12.63 – 15.78	CCA	21.29 – 25.04	EA 3

Note. Early Childhood Educator salary ranges are based on the Market Competitive Salary Guideline Scale 2017-2018 (MCCA, 2019). Educational Assistant salary ranges are based on the Collective Agreement between the Louis Riel School Division and the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3473 2015 – 2019.

ECEs identify the desire to assume the role of an EA due to a perceived increase in benefits, hours of work and time off to meet their own family needs (M. Dielschneider, personal communication, January 11, 2019). Considering this competition for ELCC educated individuals, the need and desire for educative mentoring are similar for ECEs, teachers, and EAs. The loss of ECEs from the ELCC sector negatively impacts the quality of ELCC services for children and families. This was motivation for my study as retention of ECEs is a key component to the quality of ELCC.

Mentoring typically involves a more expert peer engaging with a less expert peer mentee by sharing their experience and knowledge (Chu, 2014). It may include a system of coaching and

tutoring, and potentially even include providing personal support. In an ELCC setting such as a childcare centre or nursery school, ECEs work within a team of educators. In contrast, teachers in the primary and secondary education system in most cases work alone in a classroom with little to no direct collaborative practice in place. Being part of a team may allude to the existence of collaborative practice yet many ECEs will claim this is not the case (Lindsey-Armstrong, 2011). An e-mentoring program has the potential to support educators in all settings; however, for the purpose of my dissertation research study, I focused on e-mentoring for ECEs. I will now turn to a discussion about the purpose of my research and will follow with the goals and questions I employed in the research inquiry.

Research Purpose, Goals and Questions

Research Purpose

The purpose of the study was to understand the experience, the embodiment, and the meaning of professional isolation as a phenomenon lived by ECEs. 'Professional isolation' is a descriptor for the feelings of loneliness in the workplace. As such, it is defined as "the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations at work is deficient in some important way" (Dussault et al., 1997, p.5). A social system of employment relationships may consist of a network of friendships, mentoring and peer coaching (Dussault et al., 1997). The latter is identified as having a global impact on ECE career satisfaction (Doan, 2013; Katz, 1995), factors related to the quality of ELCC (Doan, 2013), and workplace retention (Pineda-Herrero et al., 2010; Reese, 2016; Waniganayake, 2015).

Research Goals

There were three goals for this research inquiry:

- To understand how ECEs articulate a sense of professional isolation.

- To understand the key elements of an effective e-mentoring program for ECEs.
- To determine whether e-mentoring could reduce feelings of professional isolation for ECEs.

Research Questions

The primary research question guiding this study was:

- How do Early Childhood Educators articulate a sense of professional isolation?
    - What is the experience of professional isolation like for these educators?

In addition, these two sub-questions were asked:

- What experiences do Early Childhood Educators have with professional mentorship in the workplace?
    - What are these experiences like for these educators?
- To what extent would an e-mentoring strategy benefit and be accepted by Early Childhood Educators?

Research Context

A motivation for this study was to understand approaches to reduce professional isolation for ECEs; specifically, whether an effective e-mentoring program can provide support for ECEs to feel satisfied with their work and consider ELCC worthy of being a life-long career.

Role of the Researcher

I have been an Early Childhood Educator III since 1986 and currently work as the Chair of Community Services at Red River College Polytechnic in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Prior to this, I worked as an Early Childhood Education instructor. I provided education and training to ECEs and through my work and teaching experiences I have developed a deep understanding of the professional needs of the ECE sector. My responsibilities as an instructor were classroom

education, curriculum development, practicum supervision and mentorship of ECE learners and faculty. My ongoing experiences as a mentor have given me the skills to observe, reflect, and provide feedback to those whom I am mentoring. I strive to demonstrate sensitivity towards those with whom I am communicating and encourage them to reflect on the process of improving their work practices within their chosen career. I am an advocate for Internet-based solutions to practical problems; moreover, I support and endorse the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for teaching resources and for community networking. It is with these skills and experiences that I proposed a qualitative research project that invited ECEs to share their experiences and consider how e-mentoring may mitigate their feelings of professional isolation. I will now impart the rationale for my research study.

Study Rationale

I have reflected on the topics that have emerged from the literature review regarding the profession of ECE, such as quality of ELCC (Akbari & McCuaig, 2017; Goelman et al., 2006; McCain et al., 2011); career satisfaction (Doan, 2013, 2016, 2019; Wanganiyake, 2013); and retention issues (Goelman et al., 2006). The relationship of these topics to professional isolation is significant to the rationale for this research study. Further review of the literature generated support for e-mentoring, digital resources, and the use of ICT in the modernization and provision of professional development resources for the ELCC sector (Doan, 2016, 2020; Dorner & Kumar, 2017; Kahraman & Kuzu, 2016; Pohio & Lee, 2012; Quintana & Zambrano, 2013). Additionally, a review of the federal governments' investment in ELCC was considered. A discussion of these topics follows, beginning with the quality of ELCC.

Quality of Early Learning and Child Care

The provision of quality care for children in ELCC programs is critical for their long-term health and development (McCain et al., 2011). In the 2017 Early Childhood Education Report, five benchmarks were identified to assess quality in an ELCC program in Canada. The benchmarks are integrated governance; funding; access; learning environment; and accountability (Akbari & McCuaig, 2017). The learning environment benchmark further defines staff qualifications, salaries, and education/professional development as predictors of quality ELCC. Additionally, low adult-child ratios, smaller group sizes than a traditional Kindergarten classroom of 25 to 30 children, and trained ECEs have been analyzed for their impact on quality in ELCC settings (McCain et al., 2011). In Manitoba, The Community Child Care Standards Act (2017) regulates these requirements which are reinforced through Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care (MELCC), a government program of the Department of Families (Province of Manitoba, 2018). Adult-child ratios are standardized so that specific age groups of children can be assured to have no less than one trained ECE per group size of children in a group childcare setting. For example, children between the ages of 12 weeks and two years must have at least one ECE for every four children; children between the ages of two and five years must have at least one ECE for every eight children; and children between the ages of six and 12 years must have at least one ECE for every 15 children (MELCC Best Practices, 2015; see Table 2 for Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care Guidelines for Staff to Child Ratios and Maximum Group Sizes).

Table 2

Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care Guidelines for Staff to Child Ratios and Maximum Group Sizes

Age of Child	Ratio (Adult to Child)	Maximum Group Size
12 weeks to 2 years	1:4	8
2 years to 6 years	1:8	16
6 years to 12 years	1:15	30

While these adult-child ratios and group sizes support minimal standards for the health, safety, and well-being of children in a group childcare setting, they reinforce a basic benchmark of quality. The MELCC Best Practices for Early Learning and Child Care Programs (2015) identifies the minimum number of trained ECEs that are required for working within a group childcare setting as two-thirds of the total number of educators with the children, in other words, for a group of 24 children ages two to five years, a minimum of two of the three staff required for the group would be required to be trained and classified as Early Childhood Educator II or III (MELCC, 2015). If childcare centres are unable to meet this staffing requirement, a provisional license to operate is issued by the Province of Manitoba MELCC Program. A provisional license is issued for a short period of time, typically three months. This time frame gives the childcare centre management an opportunity to meet the required standard; for the example provided, recruiting one or more trained ECEs. This standard has posed a significant challenge for many childcare centres in Manitoba and is discussed more fully in the subsequent retention issues section. An added challenge that has arisen in recent years in Manitoba is the attrition of centre

directors through retirement. To be employed as a childcare centre director, the candidate must be classified as an ECE III and ideally have several years of experience in the field. The position requires proficiencies in human resources, financial management and policy development, among other skill sets such as leadership and mentoring. In the province of Manitoba there are several post-secondary certificate programs that prepare ECEs who may have a demonstrated interest in transitioning into an administrative career, although the training provides minimal guidance in many of the circumstances that may occur regularly in an ELCC program, such as the need for conflict resolution, understanding family court orders or jurisdictional building codes as examples.

In 2013 a mentoring strategy for novice directors was established through MELCC. The program is one year in length and is funded by the provincial government Department of Families. To recruit participants, information about the program was emailed out to all licensed childcare centres in Manitoba. Enrollment for the program is voluntary and participants are matched with a paid mentor who visits and/or contacts the mentee two to three times within the year. The program has not been evaluated for its effectiveness and is currently still being referred to as a pilot program (G. Stolz, personal communication, August 22, 2018). In Manitoba, there is no requirement for ELCC programs to mandate specific mentor training opportunities for directors or frontline ECE personnel. This may be a contributing factor to the low retention rates of trained ECEs and to feelings of professional isolation. Mentoring is a beneficial service for novice ECEs as it has been shown to have positive impacts on teachers and leaders, and on education itself (Wong & Waniganayake, 2013). Mentors inspire novices and others to improve pedagogical practices and other professional skills associated with ELCC, such as meeting occupational and licensing standards (Chu, 2014). In a study completed to understand the

experiences and needs of beginning ECEs in British Columbia, Doan (2016) concluded that ECEs note “the work is both overwhelming and deeply satisfying; the induction support that beginning ECEs receive is haphazard; and beginning early childhood educators would like induction support in the form of mentoring or peer support, observations, feedback and professional development” (p. 43). Providing induction support and regular feedback combined with a mentoring program may contribute to higher ELCC program quality.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2006), program quality can be increased by providing opportunities that emphasize peer support and collegial learning for ECEs. The positive aspects of mentoring are juxtaposed with challenges for both mentors and mentees. Reese (2016) described challenges of mentors as “lacking time to observe and interact; struggles with appropriate feedback and establishing goals for the mentee; uncertainty of balancing support and evaluation” (p.40). Despite these challenges, the benefits that mentors perceive because of participating in mentorship include “a viable form of professional development of leadership skills; a decrease in isolation; and a sense of contributing to the improvement of the teaching profession” (Reese, 2016, p.40). These benefits may result in greater career satisfaction for both mentors and mentees, lower attrition rates of ECEs and higher quality ELCC overall, which are reinforced by the OECD Starting Strong (2020) study. “Leadership is key to supporting and sustaining quality in ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) settings and for creating a stimulating environment for both staff and children. Effective leadership establishes organization conditions that promote process quality” (OECD, 2020, p. 42). A formal e-mentoring program may offer the opportunity for ECEs who are trained and experienced to develop an online Community of Practice. This would provide online/remote mentorship to novices who opt for a professional platform in which to do

this, and one in which the mentors could also experience the benefits from providing mentorship to others. The next section discusses the topic of career satisfaction in more detail.

Career Satisfaction and Mentoring

Career satisfaction "is a measure of a workers' contentedness with their job; whether they like the job or individual aspects or facets of jobs" (Spector, 1997, p. 2). "Differences in satisfaction with working conditions across countries translate into differences in staff's wellbeing" (OECD, 2020, p. 43). In the 2018 Starting Strong survey, ECEs who reported experiencing work-related stress were "more likely to indicate this reason as a reason for leaving, which points to the need for policies aiming to mitigate stress for some categories of staff" (OECD, 2020, p. 43). Further, the OECD Starting Strong study showed that there are various aspects of ELCC working conditions that can improve staff satisfaction. Among these are improved career progression opportunities, a supportive work environment in which the culture supports peer learning, idea exchanges and positive interactions between staff members and their leadership (p. 42). Career satisfaction for ECEs was an important consideration for my research study, and it was necessary to identify key literature including initiatives to influence career satisfaction such as Mentoring in Motion (MIM). This project, implemented in Oklahoma, USA, was designed to facilitate the understanding and the application of ECE coursework material in classroom practice through a direct mentoring process (Monroe & Norris, 2018). The positive results that were identified from the MIM project were continued communication between the mentors and the mentees; feelings of support and encouragement from the mentors for the mentees; and reflective feedback by both the mentors and the mentees that contributed to transforming ELCC practice. The limitations identified in the research were described as a lack of time and physical space to meet and have discussions; and a lack of substitute coverage

limited how much time the mentee was able to be away from the workplace to meet with their mentor (Monroe & Norris, 2018). An e-mentoring strategy could mitigate these shortcomings by allowing ECEs to participate in a mentoring relationship in a place that they determine, such as their home, a local library, or other community space. This activity could also occur at times that are mutually agreed upon by the mentor and the mentee outside of the standard work hours, thereby reducing the need for substitute coverage in the workplace.

The limitations identified in Monroe and Norris' (2018) study substantiate why alternative methods of mentoring should be considered. An e-mentoring program can improve accessibility to current information and support networks, at the same time as alleviating the need for physical space and substitute coverage (Quintana & Zambrano, 2014). E-mentoring may involve participation in emails, chat rooms, blogs, discussion boards, and Web conferencing. These approaches can be engaged in by the mentors and the mentees at mutually agreed upon times. The environment must support the requisite technical communication essentials such as a reliable internet connection, current hardware, and a time that fits all of the participants' schedules. Synchronous online meetings may be valuable to the participants, but they require careful scheduling and participant flexibility. The distinctions between synchronous and asynchronous sessions will be considered in further detail in the Information Communication and Technologies section in the Literature Review chapter.

Pedagogical leadership may contribute to increased career satisfaction. "Pedagogical leadership is about supporting teaching and learning" (Abel, 2016, para. 3). According to the Starting Strong Survey (2018) "staff's confidence in their ability to promote child development, learning and well-being is positively and consistently associated with strong pedagogical leadership" (OECD, 2020, p. 44). When ECE staff feel that their leader is involved and

supportive, as well as trusting that staff can make decisions in the best interest of children's development and learning, career satisfaction is rated as more positive (OECD, 2020, p. 45).

Accessibility needs that are affected by geographical location, staffing costs and time are all alleviated if an e-mentoring program exists (Quintana & Zambrano, 2014). An online/remote mentoring program which blends communication systems may be an optimal process for all of those involved. I wanted to consider the viewpoints of the ECEs who work in both urban and remote communities so that I can understand accessibility issues which may relate to participation in knowledge sharing with the ELCC sector.

Career Pathing

Mentoring and leading are two steps on a career path for ECEs. Typically, the potential for career advancement for ECEs is minimal if they are to stay within the sector of ELCC. The field is full of anecdotes about young people who love working with children, but eventually leave the profession because they can no longer afford to live on poverty-level wages (Rhodes & Houston, 2012). In the pre-design stage of my research study, I consulted with various stakeholders in the Manitoba ELCC community. An ECE who had left the field and recently returned, stated:

> When I left the field 12 years ago, one of the reasons I left was that no one around me (in my daycare at the time) was pursuing higher education…it was neat to hear about your educational journey. Since re-entering the field, I understand that many people are seeking education, but this sure would have been helpful to see at that time! (S. Eisbrenner, personal communication, November 5, 2019).

Participating in a formal e-mentoring program is a progressive step on a career pathway for mentor ECEs, as they encourage the mentee to learn about new roles and potential routes to related occupations. However, Quintana and Zambrano (2014) argued that "not everyone can

take the role of companion, mentor or counselor" (p. 630). This would suggest a formal mentor training program should exist for those who are motivated to advance their careers in ELCC and those who demonstrate a calling to support others in their quest towards quality ELCC practices. The topic of career advancement and opportunities to further the ECEs career will be discussed in greater detail in the Literature Review. According to Rodd (1994) "it is the leader's responsibility to ensure that the group moves towards its goal, which, in early childhood, is the provision of a high-quality program" (p. 10). Typically, leaders in ELCC programs are the director and supervisor. Therefore, in addition to Rodd's assertion, I would argue that it is also their responsibility to advocate for a sustainable mentoring program within the ELCC environment to support the goal of quality childcare, which includes career development and retention rates of ECEs.

Retention Issues

Increased demand for ELCC services by families requires a well-educated and consistent workforce. Unfortunately, high turnover rates contribute to lower program quality (Goelman et al., 2006). According to the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC, 2013), retention rates in relation to quality care are attributed to lack of appropriate applicants for vacancies, competition from the education system, and length of time required to fill vacant positions. According to one ELCC Director, on average it takes up to four weeks to hire an ECE, including advertising, screening for suitability, interviewing, and reference checks. This Director added that they hire ECEs to start employment on condition that their references are satisfactory to avoid losing a qualified candidate. The time required for hiring is consistent within the sector and will result in ELCC programs operating with fewer staff than required by legislation which may impact the quality and safety (C. Anderson, personal communication, September 11, 2021).

Indeed, "[e]arly years practice relies heavily on how much staff give to the job; often over and above their set hours and certainly beyond the level of remuneration most receive" (Georgeson, 2015, p. 10). In addition, burn-out and career stagnation can lead to the loss of ECE staff (Ambrosetti, 2014; CCHRSC, 2013). Governments must attend to developing a strategy that addresses the recruitment and retention rates of trained ECEs beyond those that only address remuneration.

Federal Investment in Early Learning and Child Care

In 2017-2018, the government of Canada released its National Progress Report on Early Learning and Child Care in which the then-Minister Jean Yves-Duclos touted "investments in high-quality early learning and childcare are among the best investments we can make to strengthen the social and economic fabric of our country" (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2017-2018, p. 3). Established in 2017, the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework included high quality as a guiding principle, which recognizes the importance of proper qualifications and training for those working in the field of early learning and childcare (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2017-2018). In 2017-18, $400 million was transferred to the provinces, of which Manitoba received $15 million. The purpose of this funding was to support the guiding principles of the Multilateral Framework. The national impact of this funding in reference to the principle of high-quality, was over 1700 educators and staff participated in or had improved access to training or professional development opportunities. Manitoba has used the money to support the ELCC sector by providing funding for various professional development opportunities such as Circle of Security, access to the Science of Early Child Development online training and the development of a virtual Board of governance training module to be offered by the Manitoba Child Care Association. It is

important to note that the province did not use the funds to increase operating grants to existing ELCC programs or increases to wages to ECEs in the province. The professional development opportunities identified earlier are micro-credentials that are transferrable to a diploma training program. However, while these opportunities provide the minimum number of hours required by a Child Care Assistant within their first year of employment in an ELCC program, as a stand-alone credential, they hold little substance. To be fair, the Multilevel Framework commitment of funds from the federal government to the provinces was directed at fostering innovative practices. However, just like building a house, if the foundation needs repair, new finishes likely will not last. This has been a common argument made by ELCC advocates across the country, that to develop sustainability in ELCC, a commitment must be made to strengthen the foundation and build up from there.

Other examples of recent revisions to ELCC legislation in Canada exist: In 2018, the British Columbia (BC) government announced a three-year, $1 billion investment in ELCC and released its expanded Early Learning Framework. The framework is based on the premise that ELCC is vital to children, families and ECE practitioners in the province of BC. An achievement of the province is identified by the investment in training funding to support recruitment and retention of ECEs. In October 2020, the government of Alberta's proposed amendments to the Early Learning and Child Care Act which came into effect February 2021. The revisions included changes to regulations particular to types and duration of licenses, inspection timeframes and the reduction of red tape to streamline processes that would benefit childcare operators. The Alberta Early Childhood Education Association (AECEA) had put forward recommendations in response to the government of Alberta prior to the amendments. They were to consider a quality model of ELCC, moving away from custodial care, legislation that protects

the rights of children which includes the right to high-quality ELCC, ongoing professional learning for ECEs and the adoption of the Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Framework, an ECE workforce development strategy, reduction of red tape without compromising ministerial oversight and regulatory status, and increased regulation of unlicensed day homes (AECEA, 2021, pp 5-6). While the AECEA recognizes the government work that was put into the amendments to the Act, the changes were made without attending to the research regarding quality ELCC and the foundational aspects of ensuring quality provision. In Saskatchewan, funds were used to improve physical quality of ELCC spaces both indoors and outdoors. Eligible expenses included furniture, equipment, materials, and resource books. In Ontario, investments were directed towards high-quality training and professional learning opportunities for those in the early years' workforce. The province of Quebec, which is seen as a leader in ELCC in Canada, used the funds to increase the number of licensed spaces and to keep the costs of childcare low for families. In the smaller Canadian provinces and territories, investments were made in creating opportunities for access to childcare. Funds were allocated to training by improving access for those who wish to study ELCC and for ongoing professional development. The Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework is based upon current research, much of which was used in the writing of this research study. There continues to be research efforts towards the importance of ELCC for children and their families. Additionally, the research supports a trained workforce, for without them, the quality of the ELCC system in Canada will diminish.

Professional Development

Sustainability efforts in maintaining staffing in ELCC programs may include increased investments in staff development. Professional development opportunities such as in-house

training or conferences are becoming prohibitive for programs that are financially compromised due to low government funding levels and the time required to participate (Welsh, 2016). In Manitoba, operating grant funds for licensed childcare programs have remained static since 2016. The last increase was identified as two percent of the overall funding amount for ELCC programs in Manitoba. Parent fees, the other major source of revenue for ELCC programs, have not increased since 2013 (J. Kehl, personal communication, December 28, 2018). This funding deficiency has created a predicament for ELCC programs in which governance structures are having to meet budgetary expenses such as salaries and overhead costs, including rent, equipment, and activity supplies, while struggling with the identified costs of professional development, which, according to the literature demonstrates a commitment to long-term support of the ELCC human resources sector (Rhodes & Houston, 2012). In addition to prohibitive fees, ECEs are often required to attend professional development opportunities on their own time, beyond their scheduled work hours. This creates issues for those ECEs who have already worked a full day that can be both physically and emotionally demanding, but also for those who have family commitments of their own, or second (or even third) jobs.

In 2019 a peer mentoring project in British Columbia was piloted to support the ongoing professional development needs of both novice and experienced ECEs. “Participants in the project were offered opportunities for peer mentoring, professional development, access to university faculty, visits to early learning programs, and online supports” (Doan, 2019, p. 68).

In Ontario, Canada’s largest province, the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) developed the Ontario Early Childhood Sector Decent Work Charter to promote a vision of decent work within organizational cultures in the Early Childhood Education sector. According to the AECEO, decent work is defined by the following four parameters: (1)

recognition of staff as valued professionals; (2) professional pay/compensation; (3) professional learning, and (4) quality work environments. Within these parameters it is recommended that organizations develop "policies that support succession planning and practices that cultivate and recognize leadership, including strategies for mentoring and coaching staff" (p. 2). Additionally, the commitment to establish and maintain structures and resources to support ECEs in all aspects of ongoing professional learning is endorsed. These include, but are not limited to, providing in-service training, support, and resources to mentor ECEs, and performance appraisal that recognizes strengths and considers career growth opportunities. The establishment of policies regarding safe work environments, including anti-harassment practices and codes of conduct are also advocated for to improve the overall quality of the ECE workplace. It is noted in the Decent Work Charter, that the responsibility lies not only with the sector itself, but also the individual employer or organization, and the larger society. The sector has the leadership to work with stakeholders such as government and licensing bodies, unions, and funders. Additionally, individual employers can use their knowledge and understanding of decent work to establish policies within their organizations. Advocacy plays an important role in ensuring that the larger society is aware of the importance of high quality ELCC and in creating an awareness of the ELCC sector in efforts to develop environments that support decent work (AECEO, 2017).

Developing an affordable, sustainable, flexible, and innovative e-mentoring program may fulfill the professional development and training needs of novice and experienced ECEs. This strategy may be an answer to reducing professional isolation and stabilizing the retention rates in ELCC programs and is the focus of the research inquiry described here. I will now discuss approaches to the modernization of professional development opportunities for ELCC using ICT.

Information and Communication Technology Approaches

Providing alternative means of accessing resources and professional development may be an appropriate response to the low retention rates of ECEs in Manitoba. ICT has been used for many years in ELCC in the form of emails, social networking, and online research. More recently, online professional development and training opportunities have been offered by several higher education institutions in Manitoba. An example of formal online training is the "Science of Early Child Development", an online initiative designed to make current child development research accessible to anyone (Jamieson et al., 2018). An informal, social networking example is "The Manitoba ECEs & CCAs Facebook" site which boasts more than three thousand members and was established in 2011. The purpose of this site is described as:

> a group for those who are currently involved in the field of Early Learning and Child Care – whether in a childcare centre, family childcare home, government ECE programs, or from a college or university perspective…if you want to connect and learn from others and share your wisdom, please join! Let's share our ideas, help each other, have fun and build our community…when we connect to others in ECE we grow as professionals! (McIssac, 2011)

As a member of this Facebook site, I acknowledge its informality and the lack of confidentiality and professionalism are at times disconcerting. Real life sector problems are identified and shared and are often responded to by others who lack formal ECE training, thereby diminishing the professionalism of the sector. As an example of how a status update can go awry: one post queries whether disposable gloves are required to be worn during food service. A variety of responses are posted with varying answers. The inconsistency in responses leads to further confusion and eventually ends in the criticism of licensing personnel (Lynn, 2018). While

a discussion about food handling practices may seem insubstantial to the everyday reader, it contributes to the ongoing debate about the health, safety, and well-being of children in ELCC settings; a tenet of the Community Child Care Standards Act (2017). This example is one of many that portray the need for formal mentoring and for mentor training. "[E]-mentoring is not necessarily based on a wise elder dispensing advice and instruction to a protégé. Rather, it is a mutually beneficial relationship that is highly versatile and can be adapted to work in a variety of settings" (Bierema & Merriam, 2002, p. 219). The Facebook site does show versatility in the various types of requests for information, but the responses are based on the opinions of its members and participation in this site may not be mutually beneficial or professional.

A Community of Inquiry. As an alternative, an e-mentoring process could be developed utilizing the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. An online educational environment that is built upon the CoI framework allows learners (both mentors and mentees) to take responsibility and control of their learning. In an e-mentoring process applying the CoI framework, the goals and learning outcomes would be co-constructed with learners (mentees) and teachers (mentors) in a purposeful, collaborative environment as opposed to the casual availability of the Facebook site. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) theoretical framework (Garrison et al., 2001) is the most widely referenced and arguably the most widely used model for constructivist-based technology-enabled learning design due to its simplicity and versatility (Anderson, 2016). Garrison (2011) shared that "the principles of preparation, sustained presence, and content expertise must be considered in concert with other technological variables if a CoI is to be created and sustained" (p. 16). A more detailed discussion of a Community of Inquiry will be explored further in the Literature Review.

It is necessary to consider whether learning without real-time interaction (asynchronous) versus learning in real time (synchronous) would be best in an e-mentoring process. According to Chu (2014) “some of the benefits of asynchronous communications are flexibility, time and accessibility” (p. 68). Moreover, Garrison (2011) stated “the nature of written communication allows for time to reflect, to be more explicit and to order content and issues” (p.17). Alternatively, the availability of newer interactive technologies allows for face-to-face opportunities even in an online text-based environment. The social environment created by discourse, whether text-based or face-to-face, supports the reciprocal construction of knowledge. Despite the ubiquitous use of ICT, an e-mentoring program does not exist in Manitoba. However, such a program could be a solution for many of the challenges the ELCC sector is currently facing, with an eye to reducing the phenomenon of professional isolation.

I am committed to supporting the experiences and knowledge of ECEs and to the social transformation that could occur because of my research inquiry.

Summary

This chapter has presented the importance of the proposed research by describing the phenomenon of professional isolation of ECEs. The three interrelating concepts of quality, career satisfaction, and low retention rates were discussed in relation to how to understand the phenomenon of professional isolation in the Early Learning and Child Care sector. A qualitative inquiry was proposed and was developed for members of the ELCC community to participate by offering their insights. The following Literature Review provides a more comprehensive representation of the concepts that underpin this research. This will be followed by the Methodology chapter which will further discuss phenomenology of practice as an interpretive act of research, the gathering of phenomenological examples from the participants, analysis methods

and ethical considerations that I proposed for the research inquiry. As I moved forward with the research project, the opportunity to engage with local and regional participants, to listen to their experiences, and to determine what an e-mentoring platform may consist of, I was convinced it would be a meaningful contribution to professional development in Early Learning and Child Care in Manitoba.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

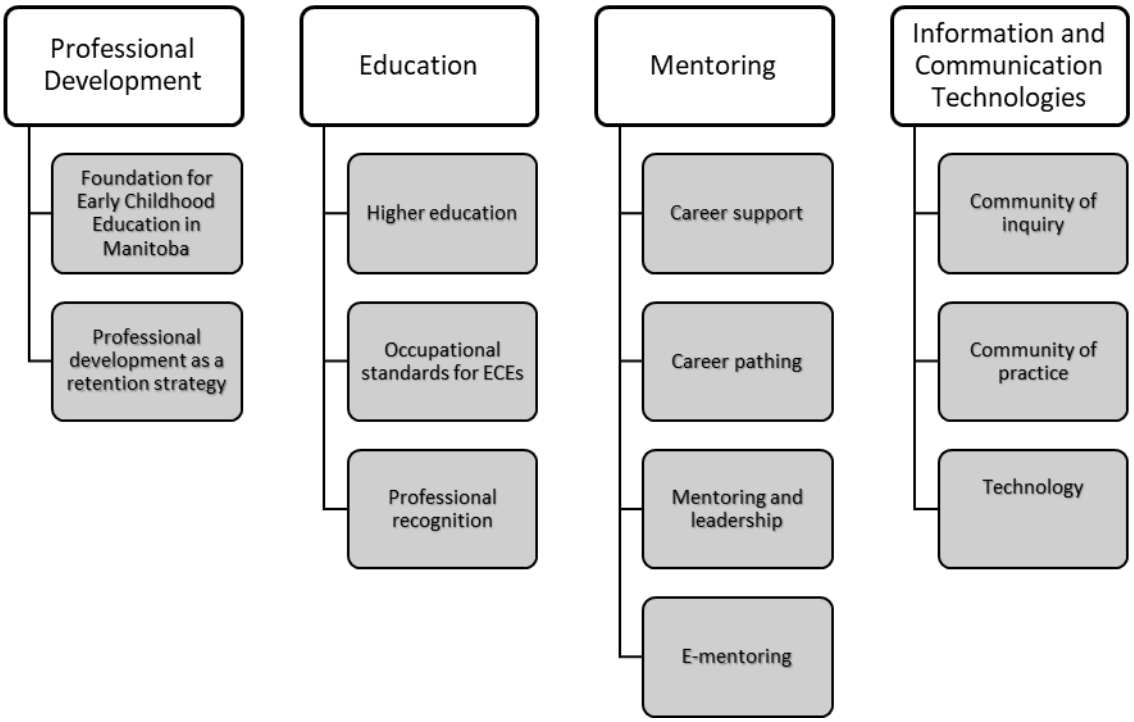
This chapter provides a review of the pertinent literature related to the field of ELCC; in particular, professional development and professional recognition as components of retention, education, and mentoring. I will transition into a review of the literature regarding e-mentoring to focus on the online/remote premise of this research. Following this, a review of the Community of Inquiry literature will be provided. The literature included in this review were chosen for their relevance to ELCC in Canada, to further my understanding of the phenomenon of professional isolation that may be experienced by ECEs, and how e-mentorship may mitigate this. According to the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (2009), there is a significant need for mentoring in the field of ELCC:

> Employers appeared to be realistic in their expectations for new graduates and acknowledged that all new graduates—regardless of the sector—need a period of mentoring or coaching. Employers agreed that new graduates are not ready for leadership roles, to work with children with special needs, or to work closely with parents. However, they also agreed that the solution was not to add more material to a two-year college program, but to introduce mentoring or coaching support to new graduates through this period, thereby increasing the likelihood that they would stay in the early childhood sector. (p.21)

The scope and organization of the literature reviewed follows four specific themes: (1) professional development; (2) education; (3) mentoring; and (4) information and communication technologies (See Figure 1). A discussion of each of the four themes will follow, beginning with the foundation for Early Childhood Education in Manitoba.

Figure 1

Scope and Organization of Literature Review



Foundation for Early Childhood Education in Manitoba

Given my desire that my research study be a personal act towards reconciliation, it is fitting to consider how my research from design to dissemination can be inclusive and attend to the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report (2015). I was intentional in choosing the literature for review, ensuring that I included Indigenous researchers' perspectives. I chose a methodology and data collection method that was culturally safe, and I was mindful that Indigenous ECEs would potentially be included in my research inquiry. Given that Manitoba has a significant Indigenous population, it was highly probable that some of the participants identify as Indigenous.

The original ways of life factor into modern early childhood education practices were an important first step in acknowledging the foundation for Early Childhood Education in

Manitoba. Manitoba ELCC programs are working towards incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing and learning into their curriculum frameworks by way of including reflective practice, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and cultural competence to support diversity, inclusion and social inclusion. As Manitoba has one of the highest urban populations of Indigenous children in all of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011) it is necessary to incorporate culturally relevant ways of knowledge and teaching into ELCC practices. First Nations' way of life honors the teachings of Elders to incorporate traditions. The Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre (MFNERC) supports the vision of following traditional ways of the Dene, Dakota, Ojibway, Cree, and the Ojibwe-Cree Nations and has been a reliable resource for educators of all age groups. The principles of love, respect, truth/honesty, wisdom, bravery/courage, and humility are identified in the "Strategic Framework for First Nations: Manitoba First Nations Schools and Community Programs Working Together" (Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre [MFNERC], 2015, pp. 17-18). These principles were "traditionally learned through families and communities. All adults helped to teach children the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they needed to function in life within an appropriate spiritual, linguistic, and cultural context" (MFNERC, 2015, p. 4). Elders represent the past and are traditionally regarded as teachers who are rich in knowledge of the past, present, and the future. "Intergenerational learning describes the way people of all ages can learn together and from each other" (MFNERC, 2015, p. 7). The concept of intergenerational learning supports children as they explore, create, discover, and absorb teachings from others of all different ages, with the understanding that everyone has different perspectives based on their experiences. It is important for all children to learn from educators who recognize their role in assisting children to reach their full potential. The MFNERC (2015) endorses developmentally appropriate practices that are identified by the

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) as the core of being an excellent teacher. “An excellent teacher is intentional in all aspects of their role and makes decisions about the well-being and education of children based on what is age appropriate, individually appropriate, and appropriate to children’s social and cultural contexts” (MFNERC, 2015, p. 17). It is also necessary to recognize the family as the child’s first, lifelong and most important educator, and that in current generations many Indigenous children attend formal ELCC programs. Therefore, the ECEs who provide ELCC services must understand that “adults learn from children, and this will guide and help First Nations communities to come together to work for the success of the younger generation of children in the community” (MFNERC, 2015, p. 25). The Child Care Qualifications and Training Committee (CCQTC) has updated the ECE II competencies to reflect culturally appropriate curricula which will enable:

> ECE graduates to support Indigenous children to develop a sense of identity and pride in their cultures, and non-Indigenous children to develop an understanding and respect for lived experiences, perspectives, traditions, and ways of life of Indigenous peoples. (Child Care Qualifications and Training Committee, 2019, pp. 4-5).

A mentorship program that includes Indigenous ECEs would help to grow the next generation of Indigenous ECEs in their understanding of traditional practices as they relate to modern-day child caring offerings.

In a Manitoba Child Care Association Member Survey (2016) only seven percent of the respondents declared their ethnicity as First Nation, Inuit, or Metis, compared to 81% who identified as white and 12% who identified as a member of a visible minority. Indigenous children and families should have fair representation of Indigenous ECEs in their ELCC programs. I suspect that the low numbers of Indigenous ECEs identified in the survey would

likely also translate to a lack of Indigenous ECE mentors, which could contribute to a feeling of professional isolation for this group of educators. As I wanted to be inclusive in the research inquiry, I sought out resources to affirm that the method that I chose would be considered culturally appropriate. According to Kovach (2009), "in an Indigenous context, story is methodologically congruent with tribal knowledges" (p. 35). I have learned that the telling of personal experiences may be a culturally safe practice for ECEs who identify as Indigenous and would support those who wished to participate in the information gathering for research. Therefore, a phenomenological inquiry that incorporates personal experiences from Indigenous ECEs is an inclusive methodology for gathering meaningful insights. I will now turn to a discussion regarding the onset of formal Early Learning and Child Care in Canada.

Early Childhood Education in Canada – The Beginnings

Formalized ELCC services are historically rooted at the onset of industrialization in Canada. Amid the nineteenth, and moving into the twentieth century, women, and children, as well as men, were sought by employers to work outside the home in factories (Gestwicki, 2008). This created the need for specific child caring services such as infant schools, crèches, and day nurseries. New learning about children emerged from university-based scientific research on child development. This knowledge was spearheaded by John Dewey. Dewey (1916) believed education could improve quality of life and his influence on the early childhood education movement and progressive education was insightful and remains so in current ECE training programs.

Higher Education for Early Childhood Educators

The first institute of child study in Canada was established in 1938 at the University of Toronto (Gestwicki & Bertrand, 2008, p. 197). It offered courses to kindergarten teachers and led

the movement in developing early childhood care and education programs. Renowned child development expert Lillian Katz (1995) suggested that "training should be specialized and contain a common core of knowledge…that it should be difficult…and be offered by accredited training institutions. In addition, regular continuing education is systematically required of the profession's practitioners" (p. 228). Katz (1995) further proposed that "ECEs should use their judgement based on the knowledge they gained from the training and adopt standards of performance as a commitment to the major functions of a profession" (p. 186). This expectation of rigour in training for ECEs remains one of the arguments for professional recognition of the ECE career and is noted as a requirement in the Occupational Standards for Early Childhood Educators (2003; 2010; 2012) to demonstrate specific skills and abilities.

Occupational Standards for Early Childhood Educators

In 2003, the Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCF) developed Occupational Standards for Child Care Practitioners. In 2010, these standards were revised and updated to include the relevant skills, knowledge, and abilities required to work effectively as an ECE in Canada. In 2012, a set of additional standards was created for administrators of ELCC programs. The Occupational Standards for Administrators (2012) included eight Sections that reflected the relevant responsibilities of the occupation. The Sections were followed by the Required Skills and Abilities; defined as "what an individual must acquire to competently perform a sub-task…and may be acquired through formal education, on-the-job learning, self-study or experience" (p. 2). Each Section consisted of a set of Tasks, which were defined as "distinct, observable and measurable activit[ies]" (p. 1). The Tasks were further broken down into Sub-Tasks, described as "the smallest practical division of work activity. When specific Sub-Tasks are combined; they describe the activities that constitute a Task" (p. 2). I examined the

Occupational Standards for Administrators to determine if mentoring, or words associated with mentoring, coaching, or supporting the workforce were identified. The two Sections that I probed further were: *Section C - Human Resources* (p. 23) and *Section G - Provide Leadership* (p. 81) as they stood out as having the most relevant connection to mentorship in ELCC. The Task for Section C - Human Resources is "Motivate Staff" and includes the Sub-Tasks, "(e) acknowledge and express gratitude for individual accomplishments; and (h) match skills and interests to job tasks, when possible" (p. 33). The Task for Section G – Provide Leadership is "Facilitate Professional Development" and includes the Sub-Tasks, (b) collaborate with individual staff to identify their professional development goals; and (c) encourage individuals to participate in professional development and share their knowledge and experience after attending conferences or a seminar" (p. 36).

"The Occupational Standards for Administrators" were established to define the work of an ELCC administrator and to offer specific guidelines to support and maintain a skilled workforce, including options which could reduce professional isolation through acknowledgement, collaboration, and encouragement. The Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC) continued the work of the CCCF until 2012 when the federal government discontinued funding for the Council. The CCHRSC however, recognized the importance of the information to ELCC communities across Canada, and that it would continue to be useful in advocacy, development, and research efforts despite the Council's termination. The CCHRSC, therefore committed to ensuring that the publications continued to be available and viewable through the CCHRSC website (2018, November 25). The status of the ELCC workforce in Canada continues to make a strong case for updating the Occupational Standards for Early Childhood Educators (2010). The 2020 ECE Report identifies that "quality is key and relies on the training, compensation, and

supports provided to educators" (Akbari, McCuaig, & Foster, 2020, p. 23). It is important to note that while wages are one indicator of the status of the workforce, workforce instability has also been associated with early childhood educators reporting less satisfaction in workplaces dominated by unqualified staff. This topic will be discussed in Chapter 6: Discussion - Barriers.

Professional Recognition

Whether ELCC meets the criteria of a profession has been a long-standing societal argument due to the perception of lack of training, status, and low pay. According to Gestwicki and Bertrand (2008), "the professionalization of the Canadian early childhood workforce includes the following components: core knowledge; codes of ethics; standards of practice; credentialing; self-governance; and professional development" (pp. 216-217). These components, along with Katz's contention about rigorous education and the standards of practice, endorse ELCC as a profession. The 2020 ECE Report supports this as it states: "educators need the range of supports attributed to a professional workforce including sound management, professional representation, career opportunities, trained colleagues and public validation" (Akbari, McCuaig & Foster, 2020, p. 23). A positive public perception of ELCC is important for ECEs as it endorses the work of those who are employed in the sector.

Professional recognition is not only that which is offered through the public, but from the sector itself. Doan's 2016 study on induction supports inquired how new early childhood educators would like to be treated. The responses varied from being valued, shown an interest in, given feedback, included, and invited into professional development opportunities (p. 51). It is interesting to me that new ECEs articulated their needs so clearly in Doan's research, and yet are the ones who quickly get usurped into a system in which providing peer support seems to be scarce. A demonstrated need recognized in Doan's research is a system of mentorship that is

constructed with the belief that new ECEs should be surrounded by a community of experienced educators who are willing to step in and embrace novice practitioners, rather than leaving them to jump right in seems both prudent and kind. This doctoral study aims to provide added support for Doan's findings.

Coronavirus COVID-19 – Global and Local Impacts

This review of literature concerning professional recognition of ELCC and ECEs would be remiss if recent information regarding the impact of Coronavirus COVID-19 was left out. The global pandemic has had serious effects on ELCC around the world. As the virus began to appear in Canadian provinces and territories, non-essential workplaces and schools were closed. Employees and school-goers were required to work and learn from home. "It quickly became apparent that not only medical personnel, but also other workers deemed to be essential such as transit and grocery store workers needed the support of reliable childcare to enable parents in these jobs to work outside the home" (Friendly et al., 2020, p. 4). The pandemic created chaos within the country including the ELCC sector workforce as childcare centres that operate essentially as small businesses were impacted due to a decline in the major sources of revenue – parents fees and government grants. A report from the Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) noted that ELCC was "cast in a new light: as a necessity, not a luxury, in a well-functioning 21st century society" (Friendly et al., 2020, p. 5). The instability of childcare services in Canada was becoming more publicly established.

In Spring 2020, the CRRU surveyed Canadian childcare centres and family childcare homes to determine statistics regarding availability of care, attendance, restrictions, fee payment arrangements, and staffing impacts. Findings indicated that attendance in childcare programs was drastically decreased all over Canada. In Manitoba, centres reported their enrollment at 13% of

their pre-COVID median enrollment during the reference week of April 27th to May 1st, 2020 (p. 20). This was reasonably close to the national average of 11% of regular attendance. Staff layoffs were significant, while 17.9% of staff worked reduced hours in Manitoba, with most centres opting to retain the leadership staff on regular hours. Up to 71% of centres in Canada reported laying off some staff (Friendly et al., 2020, p. 32). The federal government provided the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) as a temporary wage relief. Manitoba respondents indicated that 95.6% of staff that were laid off applied for CERB (p. 33). Centres were asked in the CRRU survey to identify how their program financial situation compared to pre-COVID conditions, 98.5% of Manitoba childcare programs reported that they had experienced lost revenue due to reduced parent fee revenues, and 47.9% of programs reported that they were having difficulty meeting wage and salary costs during this period of uncertainty (p. 37). Centres were asked about problems that they would anticipate in the short-term after childcare is able to resume or re-open; most programs reported that staffing difficulties, re-opening costs, COVID health and safety related costs, lower enrolment and return to pre-COVID government funding were the most significant matters they identified (p. 39). Longer term problems were similar, however, staffing difficulties, COVID health and safety related costs and lower enrolments topped the list of being the most troublesome issues (Friendly et al., 2020).

Licensed Family Child Care Homes in Manitoba saw little change in their attendance during COVID-19 as 77.9% of the providers remained open and operational with the same business hours during the same reference week (April 27 – May 1, 2020) (Friendly et al., 2020, p. 56). There were no restrictions on whose children could attend during this period regardless of whether the parents' employment was deemed essential or not. Manitoba FCC Providers identified in the CRRU survey that they experienced higher health and safety costs and lower

enrolment as being the most concerning problems to attend to both in the short and long term when resuming to pre-COVID operations (p. 73).

COVID-19 has left the Canadian ELCC sector in a state of unknown, which is identified by respondents in the CRRU survey as the biggest hurdle. It is acknowledged that it is difficult to anticipate future childcare needs and practices, and that had a national childcare strategy been in place prior to the pandemic, situations may have been handled differently and potentially more positively. I will now discuss the role of professional development and education for ECEs in Canada, which could potentially include a formal mentor training program.

Professional Development and Education

ECEs in Canada are faced with multi-dimensional responsibilities including leadership and mentoring (Ambrosetti, 2014; Hall et al., 2008; Tang & Choi, 2007). These duties may require education above and beyond the curriculum offered in most ELCC post-secondary programs. The OECD distinguishes the need for preparation and education in leadership and mentorship roles in the statement "ongoing professional development has the potential to fill in the knowledge and skills that staff may be lacking or require updating due to changes in particular knowledge fields" (2012, p. 4).

Typically, ECEs receive post-secondary education at a college or university. In Manitoba, most of the higher education programs offer ongoing mentorship through faculty supervision of practicums, which may be referred to in some cases as professional mentorship. However, after graduation, that mentorship is reduced, thereby leaving novice ECEs to fend for themselves as they develop their professional practice. This is a common situation documented globally (Ambrosetti, 2014; Doan, 2016; Walkington, 2005). According to Doan (2016) "some beginning educators in BC are left on their own, without adequate induction support during their first year

of work. It is as they are viewed as fully prepared, or licensed and ready to go" (p. 50). This is troublesome, due to the high level of responsibility ECEs have in their work, caring for children including those under two years of age in a group setting, often alone or with unqualified co-workers.

In their study of a pilot mentoring component of an ECE college programme, Monroe and Norris (2018) recruited 40 participants from various ECE post-secondary programmes who also worked a minimum of 30 hours per week in a licensed community childcare program. A mentoring component was established with the participants within their workplaces "to facilitate understanding and application of coursework material in their classroom practice" (Monroe & Norris, 2016, p. 668). Combining a variety of research methods such as observations, surveys, and interviews with the participants and their workplace administrators, the results of the study demonstrated that pre-service ECEs could work with their mentors to establish personalized goals which they could then work towards in both their education and their practice. Other benefits for the participants were identified as gaining confidence in ECE practice, self-advocacy within the field of ELCC, and consistent feelings of support and encouragement from the mentors (p. 673).

In Canada, a universal model for education and professional development for ECEs is non-existent. However, all provinces and territories, except for New Brunswick have some requirement for professional certification or professional development (McCuaig & Akbari, 2017). The methods by which ECEs engage in professional development in Canada vary based on region, availability, and cost. The processes by which ECEs receive funding for professional development also vary from country to country, and in Canada, from province to province. In Manitoba, ECE professional development is funded by the government and employers but may

also be self-financed. Online education and professional development opportunities may improve accessibility for ECEs, especially for those who reside in regions that experience geographical challenges such as distance from higher education institutions. According to the OECD (2012) "[m]ore countries use the face-to-face approach (e.g., seminars, workshops, onsite mentoring, formal training options in an educational institution) than online training; however, they are not mutually exclusive but complementary" (pp. 2-3). For those ECEs who face internet connectivity issues and other technological challenges, Web-based education and professional development may be construed as unaffordable and inaccessible particularly in northern and remote areas of Manitoba. At present, the Government of Canada department of Innovation, Science and Economic Development is endeavoring to improve access to computers and the internet for Canadian families with the initiative Connecting Families. It is noted that this program is to "help bridge the digital divide for Canadian families who may struggle to afford access to home Internet" (para 1). In the pre-design stage of my research, to inform my study I discussed the availability of internet service with a colleague who resides in Garden Hill First Nation in Manitoba, a fly-in community located 450 air miles from Winnipeg. They told me that "access to internet in northern Manitoba is available through several Internet Service Providers. However, it is expensive, and the reliability of connectivity is often impacted by the weather. The school has internet service, however access to community members is questionable" (J. Harper, personal communication, November 3, 2019). When I queried what they meant by "access to community members is questionable," they responded, "if it is necessary, they will make it work." This conversation affirmed to me that affordability and accessibility to internet service continues to be a challenge for many Manitobans in 2019. In 2020, it was reported that the government of Manitoba planned to boost rural and northern internet using Hydro-built fiber optic network to

deliver broadband internet to rural and northern communities (Bergen, 2020). As of the time of this writing, no progress has been made on this plan.

Considering alternate methods of education and professional development for ECEs may improve both accessibility and quality. “E-mentoring has the potential to cross barriers of race, gender, geography, age and hierarchy that are rarely crossed in traditional mentoring relationships” (Bierema & Merriam, 2002, p. 220). An ECE who can experience mentoring from an individual or group which demonstrates diversity in perspective is one who can experience equal opportunities in their professional development. In a discussion regarding visualizing and designing online learning opportunities for ECEs, Pohio and Lee (2012) noted that “a rich, visual online learning experience can support the depth of engagement and critical reflection by the learner” (p. 99). The concepts they discussed as emerging from the design of online learning are opportunities for collaboration and reflection; multiple pathways to learning; strong visual provocation; and a holistic and integrated approach (p. 102). To elaborate, opportunities for collaboration included examples of discussion forums, an online gallery, and an online portfolio. In addition, multiple pathways to learning included options to use a variety of video clips and websites within a digital framework. Furthermore, strong visual provocation was focused on the visual imagery provided by the design of the online course; and a holistic and integrated approach was “achieved by interlinking all the course materials – a practical task page, video clips, online activities, and readings and resources” (Pohio & Lee, 2012, p. 104). To build upon these ideas, the study will provide information for the potential development of an online mentoring platform.

Continuous education and professional development are closely linked to the quality of ELCC. Pinedo-Herrero et al., (2010) evaluated the state of continuing training on pre-school

education (p. 258). This mixed-methods study was done in three communities in Spain, with a sample of 1500 preschool childcare centres. Document analysis, surveys, interviews, and forums were used to examine the perspectives of educators regarding continuing education for the ECE sector. Results of this study demonstrated that application of education undertaken by pre-school teachers is, in fact, effective as it answers the need for education and generates further learning, which is then applied to the job. Regarding the impact of education on professionals' careers, the study results emphasized the fact that "pre-school teaching staff believes that continuing training has a strong effect on their personal development and cultural enrichment" (Pinedo-Herrero et al., 2010, p. 267). A further point in the findings, relevant to my study, was that "[t]raining has little impact, however on the permanence of a position at an educational center and on promotions with the field of education" (p. 267). Justification for this result cited "promotions and professional stability are guided by other criteria especially at government-funded centers" (p. 267). The study authors described this as an unexpected result. In Manitoba, the majority of ELCC centers receive government operating grant funds. However, budgets are specific to each center (which are governed by individual boards of directors). Therefore, ECEs may be only eligible for promotions within their specific employment situation, unless they choose to leave their current employer for advancement potential. This sociocultural difference may affect the career development of ECEs in Manitoba more significantly than those identified in the Spanish study mentioned above. These findings emphasize how differences in a global location may impact access to education and professional development opportunities and may also affect the outcomes for ECEs. According to the OECD:

> High-quality ongoing professional development is not only important for staff to stay abreast of the latest advances in teaching and care practices and of changes in curricula, it

> can also help to retain staff by building a sense of professional identity, increasing job satisfaction and creating opportunities for career development. (2020, p. 71)

Completed prior to the global pandemic of Coronavirus COVID-19, the OECD Starting Strong (2020) survey reported that most of the in-service training took the form of single or a short-series of externally provided learning courses, whereas online activities are the least common. With the onset of the pandemic, the option of online opportunities for professional development for ECEs in Canada has increased. The Canadian Child Care Federation has begun to offer online professional development for its members and most provincial associations have pivoted to making seminars available to their members online.

According to Doan (2016), new ECEs would like to be invited to professional development opportunities, including paid time off to attend as well as monetary support to cover the associated costs. For novice ECEs, professional development helps them "to gain information that affects their practice" (p. 51) and provides occasions for meeting and networking with other ECEs.

The OECD Starting Strong survey noted diverse approaches to professional development in Chile, Norway and Turkey that are worthy of consideration. In Chile, the Sistema de Desarrollo Profesional Docente (Teacher Professional Development System) works to improve the working conditions and professional competencies of educators at all levels, including ECEs. Opportunities exist for free induction and mentoring for those ECEs with less than one year of experience. Free access to courses to continuously develop their practice, and professional development evaluation which considers knowledge and pedagogical practices are offered. The latter may result in an increase in pay. In Norway, a national strategy is ongoing to enhance the professional competence of all ECE staff. Using financial incentives, the Norwegian strategy

includes state-subsidized vocational training and paid educational leaves. Additionally, ECE leader training is available for all centre leaders. There is also a mentoring strategy for novice ECEs to assist in the transition from pre-service to in-service. It is noted that this strategy helps to recruit and retain new graduates, stating that "the mentoring arrangement helped them develop relevant skills for their work with children, gave them confidence and self-awareness of their own competence, and reduced "the practice shock" in the workplace" (OECD, 2020, p. 76). In Turkey, the Ministry of National Education supports the enhancement of ECEs knowledge and skills for pedagogical and managerial tasks by holding semi-annual seminars for vocational development, in addition to compulsory training activities throughout the year. All these opportunities are free to the ECE staff working in public settings, who are paid their regular salary while in attendance (OECD, 2020, p. 76).

The involvement of the participants in my study assisted in considering the identified career needs of ECEs in Manitoba, with an understanding that the research results may have the potential for transferability both federally and globally. In the upcoming section, I will outline the typical career development of an ECE.

Career Support

Novice ECEs often express the need and desire for support after completing their diploma or degree training program (Heikka et al., 2018; Monroe & Norris, 2016; Zaslow, 2009). According to Pineda-Herrero et al. (2010) "every good professional needs to be updated to respond properly to the challenges of his or her profession" (p. 258). Graduating from the learning environment where constant feedback, encouragement, and professionalism is cultivated by instructors can be an experience that evokes fears of isolation and uncertainty (Doan, 2013). At Red River College Polytechnic in Manitoba, ECE students receive education in a two-year

diploma program that combines pedagogical theory with practical application. Learners engage in practice with the supervision of both an instructional mentor and a community mentor in licensed ELCC programs within the province. The duties of both the instructional mentor and the community mentor are to provide support, collaboration, feedback, and sharing of experiences with the ECE learner. This provision of mentorship is direct and purposive. However, once the ECE learner completes their program of study, the intensity of mentorship diminishes unless a mentorship program exists either formally or informally within the ECE's place of employment. This transition to the workplace may be "a critical time in the ECE's career when mentoring might be beneficial" (Doan, 2013, p.21). Novice ECEs report that a mentoring model where they connect with an experienced educator would be most effective as they transition into the role of a professional ECE (Doan, 2013). Mentoring is a significant step in the career development of an ECE. Career development has an integral role in employee satisfaction and maintaining ELCC workforce stability, ultimately contributing to the overall quality of ELCC services for children and families.

Career Pathing – The Next Steps for ECEs

Many ECEs reach a point in their careers when they seek greater responsibility or challenges in their work. As career pathing is a relatively new consideration for ECEs, recognizing the need to identify opportunities in which ECEs can satisfy the need for an occupational challenge is an emerging issue. Moreover, the CCHRSC (2010) stated that:

> Most ECEC organizations have a relatively flat organizational structure. This means that there is little room for promotion. Employees and organizations need to embrace the idea that moving "up" is not the only way to be satisfied with one's work. An alternative is to

> create challenges for employees in their current position or a similar position. (Factors affecting working and learning section, para. 6)

Creating opportunities for ECEs in which their desire for greater responsibility is satisfied poses a challenge for the sector in general. Examples of these challenges may be affordability, accessibility, and availability of professional development; instability of the ELCC workforce; and under-recognition of ELCC as a profession (CCHRSC, 2010). The ELCC sector must develop a ladder of opportunities for ECEs that makes career steps achievable and sustainable for the sake of both employee satisfaction and workforce stability. Some career steps for ECEs are becoming a mentor for novice ECEs and students within their workplace program or advancing to a supervisory or administrative position within the ELCC sector. Potential career opportunities beyond the ELCC sector, may involve working in a community family resource program, a language program that supports new immigrants and their children, or for a provincial professional association such as the Manitoba Child Care Association. An e-mentor training/professional development infrastructure may address the barriers of affordability and accessibility at the same time as providing the opportunities identified by the employee who wishes to continue their career in a mentor or in a leadership role. As Waniganayake (2015) stated:

> Given the increasing complexity of challenges encountered by today's early childhood educators in the frontline of service delivery, it is imperative that those in leadership roles are well prepared in order to respond effectively to support the education and wellbeing of children and families in their communities. (p. 66)

Further to Waniganiyake's (2015) indication of complexity of challenges, ECEs in Manitoba have identified the lack of career pathing knowledge, decreasing availability of

professional development funds, and increased responsibilities related to working with higher numbers of Child Care Assistants (Welsh, 2016) as hindrances to career satisfaction.

Breaking down barriers that influence ECE career success, advancing opportunities for professional practice, providing avenues for advancement and career satisfaction are all goals of a mentor training/professional development program (Ambrosetti, 2014; Monroe & Norris, 2016). In England, a longitudinal investigation of aspiring, current and experienced practitioners was undertaken to determine how they interpreted and applied their professional purpose in leading practice (Murray & McDowall Clark, 2013). The sample included a variety of early years practitioners at various stages of ECE training programmes and who also worked in ELCC programs over two years. Interviews completed intermittently and at the end of the two-year period queried the participants' views about leading practice, values, and passionate care. Passionate care is defined by the authors as "a strong commitment underpinned by clear values which motivated and sustained their sense of professional mission" (Murray & McDowall Clark, 2013, p. 295). The findings outlined consistency and correlation regarding motivation and the model of leadership being pursued. The participants identified a commitment to empowerment through leadership and the value of working with others to improve practice. The sense of collectiveness as a strength was a relevant finding within this study and reinforced the passionate care demonstrated by the ELCC sector. Recognizing the career development of an ECE is a significant step in understanding the commitment made by practitioners in the field of ELCC. It underpins the need for mentorship and leadership education and professional development opportunities that will have the potential to positively impact the labour force by improving working conditions and mitigating professional isolation.

Mentoring and Leadership

As an ECE instructor, an issue for me is whether to educate for competency or for excellence in practice. The curriculum at Red River College Polytechnic in Manitoba is based on competencies in Early Childhood Education as determined by the CCQTC. The mandate of this committee is "at the minister's or the director's request, to advise and make recommendations about any matter relating to the qualifications and training of staff for facilities" (Government of Manitoba, 2018). The competencies are based upon best practices for ELCC and are specifically focused on child development, health, safety, and well-being. The goals of the competencies are to present enough information and practice to equip the novice ECE with the knowledge and skills to provide ELCC services for children and families. Educational opportunities for professional development beyond the requirements of an entry-level ECE are limited at the post-secondary education level. Professional development beyond the novice level of ELCC is entrusted almost entirely to the provincial professional organization: the Manitoba Child Care Association (MCCA). Professional development opportunities offered through the MCCA are not recognized for credentialing by the CCQTC.

Professional development beyond novice expectations at the post-secondary level may be contrary to what some researchers in ELCC have endorsed and this must be considered. Katz (1995) proposed a theoretical model for the stages of Early Childhood Educators (p. 203) and urged readers to consider teachers as having "developmental sequences in their professional growth patterns" (p. 204). Planning professional development opportunities requires an understanding of the career path that an ECE desires. If the opportunity is too challenging or alternatively, uninspiring, the effort would be disadvantageous. In this time of stagnant government funding to ELCC programs, investment in professional development must be cost-

effective and useful, even attractive for the ECE, the organization in which they are employed, and for the sector. I will now discuss the role of the mentor in relation to the ECEs' career stages.

Katz (1995) described the first stage of an ECE's career as 'survival'. During this stage, the ECE works to persist in their work. Katz (1995) asserted that the ECE must weigh "the discrepancies between anticipated successes and classroom realities which may intensify feelings of inadequacy and unpreparedness" (p. 205). At this stage, it is important that the mentor can assist the ECE in daily situations, to show support, understanding, encouragement, reassurance, comfort, and guidance. Moreover, Katz (1995) recommended that time for these efforts is a necessary commodity, and the mentor should be physically nearby on an as-needed basis (p. 206). The second stage is identified as 'consolidation', "a phase when educators are ready to consolidate overall gains made during the first stage and to differentiate specific tasks and skills to be mastered next" (Katz, 1995, p. 206). During this stage, on-site mentoring continues to be valuable as the pair can benefit from real-time observation and reflection. The interpersonal skills identified in the first stage are more readily available. The third and fourth stages are 'renewal' and 'maturity'. It is at these times when an ECE may seek out further professional development, including new ways to engage in their chosen career and ask deeper philosophical questions. The physical proximity of a mentor is deemed unnecessary in these two stages, thereby reinforcing that e-mentoring could be considered as a legitimate option for ECEs.

Katz (1995) claimed that teachers at these latter stages may prefer to engage in experiences beyond their programs, perhaps including in-place regional and national conferences and workshops that are most often offered by professional associations. ECEs who may be interested in sharing their knowledge with novice ECEs and others, may consider participating in an e-

mentoring program to enable this collaboration and engage in farther-reaching possibilities than an in-person mentoring strategy.

Benefits of E-mentoring

According to Penny and Bolton (2010), the benefits of an e-mentoring program are numerous, including increased access to subject-matter experts, ease, and convenience due to the availability of both synchronous and asynchronous possibilities, and the potential for recording of interactions, creating the possibility of sharing with other participants at any time (p. 18). In addition to these benefits, e-mentoring can overcome barriers such as age, race, gender, and status, which Penny and Bolton (2010) identified as having the potential to negatively affect traditional mentoring relationships (p. 19). The benefits to mentors are highlighted as "receiving a sense of satisfaction and competence from the experience" (p. 19). These feelings of pride reinforce the third and fourth stages of career development as detailed by Katz (1995), 'renewal' and 'maturity'. During these stages, an ECE may be interested in sharing their knowledge and experience within a Community of Practice, while at the same time developing their own competencies in learning how to provide feedback, how to contribute to goal setting exercises, and developing their professional communication skills. Penny and Bolton (2010) note that "while anecdotal evidence is available to support the benefits of the e-mentoring experience to mentors, there has been little empirical research done on this topic" (p. 19).

To consider the benefits of mentoring, I examined a study completed at Central University in Philadelphia by Penny and Bolton in 2010. It paired teacher-trainees in an educational technology class with students from inner-city elementary and middle schools who had diverse cultural and racial backgrounds. The teacher candidates were required to mentor the students while they were working on a school science project. The purpose of the study was to evaluate

the effect of this e-mentoring program upon attitudes and potential behaviors of teacher candidates and to demonstrate how technology can be used in the classroom to provide a meaningful educational experience (p. 20). Data were collected from three groups of students who participated in various forms of e-mentoring projects and from the teacher candidates. The conclusions of the study showed that the e-mentoring program had a positive effect upon the teacher candidates. It helped them to feel good about their decision to become a teacher and gave them confidence in their abilities as a prospective teacher (Penny & Bolton, 2010, pp. 26-28). Overall, a large majority of the students who participated in the e-mentoring program reported that it was beneficial to have an e-mentor. Cautions regarding the results included that the most positive results came from those who participated in a blended version of mentoring, where the teacher candidate visited the school in person in addition to providing the e-mentorship (p. 29). This limitation identified by Penny and Bolton (2010) was an important consideration as I moved forward with my research.

Research on mentoring programs for ECEs in Canada is scarce. In 2010, the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services provided funding to the Early Childhood Community Development Centre to develop the Mentoring Pairs for Child Care (MPCC) project. This was a response to recommendations made by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Councils' Occupational Standards for Child Care Administrators (2006). The goals for this project, beyond increasing the quality of childcare were to increase ELCC supervisors' enthusiasm for working in the sector, increase supervisor professionalism and leadership skills, establish mentoring relationships, and support reflective practice. The design of the tools, strategies and overall approach was completed in consultation with stakeholders and included development of a marketing strategy and tools and training materials to be used. An advisory committee was

formed that brought together community members from various educational institutions, professional associations, and the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council. This program involved a training component for participants who were identified as “animators” to work with mentors and mentees, and to facilitate group training and to support the mentoring pairs. The project was completed in phases. After the initial development work was complete, participants were sought out, selected and mentees were matched with mentors. One phase included training the animators in mentoring practices which involved an orientation to the program materials, training in reflective practice and how to facilitate coaching skills. The second phase took place after one year and involved evaluation for outcomes. In total, 403 participants from various communities in urban and rural Ontario were involved in the project, with a close-to-even division of mentees and mentors. The data collection for the study was completed through several directed questionnaires, surveys, and observations. The findings of the study were positive, with most of the participants reporting feeling that the time spent in the MPCC program supported their professional development (Doherty, 2011, p. 21). One of the goals of this research study was to increase the ELCC supervisors’ satisfaction for working in the sector. The author notes that “feeling more enthusiastic about your work, more confident in your role, and less stressed by the job realistically could be expected to be associated with increased level of job satisfaction” (Doherty, 2011, p. 33). This was affirmed by the respondents. It was concluded that the five project goals were achieved by the MPCC; these findings support the relevance of my dissertation research related to understanding the key elements of effective e-mentoring for ECEs.

The Peer Mentoring Project for Early Childhood Educators in British Columbia (BC) is a recent example of how a model of e-mentoring combined with professional development and

input from knowledgeable professionals can support ECEs in their careers and further supports the relevance and timeliness of my research. Started in 2016, the project aimed to:

> expand the current infrastructure of support, with the aim of slowing down the number of ECEs who leave the field by building the capacity of ECEs, supporting their ongoing professional identity development needs, increasing their levels of teacher-efficacy, and boosting confidence in their abilities as educators. (ecepeermentoring.trubox.ca, 2021)

The Peer Mentoring Project steered by Dr. Laura Doan, Faculty of Education and Social Work, Thompson Rivers University, was conceived from novice ECEs across BC who identified the need for induction support. Induction support is described as the encouragement a new ECE would receive through feedback, observation, and discussions with experienced ECEs. It also included professional development. The project identified that mentoring is a significant method for induction support and is relevant to novice and experienced ECEs alike. Developed in collaboration with ECEs, who described what they felt was important in an induction support process, the project is grounded in the research of Lillian Katz (1995) which I have noted earlier, examining the stages of ECE career development. I have chosen to reference Dr. Doan's research on peer mentoring and induction support several times during my dissertation because it provides a western Canadian perspective, and it is current. Canadian ELCC research is becoming increasingly more available. Doan's research focuses on specific human resource issues that impact ECEs and I found it to be relevant to my research topic.

The pilot offering of the Peer Mentoring Project began in British Columbia, Canada in 2016. It examined five components: peer mentoring, professional development, access to faculty, online support, and visits to early learning programs. The research involved 22 certified BC ECE participants ranging in experience from novice to 29 years of ELCC experience. The participants

were given the choice to get involved in any or all the five components listed above. The research engaged participants in interviews and focus groups, in which they were able to describe their experiences about their involvement with the components. The findings showed that involvement in peer mentoring and professional development ranked the highest in helpfulness, followed by visits to early learning centres, online support, and faculty support. Four themes were identified: awareness of the importance of peer mentorship, connection to community, increased knowledge, and sense of efficacy (Doan, 2019, p. 72). The participants who engaged in the Peer Mentoring Project made recommendations to offer increased online support through a closed Facebook site, using a private platform for discussions, and using Facebook Live to video professional development opportunities. Other recommendations included having a separate option for managers and a structured set up for peer-mentor matching. Based on this research, there is a clear need to improve mentor efficacy. This reinforces the need for a mentor training process to be considered for future. A limitation of this research is that it was completed with a small, local sample within the province of BC. I envision a made-in-Manitoba opportunity that incorporates Doan's (2016/9) studies in addition to findings from my inquiry.

It is important to note here that much of the current ELCC mentoring literature fails to address the training of mentors, or to examine the reciprocal effects of mentoring on the mentors (Monroe & Norris, 2016; Wong & Waniganiyake, 2013). For example, Grarock and Morrissey (2013) explored the teachers' perceptions of their ability to act as educational leaders in their childcare centers. This qualitative study involved 11 early childhood teachers who were interviewed "to gauge their experience, qualifications, recollections of any changes they'd introduced, and feelings about how easy it had been to effect change within their centre" (p. 6).

The interview data were analyzed thematically, and the findings showed while "the teachers were less able to readily identify examples of helping to effect change across the centre, they were able to cite barriers towards initiating change such as time, financial resources and co-worker acknowledgement" (pp. 8-9). The study concluded that "despite the limitations they faced beyond their room, it is clear that the teachers interviewed were undertaking changes that were supporting quality practice" (p. 10). It was recognized within the study that the teachers involved were without formal titles of authority, such as Educational or Pedagogical Leader. It was also noted that "a formal title made a significant difference to the teachers' confidence in recalling changes they'd worked to enact, appeared to make initiating this change easier and gave them a clear professional identity" (p. 11). Grarock and Morrissey (2013) suggested that "an absence of an official title can undermine teacher leaders so that they are not acknowledged for their work in pedagogical leadership by their co-workers" (p. 8). In 2012, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), under the auspice of the government of Australia, established a national quality framework, including seven areas within a quality standard that are important outcomes for children. Quality area 7 is designated as Governance and Leadership. The standard 7.2.2 is entitled Educational Leadership and lists the following description for this quality: "The education leader is supported and leads the development and implementation of the educational program and assessment and planning cycle" (ACECQA, 2012b, p. 85). The ACECQA lists the main tasks of the educational leader as being to "guide other educators in their planning and reflection, and mentor colleagues in their implementation practices" (ACECQA, 2012b, p. 85). However, it seems that when this recommendation began to be implemented, it was not without challenges. The position of the educational leader came without articulated roles and responsibilities, leading to confusion and

challenges to ELCC programmes and ECEs across the country. Waniganayake (2015) suggested that the role of an educational leader should be supported with a position description, pedagogical leadership training, and access to professional development in addition to financial remuneration (p. 3).

There is little research comparing those who have both administrative and supervisory responsibilities to those who are solely mentors (Monroe & Norris, 2016; Nutbrown, 2012). This begs the question of whether having formal professional qualifications in Early Childhood Education teaching, centre management, and leadership is practical, or whether it would be more appropriate to hire human resource management specialists for administrative duties (Waniganayake, 2015). The results of effectiveness of mentoring in relation to support for novice teachers and their retention was inconsistent in the literature (Morrissey & Nolan, 2015; Pineda-Herrero et al, 2010).

Having access to quality frameworks and policy recommendations from other provinces and countries provided a foundation for examining ELCC quality assurance research implemented in Canada. The Australian Quality Framework was comprehensive and aligned with the framework principles of the Government of Canada Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework (2017). This has been beneficial. Additionally, Te Whariki, the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum (2006; 2017) and Flight: Alberta's Early Childhood Framework (2014) have proven to be excellent international and provincial resources. I used these documents to compare the Early Returns: Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework (2014). The next section discusses information and communication technologies (ICT) which were fundamental as the online/remote premise of e-mentoring was a foundation for this research.

Information and Communication Technologies

E-mentoring has its roots in tele-mentoring using telephone conversations and later, email and computer conferencing, all of which can be used when an in-person opportunity is impossible. Bierema and Merriam (2002) defined e-mentoring as "a computer-mediated, mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and a protégé which provides learning, advising, encouraging, promoting, and modeling, that is often boundaryless, egalitarian, and qualitatively different than traditional face-to-face mentoring" (p. 214). Presently, a plethora of ICT platforms that enable live interactions exist such as MS Teams, Zoom, and Facebook Messenger. These applications facilitate the increased potential for online interaction among mentors and mentees and engagement that is required in a mentoring program, regardless of whether the program is offered in-person or online. In addition, these applications are available for use on mobile devices, thereby supporting an anytime-anywhere mentoring experience.

A Community of Inquiry

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework supports the presence of groups of students (mentees) and teachers (mentors) to learn together in an online community (communityofinquiry.org, n.d.). An online community of practice could potentially offer these participants an opportunity to engage in an educative environment that supports critical discourse related to ELCC routines and procedures, as well as enhancing pedagogical practices. In an e-mentoring process, the mentors and mentees would work within a collaborative constructivist environment in which they would set goals (learning outcomes). According to Garrison (2011) "creating an educational CoI requires preparation, sustained presence, and considerable pedagogic and content expertise" (p. 16). Resources and methods of assessment congruent with the learning outcomes may differ in each mentor-mentee relationship as expectations and goals

will vary with each pairing. A CoI framework would empower mentors and mentees to take responsibility for each of their learning goals from a personal and individual perspective depending on how much the pairing wishes to invest in their relationship.

A CoI is made up of three interdependent elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. "A presence is a sense of being or identity created through interpersonal communication" (Garrison, 2011, p. 23). Everyone in the experience demonstrates each of the presences. According to Garrison, "the exact nature and the degree to which they reflect each of the presences will depend on the individual and the task at hand" (p. 26). An emergent constructivist approach is reinforced as the three forms of presence ebb and flow between the mentor and the mentee; in essence, all individuals learn from each other, reinforcing the equal and democratic role of each member. A detailed explanation of the three presences within the CoI framework ensues, beginning with social presence.

Social Presence

Social presence is the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into the community of inquiry (Rourke et al., 2001, p.50). In a mentoring relationship, opportunities for collaboration, reflection, and discussion forums are examples of components that are improved by a sense of belonging and community. Presenting a collaborative space to engage with others will be an important design consideration for an e-mentoring platform. The ELCC community thrives on social interaction, most commonly through professional networking at conferences and workshops. Collaborative environments are necessary to reduce the sense of professional isolation. Therefore, it is important that an e-mentoring strategy has a strong social presence, a factor that could be reinforced in a synchronous online setting. In a synchronous online situation, participants agree upon a time to meet virtually and complete tasks, discuss

questions, or examine an issue that has been put forward by one or both members of the pair. Some examples of platforms that could be used for synchronous online sessions are Adobe Connect, Zoom, Skype, or Facebook Messenger. Positive aspects of a synchronous session are the essence of an in-person meeting through live-streaming; the opportunity to work collaboratively on documents or review observational videos at the same time; and the ability to connect with someone from a remote location who may not be able to access mentorship in any other way. Additionally, free platforms such as Skype or Facebook Messenger, improve financial accessibility. In contrast, an asynchronous virtual session would suit participants who are unable to meet with their partner synchronously. Time zone differences, connectivity concerns, or convenience for the pairing are some issues that can be mitigated by meeting asynchronously. There are some negative aspects of an asynchronous meeting such as the lack of synchronous verbal communication. However, according to Garrison (2011), participants can and do overcome the lack of verbal communication during asynchronous periods using greetings, encouragement, font use, and emojis. Non-verbal interactions may offer greater opportunities to engage in critical thinking, reflection, and discourse (Garrison, 2011, p. 41). Social presence in an e-mentoring context means creating a climate that supports questioning, reflecting and challenging thoughts and ideas for ELCC practice. “Social presence works in conjunction with the elements of cognitive and teaching presence to take a community beyond a largely social function to one of inquiry” (Garrison, 2011, p. 41).

Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence is associated with the thinking and learning that occurs in an online community. Using existing knowledge to build new understanding is the underpinning of constructivism and on which a mentoring relationship is built. Mentoring involves the process of

reflection, critical thinking, and collaboration. The mentors may suggest new ways of ELCC practice, and the mentees may reflect on these suggestions, act upon them, and then reflect again. This process is called 'practical inquiry', according to Garrison (2011). The practical inquiry model, as proposed by Garrison (2011) is made up of four components: (1) A triggering event which, in the case of a mentoring process, could be a provoking question or a challenge that the mentee is experiencing in their practice. (2) The mentor encourages the mentee to explore the nature of the challenge and engage in a search for resources to increase their understanding. (3) The mentor scaffolds the mentee's process as together they construct a new meaning of the challenge by engaging in deep, meaningful conversation; and (4) the mentor and mentee build a framework together whereby the mentee ventures out to approach the new practice, and with that, the inquiry starts all over. This model is dependent on the final element, teaching presence.

Teaching Presence

Teaching presence is key to a learning centered approach in which both the mentor and the mentee are part of the learning process. It is this element that reinforces Quintana and Zambrano's (2014) argument in favour of a formal mentor training program. The mentor must be aware of the roles and functions required for creating a dynamic learning environment. Garrison (2011) suggested that the teacher should be a subject matter expert, understand educational design, and be both a facilitator and a teacher. For an e-mentoring strategy to be highly effective, the mentors must be able to facilitate an educational process within an e-learning environment. They should, therefore, not only understand ELCC practices but also understand constructivist teaching methods to reinforce the educational aspect of mentorship.

Integrating Teaching with Technology

A third component in the list of requirements for potential e-mentors, is an understanding of how to integrate teaching with technology. For this requirement I recommend the application of the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework as the mentors begin to use digital tools and strategies in their practices (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). As an Adult Educator, I support the integration of technology into education. My experience has taught me that having a supportive framework from which to build my skills and efficacy for using technology in the classroom and beyond has been beneficial. The TPACK framework has a foundation for educational practice and stretches beyond the standardized requirements of teaching by incorporating digital technologies. Using technology may present a different challenge to those who are also unfamiliar with the educative process. However, since mentors are potentially new to the role of being an educator, the integration of digital technologies may be woven into the mentor training program at the onset. Koehler and Mishra (2009) stated "[a]t the heart of good teaching with technology are three core components: content, pedagogy, and technology, plus the relationships among and between them" (p. 62). Further, they state: "[t]hese three knowledge bases (content, pedagogy, and technology) form the core of the TPACK framework" (p.62). As stated earlier, mentors must understand ELCC practices, child development theories, and the occupational standards for ECEs. This is a critical requirement as mentors may be called upon to share their own personal experience, skills, and knowledge with the mentee. This is what will contribute to the professionalism and reliability of the e-mentoring process, as opposed to the Facebook site mentioned earlier, in which information is shared that may be both unreliable and unprofessional, depending on who is providing the content. "Pedagogical knowledge (PK) is teachers' deep knowledge about the processes and practices or

methods of teaching and learning" (Koehler & Mishra, 2009, p. 64). It implies that the teacher understands how people learn and allows them to demonstrate their understanding of materials. In this instance, it would be helpful if the mentor has a working knowledge of adult learning theories and how social interactions with peers and experts may contribute to the development of understanding. The Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework is based on constructivist teaching methods for children, and this theoretical perspective underpins the curriculum that is taught to the Early Childhood Education learners in higher education programs in Manitoba. Technology knowledge is constantly evolving, therefore, Koehler and Mishra (2009) recommend "a deeper, more essential understanding and mastery of information technology for information processing, communication, and problem solving" be present rather than just a sense of computer literacy (p. 64). The mentor, therefore, would be required to commit to the understanding that technology is an integral and developing component of the e-mentoring process. The TPACK framework, and the ways the individual elements of content, pedagogy, and technology interact with each other, could be incorporated into a well-designed mentor training program, and may result from the findings of this research study.

Community of Practice

A community of practice (CoP) is defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1). ECEs, by the collaborative nature of their work, form a CoP. The CoP theme forms a pillar of this research inquiry as it describes the social and relational aspects of ELCC. Conrad (2014) emphasized that "learning communities' nest within Web-based frameworks and are fuelled and sustained not only by the energy of the individual who populates them but also by the many learning resources and objects that are brought…by both learners and

instructors" (p. 385). Learner inquiry and self-motivation are critical elements to the success of the learning process and may be reinforced in a CoP. The CoP will be fortified through this research inquiry as it underpins the outcome of attention to relationships; learners "develop skills related to supportiveness, listening, relationship building and empathy" (LeFever, 2016, p. 414). The development of an e-mentoring program can be built on a CoP model which supports both individual and group practice. The key elements of a Community of Practice are: (1) the domain, members are brought together by a learning need they share; (2) the community, the collective learning becomes a bond among them over time; and (3) the practice, their interactions produce resources that affect their practice (Wenger-Trayner, 2015, pg. 2). These three elements reinforce the social nature of learning also expressed by Dewey (1916), LeFever (2016), and Vygotsky (1978).

The Peer to Peer Mentoring Project (2016) is grounded in a Community of Practice model, in which participants can connect with other ECEs. The sense of community connection is acknowledged by both novice and experienced ECEs. "The connection to community is highly important given the nature of the work…especially when one considers the reality that some workplaces are not places of support" (Doan, 2019, pp. 73-74). An e-mentoring program will become an online learning community of practice by way of a population of mentors and mentees contributing reciprocally to a CoP for the advancement and quality of ELCC in Manitoba.

Technology

Up until the onset of Covid-19, the use of technology in ELCC settings was moving at a slower pace than in other industries. Literature searches for technology use in ELCC resulted in articles related to children using computer applications for learning (Wardle, 2012), and reasons

why exposure to digital learning should be limited (Elkind, 1998; Gardner, 1983). There is limited research on the use of technology by ECEs for professional development. In a 2009 study on e-mentoring with pre-service teachers, Kahraman and Kuzu (2016) explored using information technologies to understand the impact of the frequency and duration of communications on the gains related to teacher professional development. The study engaged 76 participants to use online tools such as journals, audio records of interviews, and reflection reports. Data from multiple sources were analyzed using content analysis with identification of the themes of sharing knowledge and experience, socialization, learning, mentoring and guidance in academic and career development. In addition, the findings explained that the interaction between classes in the department studied increased and that this had a positive influence on newcomer transitions and improved overall socialization between mentors and the mentees. The study was not without limitations, as shared by the researchers. This research was undertaken in Turkey, yet all the materials were provided in English and translation of some of the software applications was not possible in the short time the study was implemented (p. 83). A further limitation identified by the researchers was the matching of mentors to mentees rather than having them choose from an available pool (p. 83). This resulted in differences in expectations between the mentors and the mentees and this negatively influenced the interactions (p. 84). Finally, a difficulty discussed in the findings was the lack of communication between participants, despite numerous methods that were set up (p. 84). I considered these benefits and limitations as I moved forward with considering the questions for the interviews, the types of communication methods for engaging participants, and disseminating study results.

Summary and Recommendations for Future Research

In summary, I have reflected on the relevant literature pertaining to ELCC in Canada and from other countries in relation to the needs of the human resources sector. The included research studies were chosen for their relevance to the topics of education and professional development, in addition to others that considered mentorship and leadership.

Several recommendations were gleaned from the literature for future research, including exploring the benefits of education and ongoing career development. Considering geographical challenges facing ECEs who live and work in remote communities, and who may benefit from alternative training offered on Web-based platforms is another potential research topic. There is sufficient research on the ELCC sector in Canada. Many ECEs in Canada and beyond experience professional isolation (Doan, 2013; Wong & Waniganayake, 2013; Zaslow, 2009). The field of ELCC is globally comparable, which may enable transferability of the findings from international studies including the research conducted in in Scandinavian and European countries as well as New Zealand and Australia (Heikka, et al., 2018; Waniganayake, 2015; Pohio et al., 2012; Pineda-Herrero et al., 2010). This research attends to professional recognition, professional development, and the continued support for a national early learning and childcare framework. However, there is a deficit in Canadian research on mentoring and mentor training. This review of the literature has provided valuable direction for my doctoral research designed to understand how e-mentoring may mitigate the professional isolation of Early Childhood Educators.

Chapter 3: The Methodological Approach

This chapter begins by describing the chosen research paradigm, phenomenology of practice, and providing an overview of hermeneutics. I will reiterate the research question and sub-questions in relation to an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, the methodology I chose for this research inquiry. This will be followed by a discussion about the research design components and culminate with the limitations and delimitations that I determined during this process.

Phenomenology of Practice – A Hermeneutical Approach

Hermeneutics studies the meanings, understandings, and interpretations about texts in juxtaposition to the worlds of human participants, culture, and the social occasions in which such texts are formed (Creely, 2018, pp. 115-116). The aim of an interpretive phenomenological research project is to gain insight into the essence of human experience of a phenomenon. Edmund Husserl (1913/1931) described 'lived experiences' as being within the world the individual is engaged with and stated that the individual may become so immersed that they may have no conscious response to it. I associate this to driving my car which has a standard transmission. I shift the gears unconsciously, the car goes, and I do not think about it. Dahlberg (2006) described this as "the everyday immersion in one's existence and the experience in which we take for granted that the world is as we perceive it" (p. 16). ECEs may be immersed in the experience of professional isolation. However, they may perceive this as a normal feeling, not truly understanding that the phenomenon is one that can be more clearly recognized and understood, an assertion made by van Manen (2007) that "phenomenology is oriented to practice – the practice of living" (p. 3). Further, van Manen stated that "[w]e have questions of how to act

in everyday situations and relations. This pragmatic concern I will call the 'phenomenology of practice'" (p. 3). Therefore, I chose phenomenology of practice as the paradigm for this research study and an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the methodological approach to inform my gathering of meaningful insights about the phenomenon of professional isolation of ECEs. In IPA "[t]he analysis seeks to explore particular, personal stories, accepting that they are the products of individual acts of interpretation, and, that their retelling is itself an act of reconstruction" (Seale, 2012, p. 448). These meaningful insights provided the content for analysis.

Learning Theory

It was challenging to identify one learning theory alone for this research study. Gathering meaningful insights from the participants lent itself to an interpretivist approach, whereas developing an e-mentoring strategy is constructivist by nature. An interpretivist paradigm is "characterized by a concern for the individual" (Cohen et al., 2011, p.17). The necessity to hear the voices of the ECEs, the social process, the role of community, and collaborative learning are essential to understanding the subjective world of human experience (Cohen et al., 2011). In an interpretivist approach, "theory should not precede the research but follow it. Investigators work directly with experience and understanding to build their theory on them" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 18). Alternatively, in a constructivist approach, Vygotsky would have argued that "learning [is] a profoundly social process, emphasises dialogue and the varied role that language plays in instruction and in mediated cognitive growth" (Cole et al., 1978, p.131). The social process requires engagement with others, an activity that is associated with collaborative learning. Vygotsky reinforced the idea of "dialogue with others in knowledge construction" (1935/1978), thereby supporting the role of learning communities and their roles in society, culture, and

politics. I will discuss the role of collaborative learning which reinforces Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism later in this chapter.

I chose to research using phenomenological inquiry, which according to van Manen (2017) "proceeds through an inceptual process of reflective wondering, deep questioning, attentive reminiscing, and sensitive interpreting of the primal meanings of human experiences" (p. 819). This permitted me to develop a deep understanding of professional isolation of ECEs while also facilitating ECEs to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of professional isolation. They did this when they shared their lived experiences through a semi-structured, collaborative interview process.

The ECEs who participated in the research inquiry were asked to recount their experiences with professional mentorship and make recommendations for the creation of an e-mentoring platform. For this component of the research inquiry social constructivism was relevant. The social process of collaboration requires engagement with others; an activity that is associated with e-mentoring. The anticipated e-mentoring platform would provide a space for the community of ECEs to interact in a professional and educational practice with others through the process of online postings. Learning communities contribute to interactivity by way of "a central design and evaluation construct for online communities…with the intended outcomes…of engagement, sociability, the group's potential to stick together, cooperation and longevity" (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997, p. 16). According to Anderson and Dron (2011) learning through a community of practice is a defining feature of constructivist pedagogies.

I will now turn to the methods section of the chapter for this research inquiry, in which I will discuss my role as an interpretive phenomenological researcher, the selection and

recruitment of participants, and how I upheld ethical standards. I will start with several points that are significant to the interpretive phenomenology process, beginning with the act of bridling.

Bridling

The term bridling was used for this research inquiry as opposed to the more familiar term of bracketing within a phenomenological inquiry. Bracketing refers to a process "in which investigators set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (Creswell, 2018, p. 78). Bracketing, according to Vagle (2013), is more commonly used in descriptive phenomenology and is ordinarily known in phenomenological research as phenomenological reduction (Dahlberg, 2006; Husserl, 1913/31; Vagle, 2013). In contrast,

> … the act of bridling accomplishes two primary things. First, bridling involves the essence of bracketing in that pre-understandings are restrained so they do not limit the openness. Second, bridling is an active project in which one continually tends to the understanding of the phenomenon as a whole throughout the study. (Vagle, 2013, p.67)

The act of bridling is to take on a reflective, open stance when considering another's lived experience (Dahlberg, 2006). In phenomenology of practice research, the researcher considers reflexivity, or how the researcher positions themselves in the world. I identify as an Early Childhood Educator, and I have had my own experiences with professional isolation. However, it was important to remove myself, or at minimum, view the experiences articulated by ECEs at an arms-length perspective, so that my own experience did not determine the phenomenon of the participants. This is an example of bridling (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2013). Rigour is also demonstrated through bridling, as the researcher is required "to maintain a balance between closeness and separateness with the participant during the interview process" (Smith et al., 2009,

p. 181). Vagle (2013) uses the metaphor of "elbow room" when describing bridling, as it refers to gaining some distance from the phenomenon, so it may be seen in a different way (p. 67). In a bridling process, we actively wait for the phenomenon and its meaning to show itself – seeing and being open to understanding the intersectional relationships between the subject, the researcher, and the phenomenon.

Research Question and Sub-Questions

The primary research question guiding this study was:

- How do Early Childhood Educators articulate a sense of professional isolation?
    - What is the experience of professional isolation like for these educators?

In addition, these two sub-questions were asked:

- What experiences do Early Childhood Educators have with professional mentorship in the workplace?
    - What are these experiences like for these educators?
- To what extent would an e-mentoring strategy benefit and be accepted by Early Childhood Educators?

Interpretive Phenomenological Approach

To answer these questions, I proposed to complete an interpretive phenomenological inquiry. As van Manen (2017) stated "the point of phenomenology as a qualitative method is to arrive at phenomenal understandings and insights – phenomenal in the sense of impressively unique and in the sense of primordially meaningful" (p. 819). I understand the phenomenon of professional isolation to be understated by Early Childhood Educators.

My proposed inquiry was to create an opportunity to capture various points of view expressed by a diverse group of participants through an interpretive phenomenological approach

(IPA). “IPA is a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social world” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p.55). Specifically, I used collaborative interviews to gather the participants’ perspectives of their lived experiences of professional isolation so that the voices of those who work in the ELCC community were heard. van Manen (2017) and Giorgi (2009) deem the use of the term “data” as inappropriate for a phenomenological inquiry “as phenomenology is concerned with meaning and meaningfulness rather than “informational content”. Therefore, from here forward, I will refer to the examples provided by the participants as meaningful insights and/or insights.

Posing carefully constructed interview questions invited the participating ECEs to communicate their lived experiences of professional isolation in the vernacular with which they felt comfortable. Interview questions “remain oriented to the experiential or lived sensibility of the lifeworld” (van Manen, 2007, p. 20) of the participating ECEs. They reflected on their feelings of professional isolation as they sense it within their practice, in a relational and personal way. Therefore, the phenomenology is sensitive to the thoughtfulness required in relational situations (van Manen, 2007). I considered the possibility that some ECEs may have chosen to refer to or include a piece of poetry, an image, or a piece of literature during or after their interview experience. These inclusions are considered less conventional. However, I acknowledge them to be creative and evocatively expressive.

The field of ELCC is deeply concerned about the rights of the individual and the collective. To use a research framework that honors democracy, social justice, and recognizes the voice of the stakeholders (i.e., ECEs, families) was important to me as I embarked upon this inquiry. The participation of ECEs as insightful contributors afforded confidence in the findings and in the

ELCC sector. In addition, it was important to me that participants perceive their contributions to research in action and in a way that affected them personally. From where I stand, ECEs are often overlooked for their participation in research and too many research projects are published without a plan for concrete implementation. Results may be published in academic journals rather than in sources that are professionally accessible and applicable for ECEs. This may result in cynicism and mistrust in the research process. Phenomenological examples "are usually cast in the practical format of lived experience descriptions: anecdotes, stories, narratives, vignettes, or concrete accounts" (van Manen, 2017, p. 814). Therefore, encouraging ECEs to share *their* experiences of professional isolation empowered them to share with others who recognize and understand the appeal for professional support. The nature of a research interview sets up an unequal power dynamic (Creswell, 2018, p. 173). Thus, I prepared for their insights through the act of collaborative interviewing, where the participant and I approached the questions and the interpretations with more equality than a traditional interview. This process required reflection and trust on both the part of the ECE and me. I ensured that they were fully aware that their experiences would contribute to scholarly research with ECEs as primary beneficiaries.

Throughout the design stages of this research, I constantly reflected on my own professional goals: to continue my own professional development within the sector of Early Learning and Child Care, and to use my knowledge and experience to advocate for professional recognition and sustainability of the ELCC sector. I would like ECEs to feel a deep sense of satisfaction in their work; to develop a passion for their career as they recognize 'the calling' as I have over many years of service to children and their families. Ultimately, I would like ECEs to recognize their ability to help mitigate professional isolation by being supportive colleagues with those with whom they work daily. These goals served as the motivations to complete this timely

and highly relevant research. This next section will explain the importance of collaborative learning to reinforce my consideration of a social constructivist influence in the development of an e-mentoring strategy as a desired outcome of my research.

The Importance of Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning is important for many reasons, not limited to "working towards building shared public knowledge" (Laurillard, 2012, 187). Further, "collaboration is a coordinated synchronous [or asynchronous] activity that is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem" (Roschelle & Teasley, 1995, p. 70). Collaborative learning, then, reinforces the social construction of knowledge.

Collaboration, or interactivity in an online relationship encourages engagement and sociability. It has been shown to support mutual engagement, joint decision making, and discussion by those who are involved (Roschelle & Teasley, 1995). It can be used to complement learning in blended courses or as the sole communication channel among learners and their teachers. As noted earlier, learning can happen from an interactive exchange of information and the construction of new knowledge occurs because of the exchange. From a pedagogical perspective, "if the teacher plays an active role in shaping and structuring the discussion – scaffolding the learning process – then it can deliver the value expected of the social constructivist approach" (Laurillard, 2012, p. 149). Selecting materials that support the discussion rather than supplementing it, will increase academic and conceptual development. In addition, discussions should be well organized by the mentor to enable the development of ideas and the construction of new knowledge by and for mentees. This recommendation reinforces what Garrison (2011) suggested regarding teaching presence in a Community of Inquiry model and was further substantiated by Bates (2015) in that the role of the mentor in the collaborative

learning setting is seen as critical, not only in facilitating the process and providing appropriate resources and learner activities that encourage this kind of learning, but also as a representative of a knowledge community or subject domain. One of the limitations of online collaborative learning as identified by Bates (2015) is related to the skill-level of facilitators. Mentors and other facilitators must consider how to use the tools of online learning to maximize interactivity. For instance, when using video tools, comfort level of both mentor and mentee is important for not only competency but also for the provision of security. These considerations are relevant to the topic of professional isolation and will be considered as a recommendation for future study if an e-mentoring strategy is developed for Early Childhood Educators in Manitoba. I will now move forward with a discussion of the research design components, beginning with a timeline of the process.

Research Design Components

A timeline of the research events is provided to display the process from a visual standpoint (Figure 2). After successfully defending the study proposal, I embarked upon the process immediately.

Figure 2

Timeline of the Research Process

Engagement of the Participants

The invitation to participate (Appendix A) included who would be involved in the research process, an explanation of how the personal experiences of feeling professional isolated would be collected and how the information would be shared. The participants for the research study were the ECEs who were working in Manitoba and who had an educational credential which enabled them to be classified as an ECE II or III. In Manitoba, this credential is: "either a diploma or a degree from a childcare training program recognized by the Province of Manitoba Department of Families – Early Learning and Child Care" (2005, p.11). Currently, the workforce in Manitoba consists of a combination of ECEs and Child Care Assistants (CCAs). The latter is defined as "a person who is not eligible on the basis of educational requirements for the Early Childhood Educator II or III level…" (Province of Manitoba, 2005, p. 11). In the *Manitoba Families Annual Report 2018,* there are 3,219 ECEs, whereas the number of CCAs is not reported (p. 81). It is difficult to establish the percentage of individuals without higher education in ECE working in the sector; a fact that is cited as a quality indicator in the literature review (Monroe & Norris, 2016; OECD, 2012; Pineda-Herrero, et al., 2010). This research inquiry focused on the ECEs who had an interest in contributing to local research. The inclusion criteria maintained rigour within the study. The participants were ECEs who represented a particular perspective in the ELCC sector and were a homogenous group for whom the problem would be relational (Smith et al., 2009, p. 44).

For my research study the inclusion criteria for participants were as follows:

1. Classified as an Early Childhood Educator II or III by the Province of Manitoba Department of Families, Regulation 62/86.

2. Employed in a licensed Early Learning and Child Care setting in the province of Manitoba or provide/s ELCC services in an Enhanced licensed Family Child Care/Group Family Child Care Program.

The exclusion criteria for participants were as follows:

1. Preference was given to Early Childhood Educators who were working as frontline staff in an Early Learning and Child Care program, or Family/Group Child Care providers. If a respondent identified that they were employed in a leadership position, such as an Executive Director, I provided them with the opportunity to be placed on a waitlist, should the desired number of participants not be reached.
2. If a Child Care Assistant indicated their interest in participating, they would be informed that the study was focusing on trained Early Childhood Educators, those who were classified as ECE II or III.

My choice to exclude ECEs who reported that they were working in a leadership role such as executive director was for two reasons: Executive directors are most often working apart from the frontline ECEs and the children in a childcare program. The executive director is typically responsible for the human resources administration in the ELCC setting including performance management and supervision. Therefore, they are perceived as being in charge and there is an established power imbalance with frontline ECEs. These reasons do not negate the possibility that executive directors also experience professional isolation. In fact, they may argue because they are in decision-making roles which include supervision, human resource functions, and ultimately the authority to engage and dismiss employees, they may also experience isolation in many instances. However, the purpose of this study was to examine professional isolation

experienced by ECEs. This carefully selected group of participants matched the research questions and supported a rigorous process. Further inquiry may lend itself to the consideration of isolation felt by managers in ELCC settings later, beyond the culmination of this research study. Excluding Child Care Assistants was a decision I made early in the research design stage as the focus was to be on post-secondary trained ECEs. To be classified as a CCA, one requires a minimum of Grade 12 education and one, forty-hour course in an early childhood education program of study. The difference in training requirements for CCAs and ECEs distinguishes the classifications of these employees. An Enhanced licensed Family/Group Child Care Program denotes that the home-based providers are classified as ECE II or III, having experienced the same requirements for training as an ECE II or III who works in a group childcare program.

To engage the potential participants for this study, I posted an invitation to participate (Appendix A) on The Manitoba ECEs and CCAs Facebook site. Information that was included indicated how the participants could become involved in my research. Information about the research project and the eligibility criteria were communicated in the invitation. My personal contact information was made available so that the interested participants could access specific information about the study, to have their potential inquiries about the project answered, and for them to indicate their interest in participation. A written invitation to participate was originally intended to be published in the Manitoba Child Care Association Quarterly *Bridges* as a secondary means of gathering interested participants. However, due to timing and financial constraints this secondary plan was modified. I made a request to the Manitoba Child Care Association (MCCA) to send an email on my behalf to their Professional Members. A professional member of the MCCA is an ECE who is classified as an ECE II or III. This method allowed for a more targeted approach, as the MCCA database sorted for only those who met the

inclusion criteria for the inquiry. The recruitment poster (Appendix B) was included in the email. This method was used to reach an audience that may not use social media and who may have wished to participate in the research project. I did not keep track of how participants learned about the study; however, a couple of the participants did indicate that they had heard about it through an email from the MCCA.

Sample Size

Purposeful sampling worked well in this research inquiry as all the participants could have been in the position of experiencing the same phenomenon of professional isolation. As a sample size, Creswell (2018) proposed working with one to 325 participants, however the recommendations to use smaller sample sizes made by Seale (2012) and Smith and Osborn (2007) were more appealing for this research study, given the time constraints of the doctoral program. According to Smith and Osborn (2007) "[t]he detailed case-by-case analysis of individual transcripts takes a long time, and the aim of the study is to say something in detail about the perceptions and understandings of this particular group rather than prematurely make more general claims" (p. 55). This is further supported by Seale (2012) "IPA researchers usually limit the number of people in their studies because this allows them to look in detail at small numbers of cases rather than dissipating their effort superficially across more cases" (p. 450). As identified earlier, the Facebook site had approximately 3,000 members and the readership of *Bridges* was similar in numbers. Given these considerations, I was confident that I would reach my desired sample of 10 to 15 participants.

The invitations to participate were met with quick interest and within several days there were 24 ECEs indicating their willingness to participate in the research. The interested, eligible participants received an email that shared specific information regarding the logistics of the

interview process and potential dates for interviews. The participants were given the opportunity to ask me questions either by email or phone prior to committing to the inquiry process. There were six ECEs who did not meet the requirements for the research project as they were employed in leadership roles and did not work directly with children or with frontline ECEs. I replied to these respondents by email that if they wished, their name could be added to a wait list, and they might be called upon if I was not able to meet my goal number of participants. All the people who were excluded were willing to have their names on a waitlist and expressed their understanding of the process that I had explained to them. There were no CCAs who indicated their interest in participating. Of the original 24 people who put their names forward, 18 were sent emails with the letter of consent (Appendix C) and a request to return the letter signed indicating their consent. They were also provided with the details of the study, the nature of the research method, the length of time the interview process would possibly take, as well how their confidentiality was to be honored. The option to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty or impact was noted along with my and my supervisor's contact information. Participants provided their consent by electronically signing the consent letter. This process was challenging for some of the participants, a possibility that I had considered when I sent the consent letters out. To counter this challenge, I gave the respondents the choice to provide their consent in the reply email by copying and pasting the consent questions into a return email and indicating "yes" or "no" to each question. Two of the respondents told me that they were unable to provide an electronic signature and preferred to give their consent at the time of their interviews. For these respondents, I read through the consent letter at the time of their interview and their consent was given. I reviewed the consent process with the respondents who returned their consent in writing to provide them with an opportunity to ask any questions about the research study. These

discussions are captured on the audio recordings and included in the transcripts of their interviews.

In total, 16 individuals consented to be interviewed. Other than the length of service in ELCC, I chose not to collect demographic information from the participants as I wanted to ensure that the findings provided examples of those who were working as frontline ECEs in Manitoba regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or age. There is research that considers gender of ECEs in the workplace (Cole et al., 2019; Whitebook et al., 2018). However, as this was not a focus in my research, I did not include any questions about gender. One participant did identify gender as a possible factor for professional isolation, however, this was initiated by them specifically. I will address the aspects related to gender that were suggested by this participant in a later chapter.

Other participants voluntarily identified their ethnicity in their interviews when they noted it was important to the discussion. During the interviews, the participants were asked how many years they had worked in the ELCC sector and how many programs they had worked in. This question helped me to understand their career longevity in the ELCC sector and the desire for change in their employment situations. Their responses could have potentially allowed me to estimate the age of the participants. It is possible that ageism could be a factor related to isolation as alluded to by one of the participants, although this may have been related to the ongoing global pandemic which I will address in a later chapter. As the inclusion criteria included working in Manitoba, I did not inquire in more detail as to where the participants lived or worked. However, some participants identified that they lived and/or worked in either a rural or an urban setting within their responses to questions or within the discussions, a factor I will consider in the findings. In the design stages of the research project, I inquired with various

individuals who had no connection to the ELCC sector about their perceptions of the term professional isolation. Their responses included comments about feeling lonely in their employment, not having opportunities to collaborate with others at work, as examples. This reinforced to me that professional isolation is a phenomenon that is wide-ranging regardless of the type of employment. My study has set the stage for the discussion of professional isolation in the ELCC sector. There are opportunities for future study and exploration of the phenomenon as it relates to ELCC administrators, gender, or ECEs who work in rural communities.

Gathering of Meaningful Insights Through Collaborative Interviews

For this research project the method of collecting/gathering/generating insights was collaborative interviews. According to Laslett and Rapoport (1975) "this type of methodological approach may seem particularly appropriate for research into the more private and intimate character of family life" (p. 969). A personal interview would provide the participants with an emotionally safe avenue to communicate their experiences and thoughts about professional isolation. The collaborative interviews were based upon the primary research question and the secondary questions that were proposed. The collaborative nature of the interview process involved asking additional questions based on interviewee responses and I encouraged the participants to follow their own storyline based on their own perceptions and experiences. Interviews were scheduled at a time that was convenient for both the participants and me. The interviews were to be conducted using the online conferencing platform Zoom depending on the participants' access to ICT. Alternatively, telephone interviews were made available to the participants. The latter option favored the participants who live in regional areas, who were isolated geographically, and where access to participating in an online interview may have been prohibitive due to lack of accessible internet.

The purpose of the interview was to gather information and opinions on the phenomenon of professional isolation and the intersectional relationships between experience with professional mentorship and participants' thoughts on an e-mentoring strategy. As demonstrations of commitment and rigour, I was thoroughly invested in the process, I ensured that the participants felt comfortable before, during, and after the interviews. I listened carefully to each one and made certain that I was attentive to the participants during the interviews. I encouraged the participants to elaborate on the different aspects of the phenomenon they identified. When I picked up on important cues about professional isolation from the participant, I dug deeper by asking probing questions such as "can you tell me more about that?" The interview process included giving information to the participants regarding the purpose of the research study including information about the recording, transcription, and storage of the interview data including audio recording and interviewer notes. I asked permission from the participants for our research interview/conversation to be audio recorded. I also asked the participants how they would like to have their responses represented in the final dissertation document and whether they would like to be identified by their given name or remain anonymous. It should be noted that naming the participants if they chose to be identified, created accountability between myself as the researcher to the participants and accountability between the participants and the ELCC community (Chilisa, 2012). To maintain confidentiality, I informed each participant that they could choose to be identified by their name, choose a pseudonym, or I would simply reference quotations from "an ECE". Several of the participants indicated that they were fine to be identified by name, others expressed neither preference. There were no participants who explicitly expressed their desire to be identified by their given, legal, or family name. As I began to work my way through the analysis, I decided I would categorize each

participant by "an ECE." My rationale for this decision was that many of their responses were deeply personal, and to protect the confidentiality of the respondents, this approach seemed to be the most appropriate. However, after discussing this decision with my supervisor, they suggested that using "the ECE" somewhat depersonalized the participant's responses. Throughout my process of writing, I had always wanted to honor the contributions of the participants and to craft a dissertation that respects their narratives. Therefore, I agreed wholeheartedly with my supervisor and made the decision to assign a pseudonym to each participant to increase the personalization of the process. However, this method as I learned, is not just a simple task of assigning an imitation name to someone, I wanted to make sure that the names were carefully chosen to represent the names of participants and the ethnic and gender expressions of the participants (Lahman et al., 2015). I assigned the 16 participants the following pseudonyms: Sandra, Carla, Rita, Chantal, Lori, Eileen, Robert, Joy, Lisa, Jennifer, Kathy, Danielle, Rachel, Geoffrey, Kirstin, and Michael.

Resources

The required resources for the interviews were access to Zoom and telephone service. Zoom is a web-based video conferencing tool with a local, desktop client and a mobile app that allows users to meet online with or without video (www.zoom.com, retrieved December 26, 2019). Using Zoom would allow me to record the interview sessions so that I could use the transcriptions to analyze the responses. I purchased a subscription to Zoom, allowing me to encrypt the interview recordings with a password so that only I would have access to them. I purchased a hand-held voice recorder for use in telephone interviews, which were uploaded to my computer.

Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity has been defined as "the way in which all accounts of social settings – descriptions, analyses, criticisms, etc., - and the social settings occasioning them are mutually interdependent" (Cohen et al., 2011, p, 19). Reflexivity requires periodic self-reflection and ongoing assessment throughout the inquiry, given the relationship between myself and the participants, which I discuss in Chapter 1 – the role of the researcher (p. 17). I acknowledge and locate my role in the ELCC community in Manitoba as an Early Childhood Educator and as an ECE instructor. I am a member of the MCCA, the professional association that represents ECEs in Manitoba. I participate at local workshops and conferences, and I contribute to the local publication of *Bridges*, the journal produced by the MCCA. My role in the ELCC community is integral to developing trust and rapport with its members who were the participants in my research inquiry,

as related by Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009):

> Whether the researcher is an insider, sharing the characteristic, role, or experience under study with the participants, or an outsider to the commonality shared by participants, the personhood of the researcher, including her or his membership status in relation to those participating in the research, is an essential and ever-present aspect of the investigation. (p. 55)

Moreover, Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) stated that "the benefit to being a member of the group one is studying is acceptance" (p. 58). My position in this research was as a member of the ELCC community in Manitoba. Developing and maintaining a trusting relationship with the participants was of utmost importance to me. I communicated my position to them, which has been a primary motivator for doing this research, choosing the paradigm, and methods.

Ethical Considerations

As a researcher, it is incumbent upon me to uphold integrity in the investigation process in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures (Appendix E). All participants were provided with the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview, to clarify or change a response to any of the questions and to augment their narrative with additional information if they felt that it would clarify their position and perspective on the topic.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Board (REB) at Athabasca University (Appendix E). Ethical considerations such as informed consent and confidentiality were clarified with the respondent before the commencement of the interview. I emailed the consent form to the participants and asked that they return them to me prior to their interview. All data, audio recordings of interviews, email consents, and transcribed interviews were stored on my password-protected computer. The participants were informed at the onset of the conversation that they had the opportunity to withdraw their interview data up until I commenced the data analysis. Once the final dissertation has been published, the transcriptions and recordings will be destroyed.

I made every effort to afford participants the opportunity to make voluntary and informed decisions about their participation in this research inquiry. Before asking for the participants' consent, I provided them with information about the foreseeable risks and potential benefits of the research (Appendix C). I noted that there were minimal risks for participants in this research study. Involvement in the interviews may have involved the disclosure of personal work history concerning the research questions. I was prepared to email information to each participant about

how to approach the Employee Assistance Program offered through the MCCA if any of the participants identified the need for mental health support after contributing to the research process. I was not required to do this for any of the participants, although I was sensitive to inquire if they wished to proceed in the interview process if I recognized that there were emotional concerns identified or demonstrated by the participants. Participants were told that their responses would be held in confidence and that no names or identifying information would be shared in the findings of the research unless they stated clearly otherwise. The indirect benefits of participating in the study were that, as members of the ELCC community, they would experience contributing to a body of knowledge about a subject they were familiar with, and which may impact their work positively in the future.

My contact information, that of my supervisor, and the AU Research Ethics Board that approved the research was provided so that those who were interested in participating could discuss any questions they had. I worked with each participant to set a time for their interview, as well as obtaining their written consent. I allowed one hour for each interview. However, I was open to shorter or longer conversations. Contact information and consent forms will continue to be kept separate from the data collected and secured in a separate file on my password protected computer. The data consisted of audio recordings and scribed notations and were transcribed into a word processing program. The data was coded using the encryption option provided by MS Word Version 2016 and is protected with a password on my personal computer.

I offered to facilitate a workshop for their childcare program, or an individual mentoring session at a time that was convenient as a way of showing my appreciation. I continue to be prepared to offer either of these choices in person or through a Zoom session online, depending on the choice of the Early Childhood Educator involved.

I will continue to maintain the confidentiality of the participants during all stages of dissemination. Participants will be provided with an opportunity to indicate their desire to receive an electronic copy of the published study. I will request that a link to the published study be made available on the MCCA website. In addition, a summary of the study results will be submitted for publication in the MCCA *Bridges* and the Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCF) *Interaction*.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations identify potential weaknesses of a research study. Sample size in qualitative research presents a potential limitation. The smaller sample size recommended by experienced phenomenologists provides a smaller scope, coupled with the constraints of researching ECEs employed in the Manitoba ELCC sector. As the recommendations were to use a smaller sample size, the participants to be included would meet the criteria of classification by the province of Manitoba as an Early Childhood Educator II.

This requirement created a delimitation as it excluded many other individuals employed in the ELCC sector in Manitoba, namely Child Care Assistants, who purportedly make up approximately 50% of the workforce, and other related professional allies. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to a larger population. The findings will be specific to the Manitoba ELCC sector and therefore, may not be used to generate theory or conceptual models based on the phenomenon.

Summary

This chapter explained the learning theory and methodological approach I used to complete this research inquiry. A description of the research design which included inclusion criteria, engagement of the participants and the rationale for collaborative interviews as the method to

gather meaningful insights was explained. The ethical considerations for confidentiality and researcher reflexivity were identified. The details of the research process and analysis proceeds in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: The Research and Analysis Process

This chapter will consider the details of the research and analysis process I undertook to study professional isolation in the Early Childhood Education sector. My research project engaged Early Childhood Educators who reflected on and shared their lived experiences of professional isolation, their desire for mentorship and what they felt was important and desired in an e-mentoring program. I was reminded that the interpretive phenomenological analysis of the insights is not unlike the work of an ECE, who interprets children's experiences and constructs potential opportunities for the children to explore their understanding of the world. In the sphere of children's learning, the ECE must take a deep dive in to understand the children's thinking through questioning and *provocation*, a term that is used in ELCC to determine if a child's curiosity is truly an interest or if it is a passing fancy. In the same vein, interpretive phenomenology allowed me to question and provoke the ECEs during the interview process. Thus, I had the opportunity to take that deep dive into the phenomenon of professional isolation. My interpretation of their accounts resulted in a conceptualization of their experiences and the opportunity to achieve a greater understanding of them. The analysis considered the questions that I posed during the interviews and included participants' responses and interpretations that were distilled from the insights. I have included a list of initial exploratory notes that I garnered during their interviews (Figure 4).

The Interview Phase

The primary method of gathering insights was done through collaborative interviews. The interview script (Appendix D) was developed with open-ended questions which allowed for additional conversations and queries by either the participants or myself. The interviews were

conducted by phone, with one exception being completed on Zoom. This was based on the participants' preferences which were established at the time of scheduling of the interviews. I began scheduling interviews once I received all the consent forms. At the onset, I was anxious to begin interviewing and gathering the ECEs' insights. For this reason, I scheduled two interviews each evening the first week. I quickly realized that this was overzealous, and I was relieved when some of the participants either forgot about their interview appointment when I phoned them or approached me to reschedule their interview due to other commitments.

Each interview started off with a short conversation about the research project and how the interview process would proceed. I indicated to each participant that they could, at any point tell me that they preferred to decline to answer any of the questions, and that this would not disqualify them from the project. In some of the appointments, participants asked whether they should have prepared for their interview, and others told me that they were excited to be able to participate in the project. I told each participant that I would be recording their interview by using a hand-held recorder and that my laptop had been set up for recording. I described the transcription process of the recordings that would occur after the interviews, and that they would be receiving a copy of their transcript. I told them I would set up a second appointment to review the transcript if they chose to, or they could email me back with their comments if that was their preference. Of the 16 interviews and transcripts shared, only three people responded back to me with requests for changes. All the remaining participants indicated that their transcriptions were satisfactory and that I should move ahead with my research.

After I completed the first interview, I realized how much emotional energy went into the process. I was conscious of the participants' time, so even though I wanted to ask many other questions and empathise with the participants' stories, I had to bridle my desire to do so,

realizing that the interview could quickly spiral into more of a conversation between two Early Childhood Educators than a process of gathering insights for research purposes (Figure 3). This example from an interview transcript demonstrated how the participant shared their insight about professional isolation using an analogy to describe how it felt to them. In turn, I acknowledged the analogy and continued onto the next question, rather than expressing my own insight into the phenomenon.

Figure 3

Example of Bridling During an Interview

Participant: So I think for me, professional isolation would mean and then would mean kind of being on that island to ECEs and nobody understanding what we do, so feeling really isolated and not having a lot of support. That being said, I could think about this for a while and I give you a totally different answer at, you know, three o'clock in the morning…
Interviewer: It's an interesting analogy to use it as an island, where you're by yourself for sure, I can totally see that. So have you ever had any experiences that would reinforce a sense of isolation in your work as an early childhood educator?

I became cognizant that each interview should be given sufficient time for reflection afterwards so that I could appreciate what the ECEs had told me, which were intimate details of their careers. I kept very detailed notes of each interview, along with an audio recording on a hand-held device and a digital recording on my laptop. Each interview took an average of 32 minutes, and I allowed myself time for reflection after each one, with some taking more time for contemplation than others. All my reflections were kept in a journal, which I referred to often during this research process.

The participants received a copy of their interview transcript emailed to them for their review, a process called member checking. This provided the participants with the opportunity to

validate the information that was transcribed and would assist with the earnestness of the interpretation that would occur once I received them back. This practice would promote a sense of transparency and trustworthiness in the research process in accordance with my research proposal and research ethics approval. After the first interview I started transcribing the recording manually, which took many hours. I realized that manually transcribing 16 interviews was going to be challenging and time consuming, so I opted to use a computer application called Otter.ai. This application develops speech to text transcription. Using Otter.ai reduced the amount of time it took to transcribe the recorded interviews. However, afterwards I had to meticulously go through each manuscript, adding in the laughter, pauses, and filler words such as "like", "um" and "uh" used by the participants. These supported the linguistic comments described in step two of the analysis phase: Initial Noting (Smith et al., 2009, p. 73). Ironically, when I provided the transcribed manuscripts to the participants, many of them expressed displeasure with how their responses sounded and asked for the filler words to be removed. However, when I explained that these linguistic comments highlighted moments in which they may have been thinking of a response, expressed uncertainty or their sense of humor, they were accepting of keeping them in. I explained that if I was to use a particular quote from their interview, that I would use it in context of the point I would be making, and that I would preserve their dignity by ensuring that the quote was suitable for the purpose. There were a small number of corrections that some of the participants asked me to make in their transcripts. One participant asked me to add in a sentence or two to clarify a point they were trying to make, as they felt that it could possibly be construed as being discriminatory. We worked together to ensure that their words were representative of how they were feeling at the time. Another participant had identified several people and places within their interview, and after reading their

transcript asked me to remove the names and locations. We worked together to replace the names and places with other descriptions that would suit the same purpose. This was another important step to maintaining the trustworthiness and confidentiality of the participants as I moved forward with the research.

Insight Analysis

The process of analysis, according to Smith et al. (2009) is "collaborative, personal, intuitive, difficult, creative, intense, and conceptually-demanding" (p. 80). They further encourage IPA researchers to be innovative in their ways of approaching analysis, encouraging a reflective process of the interviewee's insights (Smith et al., 2009). Using a step-by-step method, the following outline will demonstrate how I approached the analysis of the interviewees' insights.

Step 1: Reading and Re-reading

I listened to the audio-recordings of the interviews while reading the transcripts. Smith et al. (2009) recommend this process to imagine the voice of the participant during subsequent readings. This assisted with a complete analysis, one in which the participant became the focus of the study. "The reading also facilitates an appreciation of how rapport and trust may build across an interview, and thus highlight the richer and more detailed sections, or indeed contradictions and paradoxes" (p.72).

Step 2: Initial Noting

I used the audio-recordings and transcripts to consider the language, such as verbs versus nouns used by the interviewees. "This process ensures a growing familiarity with the transcript, and, moreover, to identify specific ways by which the participant talks about, understands and thinks about an issue" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 73). Following this method allowed me to develop

"a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data" (p. 73). I understood that each participant entered the discussion with their thoughts and ideas about professional isolation, which helped me to understand what the phenomenon was like for the participant. Smith et al. (2009) recommend using three discrete processes with different focuses (p.74). These three methods included breaking the insights down into descriptive comments, which focus on describing the content that the participant has said; linguistic comments, which focus on exploring the specific use of language by the participant; and, thirdly, conceptual comments which focus on a more interrogative level (p.74).

Step 3: Developing Emergent Themes

In this process, the transcript of the interview was broken down into parts for analysis. The goal of this process was to produce a powerful statement of the critical sections within the transcript. "The emergent themes should feel like they have captured and reflect an understanding" (p. 80). The themes were not only the participants' words and thoughts but how I interpreted them.

Step 4: Searching for Connections

Once the themes for each participant's insights were established, I developed a chart and determined how the themes relate. This process allowed me to consider all the most interesting and important aspects identified by each participant. The charting of themes was completed by focusing on the words and meanings shared by each participant. Smith et al. (2009) suggest several ways to assemble the ideas; one such way is 'contextualization', a way of looking at connections between emergent themes. This appealed to me because it had me considering the temporal, cultural and narrative themes proactively. These contexts were relative to the topic, participants may have experienced professional isolation at a certain point in their career as an

ECE. Additionally, I understood that using different strategies to analyze the content for themes strengthened the dynamic design of the research. I kept a journal and reflected upon the process of analysis as I proceeded. I developed a conceptual framework of emerging themes (Appendix F), which was useful when disseminating the research.

Step 5: Moving Along

I repeated the steps identified in the process, being careful to treat each participant or "case" as its own to ensure I honored the individuality of each participant's response.

Step 6: Looking for Patterns

Once each participant's insights were analyzed, case by case, I studied the themes within each case and probed for patterns/common themes across the cases. The patterns drew connections among the themes, and on some occasions conveyed new themes. The result, like Smith et al. (2009) suggest, should capture the most important things that I wanted to say about the participants and have a suitable ordering of those things (p. 91). A complete report of the thematic analysis of meaningful insights comes later in the chapter.

Identifying the Emerging Themes

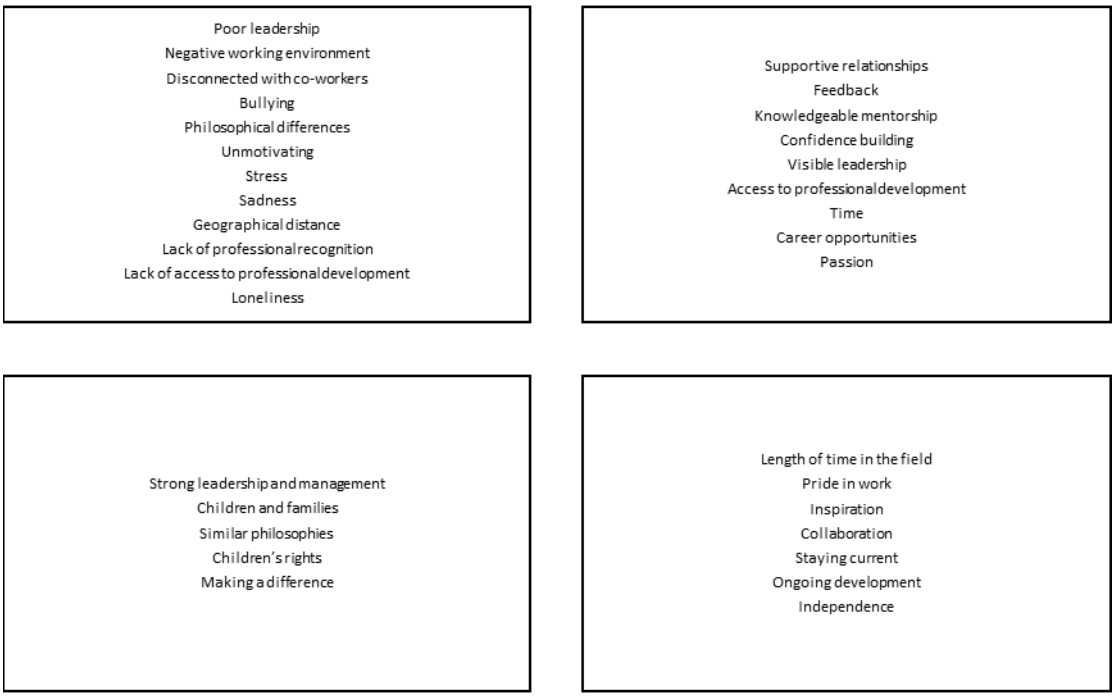
Once all of the transcripts met the approval of the participants, I began step one of the analysis phase: Reading and Re-reading (Smith et al., 2009, p. 72). I listened to the recordings and followed along with the print transcripts. This process allowed me to situate myself back into the interviews, listening to the voices of the participants, hearing their hesitations and laughter, and recognizing my own perceptions of their emotions, whether they sounded joyful, sad, or angry. I wrote notes in the margins of the electronic scripts and underlined key words that I thought would be useful later for determining emergent themes. When I read the transcripts, I noted the number of times the participants repeated some phrases, when they were articulate and

confident about a point to be made and when they hesitated. When I listened to the recordings, these aspects of language melted into the conversations, making them smooth and natural as if I were right back in the time of the interview. I also discovered that as the participants became more comfortable in the interview process, they returned to previous questions to add more of their insights, even adding in additional anecdotes to further illustrate a point. I will discuss the added anecdotes in Chapter 5 in which I will identify the findings of the interviews.

Next, I began developing lists of the key words I had heard from the participants. I found it helpful to create these lists with each question, and I began to employ an elementary form of coding by marking each word with asterisks. As an example, I would assign one asterisk to words that implied altruism, two asterisks for words that suggested barriers, and so on. I grouped the initial exploratory notes from the discussions with the participants (Figure 4) into categories, which would later be identified as the themes that emerged (Figure 5). I chose not to use a computer software program to analyze the insights, choosing my less-sophisticated approach over a method that seemed to me as mechanistic and potentially unable to recognize the emotional nuances I knew existed. While I had chosen a computer software program for the transcription phase, that choice was made in relation to being a time saver. However, during the analysis phase I felt like I needed to immerse myself in the words, the emotions, and the descriptions the participants had shared with me.

Figure 4

Initial Exploratory Notes From the Discussions with the Participants



After generating the lists of key words, I endeavored to identify the themes. Rather than rushing into the next step, I took some time to reflect on the words, speaking to a co-worker who I respect and honor for their work in emergent curriculum (M. Battle, personal communication, February 4, 2021). As I had noted earlier, interpretive phenomenology is like understanding how children's curriculum is determined through reflection and provocation which is a process, in my opinion, best done collaboratively. With my co-worker's involvement, this brainstorming session helped me to understand the key words I had grouped together and the themes that resulted from the process. This collaborative process permitted me to remember the words of Dahlberg and Dahlberg "the act of bridling as the ability to slow down and reflect on the process of

understanding, so that we don't understand too fast or too carelessly" (2019, p. 3). I reminded myself to work slowly through the insights, absorbing and relishing every instance.

Determining the Themes

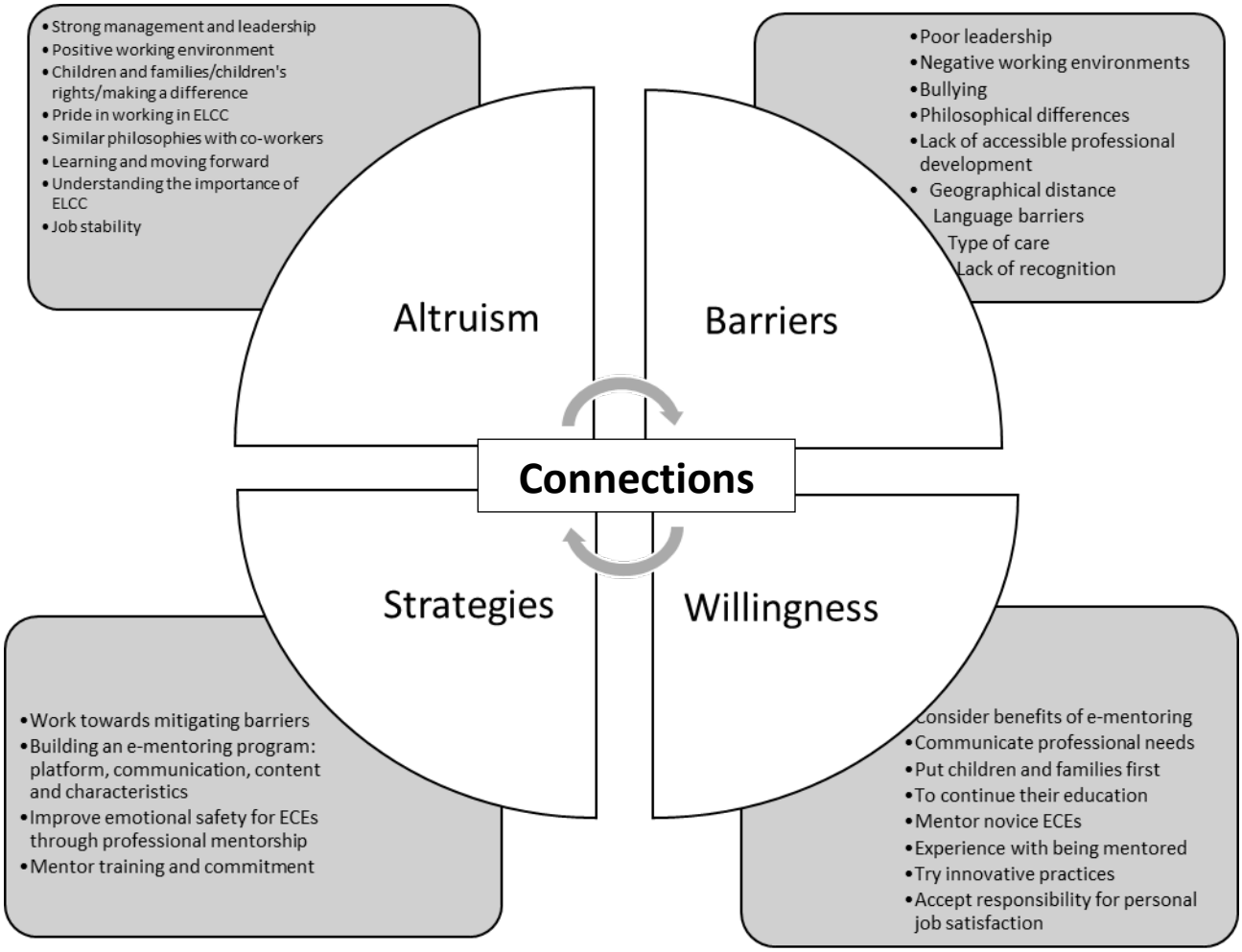
The themes that become evident during an analysis are classified differently by various phenomenologists. Smith et al. (2009) use the term *theme* to describe:

> The managing of data changes as the analyst simultaneously attempts to reduce the volume of detail (the transcript and initial notes), whilst maintaining complexity in terms of mapping interrelationships, connections, and patterns between exploratory notes. (p. 80)

Alternatively, Dahlberg (2006) uses the term *constituent* as it describes "meanings that constitute the actual essence" followed by "the essence must be seen in every constituent" (p. 14). van Manen (2017) imparts that "examples are the data of phenomenological research. Examples are experiential data that require study, investigation, probing, reflection, analysis, interrogation" (p. 814). I chose to follow the Smith et al. recommendation and use the term *theme* for its simplicity. The themes that emerged from the cross-case analysis are represented in Figure 5. The words altruism, barriers, willingness, and strategies gave power to the participants' voices by synthesizing the thoughts and emotions they shared with me into one carefully chosen theme word. While the words, altruism, barriers, willingness, and strategies may have been used by some of the participants specifically, the review of my journal notes, repeated listening to the interview recordings and my interpretations of the participants' insights resulted in these themes. The words provide meaning to the interpretations I have made in this process of individual case theme identification and cross-case theme identification. Figure 5 depicts the themes after cross case thematic analysis.

Figure 5

Emerging Themes



Summary

This chapter has described the gathering of the participants' meaningful insights. In addition, the process of how the interviews were transcribed and shared with the participants for member checking prior to the analysis phase was included. A description of the distillation of key words from the transcriptions and the grouping into lists of similar meanings was provided. These lists were eventually refined into themes that I have used to understand the phenomenon of professional isolation. In the upcoming Chapter 5, I will consider the participants responses

which led to my depiction of the Emerging Themes (Figure 5), attending to the themes which I interpreted as altruism, barriers, willingness, and strategies, and creating the superordinate theme of *connections*.

Chapter 5: Findings

In this chapter, I will provide detailed descriptions of the participants' responses and my interpretations of their reflections. Four themes evolved from the analysis of the interview content and my interpretation of the insights shared with me by the participants. I will discuss each theme as it relates to the key words I distilled from the interviews and support the interpretations with quotes from the participants. The superordinate theme of *connections* features prominently in this findings chapter. The increased comfort level with technology expressed by the participants due to the global pandemic also became a significant finding in the research. This was reinforced by their insights regarding the important features of an e-mentoring program. Additionally, the global pandemic created a new dimension to the phenomenon of professional isolation, and ultimately strengthened the need for mentorship.

Altruism

Altruism is the "unselfish regard for or devotion to the welfare of others" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). I identified altruism as a key theme given the noticeable lack of focus on remuneration in the interviews. I interpreted this as reflecting or demonstrating that ECEs believe that pay, while not insignificant, was less important in light of other benefits, such as working with strong management and leadership, appreciating a positive working environment, knowing they were making a difference in children's and families' lives, feeling pride in working in ELCC, having similar philosophies with their co-workers, understanding the importance of ELCC and valuing their job security in the sector.

My interpretation of participant insights as reflecting altruism was influenced by my knowledge of the ELCC context that I will describe before presenting the participants' words that demonstrated altruism. Despite the historically low rates of pay in ELCC, prospective

learners continue to register for and graduate from ECE training in post-secondary institutions across Canada. In one Manitoba college, for example, 108 students graduated from the ECE program between 2018/2019 (RRC, 2018/19, pp. 77-78). During the Coronavirus pandemic, caring professions were frequently profiled in the media. Additionally, Early Childhood Education was in the spotlight as the federal government proposed a Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan in the 2021 budget. This attention to the profession may have drawn potential individuals to the sector. Other reasons could be that the work, while challenging, is recognized as stable and reliable, as Lisa noted in their interview "it's just the stability is the security."

Optimistically, the announcements by the federal government to increase funding for "expanding the quality, capacity and compensation of the existing and future early childhood workforce" are regarded by ECEs as positive measures towards change in the sector (Yalnizyan & McCuaig, 2020, p. 3). This has given new life to a sector that has been advocating for such a plan for decades. Job satisfaction is a key factor that leads to feeling committed to the ECE profession and is supported by high rates of retention and often associated with lower staff turnover in ELCC programs. From a global perspective, up to 70% of centre based ECEs in Germany, Israel, Norway and Denmark reported in the Starting Strong survey "all in all, I am satisfied with my job" (OECD, 2018, p. 78).

The most common reasons the participants identified as motivating them to stay in their current employment in ELCC were having a strong management and leadership, a positive working environment, and co-workers with whom they shared similar philosophies of early learning. Responses to the question "What have been motivating factors that have kept you working in this program?" included "yeah, a really positive working environment…I would

probably say positive co-workers…co-workers who just strive to do their best every day." Strong management and leadership were also an important motivator in participants' accounts of what influenced how they felt about their work. Geoffrey, for example, responded with "a management team who believes in me and a management team that allows me to really push what I want to do with the childcare field…having a supportive management team has been amazing."

Perhaps one of the most positive responses to the question came from Chantal:

> I'm lucky where I work right now. It's really inspiring where we work…everybody that's there is super supportive and encouraging…they're always ready to listen and they always check in and see if we're okay…it's just really motivational.

Another common motivating factor for staying in ELCC identified by the participants was their sense that they were making a positive difference for the children and families themselves. Sandra commented about their reason to stay:

> Definitely children…you've made connections with them, then regardless of what's going on around you as far as the workplace or just the sector in general, you know, the children are always what kept me there…you just feel bad about leaving so you stay at job longer than you wanted to.

Joy also highlighted their involvement with the children:

> "I love interacting with the kids, I really love watching them play and their imagination and I love watching them grow."

Rachel declared:

> The connections…that we make with the families and the children…the families do come to you for support, they do seek you out for advice…I mean, we don't get the recognition elsewhere, but that feeling I get from helping my families is definitely what helps me.

Other motivations identified for staying in an ECE position were pride in the work, having similar philosophies with leaders and co-workers, having the ability to learn and move forward in their position, understanding the importance of the work, and having a stable, consistent job.

One context for what I interpreted as altruism related to working as an ECE, was how long they had been working in the early education sector. Based on information offered by the participants in their interviews, I learned that the average length of service of the participants was 17 years. The longest career was stated as 30 years and the shortest was five years. The average number of programs that the participants had worked in, including their present employment was five. The highest number of programs worked in was 15, the lowest, was one program.

A fitting definition of the word altruism is "willingness to do things that bring advantages to others, even if it brings disadvantage for yourself" (Cambridge.org, n.d.). Altruism was evident in the participants' reflections as they made statements about being present for the children, enjoying the privileges of observing and understanding child development, being available as a resource for families, and for supporting novice ECEs as they begin their careers.

The findings from the ECE participants related to job satisfaction, meeting others' needs, putting others wants and requirements ahead of their own, and understanding the contribution that an ECE can make to the building of future generations exudes the sense of altruism in the workforce.

Barriers

The next theme that emerged from the analysis was *barriers.* When asked to reflect on motivating factors to change employers, some of the participants identified that working with poor leadership was a significant factor in deciding to leave their employment. Other reasons that the participants noted were negative working environments in relation to disconnects with their co-workers, bullying in the workplace, philosophical differences, being unmotivated, geographical distance, lack of professional recognition and lack of professional development opportunities.

Poor Leadership and Negative Working Environments

Asking the participants to identify a factor(s) that may have motivated them to change employers garnered many diverse responses, yet there were several that were similar amongst most of the participants. The most common reasons identified were poor leadership and negative working environments that had managers failing to mitigate the negative discourse in the working environment and being invisible. When queried about the concept of visibility, Rachel divulged: “Management kept making demands, but never actually spent any time on the floor. They didn’t see what we did every day.” Others identified “the number one motivating factor to leave has probably mostly been just the lack of professionalism, it’s not just the frontline, I’ve found it even in management,” a statement reinforced by Joy: “When I first started working, the person in charge wasn’t qualified, was unstable and definitely not professional…”

In some cases, ECEs discussed the absence of a workplace orientation by the program leadership when starting a new position or insufficient encouragement or performance support after they had been working for a few years. Chantal stated:

> The support wasn't really there, it felt really confusing, it just felt like work, just *so* work, and it wasn't enjoyable, everybody was so tired, and it wasn't very motivating, a lot of focus on the negative things, it was just never inspiring or positive, it was just really sad to go to work…

Strong leadership in an ELCC program was cited as one of the most positive reasons to remain employed, so it is intriguing that certain leadership qualities would underpin the rationale to depart and was regarded as a barrier to experiencing true job satisfaction – the feeling of happiness with one's work. When queried, participants articulated philosophical differences with their managers, including too many rules and demands made by their leadership that had little connection to the care and education of children. In one case, a participant noted their leader hindered the program by intervening in every program decision, leaving the ECEs feeling doubted and disheartened. Another ECE mentioned that if their leader bullied the staff, this would be a significant factor in their decision to leave their employment. To be fair-minded, the role of a leader in an ELCC program has many facets. In Manitoba, and in many ELCC programs in Canada and beyond, the leader is responsible for not only the human resources but also the financial and regulatory administration of the program. They may also have additional responsibilities such as participating in external committees and public-facing expectations. The time spent directly with ECE staff may be minimal, contributing to the lack of visibility that one participant noted. It is difficult for a director to provide mentorship for their staff if it is not the primary focus of their work. These outcomes contribute to barriers to job satisfaction.

Professional Isolation and Barriers

A significant finding was the pervasive feelings of loneliness, stress, and discourse often driven by a disconnection with their co-workers, philosophical or pedagogical differences, and a

shortage of professional recognition in their current or previous workplaces. When I asked the participants to tell me what the phrase professional isolation meant to them and what experiences they had that reinforced it, the participants were thoughtful as they questioned "do you mean in the ECE world or just in general?" and "it depends if you're looking at the big picture." Others referred to the term *isolation* as being a common word used today due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and some identified feeling isolated in a literal sense as they had not yet returned to work after being laid off due to the pandemic. Some of the collective descriptions for professional isolation were feeling a lack of support from their co-workers, having philosophical differences with unqualified co-workers and a lack of fit in the workplace. Cathy and Rachel used metaphors to describe the feeling of professional isolation, such as "being on that island all by ourselves" and "we are considered second-class citizens," but the most common descriptor of feeling professionally isolated or professional isolation was loneliness, often associated with a lack of connection to their co-workers. Geoffrey supported this description by telling me:

> "So, to me, professional isolation refers to, um, working alone. In, working alone in a capacity that…you're not, you're not exactly isolated. It just feels…lonely."

A similar response from Jennifer reinforced this articulation of loneliness as they stated:

> "I think it just means you kind of feel alone and doesn't necessarily mean you are alone. It just means that you feel like you're alone."

Regarding the disconnection from co-workers, Joy told me:

> "I feel like you're not connecting with people, people who have the same um knowledge or have different knowledge that you can sit down and share with…"

and from a wider perspective, Robert stated:

> "Feeling alone in what you do professionally…a lot of people don't understand or care to understand."

Access to Professional Development

The feelings of disconnection from co-workers were coupled with lack of access to professional development. When pressed for more information, ECEs described situations in which they were required to pay for their own professional development as their employer would not subsidize the cost or they had to seek out their own resources. ECEs indicated that when professional development opportunities were readily available, they were unaffordable and inaccessible due to time or location. When asked when they looked for professional development opportunities, Joy expressed: "Often outside of work. I'm too tired to look for that stuff." Kirstin shared that: "Being a single parent, it's hard enough to get everything done when you're working, not in getting…you know, in touch with the rest of the community, except when something has been organized."

Kirstin associated the disconnection from their team in the workplace to not having regular staff meetings where they could be together and brainstorm and talk.

Geographical distance was a barrier some ECEs explained that also contributed to feeling disconnected from their co-workers and the broader ELCC network. Lori supposed that professional isolation could be felt by ECEs who work in small communities. Kirstin, who works in an ELCC program located in a rural community stated:

> "I've always felt that we're not in contact with the rest of the childcare field…I think in a rural community, you're really not connected in so many ways."

The Manitoba Child Care Association (MCCA) has several regional chapters beyond the city of Winnipeg that offer professional development and networking opportunities for ECEs.

With the onset of the pandemic, in-person workshops and conferences were cancelled, which further contributed to an ongoing and building sense of isolation. However, within a short period of time, meetings and seminars started popping up in virtual environments, bringing together ECEs from various communities. This resulted in creating a greater collective, as ECEs from regional communities were now able to engage with those who resided and worked in the urban areas. I will discuss the reaction to these gatherings in more detail when I consider the responses to the interview questions about e-mentoring.

Language Barriers

A significant revelation that Chantal described as contributing to feeling professionally isolated was experiencing a language barrier related to a recent change in their employment. Chantal encountered some challenges during the transition to a workplace that was primarily made up of ECEs whose first language was not English. Chantal stated:

> They speak a different language than English. So, I'm not understanding a lot of the communication that's going on…I felt out of the loop…it took a little while for me to adjust, um, I felt isolated when I first started, it took a while because I had to get to know people, it's really hard to get know people when I'm not understanding what they're saying.

Although only one participant voiced language as a barrier, I have included it as the ELCC workforce across Canada has recently been bolstered by the influx of immigrant workers for whom English is not their first language. One might think that the situation would be reversed, and that the isolation would be felt by those who are coming into a largely English-speaking workplace. However, from Chantal's admission, clearly the language environment was more diverse than what might be expected.

Type of Care and Professional Isolation

Another barrier contributing to professional isolation is the type of care. Family childcare (FCC) providers, those who provide ELCC programming in their homes, are often under-recognized members of the sector, and are susceptible to feelings of professional isolation given that they work independently in their own homes. Two ECEs who provide Family Child Care participated in my study, both of whom identified that working alone contributes to isolation in the truest sense of the word, although, both mentioned that choosing to work as FCC providers reinforced the ability to make their own decisions and be independent, two choices that they both celebrated. When I probed them more about feelings of isolation, both FCC providers identified that they did not really feel isolated, however, they acknowledged that the profession itself is isolated, a statement reinforced by most of the other participants. Rita, who provides ELCC for infants and toddlers in a group childcare centre noted that most of the professional development that is offered is geared to preschool caregivers, and that:

> "Infant care is not as widely open, like it's not in touch, and I must really look for what is offered for infants…you have to make more of an effort to find out things yourself."

The ELCC sector provides services to children from birth to 12 years of age. Depending on how these age groups are distributed, it is possible that the ECEs may develop a sense of isolation from being unable to collaborate with others, such as Rita has suggested.

Lack of Professional Recognition

The lack of professional recognition is a common argument acknowledged by ECEs globally. In the interviews, this topic came up frequently as a reason for not only feeling professionally isolated but also as a reason that some would choose to leave the sector permanently.

Cathy described it as:

> Nobody really understands what our profession is. Everyone knows what teachers do, everyone knows what doctors do, what lawyers do, even like people that pick up the garbage, but I don't really think they know what ECEs do, nobody understands what we do.

Despite professional advocacy campaigns, Federal Government Throne Speeches and even the proclamation of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (Bird et al., 1970) outlining the necessity of childcare services for women's social and economic equality, the work of an Early Childhood Educator continues to be an enigma. As the participants used words and phrases such as loneliness, feeling alone despite working with a group of people, and the sentiment of their profession being misunderstood, it came as no surprise to me that professional isolation is a fitting phrase which resonates with ECEs.

The barriers that the ECEs identified were numerous and real. However, the ECEs demonstrated resilience by acknowledging that when a barrier existed, there were ways around or over them, contributing to the next theme, willingness.

Willingness

The subsequent theme of Willingness surfaced after a series of questions about the participants' experiences with mentorship. I detected that the ECEs had the willingness to consider the potential benefits of an e-mentoring strategy to mitigate professional isolation. When given the opportunity to provide their feedback, ECEs in this study readily communicated what they needed so that they could continue to offer quality early learning and childcare services.

Willingness is “the quality of being happy to do something if it is needed” (Cambridge.org, n.d.). This theme of willingness was evident in my interviews with the participants and is one of the virtues that contributes to the resiliency of the sector. As with altruism, ECEs demonstrate willingness to put children and families’ needs first, even when the situation is challenging, acknowledging that the contribution of a highly qualified workforce is an important component of a high quality ELCC sector, and an important factor that keeps ECEs working in the programs. Mentoring novice ECEs was an example of willingness that the participants highlighted to position those who are new to the sector workforce and to find inspiration for their own practice from others. Additionally, the strong support for an e-mentoring strategy that is structured around mentoring principles demonstrated the participants’ willingness to try something innovative and could potentially work towards building a sense of confidence in the ELCC sector. The participants’ expressed desire to stay current through ongoing professional development whether opportunities were offered in-person or virtually, and synchronously or asynchronously, were examples of willingness to accept responsibility for their personal job satisfaction. These were several approaches that the participants voiced frequently, that led me to the theme of willingness.

Previous Experience with Professional Mentorship

The participants’ previous experience with professional mentorship contributed to their willingness to consider e-mentoring and share their reflections about the benefits and the long-term impacts of being mentored. As one of the goals of my research study was to determine what types of experiences the ECEs had with professional mentorship, I asked the participants about being supported by a practicum instructor during their post-secondary ECE studies and how that position supported their professional practice. Most of the participants recalled the relationship

they had with their practicum instructor, although several of them humorously identified that the time frame had been so distant, that they could not recollect specifics about their experience. The characteristics that were most identified of the practicum instructor were: supportive, giving feedback, passionate and, being knowledgeable about child development and the profession. The ECEs were quick to provide positive experiences they had with their practicum instructor. Sandra stated:

> She was very supportive of me. And I knew that I could go and talk to her if I had any questions about my assignments…she always provided really good feedback…gave me ideas…of how to scaffold things even more…she was so gentle, has a lot of knowledge, a lot of passion. She kept stoking that fire for me…I really loved having her as a practicum instructor.

Jennifer communicated that the practicum instructor provided the role of a coach and mentor:

> Going into my first practicum I was terrified…my instructor for my practicum was just the most calm, friendly, and super sweet…and she was like, they (the children) are going to come to you, you don't even have to worry, it's all your energy…that is something that has resonated with me like my entire career…she was so encouraging, and always available…she was great.

Lori expressed how the practicum instructor championed their desire to advocate for developmentally appropriate practice and children's rights:

> My instructor definitely had my back when it came to like if I disagreed with something my practicum supervisor (in the centre) said... she helped me build up my strengths and that it's okay for me to disagree with other people about the way things should be done.

ECEs described the ways their practicum instructors supported their learning, helped them to figure out how to manage differences in philosophies and how to assert themselves as confident learners. The two key attributes identified by almost all the participants, were regular observations by the practicum instructor at the field placement site, followed by feedback sessions and opportunities to contact the practicum instructor in multiple ways at any time. These aspects were seen as positive and felt as a loss when that relationship terminated after graduation. In some circumstances, ECEs mentioned that they had continued a relationship with their practicum instructor after they graduated. Robert stated:

> I still keep in touch; we still talk now. And that's reassuring knowing that if there's some big question I have, like I don't know, pedagogical crisis, that I could confide in this person, and they would still be there.

When I asked the participants if they considered their practicum instructor to be a mentor, the answer was a resounding yes. The responses revealed to me that as students they were aware of how important the role the practicum instructor played in their learning process. When I asked the participants to reflect on their experiences now as ECEs, they viewed the practicum instructor's role as significant in how they developed in their career. I interpreted this as a sense that regardless of whether ECEs are learning or have years of experience, they still understand the importance of having a supportive figure in their career. Research from Doan (2016) recognized that being assigned a mentor after graduation has been shown to be beneficial to the transition to the ELCC workplace. I asked the participants if they had been assigned a mentor when they began working after graduation. Fifteen of the sixteen participants said that they had not been assigned a mentor. As the response was overwhelmingly negative, the next question that I had prepared to ask, which was how that relationship compared to the one they had

experienced with their practicum instructor, was superfluous. Since most of the participants noted that they had not been assigned a mentor at the onset of their career I was motivated to ask what their beginning experiences were like. The participants reflected on their past experiences as a novice ECE, illustrated by the similar statements from several participants: Michael, Lisa, and Eileen all said: "I was just thrown in." Cathy told me about their first work experience: "What the hell am I supposed to do? I had to trust my own judgement and hit the floor running." Jennifer voiced: "I looked up to people, I would just kind of watch."

The one participant who identified being assigned a mentor when they began working remarked: "They were very helpful, understood my experience, and saw my potential." These statements were raw and reflected what the participants acknowledge, with the one exception, as a flaw in the orientation process for new ECEs, a problem reinforced by Doan (2016) in their research on induction support of ECEs.

The benefits of having a mentor were noted by participants as someone who can answer questions and can relate to the experience of being a novice practitioner. Geoffrey mentioned that a mentor can provide ongoing teaching of skills to ECEs, while others remarked on how a mentor can provide non-judgemental feedback, affirmation, and build connections between theory and practice. The overwhelming response to having a mentor was having the feeling that someone is supporting you as an ECE. As I recall the reasons why ECEs leave their employment, feeling like there is a lack of connection and professional isolation, it is clear to me that the role of the mentor requires greater exploration. I will discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Willingness to Reflect on E-mentoring

The physical proximity of a mentor is described in Lillian Katz's (1995) work on career stages of ECEs. Katz identifies the early career stages of an ECE; 'survival' and 'consolidation'

as the periods of time in which an onsite mentor would be most valuable. I asked the participants whether they felt a mentor should be onsite and who would benefit the most from this arrangement. The purpose of this question was to determine if the ECE would identify the mentor, the mentee, both, or another possibility such as the children or families. This question resulted in mixed responses. Some of the ECEs were adamant that mentorship should take place in-person. In some cases, ECEs changed their minds about their original opinion within the interview period. This was an example of when the participants became comfortable during the interview and returned to their statements and provided anecdotes to support their responses. One common reflection was that onsite mentoring provides an opportunity to observe and notice what is happening in real time. This was substantiated by Geoffrey who said:

> I think a mentor at a distance doesn't have the opportunity to observe and uh, capitalize on those teachable moments where you are doing something that you should be doing and acknowledging that. Yeah…onsite mentoring is huge…huge.

Eileen said steadfastly: "no, you need somebody there to see how things go from day to day and to see how the staff operate and run and work." And, as the topic of qualified and unqualified staff continued to come up during the interviews, Joy referred to onsite mentoring as necessary: "Yeah, absolutely, especially if you've got…more CCAs or students than trained ECEs, there should be a mentor on site."

Those ECEs who originally equated having an on-site mentor as essential, who changed their opinion said that they could gather information from other sources who work in-place with their mentee, or ask the mentee to reflect on their work, which could then be discussed at a later point. Most of the ECEs mentioned that they felt it would be beneficial to have an on-site mentor, however, Jennifer declared: "I think it depends where you are in your career. I think for

new graduates or people coming into the program…having a good mentor on site is crucial…that's how they are going to learn," or Eileen, who was one who revisited their first response, countered with: "I think mentorship could happen online, yes, absolutely. I can see that totally being like the way we're having this conversation now."

From these alternating perspectives, it seems that onsite mentorship would be ideal if it was possible and mentoring from a distance would also provide the connections that ECEs are expressing the need for. When pressed about the benefits of mentorship and who benefits the most, the responses were similar. Many felt that both parties would benefit. The mentee would benefit by having a regular connection and process for support, and the mentor would benefit by being able to impart their knowledge and expertise. Danielle noted that: "Having a mentor would be especially beneficial for people that are working in a remote setting as they would be able to find out what is going on beyond their geographical location."

The participants' responses reinforced that having opportunities to be mentored and exploring the possibilities that an e-mentoring strategy can offer is a significant finding in my research.

Strategies

The final theme that I identified was *strategies*. I returned to the initial exploratory notes from the interviews that imparted ideas about how to overcome the barriers they expressed earlier. I viewed these as strategies to mitigate professional isolation. The ECEs who I interviewed were eager to share their thoughts about their work, and how it impacted them, both professionally and personally. They were able to identify their altruistic characteristics by recognizing that children and families are dependent on a high-quality early learning and childcare system. They acknowledged that ECE is a vocation. There was a strong sense of

willingness to overcome the barriers to job satisfaction, and work towards a brighter future with strategies that could mitigate the barriers that contribute to professional isolation.

Building an E-mentoring Program

Many of the ECEs acknowledged that onsite mentoring may not always be an option and offered up their own thoughts about how distance mentoring could be provided. This led into my next question for which I inquired if an e-mentoring program were to be available, what should it consist of. The feedback and responses for this question were multi-dimensional but had common themes among them. The themes were related to exchanges of ideas, communication and discussion, presence and availability, timeliness, and the need for a strong element of reflective practice. When asked who should provide the mentorship, the participants identified ECEs who stood out in their community as knowledgeable professionals, those who had specific experiences in professional areas such as curriculum, child guidance, and career laddering, and included those ECEs with differing philosophies, such as those who follow the Montessori or Reggio Emilia approaches as examples. There were some responses that indicated a desire to know more about sensitive topics such as mental wellness support and workplace bullying.

Technological Competence

A significant finding from the research was that the participants noted that their technological skills had improved and their comfort level with online platforms had increased since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. They were able to clearly articulate their preferences for platforms and other supportive technologies. The ECEs preferred to have an online platform that would support the opportunity to share video footage, recording of discussions, and the possibility of a global existence were also seen as important options. When I inquired about the platforms they were familiar with and whether they would be suitable for a potential e-mentoring

program, the participants suggested Zoom as it provided opportunities for conferencing and a visual presence. These features were noted as being particularly important in a mentoring relationship. Some of the respondents mentioned that the Manitoba ECEs and CCAs Facebook site offers a quasi-mentoring platform, although they identified that the discussions can quickly become judgemental and emotionally unsafe. There were other online conferencing options that were suggested, Chantal mentioned: “Messenger is pretty good too, like their videos and stuff, their quality is actually really good. I don’t know about privacy, per se…”

The mention of privacy by Chantal, and the concern about judgemental behaviors reinforces the topic of online safety. Multiple participants in the research process identified “a safe space” as being important for online mentoring. As another noteworthy outcome of my research, I will discuss the topic of safety as it relates to not only privacy and confidentiality, but also from an emotionally supportive and non-judgemental perspective in Chapter 6. Some of the ECEs recognized having forums or message boards in which topics could be discussed was a good support, others mentioned that mentor commitment was important for this to be taken seriously, and that it was important for mentors to know how to mentor someone. A suggestion for a mentor matching service through a paid subscription would allow for an option to connect with ECEs who speak a specific language or have knowledge of desirable topics. Additionally, I will discuss the availability of synchronous and asynchronous options for an e-mentoring strategy.

E-mentoring Development

I wanted to understand if the participants would be interested in developing an e-mentoring program. The responses were overwhelmingly positive, with many enthusiastically stating, “yes, sign me up” and others that offered their assistance in any way that I felt would be helpful,

indicating that they would be honored to provide input in the process. At this point in the interviews, I shared with the participants that my eventual goal was to develop an e-mentoring program, however it was important to gain insight into what that program should look like by gathering perspectives from the ECEs who might use it. All of the respondents identified that they thought it is a worthy idea, evident from these statements: "it would be nice to have more support" and "I definitely would be and like I said, if it was something where there's people who are experts and then also a place where you can reach out to people, I would love that" and, "I would be willing to contribute whatever skills people think I have."

Building a professional e-mentoring program necessitates consideration of the opinions of both mentees and the mentors. When asked what an e-mentoring program might consist of, the participants had thoughtful suggestions. I have chosen to organize their suggestions into four groupings to categorize the elements that were proposed by the participants. The categories are: (1) Platform; (2) Communication; (3) Content; and (4) Characteristics.

Platforms. The types of platforms that were recommended were all virtual ones based on the premise of an e-mentoring program. Two stood out as the most common submitted by the participants. They were Facebook, "an American online and social networking service" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook, n.d.) and Zoom "a cloud platform for video, voice, content sharing and chat that runs across mobile devices, desktop computers, telephones and room systems" (zoom.us/about, n.d.). The choice of these two platforms could be attributed to their familiarity with them, rather than the participants' experience or ability in distinguishing quality. Still, one participant advocated for another application based upon their experience with the high resolution of video production. This same ECE added that they were unsure how privacy is ensured within the application they proposed. It was recommended that a Facebook

site be separate and distinct from the existing one mentioned previously in the study. Jennifer stated: “I almost feel like that Manitoba ECE Facebook page is a bit of an e-mentoring program…it would need a little bit more control, so it becomes less of a venting page.”

The rationale for an independent site has much to do with creating an emotionally safe space. It was further noted by Jennifer that: “The discussions on the current site go sideways in a hurry.” Rita mentioned: “The Manitoba ECEs and CCAs Facebook site goes really off the topic, and there’s lots of bickering and all that stuff.” Lisa reiterates these reflections by telling me:

> I see the site of the CCAs and the ECEs as uh, a not really mentoring site. But from where I can learn. I always read you know, the comments. It’s just sometimes it’s more of a complaint. I try to erase from my mind whenever I read that I don’t think I like.

A Facebook page has advantages, primarily because it is a free platform and largely accessible to all who choose to use social media. Chantal mentioned: “Everybody has phones…and they don’t always have time to find a computer to sit at.”

Chantal’s statement reinforces the need and desire for an accessible process and platform for the e-mentoring program. The concern about emotional safety is a valid consideration. Facebook sites require close monitoring for safe and reliable discussions. This responsibility would require dedicated administrators, especially since the participants identified the exchange of ideas must be positive, quick and have the option to discuss sensitive topics. In comparison Zoom offers a virtual lock to ensure complete privacy, which was a common feature characterized by the participants for times when discussing issues of mental health supports and personal topics. If either application is hosted by a professional association, it could be considered a benefit for members and as the primary administrator, matters of privacy and

confidentiality could be reinforced just as they are in professional development opportunities that are offered in person.

Zoom, and other virtual meeting spaces that have become popular during the pandemic, provide the opportunity for synchronous meetings, teaching and learning to occur in group and breakout sessions. The participants described becoming more comfortable with online platforms, as Rachel identified "the visual aspect brings that connection as well." Synchronous and asynchronous sessions are important when considering time zone differences and scheduling of mentoring sessions.

This may be one of the covert benefits of the pandemic I uncovered during my research, as people all over the globe have become more technically savvy. If ECEs desired a visual connection with their colleagues, families, and other professionals, learning to use platforms such as Facebook or Zoom, became a necessity. As stated earlier, this is a noteworthy finding in the research and adds support for the contemporary significance and applicability of an e-mentoring strategy.

Communication. Suggestions for how communication occurs in an e-mentoring strategy is another category that the participants had recommendations for. A flexible online delivery is key to ensuring that all who are involved have access to the components of an e-mentoring program. Synchronous video conferencing allows for face-to-face discussion, idea exchanges and for question-and-answer sessions. These gatherings could be recorded and provided to users for asynchronous viewing. Other suggestions for communication were forums and message boards for specific topics, different threads, ideas, and philosophies that could provoke discussions. A synchronous chat function, space for reflection and conversations were also offered up as valuable characteristics. These could be accessed by selecting an option by way of a series of

drop-down menus, as recommended by one of the participants. It is clear from my analysis that ECEs know what they want in relation to communicating about their work and that they are prepared to communicate in many ways because they recognize the importance and desire the connection.

Content. Suggestions for content were wide-ranging, from how to improve professional practice to how to deal with being bullied by a co-worker or parent. Ideas such as sharing new research and building national and global awareness were also recommended for content. Some of the participants suggested matching mentors with mentees based on areas of interest, or specific expertise to build learning communities. Opportunities for webinars and guest speakers were also identified as potential content in an e-mentoring program with the subject-matter ultimately being determined by those who were engaged in the process. Chu (2014) recommends coaching opportunities for connecting curriculum and teaching, and for establishing what an individualized professional development plan might look like. These suggestions could be added to the conversation with a team of program developers that includes ECEs.

Characteristics. The provision of a mentorship program and being mentored are two professional development opportunities that have far-reaching outcomes. The program must be professional, mirroring the experiences that were described by participants when they discussed the outcomes of being mentored by a college instructor. Therefore, I would recommend an educative mentoring process be considered in the development of the program. “Educative mentoring is mentoring that goes beyond the quick-fix, ‘feel good’ support” (Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005). “It is based on constructivist principles that involve building compelling theoretical knowledge about teaching and learning” (Richter et al, 2013), and it “facilitates the development of alternative beliefs and viewpoints” (Flores & Day, 2006). For these reasons, an

e-mentoring program would be remiss if mentor training was not included in the development of such a strategy. An e-mentoring program must be of high quality, and the development must involve engaging various partners, such as post-secondary education institutions, the professional association, government representation and ECEs. Professional mentoring is of utmost importance for an e-mentoring program to be credible in the eyes of the users. Several of the participants noted that the incidental mentoring that occurs through the Facebook site results in venting and at times less-than-professional responses to situations in which ECEs are looking for support and kindness. As stated earlier, many of the participants recalled the professional mentorship they received from their practicum instructors while they were in college. The mentorship and guidance were positively related to receiving feedback about their practice, developing their ongoing understanding of child development and the acknowledgement they received about working towards becoming a professional ECE. It is this relationship that an e-mentoring strategy must attempt to emulate. I will now turn to a discussion of the discovery of the superordinate theme – *connections*.

Superordinate Theme – Connections

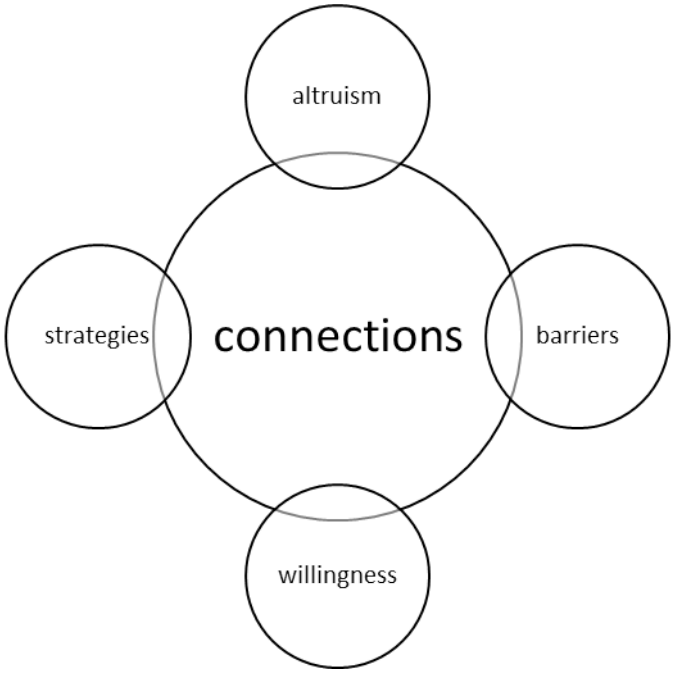
After the process of understanding the emerging themes, I began probing for relationships across the themes, perhaps even a unifying theme. It was not difficult, "putting like with like and putting a new name for the cluster" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 85) which resulted in identifying the superordinate theme, *connections*. Moreover, Smith et al. promote

> patterns between the emergent themes can be identified through the process of abstraction and developing a sense of what can be called a 'superordinate' theme. The superordinate theme emerges at a higher level as a result of putting the themes together (2009, p. 85).

The desire for connections was evident from the participants' insights. I extracted key words used by the participants during their interviews, which led to the development of four emergent themes: altruism, barriers, willingness, and strategies. Through the process of analyzing these emergent themes, the superordinate theme that resulted was *connections*. Connection is "the state of being related to someone or something else" (Cambridge.org, n.d.). When I inquired about what the ECEs' motivations were for staying in an employment situation, the words used were "fulfilling", "connections", "collaborative" and "security." These words are positive representations of what the ECEs acknowledge about their career experiences. When I asked about their understanding of the term professional isolation, a selection of words that were offered were "alone", "lonely", "exclusion", and "insecure". These words are more challenging representations of how the participants acknowledge their sense of self within their careers. Smith et al. (2009) state that there is "interplay between organizing themes by their positive and negative presentation…and that the function of the language use is inevitably deeply intertwined with the meaning and thoughts of the participant" (p. 87). It is my interpretation that the ECEs are conveying that a sense of connection is paramount to job satisfaction, and ultimately an approach to mitigate the phenomenon of professional isolation. Figure 6 illustrates the relationship between the themes and the superordinate theme of connection.

Figure 6

Relationship of Themes



An e-mentoring strategy can help build and support connections between ECEs by utilizing a platform that is accessible in the sense of cost, location, and ease of use. Providing multiple modes for mentees and mentors to communicate will reduce the barrier of needing to be in the same place at the same time. Incorporating subject matter that is practical and topical based on feedback and contributions from both the learning community and the individuals will make the content relevant. Additional research to understand the composition of the ECE workforce regarding cultural and language needs will be required as the sector continues to increase its diversity. This would support future steps to ensuring mentorship becomes available in the ECEs first languages and in culturally sensitive approaches. These steps will support a foundation of professionalism that is characteristic to Early Learning and Child Care.

Summary

This chapter has detailed the findings from the research process, including comprehensive responses from the participants to the interview questions. The distillation of key words in the analysis phase resulted in identifying themes of altruism, barriers, willingness, and strategies. The refinement of the themes helped to establish several noteworthy findings in my research. These significances included the evolution of ECEs comfort level with technology, the feelings of loneliness, stress and discourse driven by disconnections in the work environment, and the critical need for mentorship to reduce the sense of professional isolation. These research and analysis processes have led to me recognizing and considering my own unsettled moments when learning about the lived experiences of ECEs, understanding the overwhelming feelings of professional isolation, and the need for mentorship and e-mentoring as methods to connect ECEs together in a safe, non-threatening platform. The proceeding chapter will discuss these significant findings from the research process, including the convergence of the four emergent themes into the superordinate theme of connections. I will explore the development of an e-mentoring strategy as a mitigation for professional isolation.

Chapter 6: Discussion

My research study addressed the phenomenon of professional isolation as articulated by Early Childhood Educators in Manitoba. As a strategy to mitigate this phenomenon, they shared their ideas about mentorship and the most important aspects of an effective e-mentoring program for those who work in ELCC programs in Manitoba. In this chapter, I will discuss the most significant findings that arose from the research process. I will address the four themes that emerged from interpreting participant insights: altruism, barriers, willingness, strategies, and the superordinate theme of connections, into which the four themes converge. Additionally, I will discuss the role of the mentor and the development of an e-mentoring strategy that was championed by the participants. I will begin by addressing the impact of the Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic which became so prevalent that it developed into a fundamental concept in my research study as the term isolation became a household word across the globe. As such, the ubiquity of the phrase required me to be specific about the notion of *professional isolation*. This research study has contributed to my sense of optimism as the ECEs involved in my research were empowered to contribute to an inquiry that is deeply personal for them and their sector.

Coronavirus – COVID-19 – Who is Essential?

In March 2020, Manitoba along with the rest of Canada and the world, began to experience the impacts of the pandemic of Coronavirus COVID-19. ELCC programs, along with many other services were affected in ways that had not been seen in our lifetimes. What started as a slow reaction to the pandemic in Manitoba, swiftly moved to eventual shutdowns of many small businesses and personal care services; stores were limited to allowing minimal numbers of shoppers, and elementary to post-secondary schools turned to remote learning. ELCC programs were also ordered closed (gov.mb.ca/covid19/soe.html, March 20, 2020). The following week,

they were told to re-open and operate, albeit in reduced capacities by offering childcare services for essential workers (Manitoba.ca, [Covid 19 Circular 2020-23], March 24, 2020; March 31, 2020). The threat of a reduction in government operating funding loomed if ELCC centres did not comply with re-opening (globalnews.ca, March 2020). Centre managers and volunteer Boards of Directors were faced with making decisions that ultimately impacted the families, the children, and the ECEs who worked in the hundreds of centres in Manitoba. ECEs cried foul, as there was uncertainty at the time about whether children could spread the virus to each other and the ECEs, many of whom had their own family's health to worry about. Some also questioned the risk to more seasoned ECEs, those over the age of 50 years, who were at a greater risk for catching the virus (childcareisessential.ca, September 2020). Later, we saw this age group of ECEs being called back to work long after the younger ECEs, a fact stated by one of the participants that contributed to their personal feeling of isolation. The ELCC sector was in a state of uncertainty, with government communications giving programs little warning or time to adjust. There was a sense of unfairness and lack of recognition, as ECEs claimed over and over, that *they* were essential, for without them Manitobans in key positions could not work without childcare. At one point, early in the pandemic, there was a period of animosity between the government and the ELCC sector, a point made clear when the government suggested that the sector should "step up" and the sector responded that they had been "stepping up" for years. In my experience, this was the first time that the Manitoba ELCC sector had voiced their concerns with such fervour. The discourse led to the formation of a group aptly named ECE is Essential, a more vocal and radical collective of ECEs and sector allies. They proceeded to advocate on behalf of ELCC in Manitoba in numerous ways. The COVID-19 pandemic has thus unquestionably reinforced the sense of isolation for ECEs. This consciousness of isolation

intensified the pertinence of the research questions as the participants demonstrated a heightened sense of responsiveness that further affirmed the goals of my research as identified earlier in Chapter 1 and which I have reiterated in the next section.

The Research Goals

Previously, I introduced the goals of my research inquiry. They were:

- to understand how ECEs articulate a sense of professional isolation
- to understand the key elements of an effective e-mentoring program for ECEs; and,
- to determine whether e-mentoring could reduce the feelings of professional isolation for ECEs.

During their interviews I encouraged the participants to describe their thoughts regarding the term professional isolation and to recall situations that may have evoked these feelings. The interview questions (Appendix D) included opportunities to discuss the participants' experiences with mentorship and their ideas for the development of an e-mentoring strategy. The participants willingly shared their thoughts and experiences, clearly articulating specific instances of feeling professionally isolated. Whether the feelings of isolation are related to working with unqualified staff, differences in philosophy, not being able to collaborate with other ECEs, or the COVID-19 pandemic, the feelings are real and substantial. Some of the situations that the ECEs described are within the ECEs' control and others are not. Their ideas about mentorship as expressed in the interviews were deeply thoughtful and reflective, and the suggestions for an e-mentoring program were based on their own personal experiences and desires for a process that would meet the needs of both novice and experienced ECEs with a newfound technological confidence. As presented in the previous chapter, four themes emerged from the analysis I implemented once the interviews were complete. The following section discusses how I understood the issues that were

shared with me in the interviews and how they related to the research questions. I will also consider the implications of these matters beginning with a reiteration of the research questions.

The Research Questions and Four Emergent Themes

The research questions were formulated to explore the lived experiences of professional isolation of ECEs, to explore to what extent mentorship might mitigate these, and how receptive they might be to mentorship mediated by technology.

The interviews and the analysis phase resulted in the discussion of professional isolation and its consequences on the quality of ELCC for children and families, job satisfaction, and the issues of workforce retention in the ELCC sector. The interviews and the interpretation of the participants insights resulted in the determination of four emerging themes that reveal common expressions of emotions, suggestions, and approaches for mitigating the sense of professional isolation. The four themes that emerged were: altruism, barriers, willingness, and strategies. I will begin with altruism, the underpinning of why ECEs do what they do.

Altruism

To understand why ECEs might come to the decision to leave their occupation, it was essential to consider incentives that motivate them to continue employment in the sector, and their justifications for leaving specific positions or the sector entirely. Service to children, families, and their co-workers, were primary reasons articulated by the participants for remaining in ELCC. I connected these reasons to having a sense of altruism. Altruism is an unlikely word to be used when advocating for universal Early Learning and Child Care. In fact, universal ELCC is now more likely to be factored into a discussion about economics than how beneficial it is for children's well-being. In the Early Years Study 4 (Norrie McCain, 2020) the economic argument for ELCC takes top billing for its benefits, while frontline ECEs are more likely to

advocate for the benefits that children and families acquire than the fiscal payback. The participants in my research stated being present for children, loving being part of the children's lives, and delighting in children's development as being important inspirations for their career choice. Building connections with children and families is a fundamental aspect of their work and was a strong motivator for ECEs to continue working in the sector as many of the participants highlighted during their interviews.

The insights shared in the interviews reinforce the theme of altruism. Research about people who have altruistic personalities shows that they exhibit empathy and sympathy towards others and feel it is appropriate and right to follow the norm of social responsibility (Borman et al., 2001). ECEs likely fit within the bounds of this description, as empathy and sympathy are key skills in this career that are required for responsive and paying attention to children's thoughts and feelings (Atkinson Centre, 2021).

It would be remiss to avoid discussing remuneration for ECEs in this context. While low pay has only surfaced a few times in my research, I will note that the average hourly wage for an ECE II in Manitoba is $19.25 (MCCA, 2019). This fact reinforces the finding that ECEs do what they do, not for the monetary rewards, but for the altruism of being in a profession that they can feel strongly about and enjoy at the same time. Much research has been done on remuneration in ELCC – it has long been sustained that ECEs earn a salary that is below what might be considered a living wage, an amount that varies from province to province and contingent on an individual's circumstances. This could be considered a barrier, although this topic was not foremost in the participants responses, in fact it was rarely brought up. The next section identifies the barriers that the participants mentioned beginning with the contributors to professional isolation.

Barriers

Professional isolation is a common, yet under-recognized phenomenon in ELCC, which is evident in the anecdotes that the participants provided during their interviews. When asked to depict what professional isolation was like for them, words such as loneliness, sadness, and disconnection were used to describe the emotions that surfaced. I construed these descriptions as barriers to feeling satisfied with a career choice and motivations to discontinue employment in the ELCC sector.

The Lack of Induction Support as a Barrier

The participants identified many barriers to continuing their work in the ELCC sector, whether it was experiencing a negative working environment or the inability to advance in their careers as ECEs. In my research process, the ECE participants noted gaps in the induction support provided to novice ECEs as they began their careers. When asked, the participants discussed noteworthy people, such as practicum instructors, who had impacted their careers as ECEs. They expressed a desire to provide similar support to novice ECEs, having acknowledged how important these allies were in their own careers. In a 2016 study of induction experiences and needs in British Columbia (BC), it was established that "the ECEs in BC would like induction support in the forms of mentoring or peer support, observations, feedback, and professional development" (Doan, 2016, p. 49). Above all, Doan's findings affirmed that it is important for mentors to understand and offer guidance that is accessible, affordable, knowledgeable, and emotionally safe for ECEs. My own study findings are similar to Doan's.

Philosophical Similarities and Differences

Having similar philosophies with leaders and co-workers was identified by many of the participants as motivating to continue working in a centre. Michael stated that what was

important to them was “finding and working for an executive director who really matched or meshed with me,” along with a connection to the centre’s philosophy framework. Michael further noted that if there was a difference in philosophy, the negativity often trickled down to the rest of the staff working in the program and this could contribute to a negative working environment and the motivation to leave the program. Robert identified differences in philosophy and values as factors that would influence their decision to leave the centre. Described as an “unwillingness to change”, Robert shared their frustration about both management and their co-workers’ lack of desire to examine their professional practice and inconsistencies in centre policies which contributed to them feeling alone professionally. While these differences in philosophy may be seen as barriers, many ECEs will stay at their place of employment, altruistically trying to effect change. Reinforcing this, Robert identified: “At the end of the day, and at the end of many days and months and years, I can look back and feel good that I left the world a better place because of the work I did.”

A deficit of cohesiveness between co-workers was a widespread response by the participants as they acknowledged their experiences, which for many of them, reinforced a sense of professional isolation. Geoffrey identified that there was often too little time to interact with their co-workers as the staff-to-child ratio was so high that the opportunities were few and far between, telling me: “It’s taxing not being able to bounce ideas around.”

Working with unqualified staff was conveyed as contributing to feeling isolated professionally and as a barrier to collaborative practice. Joy communicated that they spend many hours of the day teaching and modelling for the CCAs, some of whom are appreciative and do their best to put the feedback into practice, while others show no interest in improving their professional practice.

As Joy said:

> this can feel isolating because you can't collaborate, because you're always teaching, I certainly don't mind mentoring but that's assuming you have a student who is looking for guidance as opposed to just telling them what to do.

The benefits of having a cohesive team of co-workers are motivational and enjoyable which add to the feelings of job satisfaction. When cohesiveness is non-existent, this is construed as a barrier to job satisfaction, and is perceived by many who participated in my study.

For example, Sandra described a difference in philosophy as "a lack of fit." They defined this feeling as: "We come from a lot of the same training, we know what best practice means for the children, but some people don't follow best practices or don't practice what they preach."

The term philosophy can also be understood as a practical component of an ELCC program. As examples, some programs may follow a specific methodology such as Montessori, "an educational system characterized by self-directed activities and self-correcting materials…developed by Dr. Maria Montessori in the early 1900s" (Christie, 2017) or the Reggio Emilia methodology which is "an approach to early childhood education which views young children as individuals who are curious about their world and have the powerful potential to learn from all that surrounds them" (Stoudt, n.d.). In relation to philosophy, Danielle told me:

> "I like there to be a philosophy…I'm going to say loosely, gives you a framework"

Other ECEs also stated that they feel strongly about working in a program that has a clearly stated philosophy because it reinforces their own personal values and beliefs about working with children. These programs are often able to entice ECEs as potential employees as there may be a connection between the centre approach and the ECE's professional standpoint. This perception is not always accurate however, as suggested by Sandra who pointed out

> I actually thought that working in Montessori would be different because the people in the centre should be following that philosophy. But that's also not the case. Everyone had their own take on it. So, I was just not finding a place that really met my own values and my own personal philosophy of working with children.

The differences in philosophies are significant findings in my research study as they are foundational to the feelings of professional isolation.

Diversity in the Workforce

Cultural values about education and children's rights can add to a challenging working environment; and while a willingness to recognize diversity was noted, an ECE wondered aloud that perhaps newcomers are directed to work in ELCC because it is perceived as an easy job and the need for skills training is not recognized as in other professions such as nursing or engineering.

> In fact, racialized and immigrant women tend to fill the most difficult and lowest paid jobs in Canada. Many women migrate to Canada with temporary permits to work as live-in nannies and find their way into group childcare programs as a result. (McCuaig & McWhinney, 2020, p.1)

A bridging program for internationally trained ECEs does exist through the Manitoba government Department of Families, however, the process is time-consuming and arduous, and many ECEs with credentials from other parts of the world express disdain about having to repeat their educational experience. Settling into a role in which the pay difference between CCA and ECE is minimal can make the decision to requalify questionable.

As the ELCC workforce continues to grow in numbers of women from immigrant backgrounds (Bhuyan et al., 2014), many are entering into western workplaces in which English

is most likely to be the primary language spoken. The situation Chantal described earlier about feeling excluded based on spoken language would be a common experience felt by many, including those who have English as an additional language or even those whose first language is English, as detailed by Chantal. This advances the topic of diversity in the ELCC workforce in Canada and the kinds of supports that need to be developed to assist the transition for globally trained ECEs into the Canadian workplace, as a strategy for building a sustainable sector.

Professional Recognition

Professional recognition, or lack thereof was a barrier to job satisfaction that was emphasized by all the participants who were interviewed and suggested that it further contributed to feelings of professional isolation. There are many factors that contribute to professional recognition. From a micro perspective, recognition can come from internal sources such as co-workers, families, and even children. A macro-perspective of recognition would be demonstrated through government policy, remuneration, and societal views on the importance of early learning and childcare. The participants were able to substantiate why they felt a dearth of recognition in their careers in the form of objections to increasing rates of pay by the public and sometimes by families whose children are enrolled in care. The ECEs acknowledged inconsistent support for operational funding for ELCC programs by governments and a perpetual deficiency of understanding the profession by anyone outside of ELCC. Some of the participants noted that there is a difference in professional recognition for schoolteachers and ECEs. Rita, who holds a Masters degree noted: “I feel like our field is professionally isolated, the way we are not treated the same as teachers are.” They further questioned the fundamental differences, as Rita reinforced their point about the importance of early years education: “It is a well-researched fact that the first five years of a child’s life is significant to later life trajectories.”

Jennifer shared that they have many teacher friends who talk about their work and their education yet are dismissive of Early Childhood Educators. “They don’t value my degree, as much as I do.” Further recognizing “people don’t see our profession as a profession…it’s isolating and it’s a little bit discouraging.”

ECEs and their allies have been vocal about the general lack of regard for the profession for decades. Many of the advocacy efforts have fallen to the wayside, government promises have failed to come to fruition and there are numerous other examples of this ongoing debate about the importance of ELCC services. The Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 has unearthed a verifiable lack of recognition for the fundamental need for early learning and childcare services and the ECEs working in ELCC programs in Manitoba and across Canada. The confusion and lack of information about COVID-19 and the expectations of service continuance was remarked upon by the ECEs who participated in the interviews for this inquiry which was underway in the Fall of 2020. At that point in time, Canada was well-entrenched in the throes of COVID-19, however, Manitoba was one of a handful of provinces and territories that had very few cases of the virus over the summer months. Sandra recalled: “Feeling especially isolated with the pandemic and working in childcare and not have the province to backup and provide information.”

As the pandemic continued, ELCC programs were expected to continue to offer services, without a plan in place and in Sandra’s words: “That was very isolating, trying to figure out what is my role, what does the government expect of me? I don’t know.”

In some circumstances ELCC programs began to experience reduced numbers of families using their services as the parents were either working at home or had been laid off from their employment. This resulted in the ECEs being laid off from their work, and as with other

Canadians in the same situation, a sense of the unknown was prevalent. ELCC programs operated with skeleton-like staffing, acknowledging that this was indeed an unprecedented time in all our lives. In July 2020, a provincial program was introduced to kickstart the Manitoba economy, which like every other province in the country was suffering due to early lockdowns of most non-essential services. As Manitobans started to slowly return to employment, the number of children requiring childcare increased. However, industries continued to encourage their employees to work from home, and this created less of a need for formal ELCC services than before the pandemic for numerous reasons such as fear of children catching the virus while in a group setting or cost-savings for families who no longer required to pay for childcare services. The lower numbers of children in centres meant that not all ECEs who had been laid off would return to their place of employment. Danielle said that she felt isolated during this period of lay-off: “I’m experiencing it right now, I think the COVID put us in that kind of situation. I think I’m one of those few people that have not been called back, they’re trying to keep me safe.”

Lisa, who offers childcare in their home stated that the confusion in which businesses were told to shut down left them feeling overlooked: “Just don’t put me last, I feel like everybody is asked to shut down, but the home care part was not asked.”

At the time of this writing, Manitoba is experiencing the beginnings of the fourth wave of the pandemic. Pundits and citizens argue that prior to the availability of the vaccination programs the Manitoba provincial government had taken a laissez-faire attitude to the situation, putting fiscal and political interests ahead of pandemic management. Positive COVID-19 test results were starting to be related to ELCC programs and schools earlier in the year, resulting in the school year being terminated earlier than usual. However, decisions to send children back to schools in the Fall of 2021 had been made and there remain questions about whether children are

more susceptible to the Delta and other variants, which will in turn increase the risk for those who are responsible for them. Despite this, the vaccination programs are underway across the province and there is hope that the fourth wave will not be as serious as previous ones. It is likely that most Manitobans are looking forward to when the door can be shut on the virus, although when this will occur remains to be seen. The Coronavirus pandemic has been devastatingly impactful to citizens around the world. It has a created a historical bookmark for our generations of families and children. The impact of the pandemic was important to document in my dissertation, not only for the significant effect it had on our global communities, but also because it altered how ECEs understood and articulated the phenomenon of professional isolation.

Gender

Another barrier that was identified was gender, as noted by Robert who considers gender as both a barrier to job satisfaction and a reason for feeling isolated. They provided examples of being left out of conversations or not wanting to participate in the discussions with other ECEs that were personal and related to sensitive topics. Robert told me that they worried about offending their co-workers and expressed that: “They can’t say that or be as open as they would be because they might offend me.”

The gender differences in the ELCC workforce have been considered in many research studies. Identified in their 2019 study Cole et al., noted about male ECEs: “because of their scarcity in the field, male educators may also require intentional supports that address the particular circumstances they raise related to bias and isolation” (para. 4). The study further identifies those male educators thrive best when they work for leaders who are sensitive to the burdens they face. Support groups available for male educators specifically to address these pressures can provide ways for this component of the workforce to develop the connections that

are necessary to feel the same job satisfaction as their female counterparts. Professional development geared to providing administrators and leaders with opportunities to understand the value of a more gender-balanced workforce and to build mentorship skills to support men in the profession is a recommendation made in their study.

The barriers identified were numerous and similar across most of the participants. Many of the barriers were related to a lack of connections such as a dearth of understanding for induction support for novice ECEs and a lack of professional recognition for ELCC in general. These barriers all contributed to an overwhelming acknowledgement of professional isolation as a circumstance that is present in the sector. The participants, however, demonstrated resilience in acknowledging these factors and ways to improve the situation for future ECEs. This is the basis of the next theme of willingness.

Willingness

Throughout the study, the participants expressed a willingness to continue working in the ELCC sector despite the low wages and the lack of professional recognition. In this section I will discuss the factors that reinforced the theme of willingness as they were shared with me by the participants. The participants identified measures that substantiated their willingness, such as their desire to stay current in their ELCC practices, finding ways to show their pride in their work, as an example, being a member of a professional association, and boldly stating their years of service in the sector. The average length of time worked in the field identified by the participants was 17 years. Given the barriers pinpointed previously, this time span is notable. In particular, the low wages and concerns expressed in this study are reason enough to think that many ECEs would have shorter careers. However, when questioned about the willingness to remain working in ELCC, many respondents identified the importance of the work as being a

significant factor for them. ECE students are taught about the correlation between an educated workforce and higher quality ELCC programs; that the building of a national childcare strategy relies on the need for a well-supported and qualified workforce; and that

> it involves not just better wages and benefits, but an infrastructure that sustains quality work including access to excellence in pre- and in-service training, pedagogical leadership, and the availability of special needs specialists. (Yalnizyan & McCuaig, 2020, p. 1)

Career Development

The importance of early childhood care and education is documented in the Early Years Study 4 in which it states: "todays early childhood education provides the first tier of education that is as important as those to follow" (Norrie McCain, 2020, Intr. p. 2). ECEs perceive themselves as partners with parents to teach infants and preschool children, and value their post-secondary education as a vital component to offering high quality ELCC programming. Jennifer, who has completed Infant and Toddler development post-graduate work stated that this additional credential became an asset to the program in which they worked, as they were able to facilitate and support targeted pedagogical planning for this specific age group of children. In Manitoba, access to further formal learning now remains at the university level as colleges have deleted post-diploma studies from their offerings. These degree options exist for ECEs to choose additional education that would strengthen working with children with disabilities and unique learning needs or in leadership positions. However, these program options may be limiting to ECEs who have other ideas for their career paths. Some ECEs may choose to work in licensing positions, or in family support roles with community agencies. The career path of an ECE offers many options, however, the requirement for further study is typically necessary. Post-graduate education is expensive and often beyond the financial reach of many ECEs, which results in

choosing non-accredited professional development opportunities usually offered in the form of conferences and workshops.

ECEs identified that becoming involved in conference and workshop opportunities relieve the sense of professional isolation as they provide openings for networking and collaboration with other ECEs. Joy told me: “This is what I consider my profession and there’s not a lot of people I can always talk to about it.” Joy expressed the desire to discuss their ELCC work with other ECEs, and that networking often occurs in professional development opportunities which they find inaccessible due to cost, further explaining: “I can’t afford it and my work certainly can’t afford to subsidize the cost of that…I find it hard to connect with resources.”

What Joy recognizes as the need for accessibility and affordability of professional development for ECEs, demonstrates a willingness to consider their own personal career path, but also for the sector in general. This position supports the OECD’s statement “ongoing professional development has the potential to fill in the knowledge and skills that may be lacking or require updating due to changes in particular knowledge fields” (2012, p. 4). There are numerous career opportunities for ECEs, and to support those, there are abundant training possibilities to increase knowledge and awareness. However, the financial burden can be limiting for ECEs whose earnings are just above the poverty line. The possibilities do exist, and there is a strong willingness to be able to attend and participate, with the acknowledgment that competency enhancement is an essential quality of being a professional but also one that comes with a cost.

Being willing and taking personal responsibility for continued education is a quality I found many of the participants made note of. Sandra expressed their aspiration for “filling my life with people who want better for kids.” They further added that they surround themselves with people who share their enthusiasm for staying current in the field by reading and attending

classes and workshops. They told me that they had completed several post-diploma certificates "just for my own learning" and restated, "finding like-minded people, who keep me passionate and grounded, and moving forward" as ways to stay ahead in the sector. In keeping with this effort for self-advancement, Lori remarked: "I made myself pretty connected I think." When I inquired whether this was something that an ECE must do independently, their response was: "I think, yeah, I think it's not easy to do…unless you have someone actively informing you, you have to get that for yourself."

ECEs make their own personal decisions about how much education they need beyond the legislated requisites leading to a workforce that is haphazard in qualifications and could be contributing to the feelings of professional isolation mentioned earlier by ECEs who work with unqualified staff. The Early Years Study 4 (2020) states: "Higher levels of education and training can improve teachers' interactions with children in ways that positively affect learning and better preparation of teachers will lead to higher pay, professionalization of the workforce, and ultimately lead to better quality applicants" (Norrie McCain, p. 58). There is an identified willingness for ECEs to engage in higher learning to improve their career paths and to offer higher quality ELCC to children and families. In the next section I will discuss the final theme of strategies that were shared by the participants that would improve their employment circumstances and includes the option of e-mentoring.

Strategies

The participants were excited to offer their thoughts on strategies to improve the situations they find themselves working within. These included cultivating communication amongst their colleagues by focusing on relationships with mentors and mentees, considering what is needed in a mentoring strategy and training mentors, ensuring that accessible professional development

opportunities are available to support career pathing for ECES. With newfound enthusiasm for technology, e-mentoring was a strategy that was overwhelmingly supported by the participants.

Developing Supportive Relationships With Mentees and Mentors

The participants reflected on their experiences of being mentored early in their careers and how these experiences impacted their practice to this day. Descriptive words such as reassuring, encouraging, kind, and challenging were used frequently by all the participants. The college practicum instructor was the closest experience the participants had with professional mentoring. Many of the participants indicated that the practicum instructor provided them with career-long advice and feedback, and they all recognized that having a mentor who could provide professional and even personal support was beneficial. Rita expressed:

> "There would be benefits because sometimes you're just trying to work out something and you can talk to somebody who's up there at your same professional level."

Combining Mentorship with Technology

Coupled with ECEs newfound confidence with using technology, the benefits of e-mentoring were acknowledged by the participants. Jennifer told me that they saw the role of a mentor as being beneficial notwithstanding location, although they posited: "It depends where they (mentees) are in their career…for new graduates…a good mentor on site is crucial."

Chu (2014) described "virtual mentoring or coaching as another option for connecting teachers and entire early-learning programs with other settings that may offer models for high-quality program practices" (p. 184). The Coronavirus pandemic has situated ELCC in similar positions as many other workplaces, in which professional development opportunities have moved to virtual environments. The MCCA pivoted the in-person workshops to online offerings to ensure accessibility to ongoing professional development for ECEs, and community directors'

groups moved to Zoom sessions to continue their connections. These are examples of how the ELCC community has adapted from traditional in-person situations. These flexible models can provide professional development and may have greater accessibility. The participants were forthright in saying that whether mentorship is offered in-person or virtually, that there needs to be an understanding of what mentorship is and that it must consist of specific elements as were discussed in Chapter 5, to be effective. These two fundamental ideas require specific scrutiny to ensure the success of an e-mentoring program.

A significant finding in my research study is that ECEs identified their newfound confidence with using technology for meetings. Prior to the pandemic, most meetings were held in-person and the notion of holding a virtual platform for gathering was seen as uncomfortable and out of the norm. However, as the pandemic wore on, it became more appealing to learn to use the available technologies to reduce the sense of disconnection that was felt by the profession. When asked what an e-mentoring platform might look like, Rachel told me:

> we're kind of getting into the Zoom. I know I said I'm not quite comfortable with it, but I like the visual aspect of it because sometimes we do a lot of body and facial expressions that people can pick up on. I think that helps bring that connection as well.

Joy mentioned: "I would see it as I'm still getting used to things like Zoom, but I think it would have to be a platform similar to Zoom."

Chantal and Robert shared that they thought phone apps would be ideal. Danielle laughed and suggested that "it would be nice if they could get on the phone occasionally." In more than one interview, the participants identified that they were starting to become comfortable with the online services such as Zoom and Facebook Messenger. The anniversary of the onset of the

pandemic in Manitoba was acknowledged in March 2021 and most meetings and professional development opportunities continue to be held virtually.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Mentoring

Opinions on the question of whether mentoring should be offered onsite or from a distance was divided amongst the participants. The career stage research from Katz (1995) reinforces that onsite mentoring is important for novice ECEs. However, e-mentoring would be appropriate for those ECEs who are in later stages of their career as they may choose to access the service when they feel the need and with the added choices of synchronous or asynchronous options. According to Bates (2013) synchronous technologies can include face-to-face seminars, audio and videocasting, and the like, with "the unifying feature of occurring in real time; thus both teachers and students have to be communicating together at the same time (but not necessarily in the same place.)" (para. 3). Many of the participants identified that they would like to have real time discussions with a mentor. However, this was not an absolute for them. Asynchronous content as described by Bates (2013) includes one-way technologies such as print media, video sharing such as YouTube, email, and online discussion forums. "Synchronous 'content' can be made available 'asynchronously' through recording" (para. 4). The participants pinpointed desirable examples of synchronous activities such as spaces for conversations, one-on-one consultations that could include opportunities to gain advice on how to manage an uncomfortable conversation with a co-worker, or a critique of a performance video. Examples of asynchronous content that the participants distinguished were recorded webinars on specific topics of interest, space for reflections, emails, and texting. Bates argued that "asynchronous online learning is almost always better for learners requiring flexible learning than classroom teaching or 'live broadcasts" (para. 11). This would meet the needs of ECEs who noted that they are often

required to complete professional development on their own time, and if they are working in another place of employment, as many ECEs do, being able to access flexible online mentoring would be more accessible. An ideal e-mentoring strategy would meet the needs of ECEs in multiple ways by having a combination of synchronous and asynchronous offerings. The following section will consider the foundation of an e-mentoring training program and the essential components of e-mentorship for ECEs.

Knowledgeable Mentorship

The ECEs asserted that knowledgeable professionals must be at the heart of a mentorship program, regardless of whether it is offered in-person or virtually. The desire to be mentored by a knowledgeable, experienced ECE stems from the relationships described from the experience with professional mentorship with a college practicum instructor. The ECEs expressed their gratitude for being guided and coached by someone who was not only experienced, but also knowledgeable and who knew how to coach professional practice. College practicum instructors have a practical and theoretical understanding of the ELCC profession, an ongoing connection with adult-learning theories and insightful approaches for mentoring relationships. A mentor-training program would require a strong foundation in adult-learning theory and relationship-based professional learning. As Chu (2008/2014) stated "a blossoming mentoring relationship begins with learning about the learner" (p. 2). The participants communicated that their practicum instructor observed and listened carefully to them, and these skills helped to build trust in the relationship. Once this is trust is established, an individualized learning relationship can occur in which critical thinking and reflective practice can occur.

The argument is sometimes made that it is important to avoid one person taking the two roles of supervisor and mentor. Chu (2014) asserted that "the need to foster a safe learning

environment requires the mentor and supervisor to be explicit and clear about their unique roles" (p. 9). Several of the participants acknowledged that their program supervisors were consumed with workload beyond the responsibilities of providing mentorship to ECEs. Joy mentioned:

> The supervisors at our site have a lot of responsibility. There are a lot of phone calls, emails and paperwork that need get done…so if the supervisor is the mentor, well, then their workload is just, you know, gone through the roof.

Additionally, the supervisory role is often combined with performance evaluation. The participants identified the importance of mentoring occurring within a safe environment with the mentor being someone who is trustworthy and understanding. Engaging in both roles is not only demanding for one person, but they may also experience professional conflict. The mentee may be left to determine how much they should share with the supervisor/mentor as intimate details may not be kept confidential or may impact their performance evaluation, which is deeply concerning. I would propose that ELCC programs consider the role of the mentor a career opportunity that is parallel to the supervisor role with distinct expectations. Not only would this clearly define the role of supervisor and of mentor but would create another level on a career path for the ECE to aspire to. To advance an e-mentoring program with the elements identified by the participants, a development strategy would be required and could be constructed by interested ECEs with the guidance of a project manager who has knowledge and experience in mentorship practices.

Connections

The superordinate theme of connections arose as the sentiment drawing the themes of altruism, barriers, willingness, and strategies together. Feeling connected is when two or more things experience the same cause, origin, or goal – a fitting definition, as ECEs all over the world

express the need to feel connected (Merriam-Webster.com). Whether the word connection was mentioned overtly, or was teased out through the analysis, it is undoubtably the best term to convey the need articulated by ECEs to lessen their professional isolation and ultimately their desire to feel satisfied in their chosen vocation. Some may argue that there are plenty of opportunities to connect in ELCC. These opportunities include the children, the families, and other colleagues. I repeatedly heard from the participants that the sense of connection is missing either because of time, location, or lack of awareness and recognition. It is possible that the pandemic may provide us with some lifelong lessons about the importance of connection. People are anxiously waiting for the time when they can reconnect with their loved ones in person but are confidently using technology to maintain a sense of connection in the meantime. It is without doubt that an in-person mentorship relationship for ECEs would have many benefits. However, we have seen that online connections can be established and maintained by relatively simple means. This may be the answer to establishing a sustainable method of mentorship for ECEs and nurture the connections they are so sorely missing. I will commit to sharing the key findings of my research study with an emphasis on the need for connections by ECEs. Many of the strategies the participants identified in their interviews are straightforward and can be implemented without cost reinforcing the accessibility notion that were highlighted in the interviews.

The key findings of connections fits within the broader literature about communities of practice and mentorship as examples. Thomas (2020) stated: “membership in communities of practice cultivates a sense of becoming and belonging” (p. 29). The participants shared their understanding for novice ECEs who are developing their sense of becoming a member of the ECE community from both micro (within an ELCC program) and macro perspectives (in the provincial and national sector of ECEs). The sense of belonging was evident, as identified in

terms of their levels of understanding of the long-term benefits of ELCC, the impact ELCC has on children, families and the wider community. Doan (2021) stated: “A mentor relationship is a valuable tool for early childhood educators in that it can address the challenges facing those new to the field” (p. 21). They further highlight:

> it is not just new early childhood educators who can benefit from peer-mentoring through communities of practice. Experienced ECEs can benefit from current research and pedagogy that recent graduates bring to their position. Both can engage in a mutually beneficial reflect practice partnership. (2021, p. 21).

Summary

This chapter has brought together the discussion about an e-mentoring strategy for ECEs in Manitoba. The chapter began with revisiting the research goals and questions that guided the interviews I had with the participants. This was followed by noting the four themes of altruism, barriers, willingness, and strategies that emerged from the analysis of the meaningful insights. Understanding these themes can assist with the development of an e-mentoring strategy, which will be an important step to building connections within the ELCC sector. The chapter culminates with a discussion of my understanding of this superordinate theme of connections.

The next chapter will bring me to my final thoughts about my research study. Throughout the process of analysis and interpretation, I have focused on the individual questions and responses from the participants. These resulted in the emerging themes, which, when analyzed further draws out the superordinate theme – the holistic need for connections. Connecting the parts back to the whole enriches and strengthens the conversation about the phenomenon of professional isolation. The participants’ insights increase the transparency of why ECEs feel professionally isolated and why they may choose to leave the sector. The superordinate theme of

connections has brought together the relationships of the lived experiences of the participants and my interpretations of them. It is my hope that the reader will be able to easily recognize the relationships I have presented.

Chapter 7 – Summary, Future Directions and Final Thoughts

This chapter will bring my study to a conclusion with a summary discussion of the research process. This summary will scrutinize several moments during the gathering and analysis of the meaningful insights which I have identified as *pinch points*. These moments reinforced this phenomenon of professional isolation for Early Childhood Educators. Additionally, I will explain the limitations, delimitations, and mitigations I encountered during the research process, and I will offer ideas for future research directions. Many of the topics identified by the participants are worthwhile subjects for future study. Finally, I will share my thoughts on the research and writing process at the end of the chapter.

The Pinch Points

A pinch point, according to the Cambridge Dictionary is "a point in a process where there are difficulties and the process slows down or stops" (Cambridge.org, n.d.). As I noted earlier in Chapter 5, there were times during the initial gathering of insights and the analysis when I needed to stop and reflect on why I felt uncomfortable. I refer to these moments as pinch points. The initial instances of these feelings were in the first week of the scheduled interviews. I was eager to get started and overzealously booked interviews every night of the week. As I mentioned earlier, the time spent listening carefully to the participants, ensuring that I had the recording devices set up properly, and being captivated by their responses left me feeling melancholy. Another doctoral candidate who was also engaging in a phenomenological study encouraged me to slow down and take time to reflect on each interview, allowing for time in between. This was good advice, and I felt relief when some of the interview appointments got postponed to later dates. I was surprised by the emotional energy that went into each interview, despite the brief time that they took (each interview took an average of 32 minutes). Setting aside

time in between each interview allowed me to read the notes I had made during the interviews and think carefully about what had been shared with me. I took time and care to document these thoughts in my journal.

The second instance, which continues to trouble me, are the ECEs' claims of feeling bullied by their managers or leaders. I have been aware of situations such as these in my career as an ECE, however, hearing about the specific situations so pervasively was unsettling, and I had to step away from the analysis for a time. One ECE who responded to the question about motivating factors to leave their employment said that the primary reason for being provoked to leave was: "The lack of professionalism in the field, catty, gossipy and wanting to bring other people down." Another ECE remarked: "Getting bullied by my supervisor and none of the other staff wanted to stand up for me." Adding: "Opportunities were taken to destroy my confidence and basically destroy my abilities."

What was most gripping was their concern about novice ECEs being at risk of becoming victims of these same behaviors, as they had experienced this since their inception into the sector, potentially normalizing this conduct. The desire to protect "the young" was most concerning to me because the sector itself is engaging in this disservice, and if ELCC is ever to stop the attrition of its workforce, attention needs to be paid to addressing, mitigating, and stopping these behaviors. When these reflections were shared with me there were times when I felt as if I had been physically pinched. The resulting sore spot remains with me today and it dismays me to think that what should be a nurturing work environment does not always function in that way.

Online Environments for Mentorship

ECEs are finding opportunities to connect online with each other. However, they reported that some of these opportunities have resulted in situations that are emotionally unsafe. Some such examples that the participants identified were feeling bullied online by other ECEs, feeling foolish for asking questions, and experiencing stronger isolative emotions than if they hadn't engaged at all. Participants repeatedly told me that if an e-mentorship program were to exist, it had to be a safe, non-judgemental, and educative environment. This further reinforces the need for a moderated platform for e-mentorship. This also strengthens the argument for a mentor training program so that the platform can be administrated by mentors who are educated in mentoring principles, are genuine and passionate about the sustainability of the ELCC workforce and are willing to put the ECE and the ECE's career development foremost.

The Research Process – A Summary

At the onset of my doctoral studies, I was determined to examine the phenomenon of professional isolation. I had discerned from my Masters study and from my professional experience as an ECE that the rates of attrition in the ELCC sector continue to be excessive, but strategies can be employed to improve the retention rates. I have established that the sector offers precarious employment, most often for women and new immigrants. I have acknowledged that the low wages in the sector are implicit, and that professional recognition is questionable, despite the importance of the work. Throughout my research study I encountered ECEs who have many years of work experience in the sector, and who expressed their altruistic perspectives on why ELCC is an essential service to Manitoba families. The participants identified their willingness to make their sector better by acknowledging the barriers they face daily and the approaches that could be implemented to tackle these challenges. The emotions I experienced when hearing their

stories of success and enthusiasm were awe-inspiring and reinforced the sense of pride I have always felt as an Early Childhood Educator. The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that influence the sense of professional isolation, to determine how e-mentorship can mitigate the feelings of isolation and what e-mentorship should be comprised of, grounded on the ECEs ideas.

Significance of my Findings

The results of my study conclude that creating opportunities for connections is fundamental to diminishing the sense of professional isolation for ECEs. Connections can be created through offering accessible and affordable professional development opportunities such as mentorship. The ECEs who participated in my research study yearn for occasions in which networking and collaborative practice are paramount. Mentorship and the development of an e-mentoring strategy are reassurances that the ECEs' careers are supported by those who recognize the importance of this essential service.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Mitigations

For more quantitative thinkers or traditional researchers, the approach of phenomenology itself is a limitation. The findings may not be generalizable to a larger population, generate theory or conceptual works. However, the results may be transferrable, for example, from this province to another with similar educational requirements, demographics, and constraints. Future studies could involve participants from multiple provinces to allow for a cross-comparison and for the results to be applied more broadly. Such studies could focus on the availability of mentoring and mentor training programs to determine if these opportunities create a stronger sense of connections within the sector. The advantages of using a phenomenological inquiry for this research project provided richness to the findings from the meaningful insights

shared by the participants. They provided a depth of feeling and benevolence that is characteristic of the field of ELCC. The information that the participants provided is valuable and contributes to the feasibility of creating an e-mentoring model to mitigate professional isolation and identifies the need for training of such mentors.

A second delimitation is related to the nature of the study and the limited numbers of participants. A greater number of participants could provide opportunities for broader surveys which would provide statistical data from which to draw conclusions. The information that the participants provided was rich in description, intense and deeply emotional. It has the potential to better inform the ELCC field about professional isolation.

A third delimitation is that the study focused on ECEs II and ECEs III who are working in ELCC programs directly with children. It did not include administrative staff or leaders. As described in Chapter 3, the exclusion criteria limited the study to frontline ECEs. I noted there that it is highly possible that administrative staff and leaders experience professional isolation. However, since this study was focusing on ECEs, the results cannot be generalized to others who work in the ELCC sector. Future research could focus on the administrative component and human resource element in the ELCC sector to determine if mentor training and workplace health and safety may impact the feelings of professional isolation identified by the participants in this study.

A phenomenological study is intense in the analysis phase, and it is suggested by experienced phenomenologists that new researchers who engage in IPA should limit themselves to a smaller sample size. Following this recommendation, a delimitation was that only those who met the criteria of ECE II or III as described earlier were included. The ELCC sector includes many other individuals who are employed but who did not meet the inclusion criteria for the

study. This scope of a boundary does not exclude the voices of CCAs or related professional allies; rather, it was to narrow the focus of this project.

Future Directions

The research would not be complete without identifying topics for future consideration. There were several subjects conveyed by the participants that I have identified as significant and worthy of future research. One such topic was the increased numbers of new employees to the ELCC sector who identify as immigrants. Related to this was the variety of languages being spoken in ELCC programs by staff, and differences in cultural expectations related to childcare and education. There is a perceived lack of ELCC specific training for immigrants who work in the sector, which leads to the more controversial subject of whether immigrants to Canada make the choice to work in ELCC. An additional focus for research is bullying in the workplace. This subject arose several times during the interview process. It is an issue that affects ECEs. This sensitive topic could be combined with an examination of mental health issues that ECEs encounter and whether support for emotional safety should be a significant consideration for the ELCC workplace and possibly a topic to be addressed through e-mentoring.

Final Words

To be an Early Childhood Educator is a privilege. Being entrusted with the care of children is a role that is understated for its influence on early childhood health and developmental trajectories, in addition to being a service that allows Canadians to work and study every day. ELCC has benefits that are proven by research: it reduces poverty, it supports economic activity, and most especially, it facilitates greater involvement of women in the labour force. The service of ELCC cannot occur without a well-educated, and well-supported workforce. There are ways to retain workers that go beyond a paycheque, and I have demonstrated that if time is spent

investing in building connections, for example through a range of e-mentoring models, we can work towards building and sustaining a much stronger ELCC workforce in Manitoba and elsewhere.

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Appendix A: Invitation to Participate

Hello!

My name is Ruth Lindsey-Armstrong. I am an ECE instructor in Winnipeg, Manitoba and a doctoral candidate with Athabasca University, Alberta. I am inviting you to participate in and contribute to a doctoral research study that I am conducting as part of my EdD studies. The study is going to explore the notion of professional isolation in Early Childhood Education.

Are you:

- An ECE II or III working in a Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care Program?

Do you:

- Have a diploma or degree in Early Childhood Education from a post-secondary institution?

If you answered yes to the above questions, then please consider participating in this study. Here are the details:

You are invited to participate in an interview that may last about an hour with me and will be asked to share your responses to questions like:

- As an ECE, what does the term professional isolation mean to you?
- If you have felt professionally isolated, what is this experience like for you?
- What is your experience with professional mentorship?
- If you have had experience with professional mentorship, how would you describe that experience?
- If an e-mentoring option was available to you, what do you think it should consist of?

As this is a research project, the interviews will be audio recorded so that participant responses can be documented afterwards. I will read a consent form to you at the beginning of the audio

recording. You will be asked for your consent to be audio recorded and for your responses to be included in the research.

After the interview and once I have transcribed it, you will be provided with a printed copy. You will have the opportunity to provide me with any corrections, additions, or deletions to the transcript. The audio recordings will be kept in a locked cabinet in my office at Red River College. Once transcribed, the audio recordings will be destroyed.

Your confidentiality will be strictly honored and will be addressed at the interview. You will be able to withdraw from the research project at any time during the project up until the data analysis concludes after the last interview. There will be no negative repercussions or consequences for you should you choose to withdraw.

This project has been approved by Athabasca University Research Ethics Board.

If you have any questions about this project, you are invited to contact me by telephone at 204.997.7327 or by email at rlindseyarmstrong@gmail.com. My academic advisor is Dr. Debra Hoven and is also available to answer questions about this research project. Dr. Hoven can be reached toll free at 1.866.441.5517 or at debrah@athabascau.ca

As a gift to show my appreciation for your participation, I am offering to provide a workshop of your choice to your childcare program, or an individual mentoring session with me at a time that is convenient for you.

I look forward to hearing from you by telephone or email by July 15, 2020.

Yours for children,

Ruth Lindsey-Armstrong

Doctor of Education (Distance) student, Athabasca University, Canada

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR

RESEARCH IN E-MENTORING AS A METHOD TO REDUCE PROFESSIONAL

ISOLATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study of how e-mentoring can reduce the feelings of professional isolation in the Early Childhood Education sector.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to: participate in an online/telephone interview in which you may share your experiences with professional isolation as an Early Childhood Educator.

Your participation is **entirely voluntary** and would take up approximately one hour of your time. By participating in this study, you will help me to identify some strategies to help ease the sense of professional isolation that Early Childhood Educators experience.

In appreciation for your time and sharing your experiences with me, I am offering to do a workshop of your choice for your childcare program or an individual mentoring session at a time that is convenient.

To learn more about this study, or to participate in this study,
please contact me by email or phone:

Principal Investigator:

Ruth Lindsey-Armstrong, Doctor of Education (Distance) candidate,

Athabasca University, Alberta, Canada

E: rlindseyarmstrong@gmail.com

P: 204.997.7327

This study is supervised by: Dr. Debra Hoven, Athabasca University, Alberta, Canada.

E: debrah@athabascau.ca P: 1.866.441.5517

This study has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board.

Appendix C: Consent Form

The purpose of this proposed research study is to determine how Early Childhood Educators articulate a sense of professional isolation and how they determine strategies to mitigate this problem. Information will be gathered through the process of recording interviews with Ruth Lindsey-Armstrong (the researcher) and the Early Childhood Educator participant. The data gathered will be used to understand the phenomenon of professional isolation. The results of the research study will be shared with the participants and in future journal issues of the MCCA *Bridges* and the CCCF *Interaction.*

- ☐ I understand that there are no foreseeable risks or negative outcomes for this proposed research study, however a tollfree phone number for Klinic will be provided to me should I feel the need to discuss my personal discomfort during or after the research study has concluded.
- ☐ I understand that the benefits to this research study are: to empower ECEs to contribute to a local research study; to have ECE voices heard about concerns in the ECE sector; and, contribute to professionalism in the Manitoba ECE sector.
- ☐ I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the process at any point during the study until the data has reached the analysis stage and that if after this stage I request that my contribution not be included, the researcher will treat the situation individually and confidentially.
- ☐ I understand that my contributions will be kept confidential beyond the interview stage of information gathering.
- ☐ I may choose to have my name shared in the data collection and analysis. I understand that if I choose not to be named, I will be identified generically as “the ECE”.
- ☐ I understand that my interview will be audio recorded and the audio recording will be transcribed into a written document.
- ☐ I understand that I will be provided with a copy of the document after the researcher has transcribed the audio recording, and that I may suggest changes to my responses or ask for additions or deletions to my responses.
- ☐ I understand that I may participate in a one-hour (more or less) interview and that a date and time will be established individually between the researcher and the participant.
- ☐ I understand that I may ask questions of the researcher or the Research Supervisor, Dr. Debra Hoven, Athabasca University, Alberta (debrah@athabascau.ca) at any time during or after the research has concluded.

I, _____ (participant's name) give my verbal consent for the information I choose to share in an interview and that I do so freely.

_____	_____
Participant's signature	Date
_____	_____
Researcher's signature	Date

Appendix D: Interview Script

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for my research study about professional isolation in the Early Childhood Education sector.

1. Please tell me about your career. How long have you been working as an Early Childhood Educator?
2. How many programs have you worked in during your career?
3. What have been motivating factors that have kept you working in this program? **OR** What motivated you to change employers?
4. Please tell me what the term "Professional Isolation" means to you.
5. What experiences have you had that would have reinforced a sense of isolation in your work as an Early Childhood Educator?
6. When you were a student, how did your practicum instructor support your professional practice?
7. When you graduated, and began working, were you assigned a Mentor?
8. If so, how does/did that relationship compare to the one with your practicum instructor?
9. What benefits can you identify for Early Childhood Educators to have a Mentor assigned to them?
10. Do you think it is necessary to have an onsite Mentor in your program? Who benefits the most from this?
11. If an e-mentoring program were available, what do you think it should consist of?
12. If an e-mentoring program were to be designed, would you like to participate in developing it?
13. Is there anything you would like to add to this conversation?

Athabasca University
RESEARCH CENTRE

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: **24001**

Principal Investigator:
Ruth Lindsey-Armstrong, Graduate Student
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences\Doctor of Education (EdD) in Distance Education

Supervisor:
Dr. Debra Hoven (Supervisor)

Project Title:
Understanding the Phenomenon of Professional Isolation in the Early Childhood Education Sector

Effective Date: July 28, 2020 **Expiry Date**: July 27, 2021

Restrictions:

Any modification or amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

A Project Completion (Final) Report must be submitted when the research is complete *(i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable))* or the research is terminated.

Approved by: **Date: July 29, 2020**

Michael Lithgow, Chair
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, Departmental Ethics Review Committee

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Athabasca University
RESEARCH CENTRE

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL - RENEWAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: **24001**

Principal Investigator:
Ruth Lindsey-Armstrong, Graduate Student
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences\Doctor of Education (EdD) in Distance Education

Supervisor:
Dr. Debra Hoven (Supervisor)

Project Title:
Understanding the Phenomenon of Professional Isolation in the Early Childhood Education Sector

Effective Date: July 27, 2021 **Expiry Date**: July 26, 2022

Restrictions:

Any modification or amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

A Project Completion (Final) Report must be submitted when the research is complete *(i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable))* or the research is terminated.

Approved by: **Date: June 16, 2021**

Carolyn Greene, Chair
Athabasca University Research Ethics Board

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Appendix G: Conceptual Framework - Emerging Themes