

Voices From The Childcare Community

by Carmella Singleton, MA

Coordinating mentor training in St. John’s, Newfoundland at the College of the North Atlantic provides me with many opportunities to listen and reflect on the voices of the women who want to learn about mentoring future Early Childhood Educators. The rationales they express for wanting to become mentors have generally focused on “a desire to help and support others” or “to improve the child care profession”. During the initial stages of training their expressions of interest in mentoring have not been about any personal benefits or needs.

My beliefs about the training needs of the women who have a desire to become mentors are influenced greatly by the work of Mary Belenky et al in *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (Basic Books, 1986). They describe five stages that women experience in their development as they gain confidence in themselves and trust in their personal ways of knowing. Mentor’s ways of knowing are appreciated and respected as they voice their comments, concerns and considerations about mentoring students in training. The voices are articulated and heard in the context of the Partners In Practice mentoring model, built on four guiding principles that are universal in the early childhood education profession ~ support and recognition, reflective practice, continuous growth and building relationships. This article is a celebration of these *Voices From the Child Care Community*.

**Support and Recognition**

*The contributions made to children, families and communities by early childhood practitioners are valuable and are to be supported and recognized.*

There is a thriving mentoring culture in St John’s. Mentors speak of a desire to create a new child care society where the contributions they make to children, families and communities are recognized and valued.

*“I now have different expectations for students.*

*Through conferencing and reflecting on a daily basis I can provide the student with lots of support, encouragement, reassurance, comfort and guidance.*

*These are the real things they need to get through the day. I now feel I have more confidence in myself when talking and working with students and staff in my workplace. Mentoring helped me remember a lot of things and to have confidence in my work.”*

This mentor and others view themselves as knowledgeable early childhood educators. They recognize that their contributions to children, families and communities are valuable. They have found their voices and are speaking in a manner that will help society recognize the value of those contributions.

This confidence allows them to move forward in their mentor roles. They are empowering the students they work with to find their voices. They acknowledge that before others can value their roles as Early Childhood Educators, they must fully understand and recognize the valuable work they do themselves.

**Reflective Practice:**

*Reflective practitioners achieve excellence in early childhood practice.*

The goal of the PIP mentoring model is to foster a reflective, caring early childhood practitioner who uses reflective thinking for personal evaluation and growth and this is reflected in the course outline and objectives. Throughout training, and specifically during the foundation course *Mentoring and Reflective Practice*, mentors are encouraged to uncover past practices as the foundation for new learning. Individual mentors and the group as a whole are responded to differently, based on the knowledge and experience they bring to the course and their reflections upon this knowledge and experience.

Initially mentors in training are intrigued by the term “*Reflective Practice*”. There is much discussion on what it is and is not, how it is attained and how one actually becomes a reflective practitioner and how does it make one a better Early Childhood Educator? Certainly, works by authors such as Donald Schon in *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1987) help the mentors capture the essence of reflective practice. As well, I found that having previously trained mentors come to class and share what reflective practice looks like in their daily work with students, children, coworkers and the Early Childhood Education community was extremely valuable. They put a voice to this guiding principle of reflective practice and help the mentors in training to trust in their own abilities to become reflective practitioners. Having senior mentors co-teach in the training of novice mentors has been a milestone in establishing an awareness of the importance of becoming reflective practitioners. This innovation was a result of reflections on and evaluations of the course itself by the mentors and myself.

**Continuous Learning**

*To value the growth and development of children we must value our own growth and development as early childhood practitioners.*

Mentors recognize that there is always something new to learn – for themselves and for students. Where they are in their personal and professional development determines what their needs are and how these needs are best met. When existing

knowledge and experiences are the foundation for new learning, trust is more easily established between the mentor and student. This trust is based on a respect for their daily life experiences, ideas and values.

*" I now believe in my abilities...I need to help students recognize their talents and abilities, build their self-confidence and to encourage them in the process. ...we as mentors need to recognize our own limitations and be prepared to defend them when it is necessary. After all, we are human and we are all learning...we aren't expected to know everything. Learning is fun when you can look at it from this perspective. There is less emphasis on being perfect...and greater emphasis on learning together....reflecting together"*

Mentors examine the theories of Erickson, Gilligan, and Belenky et al as a foundation for examining their personal and professional lives. They learn about and acknowledge and appreciate the value of their own personal and professional growth and development as Early Childhood Educators. During this process, they acknowledge the importance of helping students in training appreciate the importance of their own growth and development and trust it as the foundation for their learning as individuals.

As mentors reflect on their past experiences, I share my own experience of growing up in rural Newfoundland. In my community, men were often away from the family home working in a variety of jobs such as fishing and hunting, while women stayed at home taking care of their homes, the grandparents, the children, the community. When something needed doing, the women took on the responsibility to carry it out. Skilled women put themselves to the task of accomplishing the goal, passing on their skills to others. As a child in that community I learned a great deal by being a part of this learning culture. In the same way mentors expose students to the wisdom of their experiences as they facilitate, communicate and encourage reflection on a range of possible solutions to unique challenges.

Mentor training helps Early Childhood Educators uncover and remember critical knowledge about themselves, child care practice, children, families and communities. Through reflection they uncover this knowledge that serves as a foundation for their learning. When they are provided this respect they become more confident in their Early Childhood Educator role. They are more aware of the remembered knowledge. As a result of working together in a collegial group, they co-create new knowledge - knowledge that is transferred to future Early Childhood Educators while they are students in training. Both mentors and students grow in their insight and skills regarding early childhood education practices.

*"... you can not offer full support and recognition to your students.....if you are not aware of how they develop and consider or understand what stage of life they are in...I am different today than when I began in this field. I have grown personally and professionally".*

#### **Building Relationships:**

*Mentoring relationships are based on honor, respect and modesty.*

Mentoring students is a critical factor during the field placement component of training Early Childhood Education students. Prior to a mentoring culture being established in St. John's, supervising field practice teachers practiced many aspects of mentoring, however they did not have significant knowledge of the mentoring concepts as outlined in the Partners In Practice mentoring model. There was a gap between practice and knowledge. I began to examine how that gap could be bridged to optimize the experience for both students and mentors in a respectful manner. Respecting the mentoring practices that already existed in the field practice of the Early Childhood Education Program and the knowledge and interest of the Early Childhood Education Faculty in enhancing the student's practicum experiences gave me a glimpse of what mentoring could be. This respect has served my mentoring journey well.

All aspects of the model are based on the values of honour, respect and modesty. From the onset of training mentors are treated with honor, respect and modesty as they find their own voices and build relationships with each other and students in training. The mentors' voices speak about the importance of celebrating their achievements, valuing their work as Early Childhood Educators, and recognizing that they are capable and competent in determining how mentoring relationships develop.

Mentor training in St. John's is a result of knowledge gained through applied and theoretical research. This knowledge is based on recognition that honours the expertise that mentors bring to the training. Early Childhood Education training includes theoretical and practice based experiences and knowledge. Faculty provide the theoretical knowledge and experiences in class and the mentors provide the practice knowledge and experiences in their child care settings. Mentors are practice experts, skilled in putting theory into practice, a component of the Early Childhood Education core of knowledge and bring this practice wisdom to the training program. There is a respect demonstrated for this practice core of knowledge. The two are vitally linked, theorists, practitioners and students being equitable partners in achieving quality child care.

My training of mentors is based on modesty, in realizing that mentors have much to teach me; respect for their skill and expertise and honour for their work with children and students. Knowledge is shared and reflected on in a respectful manner by mentors and faculty. Experienced mentors who have participated in the training are valuable resources and support for less experienced mentors. Respecting this expertise, they are invited to continue in the mentor training program as co-teachers. Learning is shared and new insights and learning are co-created. They actively participate as equitable and valuable partners in informing the next steps in the Early Childhood Education training program at the College of the North Atlantic.

*"The more I learn in my early childhood practice, the more I have to offer my protégé. I recognize there is always something more to learn...my protégé learns from me and sometimes I learn from my protégé...that is what mentoring is about...it's great because I don't have to feel that I have all the answers. Sometimes we figure things out together."*

An African proverb states that *"it takes a village to raise a child"*. To be the best we can be in our role as part of that village in raising a child we must be active in defining and articulating what we as Early Childhood Educators need to fulfill that role in raising a child. Another proverb, *"If I am not for me then WHO will be? If I am only for me WHAT will be?"*, expresses a major challenge we face as a profession ~ Balancing our concern for children and families with what we need in order to provide the best possible quality of care for children and families.

The Early Childhood Education community in St John's, Newfoundland believes that mentoring based on the Partners In Practice mentoring model provides a foundation of skills, confidence, values and beliefs that enable Early Childhood Educators to have a voice and to be listened to by society. The model identifies the need for Early Childhood Educators to have opportunities for safe dialogue and reflection, voice and a sense of belonging. It provides the means to meet those needs through support and recognition, reflective practice, continuous learning and building relationships– the guiding principles of the model. When Early Childhood Educators in Canada are supported and empowered to articulate and practice these guiding principles in their daily work with children, families and communities their voices will be more distinct and recognized. The Early Childhood Education Program at College of the North Atlantic in St. John's, Newfoundland is making positive strides as it connects with the Early Childhood Education community in the development of a mentoring culture.

It is exciting as well that our Early Childhood Education students are becoming a part of this learning culture in St. John's as the mentors play such a critical role in developing and sustaining it – a culture in which Early Childhood Educators are taken care of and respected.

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### Resources:

- Visit the Partners In Practice Web Site, [www.partnersinpractice.org](http://www.partnersinpractice.org) for resources on mentoring.
- Attend the **Animating Mentoring In Communities Institute**, February 13-15, Halifax. Information: PIP Institute, c/o 100-1200 tower Road, Halifax, NS B3H 4K6 902 423-8199

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