An Octopus Walks Into a Bar...

... And Other Stories from the Atlantic Canada Early Childhood Education Lab



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All In
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The Topics

Design in Social Innovation Labs

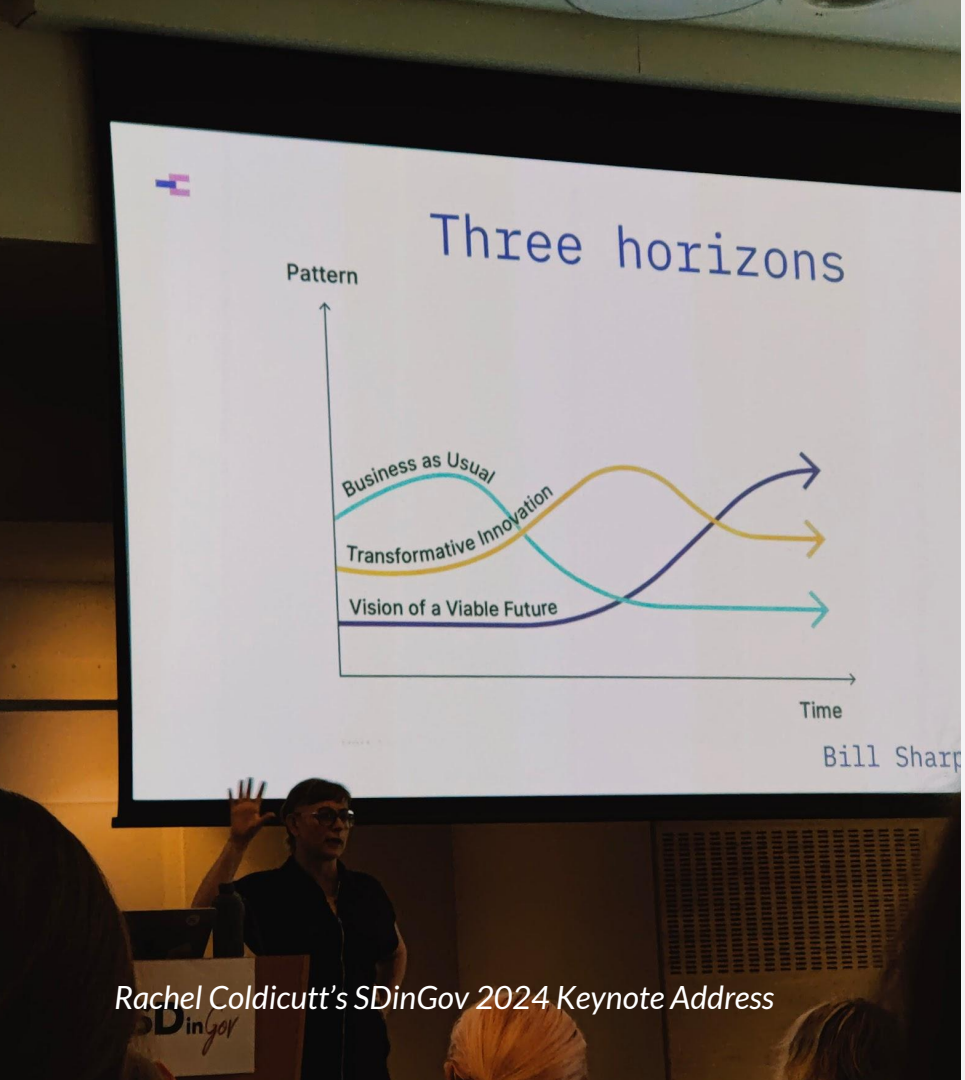
Relational Approach to Systems Change

Conditions for Co-Design with Carers

Social innovation lab

a convening of multi-sectoral interest-holders to work on a complex challenge

a sandbox for collaboratively imagining new futures



Rachel Coldicutt's SDinGov 2024 Keynote Address

People living and working on the challenge can be their own heroes*

*maybe? relationships and learning are hard to see in heroic terms

Design

habitually treating problems as though they are ill-defined

simultaneously investigating challenges and solutions

learning together iteratively through form-giving

Cross, Nigel (1992). Research in Design Thinking.

Make visible, make actionable

The Stories

1. A Lab about Care
2. The Birds
3. Data Parties
4. From “Fix it” to “Change it”
5. An Octopus Walks into a Bar
6. Catalysts and Cross-Pollinators

The Stories

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“The single most critical factor affecting the quality of early learning and care programs is the knowledge, skills, and stability of the early childhood workforce.”

Best Start Expert Panel, Ontario (2007)

Around the world, the Early Childhood Education (ECE) sector has been running on the resilience of women* who work and live in precarity.

**Statistics Canada reports that 96% of Canadian ECE workforce is comprised of women. (2016)*



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ECEs perform essential work for low wages with little recognition of their professional expertise

“The first three years of life are extremely important for human development; the research is there. We're not just babysitters, we're educators. ...we're working with language development, we're working with physical development in the very early stages, and we're working with cognitive development. So, we're setting it up for the [K-12] educators, so that helps them when they go into the school system.

It's very, very important what we do. And I think it needs to be seen.”

- Atlantic Canada Early Childhood Educator

Labo en EPE Atlantique

Atlantic ECE Lab

2020-2023

Future Skills Centre | Centre Compétences futures

NouLAB

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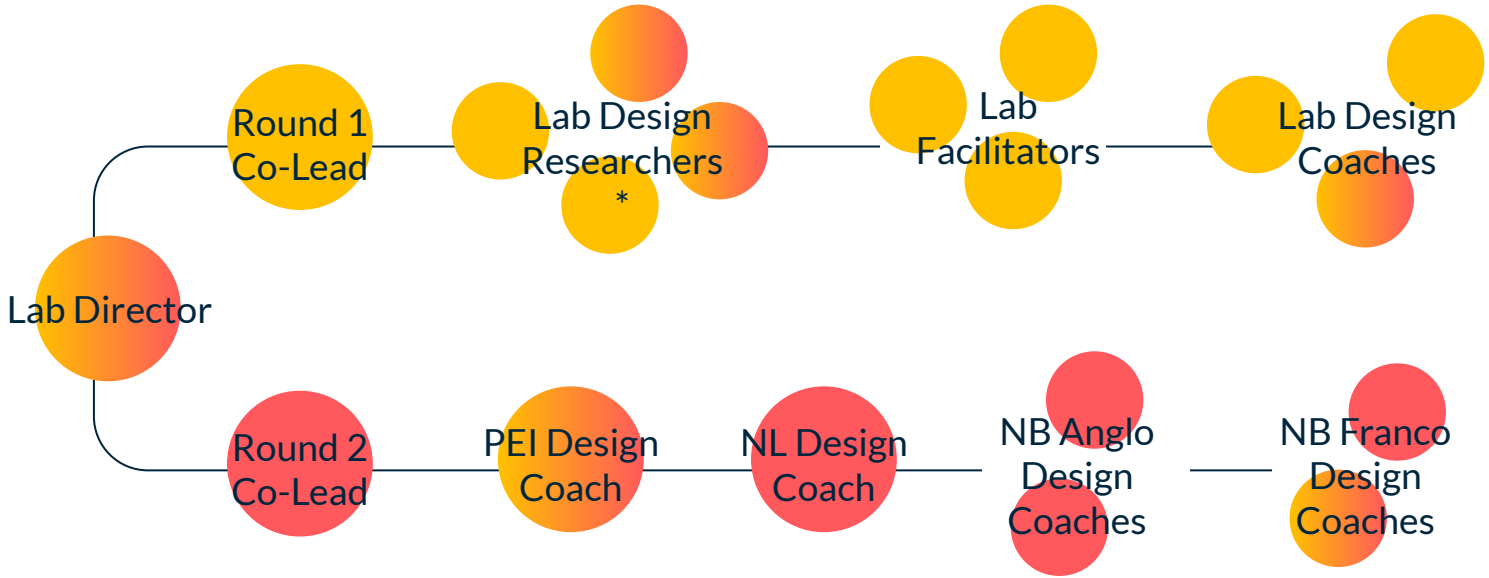
The Lab at a Glance



The ECE Lab Team



The ECE Lab Architects



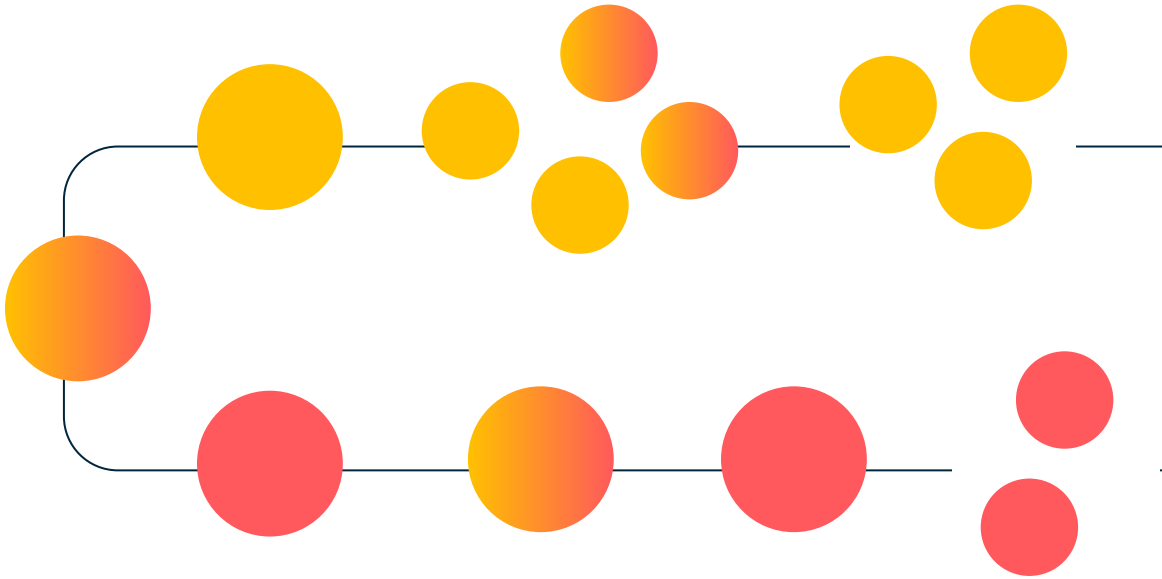
Amanda Hachey
Lab Co-Lead



Jules Maitland, PhD
Research Lead, Rd 1



Shawni Beaulieu
Co-Lead, Rd 1



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Participant Teams

N.-B. Équipe francophone



NL



PEI



NB Anglophone Team




Recording...
View
Linn
Pam~ Bright Ridge ~NL
Sandy Gow, AECENL NL
Amanda Hachey
mary.linehan
Coralee Burton
Nada (NB Design Coach)
Risa Babaeva (New Brunswick)
Jane Ouillette
Linda Gould (NBCC) New Brunswick
Kim Gillis
Maddy Jeffery
Molly Balcom Raleigh (she/her)
Kati Smallman- PEI
Monique McClean PEI
Shawnee McConchie NB
Jamie Mosher
Kate Flanagan
Jewell Mitchell NB EECD
Embrace Limitless
Andreas(On-Dre-As) X Robinson (h...
Sharlene
Heather Fowler NB
AECENL - Skye
Lori Chaulk - Associat...
Lori Chaulk - Associate Dean - CNA...
Unmute
Stop Video
Security
Participants
25
Chat
Share Screen
Polls/Quizzes
Pause/Stop Recording
Show Captions
Breakout Rooms
Reactions
Apps

Co-design with Carers

Invitation to Participate

- Open calls for participants on social media and posters at Early Learning Centres
- Seeking recommendations from leaders and advocacy/ professional associations
- Short expression of interest online with phone call followup
- Hourly compensation for time spent working on lab (liveable wage) (active and prep/ reflection)

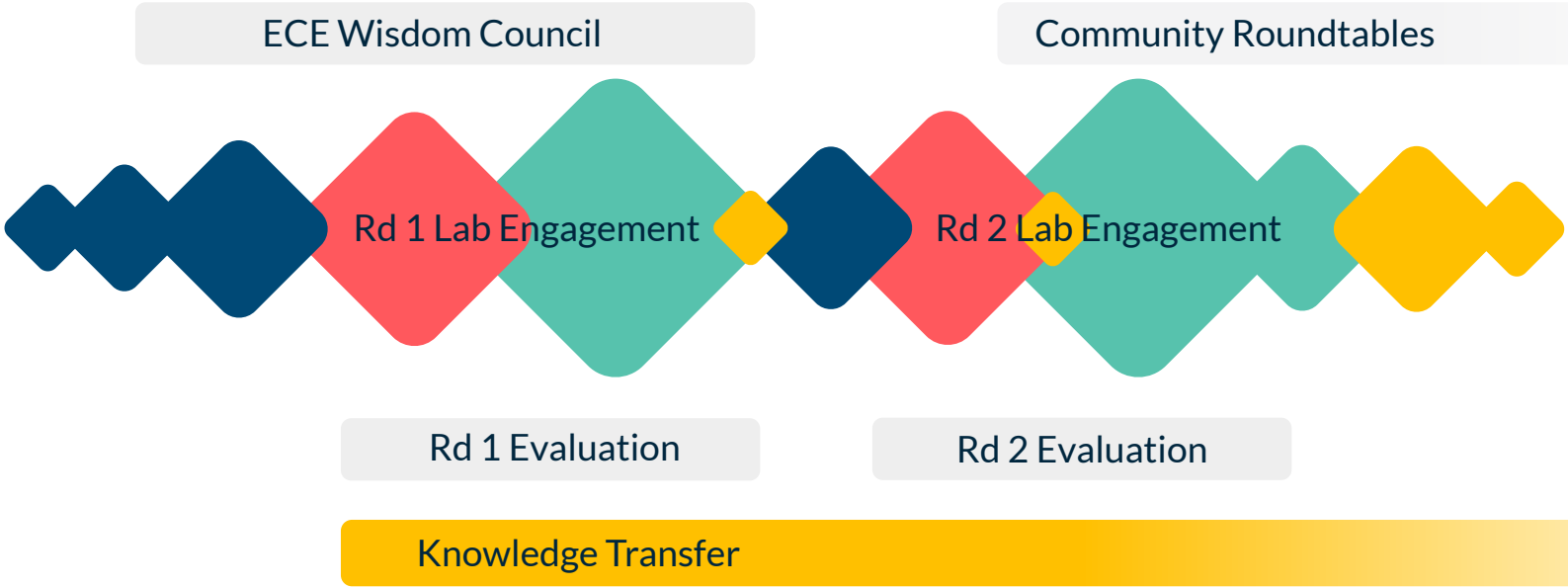
Ongoing Assessment and Feedback

- Third party program evaluation for both rounds included participant interviews
- Feedback channels with fast response, redesign of engagements based on feedback

Support for Participation

- Onboarding calls and workshops to teach & troubleshoot digital tools used in Lab
- Attention to building team cultures, incl. collaboratively created groundrules
- Design coaches embedded in teams to lend design capability and carry workload
- Facilitation approaches – games to share attention, intentional breakout rooms, check ins and check outs – to sense and address power dynamics btwn authorities and ECEs
- Exit points built into process and intentional re-invitations to continue
- Continuous reflection/grounding/ lab design iteration to understand and meet value to participants

Lab Structure



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The Birds

Interview, academic, and desk research synthesized into four ECE archetypes

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Fledgling Apprentice
Pragmatic
and curious



Seasoned Practitioner
Experienced
and dedicated

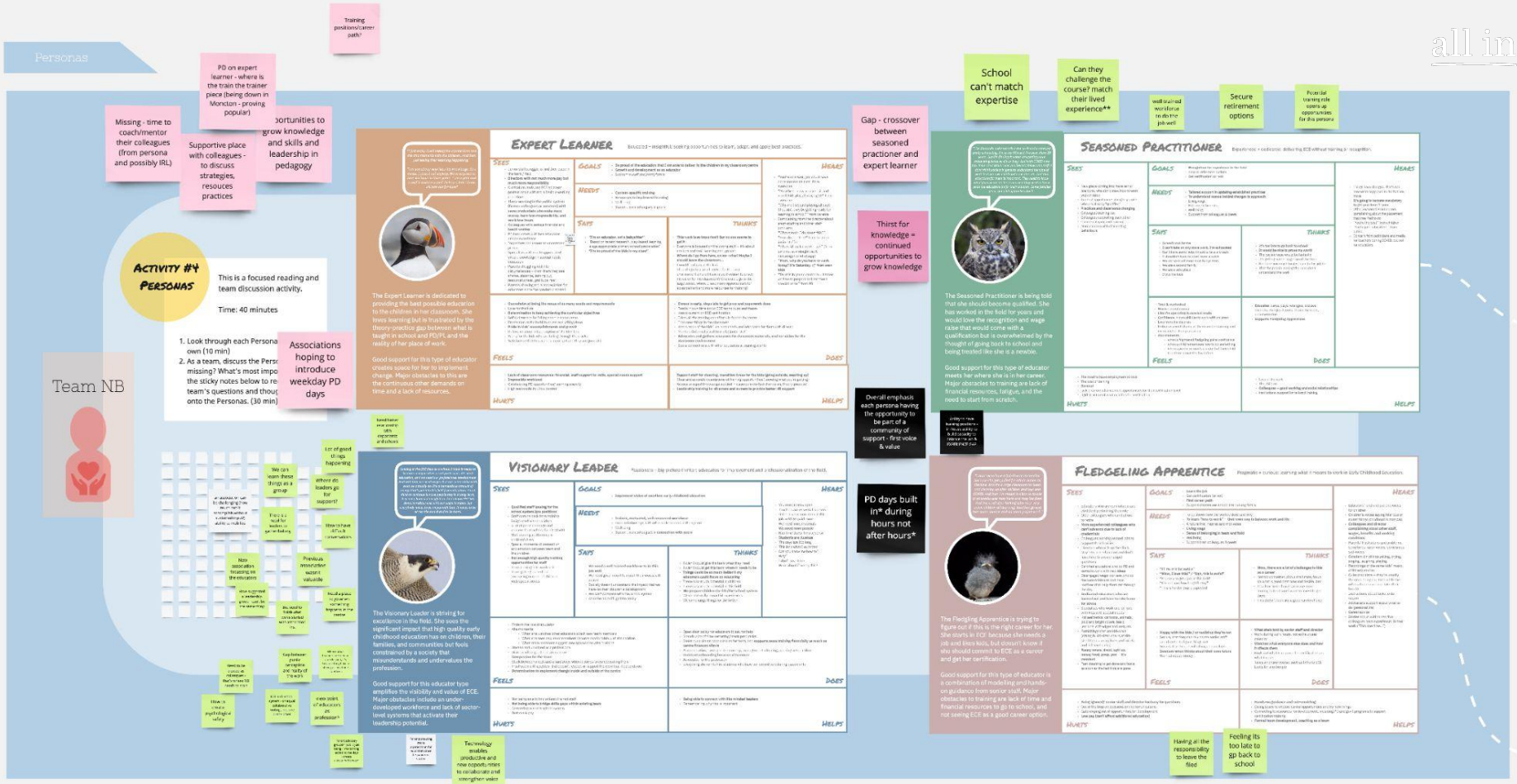


Expert Learner
Educated
and insightful



Visionary Leader
Passionate and
big-picture thinker





Personas
all in
Training positions/career path?
PD on expert learner - where is the train the trainer piece (being down in Moncton - proving popular)
Missing - time to coach/mentor their colleagues (from persona and possibly IRL)
Supportive place with colleagues - to discuss strategies, resouces practices
ortunities to grow knowledge and skills and leadership in pedagogy
Activity #4 Personas
This is a focused reading and team discussion activity.
Time: 40 minutes
1. Look through each Persona own (10 min)
2. As a team, discuss the Pers missing? What's most impo the sticky notes below to re team's questions and thoug onto the Personas. (30 min)
Associations hoping to introduce weekday PD days
Team NB
Expert Learner
The Expert Learner is dedicated to providing the best possible education to the children in her classroom. She loves learning but is frustrated by the theory-practice gap between what is taught in school and PD/PL and the reality of her place of work.
Good support for this type of educator creates space for her to implement change. Major obstacles to this are the continuous other demands on time and a lack of resources.
Gap - crossover between seasoned practioner and expert learner
Thirst for knowledge = continued opportunities to grow knowledge
Overall emphasis each persona having the opportunity to be part of a community of support - first-voice & value
PD days built in* during hours not after hours*
School can't match expertise
Can they challenge the course? match their lived experience**
well trained workforce to do the job well
Secure retirement options
Potential training role opens up opportunities for this persona
Seasoned Practitioner
The Seasoned Practitioner is being told that she should become qualified. She has worked in the field for years and would love the recognition and wage raise that would come with a qualification but is overwhelmed by the thought of going back to school and being treated like she is a newbie.
Good support for this type of educator meets her where she is in her career. Major obstacles to training are lack of financial resources, fatigue, and the need to start from scratch.
Visionary Leader
The Visionary Leader is striving for excellence in the field. She sees the significant impact that high quality early childhood education has on children, their families, and communities but feels constrained by a society that misunderstands and undervalues the profession.
Good support for this educator type amplifies the visibility and value of ECE. Major obstacles include an under-developed workforce and lack of sector-level systems that activate their leadership potential.
Technology enables productive and new opportunities to collaborate and strengthen voice
Fledgeling Apprentice
The Fledgling Apprentice is trying to figure out if this is the right career for her. She starts in ECE because she needs a job and bills kids, but doesn't know if she should commit to ECE as a career and get her certification.
Good support for this type of educator is a combination of modelling and hands-on guidance from senior staff. Major obstacles to training are lack of time and financial resources to go to school, and not seeing ECE as a good career option.
Having all the responsibility to leave the filed
Feeling its too late to go back to school

Journey to an ECE Career

Total: 45 min	8 min	8 min	8 min	8 min	8 min	8 min
	Before Training		During Training		After Training	
Fledgling Apprentice	Gathering information	Making a decision	Acting on decision	Going through the process	Outcome of process	What's next
What is she doing? *Who is she with?*		Talk to family, what works for them as well? trying out the work what are my options? go to ECDA, who will pay for it, what is paid for list of colleges you can do online, see training supports		checking in with peers attending classes	doing the same job but with more pay and knowledge	
What questions is she asking? *Who is she asking?*		What did she find out about money? do I want to be doing this?	upgrading needed? to enrol am I accepted? did I do the right thing?	"will I like it?"	(Level 3s .. how to keep them?) What keeps a primary teacher in their job without career laddering?	what will I advance to next?
What does she need? *From whom?*	money!	if no broadband, needs community access sites		mentor checking in on her	support her joining Fa Fadl	work for a few years then leave?
Persona stickers						
How is she feeling?			"I'm not smart enough" "terrified"		"I'm doing it!"	
Barriers and Enablers	Hurts / Helps	Finding online course in french has limited options - what is available and accredited? Benefits: Wage, PD paid for, sick leave. Understand that all of this is included	Hurts grade 12 academic English Helps taking Adult Ed (free)	Hurts Helps	Hurts Helps	Hurts / Helps



Seasoned Practitioner

Experienced + dedicated: delivering ECE without training or recognition.

The Seasoned Practitioner is being told that she should become qualified. She has worked in the field for years and would love the recognition and wage raise that would come with a qualification but is overwhelmed by the thought of going back to school and being treated like a newbie.

Good support for this type of educator meets her where she is in her career. Major obstacles to training are lack of financial resources, fatigue, and the need to start from scratch.

> *"The demands and stress that are on the educators get pretty exhausting. I'm in my 50s and I've been there 20 years, but I'm finding the days are getting more exhausting because it's so busy. And with COVID now too, there are certain rules you have to follow and stuff. I don't think society in general understand the type of work that our own childhood educators do. And that education for them is important. They need to know what goes on inside the centre and they need to know what the educators do for their children. Some families get it, but a lot of families don't."*
>
> *- Atlantic Canada early childhood educator*

Goals

- **Recognition for experience in the field**
- Secure retirement options
- Get certification (or not)

Hurts

- The need to leave employment to train
- The cost of training
- **Burnout**
- Lack of career advancement opportunities for their certification level
- Rigid structure of what qualifies for certification

Needs

- **Tailored support in updating established practices**
- **To understand reason behind changes to approach**
- Living wage
- Retirement benefits
- Wellbeing
- Support from colleagues & peers

Helps

- Love of the work
- The children
- **Colleagues – good working and social relationships**
- Institutional support for tailored training

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Data Party

A gallery walk of qualitative & quantitative data hosted during a pandemic

The Virtual Lab



Findings from Literature Reviews

Lab orientation materials and team agreements





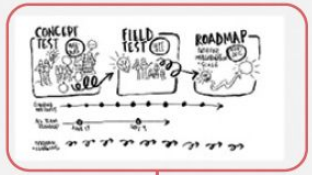
Desk Research and Interviews with Data Party activities

Lab team participation certificates









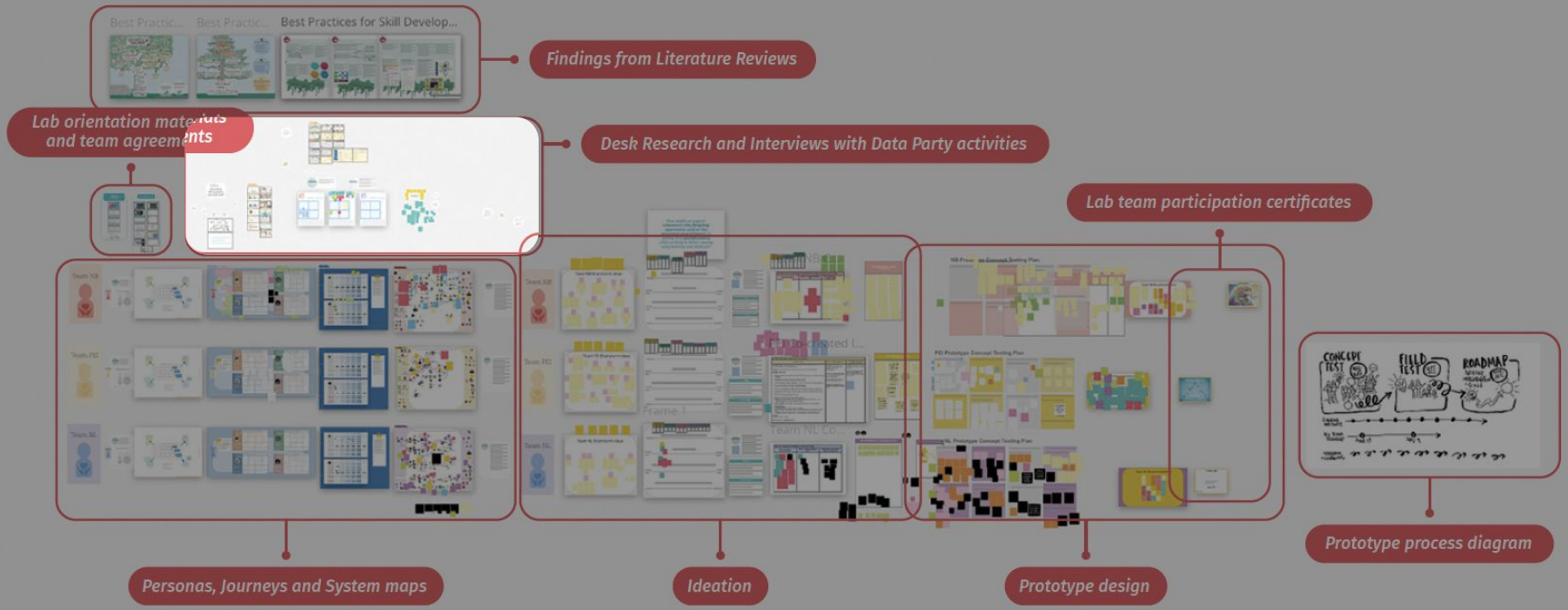
Prototype process diagram

Personas, Journeys and System maps

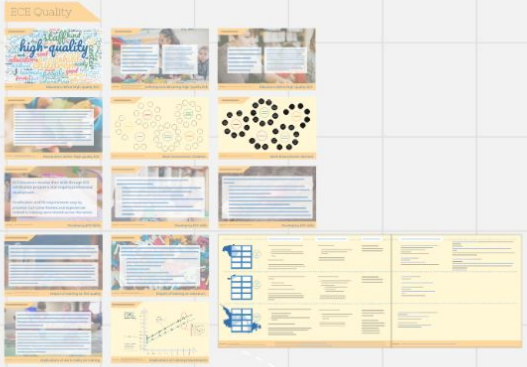
Ideation

Prototype design

The Virtual Lab



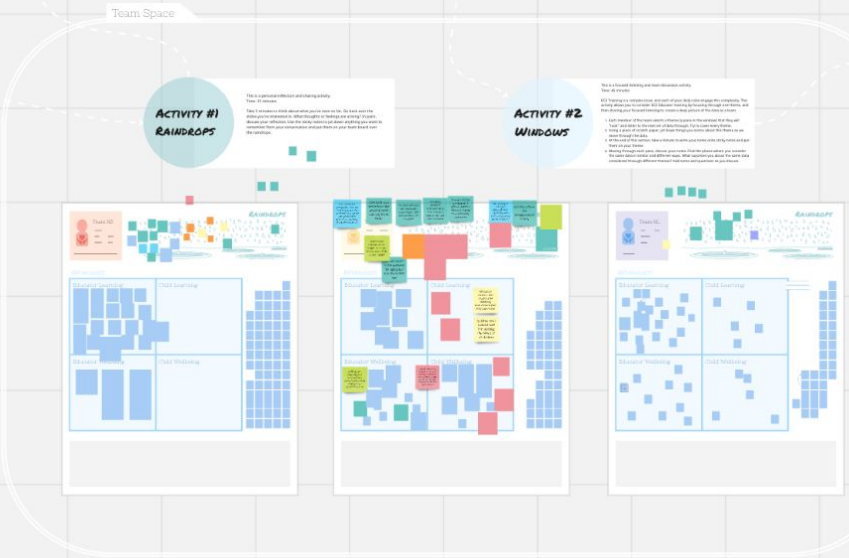
Data Party


ECE Quality
high-quality


BREAK
10 MIN


Early Childhood Education Lab
WELCOME TO ECE INNOVATION LAB'S DATA PARTY!


ECE Context


Team Space
ACTIVITY #1
RAINDROPS
ACTIVITY #2
WINDOWS


DATA PARTY PART I CHECK OUT! WHAT SURPRISED YOU? WEATHER REPORT..
TORRY

Gaps | ECE Educators are **least satisfied** with these aspects of the work:

#1 Wages

- 45.8% — Less than half of ECEs are satisfied with wages
- For example, in NS only **22%** of ECEs think pay is fair
- **1 in 4** ECE educators work a second job to make ends meet
- Although not part of our survey, wage issues were raised by almost every respondent

#2 Benefits

- 47.1% — Less than half of ECEs educators are satisfied with benefits
- Benefits include health, dental and retirement, but also paid or comp/flex time for PD
- Lack of benefits was often mentioned in relation to burnout in interviews
- One reason cited was needing to take vacation time to address health issues

#3 Career Path

- 47.7% — Less than half of ECEs are satisfied with career opportunities
- **60%** of ECEs work in the same position as when they started
- *"Why someone would get a master's degree to work minimum wage I don't know."*
- For example, in NL 9 of every 10 new hires is to replace someone leaving the sector
- The majority of ECEs leaving the sector go to work in the school system

#4 Respect

- ECEs reported the perception that their work was **undervalued**
- Many respondents pointed to the difference in perceptions of respect between ECE educators and schoolteachers
- *"I find some people will say, Oh, you know, you're just a babysitter. You don't hear that about a great primary teacher. We're not glorified babysitters."*
- For example, ECE educators in NS selected **"promoting more respect for ppl in childcare"** as the second most important thing that could be done to improve working conditions (behind addressing low wages)

"I know that you're asking a lot of questions about like training and practice and stuff like that. But like, none of that stuff matters until the people who are taking the training are able to be healthy and have dental care and be able to afford to retire."

"Get more people. Then they could actually run high-quality programs that they are proud of at the end of the day, and they could take mental health days and have regular breaks. I think that people could see it as a career, but right now the burnout is just so high because of that."

"In general, we hear a lot of talk about how important the ECE sector is, but there's never really concrete actions to make the staff or the educators feel like they are important. I've had quite a few staff tell me they were actually ashamed or they didn't really like saying to people that they worked in daycare because people just assumed that they were babysitting kids and they were sitting all day and not doing very much."

For educators, pay isn't only an economic issue, it's a symbol of how ECE work is valued by Canadian society.

Sources

2021 ECE Innovation Lab Primary Research Interviews.
Kathleen Flanagan, Jane Beach and Petr Varmuza. "You Bet We Still Care: A Survey of Centre-Based Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada. Highlights Report." 2013.
Christine Saulnier and Lesley Frank. "Unappreciated and underpaid" Early Childhood Educators in Nova Scotia. 2019.
Early Childhood Educators Human Resource Council. "Examination of Recruitment and Retention Issues within the Regulated Early Learning and Child Care Workforce in Newfoundlandand and Labrador." May 2019.
Kathleen Flanagan and associates, "PEI Workforce Strategy Project Final Report." March 2019.

Quotes are from interviews with Atlantic Canada early childhood educators and directors.

The Stories

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From “Fix it” to “Change it”

We *danced with systems* while we hired subs, organized professional development days, visualized credential pathways and produced showcase events.

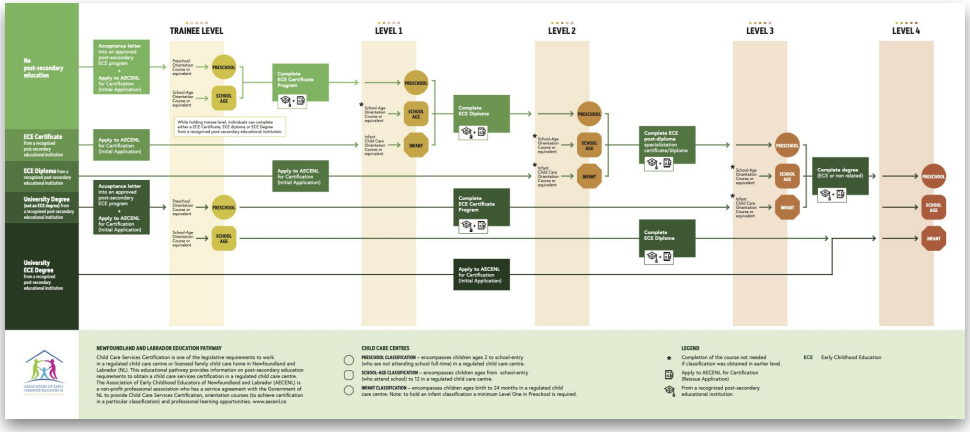
Meadows, D. (2001). Dancing with systems.

The Lab's First Challenge

How might we support early childhood educators in getting ECE qualifications while working to deliver quality early learning and childcare in Atlantic Canada?



Round 1 Prototypes



Early Childhood Education Innovation Lab

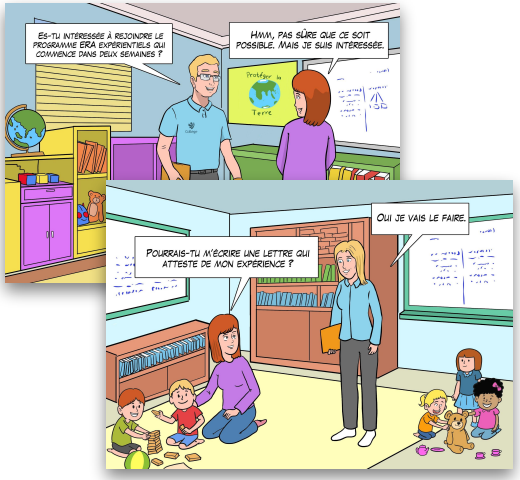
Interested in helping Early Childhood Educators obtain their professional credentials?



For more info contact

innovate@noulab.org

https://noulab.org/ece





The Hole in the Bucket

Themes from Research

Theme 2:
Recruitment and Retention Factors for ECE Workforce

Working Conditions

"Staff well being, job satisfaction and the likelihood to stay in the sector has to do with **the balance between job demands, job resources and rewards.**"

Jane Beach, What's Next for the ELCC Workforce? [webinar], 2022

Successful recruitment and retention of ECEs can kickstart a virtuous cycle of improvement in quality of life in communities and better working conditions for ECEs

BLUE = ECEs positive spiral
GREEN = community positive spiral

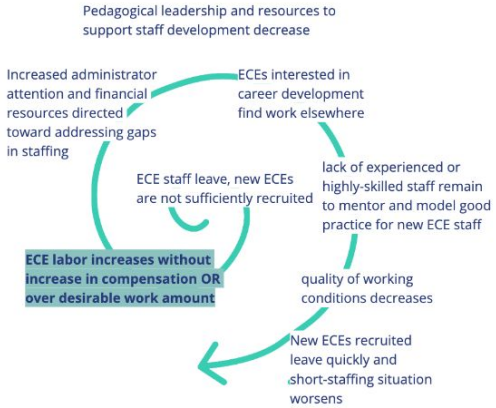


Themes from Research

Theme 2:
Recruitment and Retention Factors for ECE Workforce

Working Conditions

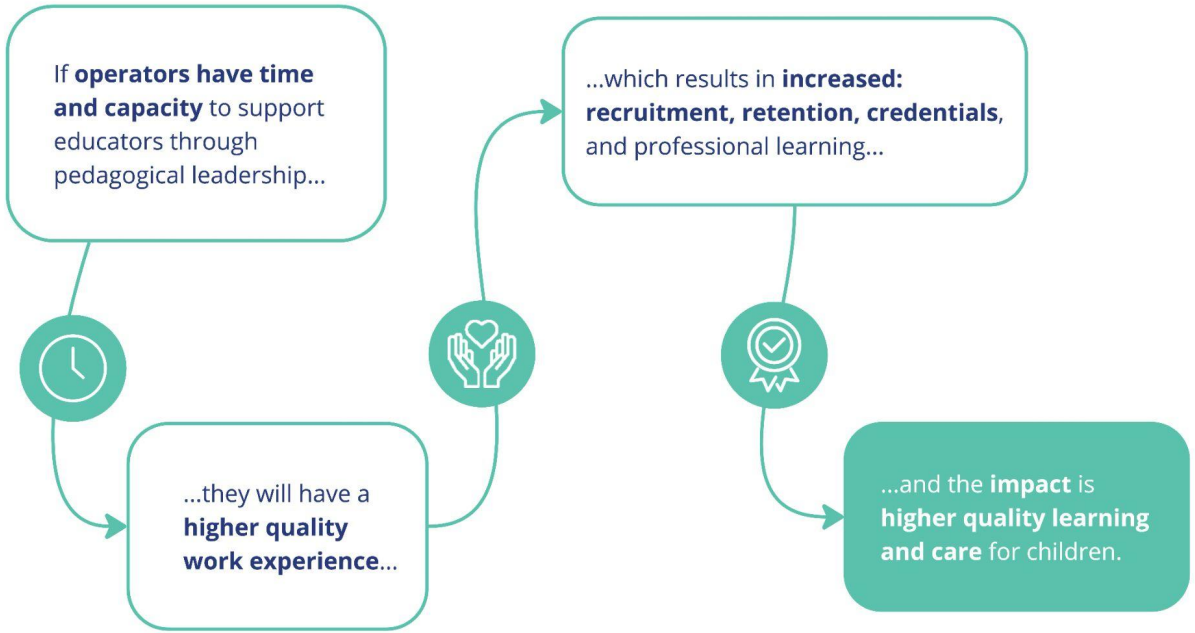
Loss of ECE staff downward spiral



ECE Staff Satisfaction

- ECEC staff show a high level of satisfaction with the profession, but their **views on the working conditions in the sector are mixed.**
- **Staff who perceive leadership as being more distributed in their ECEC centre tend to engage more frequently in professional collaborative practices and report greater satisfaction with their job.**
- **Feelings of stress emerge from imbalances between job demands, resources and rewards.** Support from leaders and satisfaction with salary act as buffers of stress in most of the countries, although not consistently. Training related to the source of stress, collaborative practices and control over decisions are not sufficiently developed or effective to act as significant buffers.
- ECEC staff more engaged in collaborative practices are more likely to participate in training activities, underscoring the **synergies between formal and informal channels for skills development.**
- Staff indicate retirement, health-related reasons, family responsibilities and work outside of the ECEC sector as the most likely reasons to leave their job, which suggests that they often **envisage limited career progression within the sector.**

ECE Lab Theory of Change

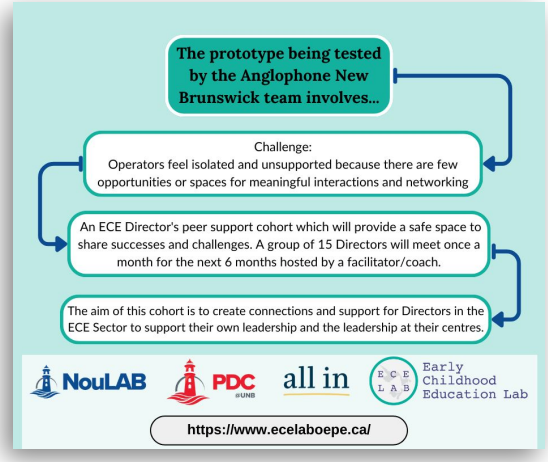


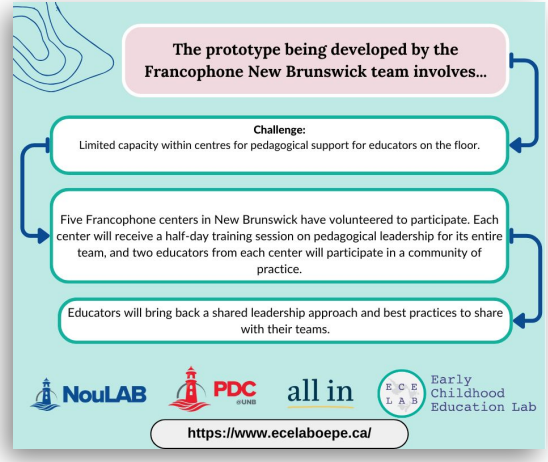
The Lab's Second Challenge

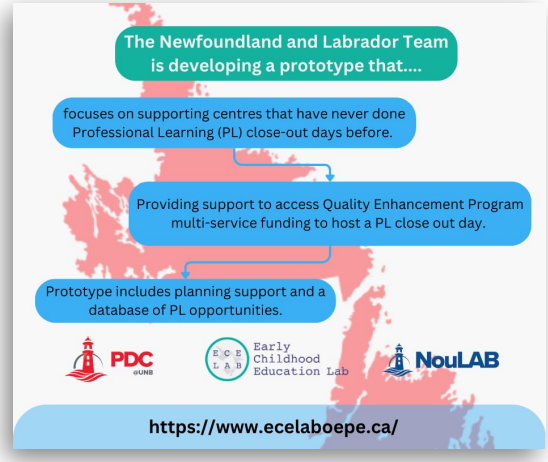
How might we create the conditions for thriving work experiences for operators and educators?

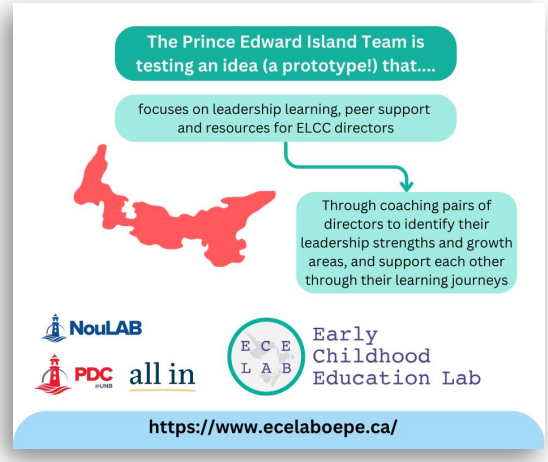


Round 2 Prototypes











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An Octopus Walks into a Bar

A rich picture of the problem space becomes a rallying emblem of ECE leaders across the region

Our fieldwork has found that the tension between admin requirements and pedagogical leadership is a barrier to thriving work experiences.



“It's just a hundred different jobs rolled into one.”

- ECE Director

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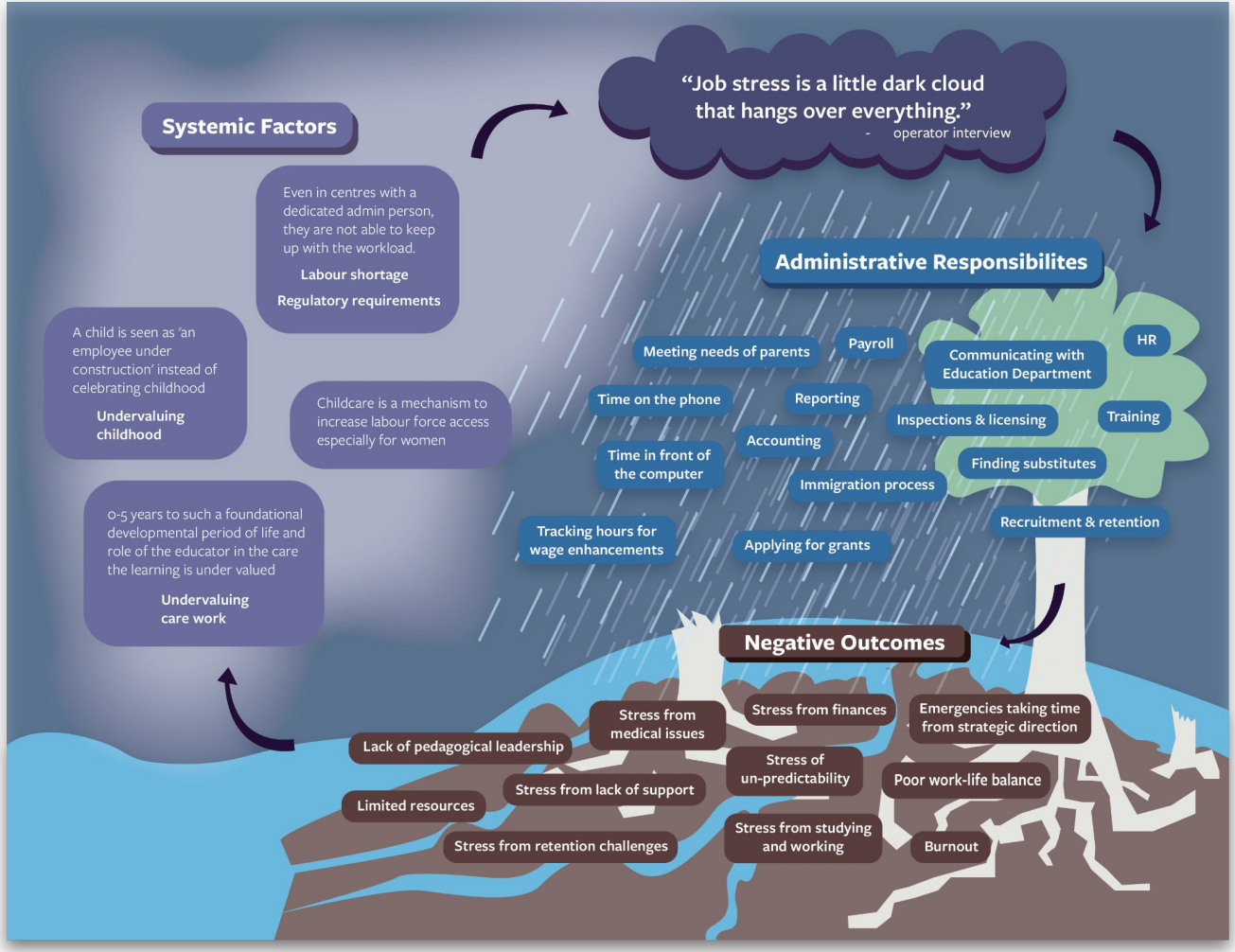
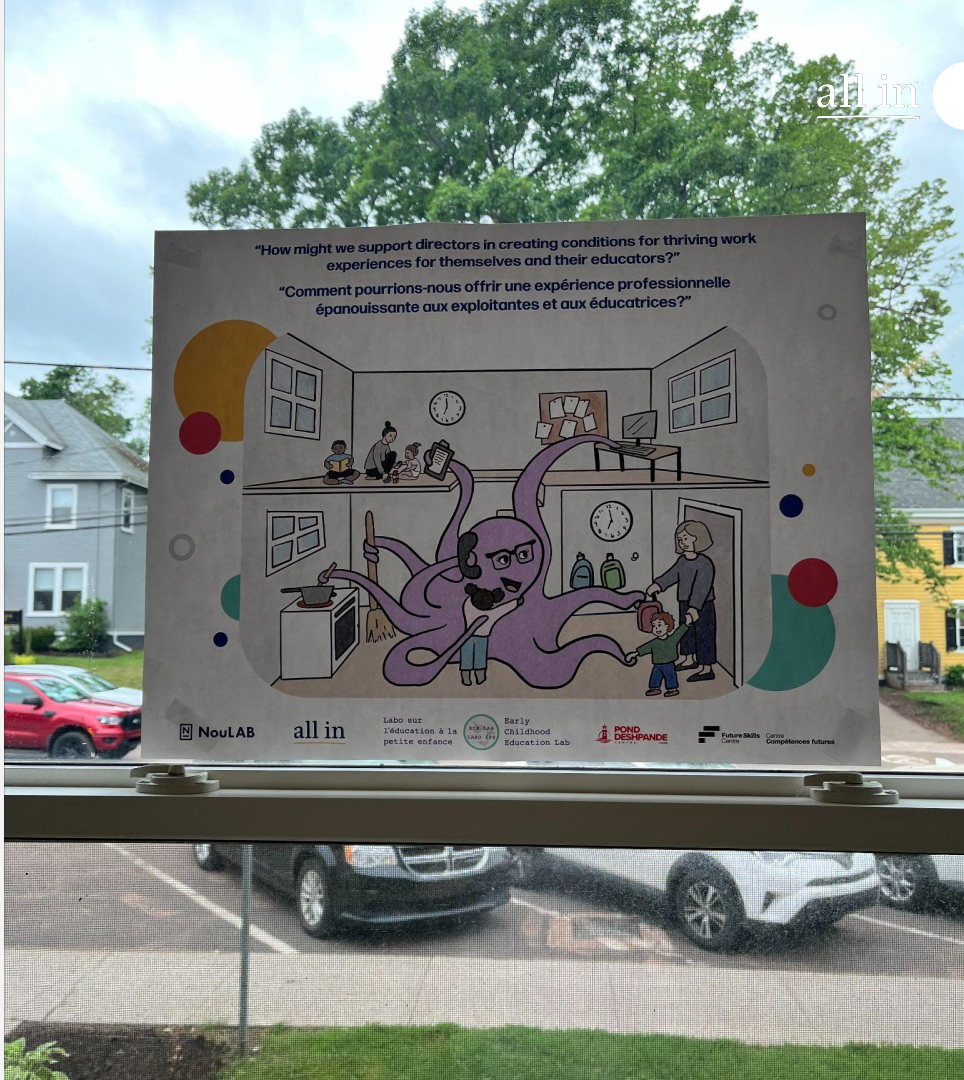

"Job stress is a little dark cloud that hangs over everything."
- operator interview
Systemic Factors
Even in centres with a dedicated admin person, they are not able to keep up with the workload.
Labour shortage
Regulatory requirements
A child is seen as 'an employee under construction' instead of celebrating childhood
Undervaluing childhood
Childcare is a mechanism to increase labour force access especially for women
0-5 years to such a foundational developmental period of life and role of the educator in the care the learning is under valued
Undervaluing care work
Administrative Responsibilites
Meeting needs of parents
Payroll
Communicating with Education Department
HR
Time on the phone
Reporting
Inspections & licensing
Training
Accounting
Time in front of the computer
Finding substitutes
Immigration process
Tracking hours for wage enhancements
Applying for grants
Recruitment & retention
Negative Outcomes
Stress from medical issues
Stress from finances
Emergencies taking time from strategic direction
Lack of pedagogical leadership
Stress of un-predictability
Poor work-life balance
Limited resources
Stress from lack of support
Stress from studying and working
Burnout
Stress from retention challenges



Posters hang in government offices and early learning centres across the Atlantic region



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Recording...






POND
DESHPANDE
Pond-Deshpande Centre


Sandy Gow She/Her AECENL

Design can bring

Breathing room – Design frameworks can help align expectations around divergence and convergence, and keep people and learning centred in the lab

Tangibility – Prototypes, concept mock-ups, speculative objects, role plays and popups – help ideas move in different spaces and reach more people in communities

Shared language – Metaphors and graspable problem framing support lab participants and their communities in both self and systems advocacy

Longevity – Lab artefacts and the bonds developed through collaborative creative process help participants carry the work forward through time

Make accessibly visible,
make collaboratively actionable,
Make together when possible, and
wanted.

Learn more, reach out



Molly Balcom Raleigh
molly@allinagency.ca
Thank you!

For the full ECE Lab report, data party and prototype materials, and links to other resources

