

**Supporting Continuous Professional Development of Early Childhood Educators:  
Comparing and Contrasting Jamaican and Canadian Experiences**

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### **Abstract**

Continued Professional Development (PD) for Early Childhood Educators (ECE) is of the utmost importance mainly because of its impact on education and the potential of the dynamic universal changes that are sometimes latent in its manifestation. This research project compares PD experiences and needs in Calgary (Canada) and Jamaica, assists in bridging the existing gap between theory and practice, and promotes partnerships. The project design includes two phases: During the first phase, surveys and interviews were conducted to identify the PD needs and experiences, and in the second phase we addressed the gaps and needs through workshop implementation in Jamaica. The research confirms and substantiates our beliefs that meaningful PD positively influences professional growth and best practices which occur when participants are given the opportunity to provide input in the decision-making processes with ongoing support from owners, administrators and governments. Additionally, our project recommends that PD can be sustained through established learning communities and partnerships amongst colleagues in Calgary and Jamaica.

**Supporting Continuous Professional Development of Early Childhood Educators:  
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It is incumbent upon Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) to meet the diverse needs of children and families from various backgrounds. They must therefore make a concerted effort to remain current in professional practices, including developing and maintaining relationships with families and colleagues. Professional Development (PD) opportunities offer the means by which this can be achieved. To grow professionally, early childhood educators need to receive appropriate in-service training. Professional conference and workshops provide opportunities for staff to receive new information and discuss practice-based issues with colleagues (Yeates et al., 2001). Through discussions with the Bow Valley College Early Learning and Child Care Advisory Committee, and early learning educators and other stakeholders in both Calgary and Jamaica, it seems that a gap exists between theory and practice, the reason being, some individuals who are employed with different designations and/or without early childhood competencies become mentors for our BVC learners. Additionally, many early childhood educators have limited access to continuous professional development.

Internationally, professional associations and regulatory bodies encourage professionals to continue to strengthen their practice throughout their careers through PD (Chandler, 2019; Early Childhood Commission Jamaica, 2007). Based on the similarities in PD outcomes and guidelines for educators, Bow Valley College, in collaboration with Shortwood Teachers' College (Jamaica) and The Early Childhood Commission (Jamaica), formed a partnership and conducted a research project. This two-phase research includes early childhood mentors, directors, educators, and a review of related literature and was designed to:

- Investigate the PD experiences and needs for ECEs in Calgary and Jamaica.
- Assess the effectiveness of the PD workshops based on the expressed needs of early childhood educators in Jamaica.

This research stemmed from the need to bridge the existing gap between theory and practice and identify the challenges in accessing effective continuous PD, and aims to support effective and meaningful PD. The findings of this research will be beneficial in supporting the mentors of our Early Childhood practicum students.

### **Methods**

To investigate the research questions, two surveys and a follow up interview were administered. Both surveys included a series of open and closed questions. This research was divided into two phases.

In phase one, participants were recruited from different geographical locations in Jamaica and from Calgary and surrounding areas. These included mentors, individuals with equivalencies, front line workers and/or supervisors or employers. The surveys were conducted using the survey monkey methodology and were created to find out the PD needs of ECEs, and looked at topics for PD, modality of PD and scheduling of PD, in addition to experiences which looked at access to PD, types of PD attended and impact of PD. All the participants who completed the survey were invited to participate in a follow up interview.

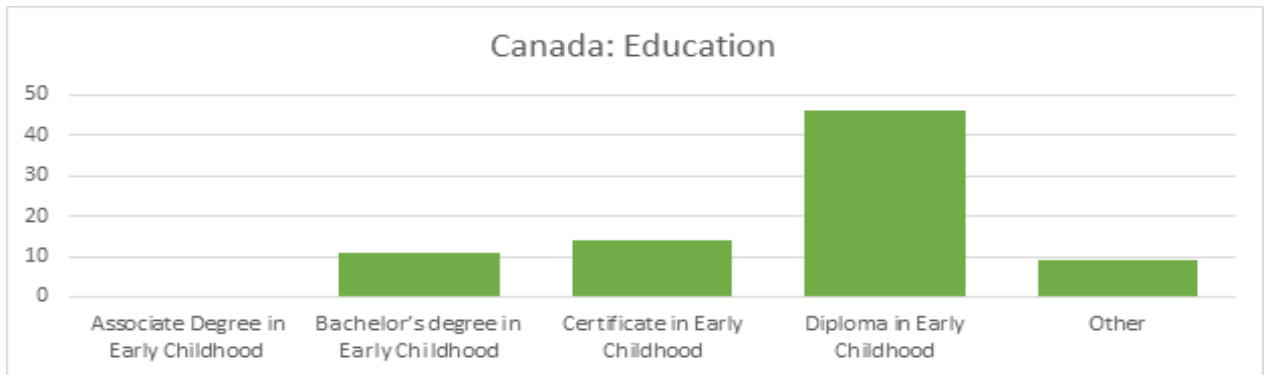
In phase 2, the workshop evaluation survey was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the PD workshops based on the expressed needs of early childhood educators in Jamaica. All the educators who attended the workshop were invited to complete the survey.

## Results

Fifty-eight percent of the Canadian participants indicated that their highest level of education is a diploma in Early Childhood Education, while 18% had a certificate in Early Childhood Education (figure 1).

**Figure 1**

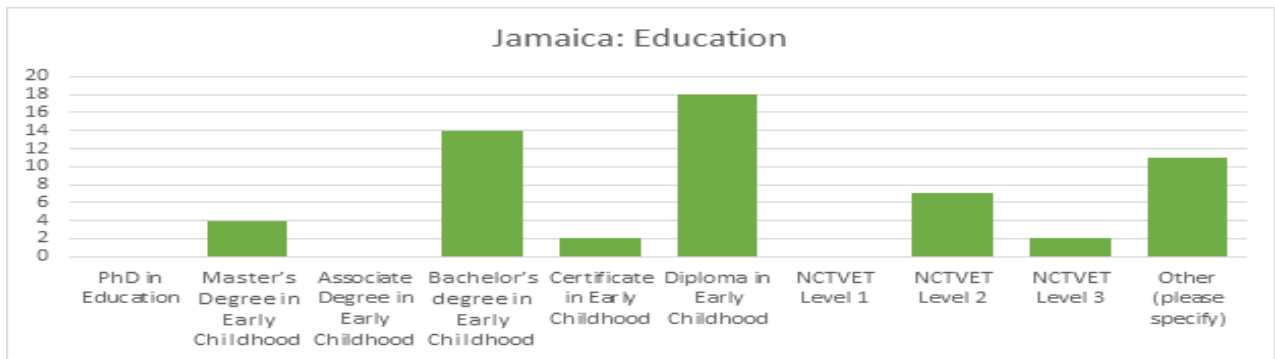
*Highest level of education of Canadian participants*



Thirty-two percent of the Jamaican participants indicated that their highest level of education is a diploma in Early Childhood Education, while 25% had a bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood (figure 2). Other educational levels included NCTVET Levels 2 and 3 and other related training in education, and Business.

**Figure 2**

*Highest level of education of Jamaican participants*



The data shows that 93% of the Canadian educators and 82% of the Jamaican educators are employed full time (figure 3).

### Figure 3

*Employment status of Canadian and Jamaican participants*



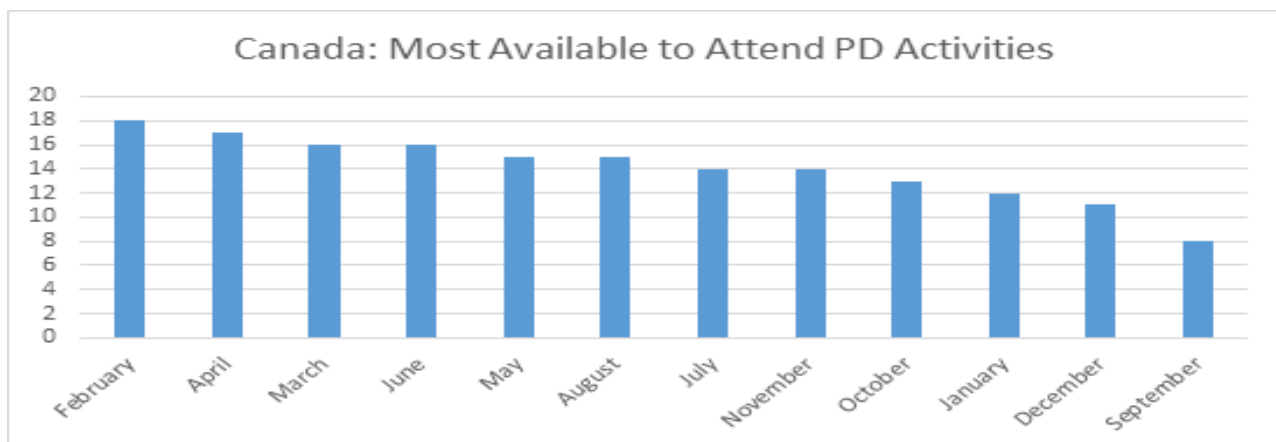
The following findings represent the three research questions and employment status of Canadian and Jamaican participants in three themes.

**Theme 1: What are the PD needs of ECEs in Calgary and Jamaica, which looked at topics for PD, modality of PD and scheduling of PD**

Participants indicated that they would be mostly available during the months of February, April, March and June (figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Canada: Most available to attend PD activities*

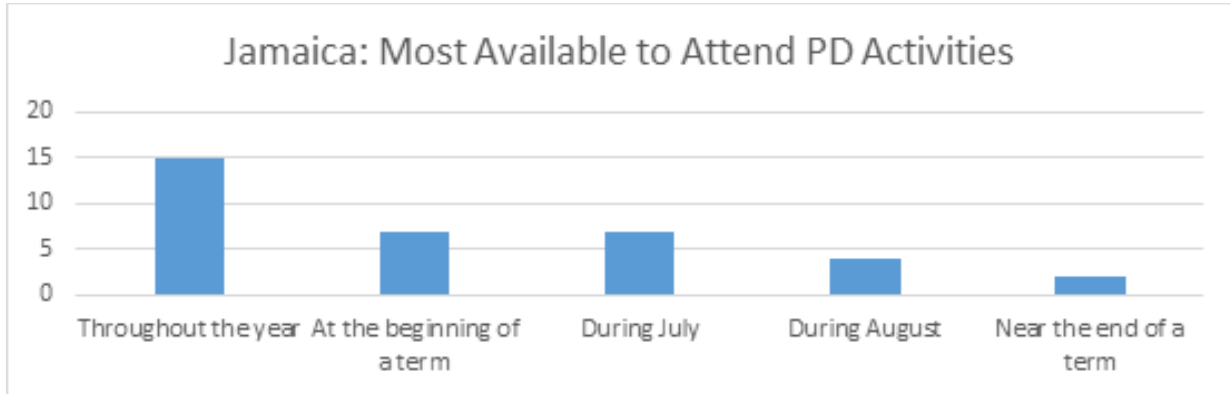




Participants in Jamaica indicated that they would be mostly available throughout the year (figure 5).

**Figure 5**

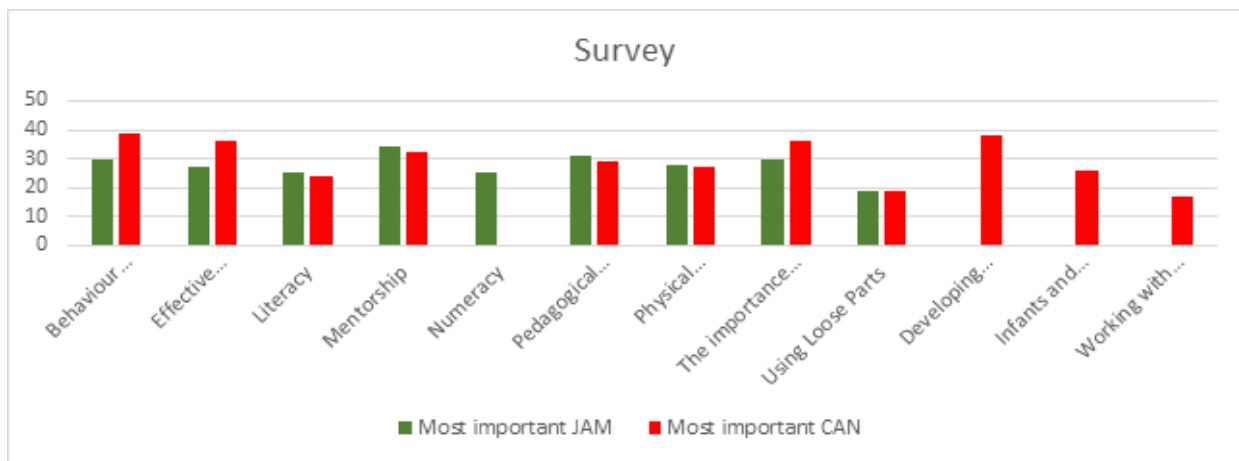
*Jamaica: Most available time to attend PD.*



The data shows that the most important professional development needs for educators in both Jamaica and Canada were similar (figure 6). These included mentorship, pedagogical leadership, behaviour modification, play, and effective communication. Educators in Canada also identified Developing Social and Emotional Competencies.

**Figure 6**

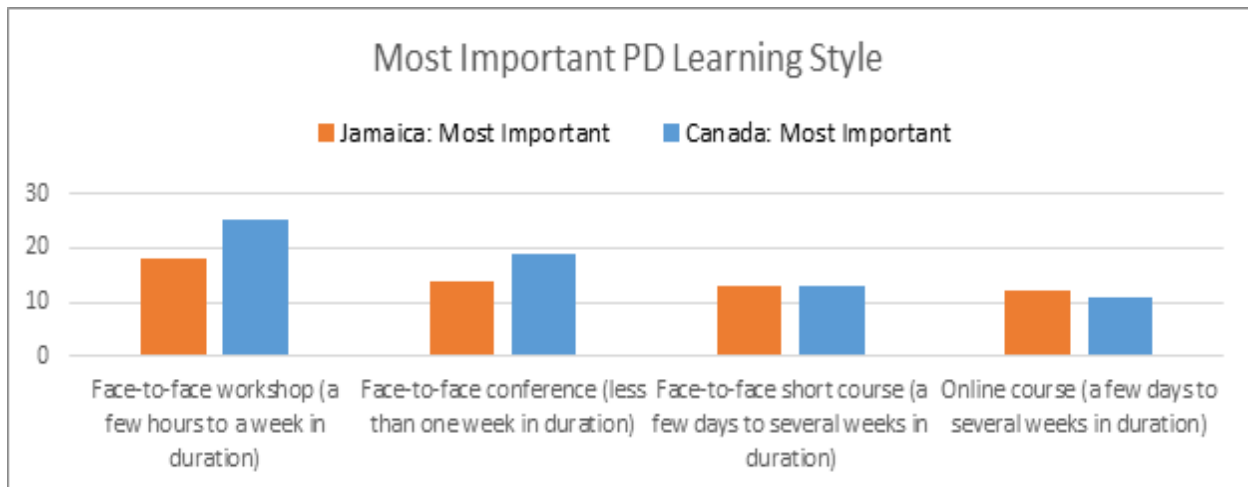
*Comparison between Canada and Jamaica showing most important PD sessions*



Both Canadian and Jamaican educators identified face-to-face workshops and conferences as their most important learning style (figure 7). Online courses were the least important learning style.

**Figure 7**

*Most important PD learning style*

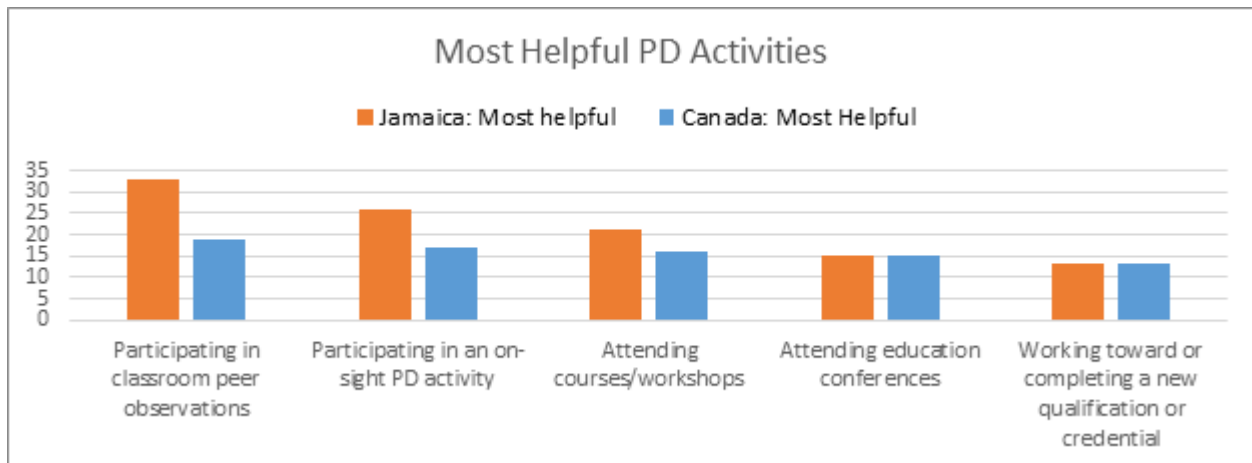


**Theme 2: What are the PD experiences, which looked at access to PD, types of PD attended and impact of PD**

Participants were asked to identify PD activities that they have attended over the past year and to rate them as most or least helpful (figure 8). The two most helpful PD activities for both Jamaican and Canadian educators were participating in classroom activities and onsite PD activities and the two least helpful were attending classroom activities and working towards or completing a new qualification or credential.

**Figure 8**

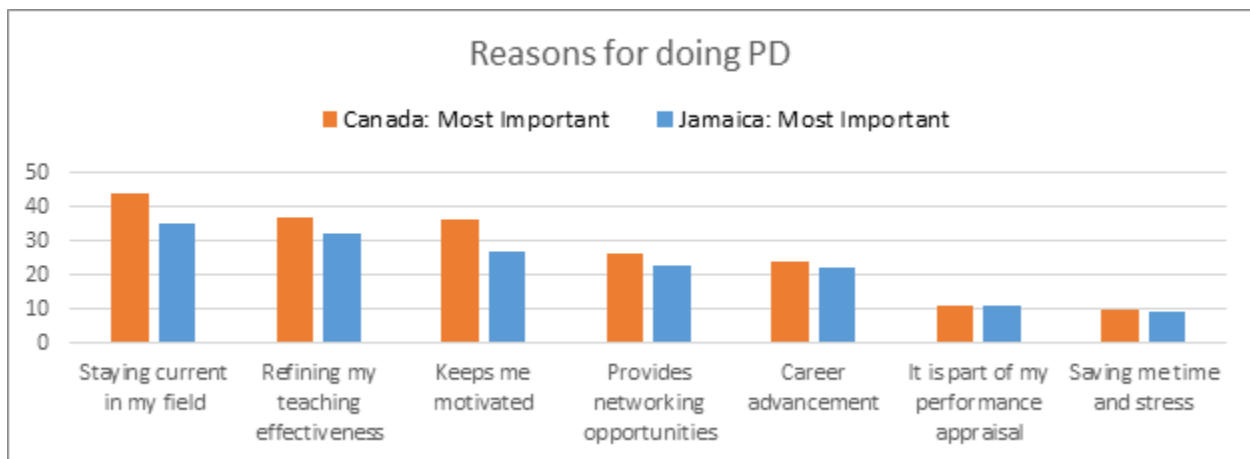
*Most helpful PD activities*



The three most important reasons for engaging in PD activities were staying current in the field, refining teaching effectiveness and motivation (figure 9). There were clearly two least important reasons for engaging in PD – saving time and stress and being part of performance appraisal.

**Figure 9**

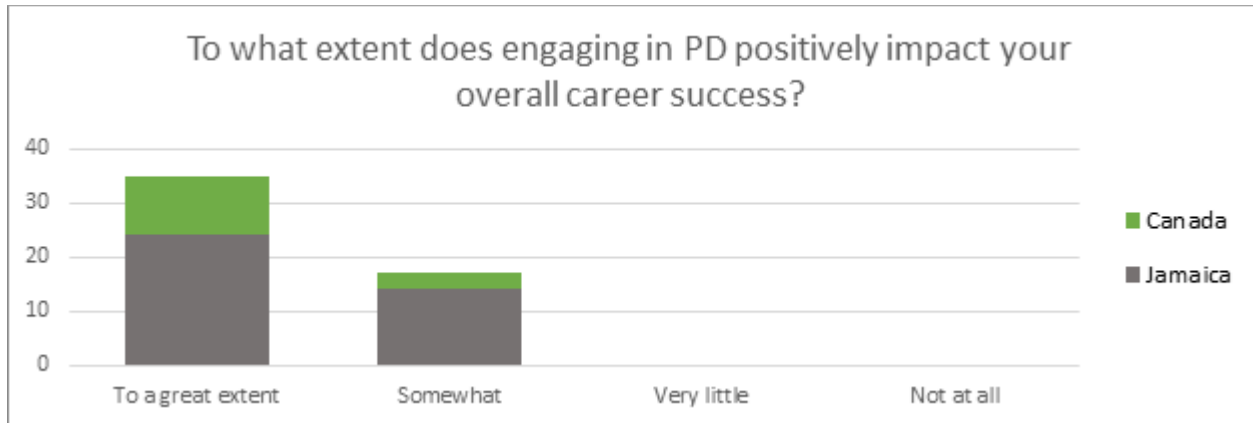
*Reasons for participants in professional development*



Most of the participants agreed that engaging in PD positively influenced their overall career (figure 10).

**Figure 10**

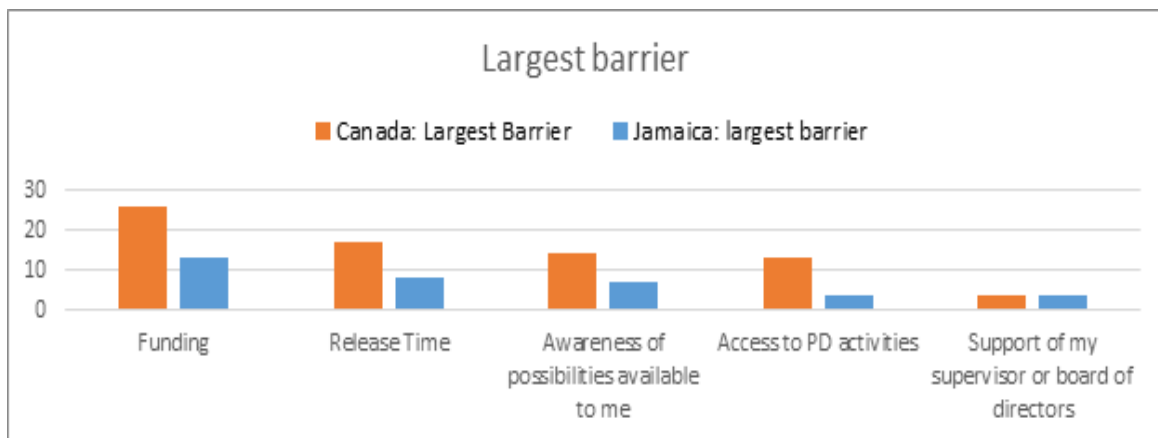
*Impact of PD*



Data shows that in accessing PD, funding and release time were the largest barriers experienced by participants (figure 11).

**Figure 11**

*Barriers experienced by participants in accessing PD*

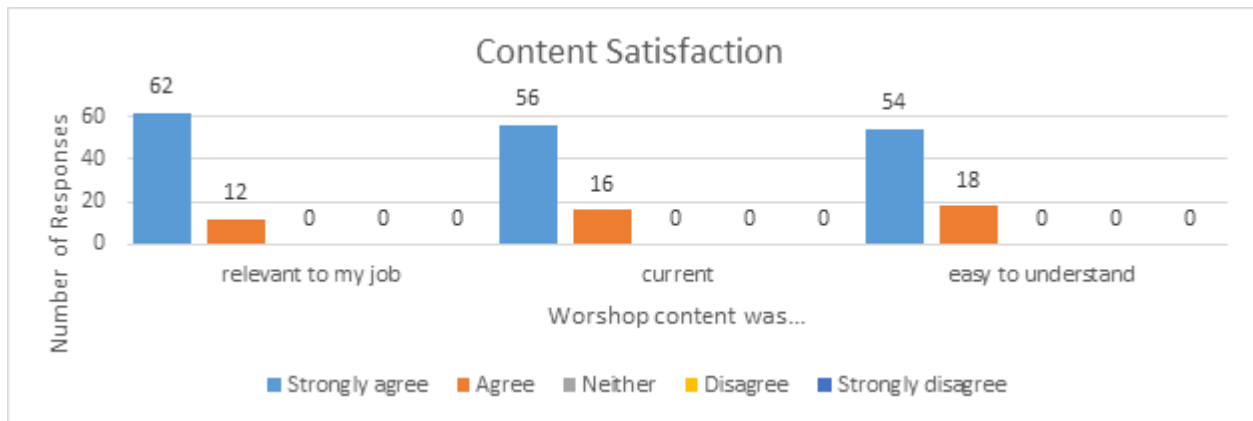


**Theme 3: Did the workshops meet the identified needs?**

Of the 76 participants, 62 strongly agreed that the content is relevant to their job, 56 strongly agreed that the content is current and 54 strongly agreed that the content is easily understood (figure 12).

**Figure 12**

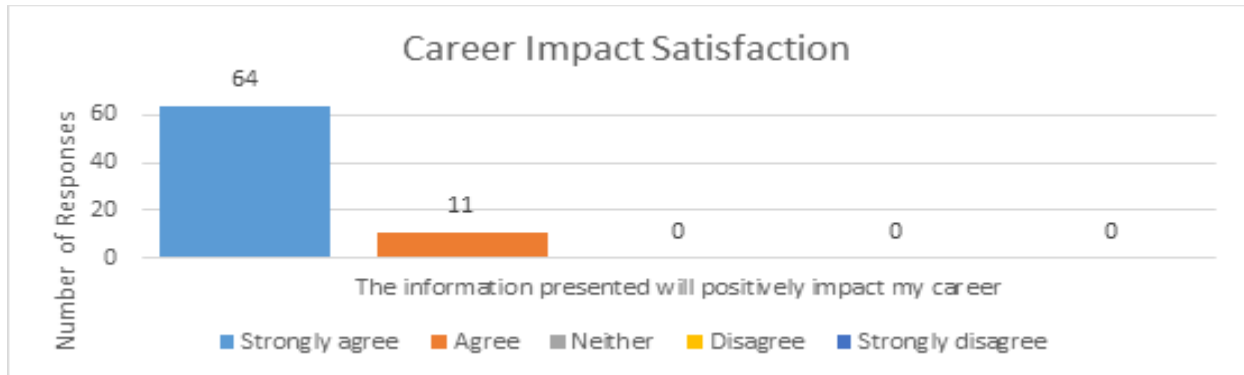
*Participants’ satisfaction with the workshop content*



A large majority of the participants agreed that the workshop would influence their career (figure 13).

**Figure 13**

*Career impact satisfaction*

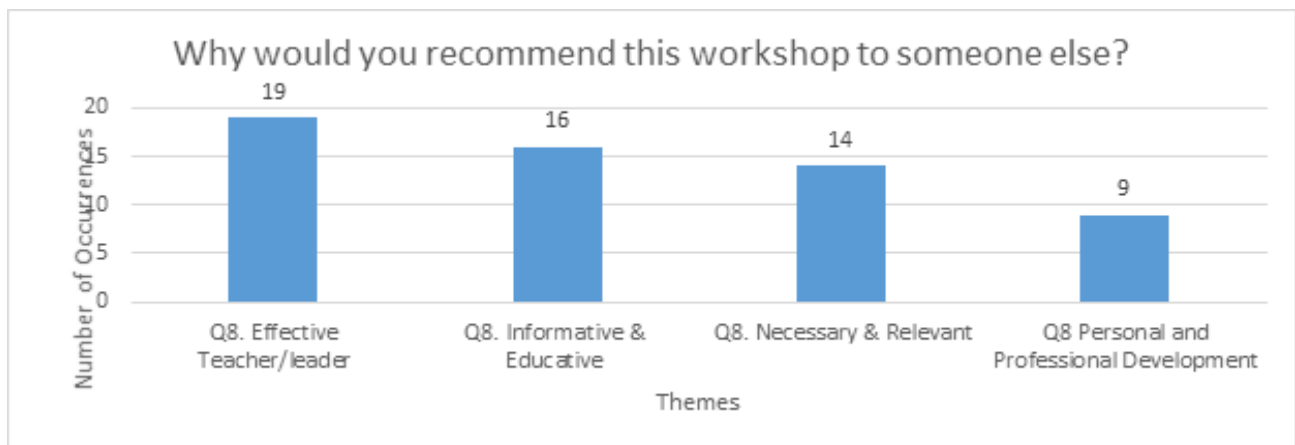




Participants would recommend the workshop to others because it would help them to be effective leaders, it was informative and educative, and the information was relevant in promoting their personal and professional development (figure 14).

**Figure 14**

*Why would you recommend this workshop to someone else?*



Positive suggestions included the workshop should also be shared with other educators and the workshop was appreciated (figure 15). Suggestions for improvements included providing accommodation, more hands-on activities, time management, and including topics on behaviour guidance.

**Figure 15**

*Summary of comments, ideas and suggestions shared by participants*



## Discussion

The results show that over 50% of the participants are employed as full-time educators and their highest level of post-secondary training is a diploma in early childhood education. Although participants are working full time, they are willing to avail themselves during most times of the year to participate in PD activities. Past research has shown that PD and higher levels of education have a direct relationship with child development and performance outcomes (Chandler, 2019; Dietze & Kashin, 2016; Sheridan et al., 2009; Yeates et al., 2001).

In both the Jamaican and Canadian contexts, participants indicated an interest in receiving professional development training in social and emotional learning, mentorship,

effective communication and the importance of play. These findings are consistent with the literature that emphasized:

Early childhood educators are being asked to have deeper understandings of child development and early education issues; to provide richer educational experiences for all children including those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged; to engage children of varying abilities and backgrounds; to connect with a diverse array of families; and to do so with greater demands for accountability and, in some cases, fewer resources, than ever before” (Sheridan et al., 2009, para 2).

Over half of the participants indicated that their highest level of education is a diploma in ECE hence it is encouraging to note that these educators had an interest in receiving additional training.

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1993), to be effective and promote positive outcomes for children and families, professional development opportunities must meet the experience, background, and roles of caregivers with a diverse range of qualifications, experiences, and employment positions. (as cited in Byington & Tannock, 2011, p.7).

Along with content, the manner in which the PD is delivered is also significant; attending workshops and conferences are the most preferred styles of learning. The literature emphasizes the benefits of selecting the most appropriate method of delivering PD that will suit the learning styles. Harris and Jones (2010) argued that “early learning professionals should take an active role in ownership of and defining a strategy that will provide them with ways to have access to learning that supports their desired outcomes” (as cited in Dietze and Kashin, 2016, p. 288). They further argued that “Individuals and groups benefit when they determine their own learning

strategy and how the change process will occur” (as cited in Dietze and Kashin, 2016, p. 288). This would suggest that educators themselves must be more than just receivers of information; they must be active participants in their own learning processes.

The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (2018) asserts that the benefits to ongoing professional learning:

ensures that early childhood educators have access to the latest research and best practices in the field, which supports continuous improvement in the quality and delivery of child care programs and creates the best possible outcomes for children and families (para. 6).

The position of the association corresponds with the results, and, as the majority of participants indicated, PD positively influences their career. This is a positive indication that ongoing professional learning plays a vital role in how educators provide quality care and education.

Our study found that the two most important reasons for engaging in PD activities were “staying current in the field” and “refining teaching effectiveness”. Alternatively, the two least important reasons for engaging in PD activities were “saving time” or “stress” and “being part of performance appraisal”. The most important reasons identified are relevant to educators' practice. As Dietze and Kashin (2016) point out, “professional learning experiences facilitate collaborative enquiry, whereby teachers explore new ideas, examine current practices and engage in discourse that may lead individuals and groups to think about practices from a new perspective” (p. 289). Chandler (2019) provided further explanations by offering some examples: “the strategies used by professionals throughout their career to keep current in the field, are internships, practicum, and memberships in professional organizations, self-study, in-service

workshops, professional literature and conferences” (p. 181).

The survey makes it clear that while participants recognize the benefits of PD, they have also experienced barriers. Participants identified the largest barriers as funding and release times. These barriers might be due to low wages and benefits associated with the field, scheduling and unexpected events, and maintaining ratios. This would be consistent with a study conducted by Vesay (2008), which determined that:

time was one of the utmost deterrents these individuals face in accessing educational opportunities. Time away from work in addition to cost of admission, personal interest in the topic, availability of relevant educational opportunities, transportation, and unsupportive management dissuade these adults from attending college (as cited in Wright, 2017, p. 21).

Additionally, in Canada, the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (2013), conducted a study on early childhood educators’ wages and working conditions and found that “fewer than 50% of employees had paid release time for professional development activities and only 36% received any financial support for these activities” (pp. 17-20). Dietze and Kashin (2019) noted that “professional development is highly influenced by employers, provincial funding models, and individual early learning teacher motivation, which adds to the problem” (p. 2). These literatures clearly support the findings and highlight the need of identifying and finding solutions to the barriers and the need for programs and government agencies to work together to support PD opportunities.

The workshop was only offered in Jamaica and was conducted by three of the research team members. The workshop survey showed that more than 50% of the participants, strongly agreed or agreed that the content presented is current, easily understood and is relevant to their

job. While participants strongly agree that they would recommend the workshops to others, much of the literature advocates that after the workshops, opportunities should be provided for follow up and support. (Brown & Inglis, 2013; Guskey, 1991; Haviland et al., 2010; Helterbran & Fennimore, 2004; Ofer & Pedder, 2010). This idea is highlighted by Lumpe (2007) who explained that recent research is beginning to use and clarify an approach to professional development which highlights the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs). This learning community would focus on effective feedback, cooperation, collegiality, practice-oriented staff development, a culture of shared beliefs, and relationships. The processes of professional development are embedded at the building level in a professional learning community where strategies can be applied and results evaluated. While formal workshops remain part of this approach, they serve a peripheral, supporting role. A central underlying assumption of PLCs is that teacher learning involves talking with colleagues about teaching and grappling with the issues embodied in everyday classroom life (Damjanovic & Blank, 2017). Additionally, in the quotes below two participants voiced their support for this approach:

“PD workshop sessions should serve as a foundation and there should be team sessions to follow up and brainstorm with one another”.

“It would be more effective if there was follow up which allow us to reflect on our practices. This could be done with pedagogical leaders or mentors”.

Peleman et al. (2019) point out that through the work carried out by teams during continuous professional development activities, practitioners gained the confidence to both “give away their best ideas instead of keeping them to ourselves and to voice their opinions in staff meetings more readily” (p. 10). This implies maximizing opportunities for sharing, exchanging and negotiating perspectives and opinions (Moss, 2011). If professional learning communities

were to be implemented, each early childhood organization, program, school, community or country would need to have clear guidelines on its purpose and address issues on how to alleviate potential barriers.

Some limitations should be considered in this research. Data collection was limited to ECE educators in Calgary and educators from selected certified child care programs in Jamaica, which restricted the ability to generalize the findings. Additionally, the workshop results are limited to Calgary, and an indication of a need or interest in workshop topics may not be transformed into attendance at relevant workshop sessions. Factors such as the location, accommodation and schedule could also influence attendance.

### **Conclusion**

This research ideally sets out to investigate the critical need for continued meaningful PD opportunities by presenting a comparison between Canadian ECEs and their Jamaican counterparts. It identifies the experiences and needs of ECEs in Calgary and Jamaica. It affirms that meaningful PD informs future practice and influences positive change in education and professionalism. This insistence on professionalism may seem to suggest that some educators are not taking their duties as seriously, but our experience lays bare the facts that indicate otherwise. It is not the lack of professionalism that is at risk, but rather the requisite and varying platforms to adequately include those directly involved in the practice. This is particularly evident when participants are afforded the opportunity to provide input in the decision making process, for instance, engage in dialogue, reflection and collaborate in a safe emotional atmosphere that upholds trust and respect. “This evaluation of the effectiveness of professional development requires looking beyond the workshop or in-service and more closely investigating the impact of training on early childhood professionals once they are back in their settings” (Brown & Inglis,

2013, p. 12). Future research could investigate the success of professional learning communities.

The need for ongoing support from owners, administrators and government in the form of funding, time and resources cannot be overemphasized. Supervisors can explore different ways of expanding opportunities for staff to enhance their knowledge base and develop new skills and competencies (Yeates et al., 2001). In addition, we are mindful that no PD program is superior. Further investigation is required into the influence of the workshops and the educator's ability to transfer the learning to their environment.

Prior to the advent of our project, there was no known documented partnership and inquiry for the advancement of PD in early childhood education in Calgary and Jamaica. Additionally and incidentally, our research unveiled that by establishing learning communities and/or partnerships with colleagues in Calgary and Jamaica, sustainability of PD can be supported.



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