

## AERA 2023

### Title

Catching your breath - Implementation and qualitative evaluation of a collective reflective coaching device

### Authors

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### Theoretical Framework

Job wellness for early childhood managers seems essential to providing quality educational services (Corr et al., 2017; Douglass, 2019). Several factors are thought to affect well-being at work, such as burnout, depressive symptoms, and job stress levels (Cumming & Wong, 2019). Reflective practice is an effective support practice, particularly useful in the context of complex problem solving, such as challenges during the pandemic and the resulting staffing shortages (Susman-Stillman et al., 2020).

COVID-19 pandemic has, indeed, generated several adaptations for ECEC managers. They needed, for example, to respond simultaneously to a need to replace an educator calling to inform that she just tested positive to COVID, making sure everyone respects the mandate sanitary measures, looking out for a financial deficit, and a closure of a class due to an outbreak, generating parents' frustration, which also needed to be dealt with. This overload of tasks and responsibilities leads to exhaustion, a decrease in the quality of work, a decrease in patience and empathy among the managers. Thus, their well-being at work seems to be severely tested. We therefore present the collective reflexive coaching device called *Catching your Breath*, which was developed by a research team following a request from a Montérégie ECEC group to meet the needs of ECEC managers during the pandemic. The objectives of this device were to overcome the socio-emotional challenges caused by the work overload of the pandemic and to prevent burnout and exodus from the profession. The foundations of this support system are based on two processes: collective support and a reflective process based on humanism (Bigras et Fortin, 2021).

### Objective

The objective of this study is to identify the themes of the *Catching your Breath* device that participants discourse as they discuss what helps them get through a difficult day during the pandemic and to identify the strengths and limitations of the program according to the participants.

### Methods

The recruitment took place with ECEC managers from regional association in four Quebec's regions, in Canada. They all signed a consent form. There were 40 participants who shared a common reality. They were divided into 4 groups according to their type of management : Group 1 (n = 12) and 2 (n = 11) by executive directors and Group 3 (n = 9) and 4 (n = 8) by assistant directors. The device consisted of a monthly 120-minute ZOOM meeting between February and June 2021. Each meeting repeated the same structure: individual reflexive work, theory capsule, work in a subgroup, sharing period, collective experimentation, and feedback about the meeting. The themes that were addressed through this device were sharing needs and identifying goals, human stress theory (deconstructing stress to understand it (CINE), reconstructing stress to prevent it, adapting, hyper-effective ways to reduce stress; Lupien, 2020), self-compassion (self-compassion, common humanity and mindfulness; Neff, 2003a, b), self-care and compassion fatigue (emotional, cognitive and spiritual, physical and professional self-care; Brillion, 2020) and relapse prevention strategies (Branch et al., 2010). At the end of the collective reflective coaching device, one-hour narrative interviews were conducted with each participant. The interviews took place within one week of the end of participation in the device. Each participant consented to have the ZOOM interview recorded.

## **Data Sources**

The sample consisted of 40 women, half of them have between 11 and 20 years of experience (50%). The majority has a bachelor's degree (42.5%) or a university certificate (37.5%) as the highest level of training. They are mostly aged between 40 and 59 years. The number of facilities they were responsible for varies: 22.5% have one facility, 37.5% have two facilities and 40% have three or more facilities. Moreover, 65% of the participants have a ECEC only, while 35% have a ECEC that includes a coordinating office for family child care settings. In addition, 30% have chronic health problems, 25% live with a relative with chronic health problems or is 70 years or older, and 65% live with a minor child.

Regarding the interviews analyzed, the questions were "What led you to participate in this support arrangement?", "Tell me about your sense of well-being at work as well as your general state of mind as a manager before the pandemic?", "Tell me about the evolution of your level of well-being at work since the beginning of the pandemic and up to the beginning of your experience of participating in this support group?", "What in the group meetings of this coaching device helped you change your view of a successful/satisfying day/time at work for you as an ECEC manager during the pandemic?", "Tell me about how you have handled difficult days at ECEC since the beginning of your participation in the coaching device?", "Tell me about your journey (the journey) with regard to your well-being at work since the beginning of your experience of participation in this coaching group?" "Tell me a situation in your ECEC that illustrates what you are most proud of in the context of a pandemic since your experience of participating in this coaching group?", "Tell me a situation in your ECEC that illustrates what you find most challenging in the context of a pandemic since your experience of participating in this coaching group?", "Tell me an experience that

illustrates your greatest learning both in knowledge and skills in your participation in this coaching group in times of a pandemic? "Tell me about an experience that illustrates your greatest challenges in terms of both knowledge and skills as a result of participating in this pandemic support group.", "Tell me about how this support system met your needs identified at the beginning of the process?", "Tell me about an experience that illustrates the strengths of this support system?", "Tell me about an experience that illustrates the limitations of this support system?"

A thematic analysis was conducted based on the strengths and limitations of the device and a thematic analysis was conducted based on three device's themes, namely human stress (Lupien, 2020), self-compassion (Neff, 2003 a, b), and self-care (Brillon, 2020).

## **Results**

Managers were questioned about their state of mind before the pandemic, 19 participants (47.5%) mentioned that it was happy and joyful, 9 participants that it was difficult at times, but that she managed (22.5%) and 8 participants mentioned that it was not going well (20%). When asked what motivated them to participate in the device 33 managers mentioned that they needed help, that they felt tired and exhausted, 16 mentioned that they wanted to participate and contribute to a research project because they trusted the project leader (Nathalie Bigras), to support others in the early childhood network or had a curiosity if the device works. For 3 participants the proposed format was an incentive to register and 8 participants hesitated a lot before registering, because they were afraid of feeling judged, afraid of not having enough time. Few (n) hesitate because they felt they were not being stressed enough, but wished to be equipped to maintain this acceptable level or avoid its degradation.

In terms of themes, stress is the one that emerges most often from the participants' comments (40%). Specifically, 9 participants mentioned using hyper-effective ways to reduce stress: singing, breathing, laughing, petting an animal, etc., 6 participants described using the strategy of deconstructing stress, for example, becoming aware and expressing oneself, and one participant who mentioned reconstructing her stress with plans A to D. The self-compassion theme was discussed by 22.5% of the participants. Specifically, 3 participants mentioned mindfulness, and one participant mentioned common humanity. Regarding the self-care strategies, it was discussed by 37.5% of participants. Specifically, 6 participants mentioned physical self-care, 6 participants mentioned professional self-care, 3 participants mentioned emotional self-care and 2 participants mentioned cognitive self-care.

Regarding the analysis of the perceived strength of the device, the managers mentioned that the theoretical contents and the learning allow awareness and reflections that allow initiating positive and significant changes. The tools and strategies discussed are very much appreciated and put into practice in daily life, which is very supportive. The participants felt privileged to have been able to participate in this project. It was helpful, even for those who did not feel beaten down. 27 managers mentioned that their participation in the group allowed them to break the isolation, to share common issues

and without any performance issues. The quality of the exchanges, the respect, the openness and the confidentiality helped them to open up about difficult experiences (37,5%). They developed a sense of belonging to their group and support among colleagues (25%). However, the process did bring some challenges. Named limits relate to time requirements and schedule management for 22 participants. In fact, 5% of participants had to drop out because they could not find the time to participate in all devices' meetings. A difficulty to share emotion was identified by 10 participants who expressed that opening up and trusting the group enough to confide was challenging. A sense of helplessness was described by 14 participants about seeing colleagues in pain and crying. For 2 participants, they felt guilty that they were privileged to have been able to participate when, they think, others would have needed it more than they did.

Stress management and self-care strategies were the most common strategies mentioned by the participants. However, it is difficult to separate the three themes, as they are not mutually exclusive. For example, setting limits was reported several times, but setting limits is as a way of deconstructing stress (human stress), being kind to oneself (self-compassion) and an emotional self-care strategy (self-care). The three themes allowed the participants to find strategies to help them take care of themselves and to give themselves the right to think about themselves before taking care of others. In addition, the strengths of the device include the fact that the opportunity to share in large and small groups allowed them to feel less isolated and to see that they were all facing the same difficulties and challenges, in addition to sharing innovative solutions. The fact that they felt listened to and respected, as well as the quality of the animation, was also a determining factor for their investment in the device's meetings. Almost all of the managers (95%) exude a sense of pride to have succeeded in giving the time for the device. For a fourth of the participants, sharing these emotions was difficult and in future recruitments, this should be formally announced. Several participants expressed a sense of helplessness and guilt about the suffering of other colleagues, which also needs to be addressed in the introduction of the device, as it is the responsibility of facilitators to support their colleagues who are worried about them outside of the meetings. In this way, participants benefit from the meetings and the ongoing process, as well as from using the strategies they have learned on a daily basis. They are empowered to make time for themselves. They feel less isolated by the support offered by the group, through the common humanity (a component of self-compassion). They say that they have regained control of how they respond to the unpredictable situations that occur in the context of a pandemic.

### **Scientific or Scholarly Significance of the Study**

The situation in ECEC is far from being back to normal and managers are still feeling the effects of this pandemic, this pressure to adapt is likely to have long-term negative effects on their mental health and there is an urgent need for more research aimed at promoting manager's well-being and mental health. *Catching your breath* is a device that has the potential to help managers prevent the deterioration of their well-being.

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