

Capacity and Credentialing: The Evidence Base for Career Development Training and Certification in Nova Scotia

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Abstract

It has been well identified in the literature that having a professional designation attached to one's name has many benefits to a practitioner's self-perception as a professional, as well as identifying the individual as having a certain standard of knowledge and practice. What is less clear is whether there is a direct co-relation between improved practice and the process undertaken to achieve the designation. This paper reports on the findings of the research project, *Capacity and Credentialing: The Evidence Base for Career Development Training and Certification in Nova Scotia* and examines what impacts, if any, participating in a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)-based credentialing process and achieving the designation has on an individual's career development practice over time. The findings reveal that overall, participants felt that the certification process had a positive impact on CCDPs' self-perception, day-to-day practice, and the career development profession more broadly. While participants identified some challenges or clarity needed around aspects of the process, there was consensus around the value of certification, with several participants advocating for similar credentials to be developed for the other career services positions, such as job developers, employer engagement specialists, and employment support practitioners.

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It has been well identified in the literature that having a professional designation attached to one's name has many benefits to a practitioner's self-perception as a professional, as well as identifying the individual as having a certain standard of knowledge and practice (Adams et al., 2004; Briggs et al., 2006; Farashah & Blomquist, 2019; Flynn, 2014; Gates, 2003; Hickey et al., 2014; Lysaght & Altschuld, 2000; Sha, 2010; Sutherland & Leatherman, 2006; Valente, 2010). This is especially true for those professions (usually regulated) where holding a designation is a requirement to practice at a certain level, such as PEng for engineers, CPA for accountants, and various designations within the medical professions (Cumberland et al., 2018; Gershuni et al., 2023). Although there has been some recent work in this area (Aslam & Bilal, 2021; CERIC, 2019; Godden & Borgen, 2024; Gough & Albert, 2019; Neault et al., 2016) what is less clear is whether there is a direct co-relation between improved practice and the process of working towards and achieving the designation, especially when that process is grounded within a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) model.

This lack of clarity is particularly noted within unregulated professions where a designation is a nice-to-have, not a have-to-have, achievement. Professionals working within such fields as public relations, human resources, and employment services fit under this category, and it is this group, specifically career development practitioners, that is considered here.

This paper reports on the findings of the research project, *Capacity and Credentialing: The Evidence Base for Career Development Training and Certification in Nova Scotia*. The Nova Scotia Career Development Association (NSCDA), which offers the Certified Career Development Practitioners (CCDP) program, is the body representing career development practitioners within the province. It is part of the provincial government's Employment Nova Scotia (ENS) ecosystem, which also includes the Nova Scotia Works (NSW) network of employment services centres, and the Centre for Employment Innovation (CEI). The CEI, sited within the Coady Institute of St. Francis Xavier University, works alongside the NSW centres and the NSCDA to strengthen the development and delivery of employment services in Nova Scotia through various activities, partnerships, and projects.

While Nova Scotian career development practitioners (CDPs) have shared anecdotally that the process they undertake in achieving their Certified Career Development Practitioner (CCDP) designation has a

beneficial impact on their practice, the NSCDA and the CEI wanted to gather qualitative data around these impacts, to determine whether the anecdotal evidence was, in fact, a true perception. Specifically, we wanted to examine what impacts, if any, participating in the NSCDA's CCDP process, as well as achieving the designation, has on CDP / CCDP practice over time. We sought funding¹, and in 2020, the *Capacity & Credentialing: The Evidence Base for Career Development Training and Certification in Nova Scotia* project began under the direction of co-principal investigators Dr. Paula Romanow² and Teresa Francis³.

The NSCDA's CCDP Program

The roots of the NSCDA's CCDP program go back to 2006, when the NSCDA surveyed its membership to determine interest in a voluntary certification process. The results were overwhelmingly positive, with 97% of respondents in support of the development of such a program. Over the next four years, various models were explored, and the shape of the provincial program began to emerge⁴.

The program developed by the NSCDA was based on the *Canadian Standards & Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners* (S&Gs)⁵, which, at that time, was the national standard for career services in Canada. There is no required direct educational pathway into the career services field in Canada; in the Nova Scotian context, individuals enter the field from a variety of backgrounds with differing levels of formal education and related experience. After careful consideration, to best respond to the Nova Scotian reality, a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) model was chosen for the certification program. For any RPL-based program to work, there need to be measurable competencies in place in which to ground the assessment methods for the individual candidates. While providing the broad standards that guide and support career development practice, the S&Gs do not include measurable outcomes. To address this, a separate Nova Scotia Core Competency Profile⁶ (commonly referred to as The NS Profile) was adapted from the S&Gs, making the S&Gs more quantifiable while also rearranging them into six core competency areas. Using this operationalized version of the S&Gs to support an RPL-based certification model is unique in the career services field in Canada; indeed, as far as we can tell from our literature review, this use of an RPL-based model for professional credentialing is very rare across professions within the Canadian context.

Unlike the other provincial certification programs in Canada that require a certain level of post-secondary education as a prerequisite, in addition to a specified number of years of work within the field, the Nova Scotian model is unique in that it is based solely upon the demonstration of competence, wherever the learning was acquired. The only prerequisite for entry into the NSCDA's CCDP Certification program is the accumulation of 5400 hours (roughly the equivalent of three years) of full-time work experience within the career services sector over a five-year period (to allow for circumstances such as maternity or other types of personal leave). The assessment components of the process evaluate the knowledge and skills of a 'competent' (not expert) practitioner. When a candidate meets the pre-requisite and feels they are ready for assessment, there is a three-part process:

1. A Work Experience Assessment (WEA) in which a candidate demonstrates how they've acquired the required competencies through their previous experience and learning. An evaluation of the candidate's WEA helps to determine any potential gaps that need to be filled.

¹ This research was funded through the CEI's Special Initiatives internal funding stream.

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⁴ The development of the NSCDA's certification program was supported with funding provided through the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) funding stream of the Adult Learning Division, Skills Development Branch of the (then) Department of Labour and Advanced Education (LAE) (which became the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration (LSI) following the provincial election in August 2021, and a change in the governing party). The project activities were led by the NSCDA and deeply informed by experts in the field of career services, working with Emerit, an organization specializing in the development of professional credentialing program, in particular its president Phil Mondor.

⁵ In 2021, the S&Gs were replaced with the Pan-Canadian Competency Framework for Career Development Professionals, following significant pan-Canadian consultation.

⁶ See Appendix A for the core competencies summary chart.

2. A multiple-choice exam.
3. A structured interview.

The latter two assessment tools are based on situations a CDP would encounter in their day-to-day practice within the Nova Scotian context, and thus it is truly a competence model. No specific courses nor texts are required for candidates, although, if needed, a variety of professional development activities are available for addressing any gaps in skills or knowledge. Candidates are encouraged to be thoroughly familiar with the NS profile, and to draw from their own individual practice to see how their learning and experience aligns with the NS profile's six core competency areas and sub-competencies. Candidates must successfully complete each part of the assessment process in the order above, before moving onto the next; this allows for any skills gaps to be identified and addressed through further training / professional development as the candidate goes through the process, optimizing the potential for success. Upon successful completion of both the exam and the structured interview, candidates achieve their CCDP designation and are then entitled to use it as part of their professional signature.

In 2013, the NSCDA's program was piloted with 75 practitioners. After a few adjustments based on the pilot results, the program was launched officially in 2014 and continued into 2015 as a voluntary program for CDPs in Nova Scotia. However, in November of that year, the Department of Labour and Advanced Education (LAE) announced a transformation process for the delivery of government-funded employment services in Nova Scotia through the Nova Scotia Works (NSW) system, working towards a more consistent standardization of services across the province. As part of this, LAE made it mandatory for all client-facing staff (e.g., case managers) working within the NSW Career Services centres to hold the CCDP designation. There was initially an expectation that current case managers would successfully achieve this by July 1, 2016. However, NSW leadership pointed out that many staff would not be able to meet the 5400-hour prerequisite by that date, especially new hires. The NSCDA was asked to come up with a solution, and so the *Career Pathways to Certification* (Career Pathways) stream was created.⁷

One of the unique aspects of this stream is that it is built on a mentorship model. As in the assessment stream, the candidate in Career Pathways completes a self-assessment process. This process allows for existing knowledge and skills to be identified, as well as any gaps that might need filling; one of the core tenets of RPL is that individuals should not be forced to repeat training for knowledge and skills they already hold. Once the self-assessment is completed, the candidate then meets with an NSCDA program advisor. If the advisor identifies Career Pathways as the candidate's recommended route to certification, a mentor is sought. The mentors must already hold the CCDP designation and be working within the career services sector, although not necessarily within the candidate's organization. Once a mentor is found, the NSCDA advisor, the mentor, and the candidate work together to develop a learning contract; this contract will guide the candidate, supported by the mentor, toward filling any skills / knowledge gaps as well as meeting the required hours prior to completing the assessment components of the certification process. The identified gaps are outlined in the learning contract and can be addressed through various means, including on-the-job work experience, courses and/or workshops, and self-study.

Candidates report quarterly on their progress, which is monitored by both the mentor and the NSCDA Registrar's office. Upon reaching the required 5400 hours, the Career Pathways candidates – if they feel ready – enter the assessment stream, where they complete first the exam and then the structured interview.

Method

The Study

As noted above, the CCDP certification process in Nova Scotia is unique within Canada, because it uses an RPL model, as well as a mentorship model for the Career Pathways program. It is within the context of this unique approach that this research study was initiated in 2018.

⁷ When Career Pathways was created in 2016, the original Certification process was renamed “the Standard Stream.” It was renamed again in 2021 and became the “Assessment Stream.”

In preparation for the research study, a preliminary literature review was conducted, which focused on any existing studies on the effects on practice of applying for and/or achieving professional certification in any field. At that time, we found very little in the literature among professions where achieving a credential is a requirement to practice (the regulated professions, e.g., health, financial services, real estate, etc.), and what we found concentrated on the importance of providing a recognized standard for practice. We could not find literature specific to certification in career services. The findings outlined in this report thus not only provide an evidence base for assessing the NSCDA's CCDP program but also addresses the gap in the literature on the impacts of certification on practice in career services, as well as in other professions.

In addition to examining impacts on day-to-day practice, practitioners' self-perception, and the profession more broadly, the study also allowed us to find out how CDPs felt about the certification process in general. Our primary research objectives were:

- to determine if, and how, the process CDPs engage in to achieve certification has an impact on and improves practice over time, and
- to determine the effectiveness of a Recognition of Prior Learning assessment process for individuals who are new to the field.

Our secondary research objectives were:

- to begin to create a body of evidence for funders and policy makers concerning the value of certification to the delivery of career services in Nova Scotia,
- to determine attitudes towards achieving certification among CDPs in Nova Scotia, and
- to determine what helps and what hinders achieving certification among CDPs in Nova Scotia.

Measures

While our original research design comprised a longer timeline and a mixed methods approach to data gathering (i.e., semi-structured interviews and focus groups), circumstances – namely, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lock-downs – necessitated flexibility and had an impact on our data collection. However, we were able to maintain the two main study components from the original design. For the first component, we conducted a series of one-time, semi-structured interviews with a variety of stakeholders and key informants to:

- get a better understanding of the core elements and considerations that are needed to shape the program,
- gather reflections on the on-going process of the certification program, and
- identify successes, challenges, and key issues that need to be addressed.

Key informant interview participants included:

- Executive directors (EDs) and operations managers (OMs) from the Nova Scotia Works (NSW) system (as the CCDP designation is mandatory for all NSW case managers)
- Career Pathways Mentors
- Structured Interview Assessors
- CCDPs who had gone through the pilot program, the assessment stream, or Career Pathways/assessment

To explore the second component of the study, we followed a cohort of CDPs currently going through the process, either in the assessment stream or in Career Pathways. We had planned to interview cohort members at the beginning and the end of the process, and then again six months after achieving their CCDP designation. However, timing challenges, mostly due to the shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, meant that we ran up against the end of our funding on March 31, 2023, resulting in some required adjustments to this longitudinal approach. Instead, we interviewed current cohort members whenever they expressed interest in participating in the study (not always at the beginning of their time in the process), and then approximately

a year to a year and a half later to determine how they were progressing. Upon completion, each audio- or video-recorded interview was transcribed. Using these transcripts, we then conducted a thematic analysis, i.e., analyzing data to identify and present recurring patterns and themes.

The findings explored in this report are drawn from data collected from 46 individuals interviewed by the CEI research team between March 2021 and October 2022; this is a large sample for a qualitative study, and we reached data saturation within this number. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the categories of participants interviewed and the number of participants that identify within each category; some participants are counted more than once because they were asked the questions that pertain to each of their roles. For example, some EDs are also CCDPs who went through the certification process and therefore answered both ED interview questions and those for CCDPs.

Table 1

Participant Types and Numbers

Type of Participant	Number of Participants
Executive directors and operations managers of Nova Scotia Works Centres	19
CCDPs from the pilot program	7
CCDPs who went through the assessment certification process	14
CCDPs who went through the Career Pathways to Certification process	3
CDPs who are currently going through either the Career Pathways to Certification or assessment processes	6
Participants who are/were mentors in the Career Pathways process	3
Structured Interview Assessors	2

Results

Two main categories of themes emerged from the thematic analysis: 1) impacts on the practitioners and the career development profession, and 2) feedback on the certification process. While this paper focuses mostly on the first category, we will begin by outlining some of the impacts and feedback on two process pieces: the use of RPL, and the mentorship component of Career Pathways, as the process itself informs, to some extent, the impact on practitioners. We will then turn to the impacts on the CDPs themselves, and on their self-perception. Next, we will examine impacts on CDPs' day-to-day practice, exploring how the process reinforced existing knowledge and provided an opportunity to learn new skills and knowledge, how it improved interpersonal skills and communication, and how it cultivated collaborative and ongoing learning. Finally, we will end with a discussion of impacts on the career development profession more broadly.

The Impacts of the Use of RPL & The Mentorship Model

We started by asking what the impacts of the program's unique elements were on CDP practice, i.e., the use of an RPL competency-based certification model, and the mentorship component of Career Pathways.

RPL Approach

Many participants expressed that RPL was very valuable as it recognizes the competencies practitioners have developed through their work that tie directly to the career development core competencies. By assessing their prior learning and experiences, candidates can identify which competencies they have already met, and

where they need to build more knowledge/skill. As one interviewee stated:

The prior learning assessment is really, really, valuable.... we get new staff who have the experience, but then not the education piece, not the exact experience. We keep thinking, how can we use their previous experience to what they are currently doing? So, the prior learning assessment bridges this piece.

Additionally, one participant explained that RPL is beneficial for career practitioners who are newcomers to Canada, as they may have the necessary experience despite not completing their education at an accredited Canadian institution. By using an RPL approach, value is placed on the skills, knowledge, and behaviours individuals have acquired through their work and life experiences.

Despite the benefits of the RPL approach, a few participants did identify some disadvantages associated with the RPL process, particularly around eligibility. For example, some CDPs who had come from other fields, but had experience that fit the descriptions of certain competencies, felt those experiences were not recognized. One such participant explained that despite completing ethics courses from Nova Scotia's Department of Education, they were unable to be credited with that experience in the ethics core competency. One manager also described that some staff members have a lot of education and training that they thought would be recognized, but they were not. There seemed to be confusion around when experience is and is not counted in the eligibility phase, pointing to the need for clarity around this step in the process.

Inconsistencies and misunderstandings around this aspect of the program were reported to have negative impacts on several participants, such as discouragement from participation in the program when they felt their experience was not recognized and they did not understand why. The NSCDA is using this feedback to clarify what previous learning may or may not be eligible, and why.

Career Pathways Mentorship Model

Overall, participants reported that the mentorship model for the Career Pathways process had a positive impact on both the candidates going through the certification process as well as their mentors. Mentors were seen as role models for mentees, providing guidance around how to handle complex situations and how to deal with clients in a respectful and effective manner. One manager explained that "having a mentor, someone that can guide them, someone that can provide feedback, bounce ideas off of, brainstorm, provide clarity, provide direction... I think would be incredibly important." Another participant stated that mentorship brought about a sense of community as mentees found support from their mentors: "the more mentorship, the more collaboration, the more CCDPs within your organization who can help new people who come along, the easier that process seems to be."

In addition to having a beneficial impact on candidates, mentors also reported positive experiences with the mentorship, expressing that they felt their own learning was enhanced and strengthened. As one mentor explained, "if anything, it was probably a good reminder for me and it was a good process to mentor and train others." Mentorship provides mentors with the opportunity to revisit and reflect on their own practice, as well as learn from their mentee. As one participant explained, this partnership is "a two-way street. Obviously, the mentee is the one learning a lot right now, but it's a relationship where you would constantly learn from each other."

Having these positive experiences with mentorship has also impacted the sustainability of the mentorship component and leadership within centres. Some CDPs indicated that when they were going through the program, they gained invaluable information from their mentors, and that when they became mentors themselves, they utilized that knowledge to help others. Executive directors also noticed a boost in confidence among staff members who are mentors in the profession. The increase in confidence coupled with the attainment of new skills (as a result of being certified) makes mentors better leaders and provides them with the opportunity to form stronger connections with mentees. Having strong leaders also helps the organization; as one director explained, "there is a level of confidence that says, I am certified, I can do this, I can mentor, I can be a leader within the Centre, I can provide leadership within the organization." Thus, the

mentorship component has not only equipped future mentors with the necessary skills and information to train and mentor others but has also helped cultivate leadership among the staff.

Overall, participants saw both the use of RPL and the mentorship component of Career Pathways as positive components of the certification process. As expected, the feedback also identifies areas for improvement. Integrating the participant feedback will be essential to strengthen the program and ensure further positive impacts on practitioners and the profession more broadly.

For instance, despite these benefits to mentorship, a few interviewees stated that because CCDPs are busy, it can be difficult for candidates to find a mentor. One interviewee also explained that mentors can sometimes feel overwhelmed as they have heavy workloads, and they also need to be available to mentees to answer the many questions they sometimes have. According to one participant, “sometimes [mentees] end up overwhelming the mentor, because of proximity, and they’re down the hall every day asking them... they should recognize that the person still needs to do their job.” Additionally, a few individuals expressed a breakdown in communication with some mentors, when candidates felt they were not receiving enough feedback on whether they were meeting the necessary requirements. For example, one participant noted that “I think what I would’ve liked to hear was confirmation that what I was doing ... [that] I was on the right track.”

Participants had a few suggestions to mitigate the overwhelming or misaligned expectations felt by some mentors and mentees. Some expressed the need for more guidance and regular check-ins with the NSCDA. One participant suggested that before individuals sign up to become mentors, the NSCDA should hold an introductory session for mentors where they are given an overview of what their role is and how to handle the types of questions that mentees might have. There was also consensus among many mentor participants that formal mentor training would be helpful. Although mentors are knowledgeable, they are not always able to adequately support other practitioners in a mentorship relationship. The lack of formal training for mentors can make the boundaries or expectations between mentors and mentees less clear. Finally, several participants expressed interest in creating a community of learning or practice for mentors to allow them to share ideas and experiences. As one mentor stated, “I would like more of a guide for the mentors, more check in and connection.”

One final aspect of the mentorship program that has impacted Career Pathways candidates is the location of their mentor, i.e., either at the same or at a different organization. On the one hand, some participants felt that having a mentor in a different centre provides mentees with a unique and new perspective. On the other hand, some participants indicated that having mentors in the same centre is essential to the candidate’s success for a number of reasons: 1) some mentees felt that having an in-house mentor who can give immediate feedback and advice makes the process of getting certified less stressful; 2) they argued that mentors in the same centre as mentees are already aware of the centre’s internal processes, such as how employees are trained and how the centre operates, which helped with clarity as they went through the process; and finally, 3) as one ED explained, mentors and candidates not being at the same centre can have several drawbacks:

I think people do not feel as comfortable dealing with somebody that they do not know and don’t necessarily develop that relationship with. They might be a little bit more hesitant to open up about challenges that they might be experiencing or if they’re feeling overwhelmed. My experience from my own staff is that they have felt disconnected from their mentors [who were at different centres] and even though the mentors volunteered to be a mentor, they really were not accessible.

However, this sentiment was not shared across the board. One participant who has mentored multiple people in different centres explained that her mentees were happy that she was at a different centre because she was removed from the dynamics and politics in which the mentees were operating, meaning they could vent or ask for advice without the risk of someone from their own centre knowing. While there doesn’t seem to be consensus around the best approach to a mentor’s location – whether in the same centre or a different one – mentorship relationships, when done well, appear to have a positive impact for both mentors and mentees.

Impacts on Practitioners' Self and Self-Perception

This section will provide an overview of the impacts of the certification program on the practitioners themselves as well as on their self-perception, beginning with their feelings of credibility, recognition, and validation, and then focusing on the main impact emerging from the research – an increased self-confidence experienced by most of the study's participants. The overwhelming majority of the feedback on self-perception was positive, although there were some concerns around how practitioners – especially those with years of experience – would be perceived by others if they did not attain the designation on their first attempt or took longer than expected.

External Recognition of Knowledge and Skills

During the interviews, when asked about any impacts of the certification process on their self-perception, many participants discussed recognition of their expertise as one of the major impacts of attaining the designation. Both practitioners and their managers or centre EDs felt that the designation of CCDP offered them the opportunity for recognition by peers, employers, stakeholders, and recruiters as competent professionals in the broad field of career and employment services; they also felt that it provided a competitive edge when applying for positions. Similarly, when working with clients, practitioners felt an increased sense of credibility. Even if they were already practicing all the core competencies prior to applying for certification, going through the process validated their experience, ensuring that they truly were following best practice and had all the competencies required for the position. Moreover, participants expressed feeling a sense of satisfaction and pride upon receiving the designation as the program offered them a level of professionalism that evokes credibility and reliability. An executive director explained that staff members “are quite proud to have their certification” and that “it does kind of put them in a group with other professionals.”

While proud to hold the designation, several participants – both those in management and the practitioners themselves – suggested that salaries should increase following the attainment of the designation. According to one executive director, “they'd be just as proud but more excited if there was a wage scale that came with that certification once they completed it.”⁸ As one participant explained, “my hope is that, at the end, it legitimizes, puts more value on the industry to the point where we get paid more.” Executive directors explained that a salary increase is justifiable and necessary since the possibility of attaining the CCDP designation raises the bar for the field, demonstrating to employers, funders, policy makers, and the public that the work of CCDPs is grounded in professional excellence. Executive directors also identified how the designation provides practitioners with credentials that position them for employment outside of the NSW system, sometimes in jobs that provide a higher salary; they fear this could lead to a loss of experienced practitioners within the sector in Nova Scotia. Therefore, for the long-term sustainability of career development services in the province, many executive directors advocate for wage scale increases.

Increased Self-Confidence

The recognition, credibility, and validation discussed all contributed to the major impact on CCDPs' self-perception expressed by most participants: increased self-confidence. Their confidence seemed to stem from both the building of their skills and knowledge of best practices in the field, and the pride in perceived professionalism. In terms of skills and knowledge, their confidence could be seen in the way they work with clients. As one participant stated, “the CCDP certification challenges what you know, and as you work toward that you acquire more skills, best practices, and I think, overall, it increases confidence in the job that you're doing.” This increase in confidence among CCDPs was also observed by management. As one director stated, “I see a confidence build... I feel that just understanding more of the process and how they're helping their clients increases confidence.”

⁸ While the Province sets salary ranges for those CDPs working within the NSW system (which represents a benchmark for pay across the profession within Nova Scotia), it is at the discretion of the EDs where an individual practitioner falls within that pay scale. It is possible that some EDs do recognize and reward CDPs who achieve their CCDP designation, but this was not identified by any EDs participating in the study.

Additionally, many interviewees indicated a sense of pride and accomplishment as their skills and qualifications were made more recognizable through the professional designation. According to one participant, “having this certification does show others your qualifications. And I’m proud of it. I am very proud.” This professionalization of the field has been a common thread through discussions around impacts on self-perception, daily practice, and the profession more broadly.

Value of CCDP Designation Beside One’s Name

In terms of whether having the credentials displayed next to a CCDP’s name has an impact on the practitioners, participants had differing opinions. Some participants acknowledged the value of the extra “C”; as explained by one manager, “I know the initials beside our names gives a lot of pride to a lot of the staff that have worked in this field for a long time and giving that recognition, I think that’s also key to it.” One practitioner explained that the designation provides the industry with an acknowledgement of the range of competencies required of a CCDP, demonstrating the professionalism of the field as a whole. For many practitioners, having the designation gives them the credibility when working with clients or applying for positions – having the title means they went through the process and have met the standards for the profession.

Conversely, some participants noted that in some cases, having the letters next to a practitioner’s name may create a barrier between them and their clients. According to one CCDP: “I think the challenge is that it doesn’t fit the population groups we serve. So, if I’m looking at the DCS [Department of Community Services] client, they don’t care about those initials; actually, if anything, it is a barrier.” Additionally, there were practitioners who felt indifferent about having the letters “CCDP” beside their name: “I learn best by doing, and by working with my clients and seeing what works and what doesn’t and learning from my mistakes... and that’s where I hold a lot of the value in my practice rather than the letters after my name.”

Impacts of Going Through the Certification Process

Finally, while most of the feedback regarding impacts on the practitioners themselves was very positive, there were some participants who expressed that they or other staff members experienced stress and anxiety that accompanied the process, negatively impacting their self-perception at times⁹. For some, anxiety was caused by a concern over whether they would pass the structured interview and exam, and how they would be perceived by others if they did not pass during their first try. Similarly, there was anxiety and stress that accompanied the process for those who felt it was taking them longer than expected to attain the designation, again, worrying about what others might think of them if the process took them a long time. In both situations, it was particularly stressful for seasoned practitioners, who felt a sense of shame for taking longer than expected to complete the certification process. Managers also noticed the fear and shame experienced by some around having a lot of experience but not being able to do well on the exam or the interview. As one manager explained, “we had one staff person [who] took forever to go through the process. And it was this fear, even though she was a skilled practitioner, the anxiety of it not going well made that person really delay each next step.” These observations led to important feedback around considerations of modifying the timeframe for candidates who may be struggling to complete the program in a timely manner. To further mitigate these impacts of stress, anxiety, and shame, some participants suggested that it would be helpful if candidates could privately and confidentially request accommodations so that they would not have to disclose to their executive directors or managers how and/or why they are struggling with the process.

Despite those experiences of stress and anxiety over the process, the data showed that the most significant impact on practitioners’ self-perception has been an increase in confidence due to validation, recognition, and further building of skills, as well as a perceived professionalism and credibility from peers,

⁹ It should be noted that this is not uncommon with adult learners, especially those who have been out of the education system for some time. We suspect that these feelings were exacerbated by the mandatory requirement to hold the CCDP designation among NSW case workers as they saw their jobs as potentially being on the line if they were not successful.

managers, and the public. The result of these self-perceptions, as explored in the next section, also informed participants' feelings concerning the impacts of the certification process on their day-to-day practice.

Impacts on Career Development Practice

There have been many positive impacts of the CCDP certification program on practitioners' day-to-day practice. These impacts emerged as three categories within the data: 1) reinforcing knowledge and learning new skills through the core competencies, 2) improved interpersonal skills and communication, and 3) collaborative and ongoing learning. Although we have divided this section into these three discrete themes for clarity, it must be noted that analysis revealed a more complex situation: there are a variety of interwoven threads that inform each theme, but also apply to other themes, and which in turn link back to the impacts on practitioners' self-perception discussed above.

Reinforcing Knowledge and Learning New Skills through the Core Competencies

In discussing the certification process's impacts on their day-to-day practice, a common response from practitioners concerned the usefulness of the core competencies as a way to frame and guide the development of new skills while acquiring new knowledge, as well as the reinforcement and validation of practitioners' existing approaches and competencies. One participant stated that having a breakdown of each competency was helpful as it provided practitioners with a detailed description of what they should aim to achieve. According to the interviewee: "It wasn't just 'here are the competencies' – there was a breakdown. I really enjoyed that there was something you could look at and say, okay, I get that, I know, and it's giving me the description of that."

Confidentiality and ethics were specifically named as areas that needed to be reinforced. Although many participants had learned ethical practice in previous roles, they said it is a competency that requires a lot of guidance and reinforcement. Several participants highlighted the importance of the clarity provided by the competency on how to adhere to ethical principles and inclusionary practices, given that CDPs provide services to a diversity of people. The emphasis on confidentiality was recurrent throughout the interviews, as participants expressed how the core competencies made them more aware of confidentiality-related legislations and procedures. One participant explained, "we're starting at the very beginning of a client appointment and being clear to speak to the confidentiality factors or our role and responsibility for client's safety." Overall, they explained that certification contributes to public protection, setting a standard for excellence and providing a potential mechanism for visible accountability that they feel the public can trust.

Additionally, several participants mentioned how they were able to connect the language of career theories to their practice. While a few individuals stated that they did not find that certification impacted their day-to-day interactions with the clients, those same interviewees also explained that the certification has made them more familiar with the core competencies as well as the various career theories. As one participant stated, "I think there was more knowledge behind the theories ... supporting why we're doing what we're doing." Participants also expressed feeling that their knowledge of career theories made them more credible when working with clients.

Given that many of the participants in the study have been practitioners for several years, they explained how they were already practicing a lot of what was described in the competencies, but that the program helped them connect previous knowledge to new knowledge. The competencies also enhanced individuals' clarity on their roles as CDPs. According to one participant:

I think a lot of people come into [our work] before being certified and have a lot of the understanding in place, but the certification process helps them solidify that and gain more clarity and structure that they didn't have before. It creates less risk of people going outside the ethical boundaries and staying within our lane.

Furthermore, several interviewees explained that the competencies allowed them to reflect on their own practices and the ways in which they can improve certain competency areas. As one interviewee explained, “It was neat to reflect on your own practice and have that structure to look at and see, ok, these are the things that I should be demonstrating... and just even a reinforcement for what you’re doing.”

Ultimately, the distinction between the impact on practitioners of acquiring new skills and knowledge versus reinforcement and validation of current practice was mostly based on level of experience. Those who were very new to the field – mostly those going through Career Pathways – found the competencies very helpful in guiding their learning. Those who had years of experience in career development and employment services still found value in the breakdown of the competencies, as it both validated and reinforced their knowledge and skills and identified where they required refreshers and further skill building.

Improved Interpersonal Skills and Communication

Many participants in this study discussed how the certification program further developed CDPs’ communication and interpersonal skills when working with clients. For example, one participant felt that certification facilitated an “understanding of where [the clients] are coming from a little bit more.” Another CCDP candidate identified that being more aware of the different career theories through certification helped them know how to apply certain terminology with clients. One executive director stated that certification provided practitioners with certain skills and tools to use when working with clients and another explained that it is essential for staff members to attain the designation as it helps them with delivering information and instructions to clients.

Interestingly, participants expressed how certification was a useful tool in CDPs’ toolbox for developing a great connection with clients through their ability to build a strong rapport. As one practitioner stated, “[certification] has absolutely strengthened our ability to advocate for our clients. I think that would be the biggest component.” Additionally, one participant explained that clients need practitioners who genuinely understand and relate to them:

Because they come in, they’re vulnerable, they don’t have a job. And one thing that all of us can say at Nova Scotia Works is, ‘we’ve all been in your shoes’. Every one of us, for whatever reason, we moved, we lost our job or whatever. And I think that really plays an important part. Because they know that we understand, we’ve been there. And we’re employed, and then they laugh. So, I think providing hope is really important.

This connection to their clients also positively affected participants’ work ethic. As one participant explained, “It’s an honor ... my relationship with clients, I would say that it upscaled the level of my work ethic, the level of the way I do my job.”

While connection and relationship building are crucial in this profession, communicating boundaries, both with clients and managers, was something participants discovered through this process. Several participants explained that reviewing the competencies furthered their own development as they were able to honour their time, set boundaries, and self-advocate when necessary. As one participant explained:

If I am trying to do that with a client, I know that I should also be advocating for that for myself and for the work that I do. It works both ways. It makes me become a better practitioner. It also makes me become a better me all around.

Collaborative and Ongoing Learning

In addition to these impacts on individual CDPs’ skills, the program has also created a learning community where peers and co-workers learn from one another. One participant explained that they retain learnings by having staff supporting and challenging each other to maintain the practice: “We challenge each other here daily, basically to do better than we did earlier.” Participants mentioned how peer-learning happened between staff who went through certification at the same time, offering candidates the opportunity to

share their expertise and knowledge with one another as they worked through their learning plans. Having staff who were going through the process also generated conversations about practices and the core competencies across all staff in some centres:

I think people, when they're going through it, their knowledge increases and one of the things that we saw is that it creates space for conversations. So, you know, when you're studying or you're preparing, or you're wondering about career theories, or about ethical practice, or whatever it might be, you start generating, thinking, and you have questions, and you'll start talking to other people about it. Maybe [with those] who are already certified or who haven't been certified. And it creates a space for discussion and growth and sharing, that kind of community learning.

Although most candidates were already adhering to ethical principles, values, and codes, staff would discuss the competencies; discussion around certification helped CDPs to become more conscious about using these things. Additionally, participants mentioned that the program allowed them to connect with other case managers across the career services system and this in turn helped them to solidify their learning. According to one individual:

It's nice to have that [connection] with case managers from other organizations – there may be ways that they're using or doing things a little differently that you could benefit from hearing. Everyone has new ideas all the time. ... I think it's good to be able to have that opportunity.

Impact of the Recertification Requirement

In order to maintain the CCDP designation, practitioners are required to participate in 60 hours of professional development aligning with any four of the six core competency areas within the next three-year period. Participants explained that this recertification process also has an impact on CCDPs' practice as it offers them the opportunity to revise already acquired knowledge while also gaining new information, staying current on the profession's best practices. Ongoing learning ensures that practitioners are progressing in their profession. Several participants indicated that recertification had a positive impact on their daily practice, as it enhanced their knowledge and served as a refresher, creating an opportunity to review the core competencies.

Participants also expressed how the best way to retain learnings was by using them in daily practice. One mentor stated that, while refreshers can be helpful in revisiting information on the competencies, in most cases, candidates retain learnings as they practice what they learned through their work. Therefore, while regular refreshers in the form of seminars and workshops for individuals working in career services are a useful practice to encourage ongoing learning and retention, in order for them to become entrenched in their work, they need to be used in their day-to-day practice.

Impacts on the Profession

On a broader level, there was consensus among participants around the beneficial impacts of certification on the career development profession. For example, in the NSW system, where the CCDP designation is mandatory for all practitioners in a case management role, participants reported that certification provides a level of consistency or uniformity to certain practices and services in NSW centres province wide. Practitioners find this consistency reassuring as they are equipped with the knowledge and training needed to effectively work with diverse groups of people.

Standardization of Service Across the Province

Similarly, one NSW executive director explained that because candidates going through the process have worked in different fields, there tends to be a lot of inconsistency in the training and knowledge that they have acquired. As well, training in the centres across the province varies, so prior to the 2015 Transformation

process, clients entering an NSW centre at one end of the province might have been receiving very different service than someone in another region. Once the CCDP designation became mandatory for case managers, participants from management roles have noted that certification provides standards and ensures that practitioners are delivering consistent service to clients. As one manager stated:

I did see a lot of inconsistencies in foundational knowledge, based on having seen training be inconsistent and sporadic depending on the region you lived in ... So, I think that the certification brought all those pieces together and addressed all those issues.

Use of the NS Profile as Hiring Guide

The impact of certification on consistency in the field also applies to hiring. Participants in management roles indicated that they used the core competencies as a guide when interviewing, and onboarding, as well as in writing job descriptions. According to one manager, “when we conduct interviews, [the competencies are] part of our interview guide. It’s built into our performance review process. So that it’s where we’re utilizing those skill sets on an ongoing basis, it becomes part of their educational work plan.”

Professionalization of the Field

In addition to providing consistency, certification has had a positive impact on the professionalization of career development, which, in turn, brings value to the industry. Both consistency and professionalism provide clients with greater levels of comfort as they are being helped by CCDPs who have the necessary resources and information to deliver services. As one participant stated, the “level of consistency, professionalism [and] accreditation is just sought after, and it provides a level of comfort for the clients that they are in good hands.”

Several in management also stated that seeing the CCDP designation provides the general population with reassurance as they are being helped by competent professionals who have the skills and knowledge needed to deliver exceptional services. As one manager explained, “when people see there is a certification attached to it, they know there’s more value placed on it.” Similarly, an executive director noted the value of certification on the industry, because “overall, [it] contributes to public awareness of career development as a defined field of practice with core competencies and areas of specialization.”

Conclusion

As this article has demonstrated, participants felt that the certification process has, overall, had a positive impact on CCDPs’ self-perception, day-to-day practice, and the career development profession more broadly. Despite some challenges or clarity needed around certain aspects of the process, there was consensus from participants around the value of certification, with several participants advocating for the development of similar credentials for the other career services positions, such as job developers, employer engagement specialists, and employment/support practitioners. The NSCDA is using the findings of this research to improve their certification process, and we hope the experiences collected through this research, which point to the value of certification for career development, will help to support and inform the development of credentials across the industry¹⁰.

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¹⁰ In 2024, the five provincial certification programs were integrated into a single national Certified Career Development Practitioner program. Launched December 10, 2024, the new national program is administered by the NSCDA via careercertification.ca.

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Appendix A

Nova Scotia Career Development Practitioner Core Competencies Summary Chart

1.0 Ethics	1.1	1.2				
	Follow Code of Ethics	Follow ethical decision-making model				
2.0 Diversity & Inclusion	2.1	2.2				
	Carry out inclusionary practices	Create and maintain an inclusive and welcoming work environment				
3.0 Administration	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4	3.5	
	Maintain client records	Use time management techniques	Collect, analyze, and use information or basic research techniques	Develop information materials	Access and use information and communications technology	
4.0 Interpersonal & Foundational Skills	4.1	4.2	4.3	4.4	4.5	
	Establish a working alliance	Work with knowledge of career development theories	Use listening skills	Use speaking skills	Use writing skills	
5.0 Career Development Services	5.1	5.2	5.3	5.4	5.5	
	Conduct needs assessment	Determine intervention	Implement intervention	Monitor and evaluate programs and interventions	Follow up and provide ongoing support or client services	
6.0 Professional Development/Career Self-Management	6.1	6.2	6.3	6.4	6.5	6.6
	Demonstrate commitment to ongoing professional development	Develop productive and working relationships with colleagues	Develop productive and working relationships with stakeholders and other service organizations	Respond to disruptive or threatening behaviours	Be familiar with labour market information	Apply labour market information

Image from: NSCDA (2013). *Nova Scotia Core Competencies Profile* (Unpublished report). <https://nscda.ca>