



Spring/Summer
2023

AECEO Conference
wrap up

ECE recruitment &
retention discussion
paper

Responses to Elder
Brenda's questions



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Worth More Day of Action

June 20th

The AECEO and our partners would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to the educators, child care workers, ECE students, families, children and community members who participated in the Worth More Day of Action.

It was a day filled with ECE POWER where participants from Toronto, Ottawa, Peterborough, Waterloo, Niagara, London, Wawa, Sudbury, Fort Erie (and more) shared information and resources with families and community members to raise awareness that governments need to solve the child care shortage by investing in decent work and pay for child care staff and providers.

Here are just some of the Day's activities:



Humber College students



Creative Beginnings Childcare-Baden



Fort Erie ECEs



AECEO Sudbury Community of Practice



Justice for Workers members-Toronto



Discovery Early Learning & Care- Sudbury



Superior Children's Centre-Wawa



Emmanuel at Brighton Child Care-Waterloo



Compass Early Learning and Care - Peterborough



AECEO London Community of Practice



Bellevue Child Care-Toronto



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Elder June Smart

Amber Straker

Kahenttiosta Yen

Rachel Yu

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EDUCATORS FINANCIAL GROUP **INSIDE FRONT COVER**

COVER PHOTO: ECEs attend the AECEO Sudbury Community of Practice meeting/get together

ECELINK DESIGN & LAYOUT
kim nelson design

What Kind of Ancestor Do You Hope to Be: Responses to Elder Brenda Mason Part 1

AECEO Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation

Elder Brenda’s beautiful and meaningful piece: *What kind of Ancestor do you hope to be?* was published in the Fall/Winter 2022 issue. The questions asked by Elder Brenda Mason, “What kind of imprints am I leaving?” and “What kind of footprints do I want to leave for those that are coming behind me?” are essential for self-reflection and human growth. They encourage us to consider how our words, actions, and behaviours impact others and how we can positively influence the people and the World around us.

We are so inspired by the responses received to Elder Brenda’s questions and as they may encourage many of our readers to respond as well, we will be continuing to accept responses to be included in the Fall/Winter issue. Please see more information at the end of this article. Meegwetch to all of our respondents!

We are grateful to have received this inspiring piece written by Métis Elder June Smart, to add to our conversation, she shares her journey of self-discovery and how it has led her to become an advocate for her community. Through her involvement with the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) and her interactions with others, June strives to be the best ancestor she can be, passing on the teachings of her ancestors to future generations. She emphasizes the importance of speaking proudly of their history, traditions, and way of life while also weaving in the richness of their stories and successes. By being a conduit between the past and the future, June believes that together, the community can be stronger.

June Smart Métis Elder’s Journey of Reflection and Obligation

It’s in the quiet of the day as I sit on my deck and gaze over the rapids in our river, watching the majestic eagles fish for salmon that I take time for deep reflection. It is then I most often find myself thinking on my journey, a journey of discovery. A journey in which I have discovered myself. I have discovered who I am. I continue to walk my path with quiet footsteps so that I can pause, look behind me and see my ancestors following me, guiding me in my journey ahead. I only truly came to know who I was later in life. I saw hints of it through the features of



June Smart MNOWC Region 4
Photo 3 May 22

my mother and my grandparents, the tidbits of stories I overheard and seeing them jig dance. I knew who I was... but didn’t know; because I didn’t fully know our story. I didn’t have a true sense of my roots. I didn’t understand the struggles my ancestors suffered through.

With my newfound revelation, I realize that I owe my ancestors a great debt that I must pay. Their spirit is asking me to pay my debt forward to those who follow me and, in so doing, be the best ancestor I can be. This obligation I accept with open arms is the very reason I became involved with the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) and serve in a number of capacities. I became involved to make a difference, to influence change, and advocate for those in need. To be the very best ancestor I can be.

I must follow in my mother’s footsteps but take a different path. I must speak to our tragic history, but in so doing, weave into those stories the richness of our history, the traditions we hold close to our hearts, the strength we have, the vibrancy of our way of life and the successes we have enjoyed. I must remind our brethren that our voices can never be silenced again, and we can speak proudly of who we are. I must speak with a spirit of joy and optimism for our future and instill confidence in all of



June Smart's Grandparents. Mother 1965

us, and in particular our youth, that our future is full of hope. We will make our own destiny, and they will lead us.

In my daily walk and with every person I meet, I challenge myself to do so with a smile and open arms. I love meeting people and speaking with them. The words I choose must be words of wisdom and understanding spoken with humility and purpose. I need to be open and honest so my motives and integrity are understood to be true, and in so doing, I can garner the trust needed for others to confide in me. In everything I do, it must be to promote our resolve, kindness, understanding, work ethic and integrity. We must hold true to our values and our teachings.

I am so grateful that I have been able to draw on the life skills and experiences of our MNO Elders as a guideline on how to set an example. Their teachings and how they walk in their daily lives has been an inspiration, and I have always taken their sage counsel to heart. Through these Elders, I continue to mature with a renewed sense of respect for all. I am hopeful that I can pass on to others all the teachings my parents, grandparents, Elders, and so many others have instilled in me. I hope that I can fulfill my obligation and be that ancestor who will continue the legacy our ancestors left for us. I hope to pass on this obligation to future generations, challenge them to pick up the gauntlet and lead us into a bright future with pride and determination.

For me to be the best ancestor I can be, I must be a conduit between our past generation and the future generation. It is how we have our sense of belonging. **Together we are stronger!**

Métis Elder June Smart,

MNO Women's Council Region 4 Rep, North Channel Métis Council Women's Rep, MNO Veteran

Sharing Inspiring Stories of Early Childhood Educators

The responses include reflections from four early childhood educators on the teachings of Elder Brenda Mason. Hedi Gordon, a manager of family programming, encourages

exploring one's Indigenous culture to positively impact children and families; Lori Huston, a Ph.D. student, stresses leaving imprints of kindness, humility, love, and honesty and shares her heritage; Kahentiiosta Yen, RECE immerses herself in the traditions of her ancestors and shares this knowledge with younger generations; The fourth respondent, Rocío Gujani, a Ph.D. student, shares her story of growing up in the Andean mountains and impacting her worldview and pedagogical practice.

Reflections on Elder Brenda's Teachings: Embracing Indigenous Roots and Connecting with Children and Families

Thank you, Elder Brenda, for taking the time to share your story. Your thoughtful questions have caused me to pause and think deeply about my ancestry and my family intertwined with my impact on children and families. I hope to have impacted the children I have had the opportunity to connect with in ways that have encouraged and strengthened their Indigenous connection. I hope that I have ongoing opportunities to engage with children, parents and communities to encourage them to ask more questions about our history and to ensure that all Indigenous children (status and non-status, on-reserve and off-reserve, First Nation, Inuit and Métis) know that they are valued, and loved and have vital history to learn and to continue to share. I recently heard someone speak of the shame that has impacted the Indigenous People, which profoundly impacted me. It connected with me on a personal level. My father and his siblings felt so much shame that they ran from their communities and their connected roots and lost language and culture, causing my struggle to search for connection. I hope never again does any Indigenous family bear that shame. I hope that we all feel that connection, especially the children and families we work with, and that they are encouraged to share their stories, language and culture. Moving forward, I will develop my understanding of connectedness and how that impacts my Indigenous Roots. I will continue to challenge myself to explore my family's Indigenous culture and share what I have learnt with my family and my community. This alignment of continuous interaction with one's emotional, mental, spiritual realities and connection to the natural world is found within the teachings of the Medicine Wheel. I will continue Elder Brenda's Challenge with a challenge to look up what a medicine wheel represents. How can you impact the children in your care by acknowledging this framework? What are your next steps in an inspiring connection?

Hedi Gordon

Madadjiwan, Algonquin First Nation (Non-Status)
Manager of Family Programming

Embracing Indigenous Heart Teachings for Culturally Responsive Early Childhood Education

Elder Brenda's words have deeply touched and inspired me. Her reflection on her Anishinaabe name and the significance of the word "imprint" reminded me of the importance of positively impacting the children and families in our lives and beyond. Elder Brenda has expressed that we can leave imprints of kindness, humility, love, and honesty.

Boozhoo, Taanishi, my name is Lori Huston (she/her) Métis, Scottish and British heritage. My Métis and Scottish heritage are on my father's side, connected to the Red River Métis people. My British heritage is on my mom's side; my grandmother, a British settler, came to Canada as a war bride in the 1940s. I was born and raised in Treaty 3 territory, Red Lake., a small northwestern Ontario town that served as a Hudson's Bay Company fur-trading post in the late 1800s. I am a mother of two sons and an Early Childhood Educator for over 25 years. Currently a doctoral student in the Education, Curriculum and Pedagogy program at the University of British Columbia. My Ph.D. work intends to merge Indigenous knowledge frameworks with heart pedagogies and determine how these can support teaching and learning in early learning settings.

I believe I have a unique opportunity to be an ancestor who embraces diversity and celebrates the diverse Indigenous identity of the children, families, and fellow educators with whom I have and continue to co-learn. Heartwork connects me to my ancestors, passion, empathy, and authenticity. I am committed to nurturing inclusion and respect for all to help create a more accepting and understanding society. Within the focus of my Ph.D. research project, I tend to highlight Indigenous heart teachings that emphasize the importance of holistic development, recognizing that mind, body, heart and spirit are interconnected and essential for overall well-being. These teachings also highlight the importance of community, relationships, and connection to the land in supporting children's wellness. Applying an Indigenous heart teachings lens to me also includes acknowledging Indigenous children and families diverse cultural contexts and experiences. It means recognizing the importance of language and culture in nurturing childhoods and the impact of historical trauma and ongoing colonialism on Indigenous communities.

Additionally, as someone with both Métis and English heritage, I believe I have the potential to bridge cultures and promote understanding and reconciliation. By embracing my identity being a guide to the heart of the stories ensuring all voices are heard to create a path of acceptance

and knowledge, I desire to build a better tomorrow for the upcoming generations. As an educator, I have an ethical responsibility to model values and teachings. I will continue to encourage children and families to be brave, take risks, and embrace their true selves.

I am grateful for Elder Brenda's wisdom, reflection, and guidance as my Elder mentor over the last 15 years. Elder Brenda's wisdom reminded me of the importance of leaving love imprints in future generations.

Meegwetch, Maarsii,

Lori Huston, RECE, Ph.D. Student

Reflections on Leaving a Legacy for Future Generations.

As an Indigenous woman, I reflect on the question of what I am doing to leave for others following behind me. As an adult, I am always striving to make choices that will leave a legacy, continuing to supply guidance and insight to other generations and live a life that will make others proud. I want to immerse myself in my own traditions from generations before me, using the knowledge to provide the following generations with insight and understanding of how to live a life that truly encompasses the learning, knowledge, and spirit of being Indigenous and living in a world with so many choices of walking between two worlds. While gathering with others, I reflect on my own firsthand experiences, the joy of being around others, learning from so many, and collaborating with others ideas to form new thoughts and ideas to continue down a path of learning, teachings, and guiding.

Kahentiiosta Yen, RECE

Weaving in Ends on Footprints and Imprints: A Reflection - Response to the Call of Wisdom

The truth about stories is that that's all we are. "There are stories that take seven days to tell ... "There are other stories that take you all your life" (King 2003, p.122).

My personal story will be shared to enrich and to contextualize this reflection. Such murmur accentuates the prefacing of this telling. My narrative is grounded by the wisdom of Elder Brenda Mason's invitational inquiry: What kind of imprints am I leaving? What kind of footprints do I want to leave for those that are coming

behind me? What imprints am I leaving when I have been with people in a gathering? I come from the mountains. I am a wayfarer (Ingold, 2009), one who travels by foot, traversing both metaphorically and literally through life. One of my many voyages led me to Turtle Island and so I became a settler of Ottawa, a city that was built on the unceded, unsundered Territory of the Algonquin Anishinabek People. As an uninvited guest of this local earth, I hold significant responsibility. Guided by the teachings instilled in me by my parents and the Andes mountains since childhood, I strive to leave behind the teachings of these footprints and imprints on this local earth, across the Island, and as I walk all walks of life.

I grew up surrounded by the majestic Andean mountains. There mist, rain, rainbows, and all shades of green are present year-round. Fresh wild foliage and fresh produce was harvested and food was cooked with love. I am deeply indebted to the Andes because this is the place where I came to be and gave birth to my ancestors — these mountains are home to me! From this affirmation and with utmost gratitude for the Andes Mountains, I position myself as mestiza. I am Colombian of mestiza (mixed Indigenous, African, and European- Colombian) ancestry. I was born, raised, and spent my early childhood years immersed playing at the ancestral hills, valleys, and slopes of the Muisca People where the city of Bogotá, Distrito Capital, D.C., of Colombia was built by European settlers.

My parents instilled in me love and reverence for the Andes and taught me the facts of life through stories about the mystery of these mountains' altitudes and latitudes. My parents instilled in me love and respect for the creatures that inhabited these plateaus, as well as an appreciation for the beauty of the universe. They often took me on walks during clear-sky nights to learn with the stars, the moon phases, and the dance of the fireflies. Their teachings on the value of simplicity, reverence, mindfulness, and gratitude have helped shape my worldview and remain with me to this day. They taught me to stand up for my rights, to ask questions, to reflect upon mistakes, to dedicate time to play, to work, to be thankful, to appreciate, and to cherish. Ultimately, my parents emphasized the importance of appreciating, caring, and learning with the more-than-human worlds.

My parents' teachings accentuated the interconnectedness of the world, as we share the same air, water, sky, and earth: "We are flesh of its flesh" (Abram, 2011, p.63). Growing up with these teachings and my childhood experiences (see Table 1), I learnt to appreciate and care for our only home — the earth! These teachings have left imprints and footprints that have guided me throughout my life's journeys, nurturing my soul and inspiring me during both

my transcontinental and local wayfarer journeys. These are the echoes of the Andes' winds whispering in my ear: "I and the world are one". The constant murmur of the Andes reminds me that "to be one is always to become with many" (Haraway, 2008, p.4).



The teachings from the Andes and my parents have had a profound impact on my pedagogical practice, my academic, personal, and professional journeys. As I walked on these journeys, my footprints have created a trail of paths that I have shared alongside with others, e.g. the more-than-human worlds and the imperfect humans. Van Doren and Bird Rose (2016) urge us to tell stories "That cultivate the capacity for response" (p.89 italics original). My reflection is a response to Elder Brenda Mason's wisdom. Responding is a give-away rhythmic event- journey of exchange: that is receiving-from and giving back-to in response because "this time you give and next time you receive" (Kimmerer, p.381). With humility, it is my sincere hope that my sharing inspires readers to examine their life experiences and think about how their footprints and imprints have manifested to them their pedagogies. Then, they can share with others how these are manifested in their daily practice. Happy sharing! Rocío.

Rocio R. Gujani, RECE, Ph. D. Student

Resources: What Kind of Ancestor Do You Want to Be?

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2. *Kinship: Belonging in a World of Relations / Volumes: 1, 2, 3, 4* Van Horn, G., Kimmerer, R. W., & Hausdoerffer, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Kinship: Belonging in a World of Relations*. Libertyville, IL: Center for Humans and Nature Press.
3. *Children's Book: Prince*, L. Prince, G., & Joseph, C. (Illustrator). (2022). *Be a Good Ancestor*. Lexile, NP: Orca Book Publishers.
4. Website: Center for Humans and Nature <http://humansand-nature.org>

My Childhood Experiences from the Andes

Early Memories They...	Felt	Sounded	Tasted	Looked	Smelled
Mist	Mystery	Soft	Sweet	Light reflections	Earthy
Rain	Happiness	Endless patterns of echoes drippings	Sweet	Transparent	Earthy spring garden
Rainbows	Excitement	Eternal silence	No taste	Bright pastel stripes	Wet soil
Green	Dawn to the earth	Silence	Spring water	Even path	Moist and soil
Bonfire	Reverence	Crunchy	No taste	Red, blue, transparent	Smoke
Parents	Love	Story telling	So sweet!	Like an oak tree	Bonfire, earth
Flowers	Soft and velvety	Silence	Sour, salty, hot	Colourful	Sweet
Trees	Rough, soft,	Hear beat	Sweet sap	Powerful, strong	Wet soil
Food	Thankful	Crunchy	So, so good!	Colourful	Herbs
Siblings	Happiness	Laughing, singing, screaming	Love	Faces full of dirt	Bonfire
Wild Places	Mystery	Echoes	Sweet	Eternal beauty	Home

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The AECEO Truth and Reconciliation Guiding Committee, including Elder Brenda Mason, is grateful for the responses that we have received. As the committee came together to discuss the responses and how we would publish them, we felt that extending the call for responses to the Fall/Winter 2023 eceLink was important. We were moved when we read Métis Elder June Smart's response, and we humbly ask our readers to help us connect with an Inuk Elder as we would like to include the perspectives of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Elders. If you considered writing a response for this issue but did not have time or were unsure, please know that we will accept responses until October 2023, and you can reach out to the guiding committee for support and mentorship and that anyone can submit a response to Elder Brenda's questions: "What kind of ancestor do you hope to be?" "What kind of imprints am I leaving?" and "What kind of footprints do I want to leave for those that are coming behind me?" Through these collective efforts, the committee aims to foster a diverse and inclusive dialogue that can contribute to meaningful change and reconciliation. To connect with the guiding committee or submit a response, please email info@aeceo.ca.

For more information: https://www.aeceo.ca/ecelink_articles

Communities of Practice in BC and Ontario: Sharing Our Stories Across Canada

Amber Straker and Laura K. Doan

The quote at the right is what it is all about for us: creating spaces for belonging, care, reflection, and inquiry, where early childhood educators can feel they are not alone. This article is about two programs working to support early childhood educators in British Columbia and Ontario. We explore the many synergies between the two projects, the learnings along the way, and the value that these programs have had for educators. The two programs are unique, but both focus on building and supporting communities within the ECE workforce. The Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) supports location-based and relationship-based communities of practice across the province and has created a new professional learning program, and both are centred on relationships of care, support, and personal and professional capacity building. The Peer Mentoring Program for early childhood educators in BC is a partnership between Thompson Rivers University and ECEBC. It aims to support the ongoing professional development needs of beginning and experienced early childhood educators, while expanding the current infrastructure of support for educators through the creation of 35 peer mentoring communities of practice across British Columbia (25 are currently in place). We share stories from each program and discuss how these structures help to provide space and time for early childhood educators to come together in care, connection, and advocacy. We explore how strong relationships and meaningful, supportive professional learning can be centred in our own ECE communities, as we seek to empower and engage educators and redefine our practice together.

This proves what I know to be true: early childhood educators need ongoing and meaningful connection and support. It keeps us mentally well, eases the heavy weight of being new to the field and the power of the challenges we face. It also lifts us up, keeps our “why” alive, and allows for joy in these especially difficult times.

~ Facilitator, Peer Mentoring Program for Early Childhood Educators in BC, 2022

Building Leadership and Learning Communities in Ontario

The AECEO Building Leadership and Learning Communities project began in the fall of 2021 and aims to strengthen the ECE workforce by connecting, supporting, and empowering early childhood educators in Ontario. By creating community, building relationships, and providing meaningful ongoing professional learning opportunities, this work strives to support educators in seeing themselves as the experts they are and to recognize the value in collaborating with each other with compassion and care.

Through this project, the AECEO is building on the Decent Work and Professional Pay project, creating and supporting communities of practice (CoPs) in Ontario. An AECEO community of practice is not necessarily focused on practice,

but on support, advocacy, and care. Working to disrupt typical power relationships, these groups welcome anyone involved in early learning and child care (ELCC), those in a pre-service position, educators working in schools or programs, as well as supervisors and operators. Groups are regional, such as the Early Years Advocates London, or allied, such as the Student ECEs of Ontario.

They are all collectives of individuals who are interested in creating connections, sharing strengths, successes, challenges, and frustrations, and eventually working together toward a common goal: advocating for the ELCC workforce. They share resources, critically examine existing structures and practices, and invite underrepresented perspectives to the forefront. Participants in the CoPs have shared that their participation has led to increased confidence and a sense of leadership. One member said that the group “helped me find my voice.” A group lead talked about the advocacy experience of their members: “Some of our members have done press conferences..., they’ve been in the news, they’ve gotten jobs in some of the advocacy organizations.” Another member said they felt a “huge professional growth but also huge personal growth” and have noted they “have increased confidence, a sense of belonging, and hope for the future of the sector.” Ongoing professional learning opportunities aim to support similar goals. By resisting dominant discourse and questioning Eurocentric views of pedagogy and care, AECEO professional learning sessions invite participants to question the norm, to consider new learning within their own contexts, and to think about how we can reconceptualize ELCC spaces. They aim to decolonize spaces, disrupt colonial knowledges, and to make room for marginalized voices. The element of community is just as important. One participant described the sessions as “... a conversation that we could all engage in and participate...” Another participant said, “I just love that kind of session where you feel you’re part of it.”

All of the work done through the AECEO is led with compassion and care, working to meet educators where they are and valuing deep relationships and connections. There are no requirements to join a community of practice or a professional learning event. You do not need to be a member of the AECEO, and all participation is free of charge. The only expectations are that everyone is treated with respect and understanding; we leave judgment at the door. The AECEO works to support the groups as each educator’s needs and goals are the focus.

Communities of practice provide opportunities for relationship building and mentorship. They provide a support system and address feelings of devaluation and isolation. By engaging the ECEs in these communities, the

By engaging the ECEs in these communities, the Building Leadership and Learning Communities project hopes to help address the issue of retention in the ELCC sector. The power of relationships and ongoing learning can lead to increased retention in the sector as these feelings of isolation and devaluation are addressed.

Building Leadership and Learning Communities project hopes to help address the issue of retention in the ELCC sector. The power of relationships and ongoing learning can lead to increased retention in the sector as these feelings of isolation and devaluation are addressed. These groups, alongside professional learning opportunities, build confidence and leadership capacity within the workforce and in the advocacy movement, strengthening advocacy for decent work and professional pay. You can hear directly from CoP participants by checking out the video on this webpage: https://www.aeceo.ca/communities_of_practice

The Peer Mentoring Program for Early Childhood Educators in BC

The Peer Mentoring Program for Early Childhood Educators in BC began as a pilot project in the Interior of the province in 2016 and was based on research with beginning early childhood educators from across BC who said they wanted a program that would include access to peer mentoring, professional development, and feedback within a community of practice (Doan & Jang, 2020). Benefits from the pilot projects included greater mentor and educator efficacy (confidence in their abilities as an educator and as a mentor), increased skills, and greater relationships in the ECE community (Doan, 2019). We found that the combination of increased confidence in their abilities as an educator and as a mentor, as well as greater connections in the ECE field, helped to sustain practice and avoid burnout. Key learnings from this research include the importance of confidentiality, as well as a community of practice model that acknowledges that each person has value, worth, knowledge, and insight.

After two successful pilot projects, this project received \$640,000 from the BC – Canada Early Learning Partnership Grant, which enabled a province-wide expansion to 17 peer

mentoring communities of practice in 17 locations across the province. Figure 1 summarizes the benefits of the 2019–2020 project. The structure of the project brought people together, breaking down barriers and uniting educators together with a common purpose and vision. Educators highlighted that having someone who listens to them, who understands them, and who supports their practice as a fellow ECE professional through this web of connection was self-care itself, which was important for their well-being (Doan & Jang, 2020). One educator shared:

I found out about the Peer Mentoring Project at a crucial point in my career in the fall of 2019. I had just reached the five-year mark working as an early childhood educator in an infant/ toddler centre, and I was beginning to feel the effects of burnout, stativity, and was unsure where I was heading in my career path...I remember walking into the room for the first time after being invited to be part of this research project...I didn't realize how much I needed another educator to connect with, and feel inspired by until I met with my peer mentor for the first time. (Doan et. al, 2021)

In 2021, the Peer Mentoring Program received \$1.4 million from an anonymous donor, which enabled us to start the program again and run steadily for three years. We also received additional funding from the BC government. In year one of this program, early childhood educators continued to work during the pandemic, and our research showed us that participation in a peer mentoring community of practice

was a benefit. Through analysis of weekly reflections and monthly reports, we identified that participation in the peer mentoring community of practice (including monthly group meetings and weekly peer mentor meetings), was a space for ECEs to learn from each other and improve practice; a way to have meaningful connection and emotional support from peers; and a place to feel heard and validated when discussing issues and challenges. One educator put it this way: “I want support and guidance, and I feel like I am finally getting that through this program instead of just being on my own.”

In the latter half of our first year (spring and summer of 2022), our research team analyzed weekly reflections, monthly reports, and focus groups. What emerged from this was a better understanding of what is contributing to burnout: challenges in the field, movements and changes in the field, personal matters, and health issues. Additionally, as with previous iterations of the program, the impact of the program helped educators to sustain practice and avoid burnout. Specifically, sharing with a peer mentor through weekly times together, along with the community of practice model, helped to increase educator efficacy (confidence) and professional identity development. One educator shared, “Our weekly meetings quickly became one of the most anticipated times of my week, and I cannot imagine what my first year as an ECE would have been like without this space to converse, rant, gain feedback, and learn from my mentor’s experiences.”



Figure 1: Benefits of the BC Peer Mentorship Program 2019–2020

Synergies Between the Ontario and BC Projects

We (Amber and Laura) first met over Zoom, after being introduced by a mutual colleague. Very quickly, we realized we had a lot in common. Yes, our projects/programs had differences, but our underlying beliefs were similar, and soon we were finding synergies between both of our projects, as well as our ways of working with people. Both projects centre the voice of the educator in our work, listening and incorporating their feedback. Both projects value relationship building and suggest regular meetings of the communities. While we both must report to funders, boards, and administrators to provide project updates about goals we've met, our coming together was very different from all of that. We were not reporting to each other; we were sharing. We were not leading change, but talking about what change looked like in our respective communities. We are two peers coming together to share, to inquire, and to learn. Many of the early childhood educators who have taken part in the communities of practice have shared that they

We felt joy as we talked about ourselves and our work, we felt curiosity as we learned from each other, and we felt hope in whatever comes next.

received support both personally and professionally from their peers. We have experienced the same thing. Meeting over Zoom, during a worldwide pandemic, we often started our meetings with a check-in, hearing about how each of us were doing with working remotely and social distancing. By doing this, we were able to connect with ourselves, with each other, and through our two projects. We felt joy as we talked about ourselves and our work, we felt curiosity as we learned from each other, and we felt hope in whatever comes next.

Over the last several years, it seems that many of us have experienced a disconnection—with ourselves, with others, with our world. This has looked different for each one of us. In her book, *Forest Bathing Retreat: Find Wholeness in the Company of Trees*, Hannah Fries speaks about the connection we crave: "Some days, some weeks, maybe even some months, it is easy to feel like a broken tree after an ice storm: full of cracked branches creaking in their cases of ice. Simple acts of connection—with a landscape, with animals, or with other people—can go a long way in helping us feel whole again, both physically and emotionally" (Fries,

2018, p. 110). We came together through our two projects in a professional capacity, and through our meetings, we became connected as people trying to make a difference.

Learnings Along the Way

Both of our programs believe in the importance of following the lead of the educators and focusing care and compassion on others as the basis of all of the work done. This means that leaders in both programs aim to hear directly from early childhood educators as well as facilitators and team leads, and to follow the direction of early childhood educators. Both projects work flexibly based on the needs of individual partnerships or groups and have centred reciprocal relationships as a main value to any healthy community, understanding that there can never be a one-size-fits-all approach that allows a true sense of belonging. As we shared together, we were encouraged to hear of the learnings along the way, and in some cases, this helped to inform the other program. For example, in BC, some of the facilitators preferred a co-facilitation model, so the BC program went with this model. This had not been tried in Ontario, but when Laura shared this idea with Amber, it was considered and implemented with success in Ontario.

Understanding the Value for Educators

Both programs collect data to better understand their impact, and in both programs, we can see evidence of the value for early childhood educators. In BC, weekly reflections from peer mentors are shared with the peer mentoring team and monthly reports from facilitators are shared with the program manager and graduate research assistants. Additionally, the BC program conducts focus groups and has an online survey. In Ontario, participants are encouraged to share their stories through various campaigns and leadership training opportunities. In addition, through the Ontario program, online surveys are distributed for each professional learning event, and an annual external evaluation is conducted, involving interviews and surveys with participants about their involvement.

Through participation in either program, educators have felt an increased confidence as early childhood educators, increased leadership and advocacy skills, feelings of being supported, and a hope for the field and their future in it, while developing professional friendships. This growth has taken place within the supportive environment of a community of practice, a place where each person has a voice and each voice matters, where hierarchy is low,

and opinions are welcomed and valued equally, within an environment that follows ethical guidelines and practice. As we have spent time together, sharing about the two programs, creating time and space for our facilitators (BC) and team leads (Ontario), to come together, we have been encouraged and have felt inspired to carry on with the work in the two programs. Through sharing together, from a province in the west to a province further east, we believe there is a mutual benefit and an increase in our own confidence as we see the important work done at the local level by passionate, dedicated educators from across Canada. By coming together to share, learn from, and write together, we feel connected to each other, despite the physical distance apart, and like so many who have taken part in a community of practice (in BC or Ontario), we feel inspired and encouraged in the work we are doing. Moreover, by sharing our collective experiences, we are influenced and changed in positive ways, as we see our practice differently, through the eyes of someone else.

Next Steps

In Ontario, you can learn more at <https://www.aeceo.ca/> and contact us at: info@aeceo.ca and in BC, you can find out more information at www.ecepeermentoring.trubox.ca and contact us at peermentoring@tru.ca.

Conclusion

The conditions that early childhood educators create for children and families every single day—places of belonging, well-being, and care— are just as necessary for educators themselves, and for all of us. Communities of practice are an incredibly beneficial way to remind us of this need, and to create these spaces specifically with educators in mind.

When we create opportunities for educators to come together, to be themselves, to share with others who understand their work, their vocabulary, and the compassion that goes into this work, we create opportunities for rejuvenation. We create a world where educators can continue with their work for more than just a few short years, where the passion for this work can be reignited, where jobs become careers, and where burnout burns out. Communities of practice are spaces where early childhood educators feel valued, cared for, and understood by their colleagues no matter where in Canada they reside.

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Provincial and Territorial Government Initiatives to Address Early Childhood Educator Recruitment and Retention Through Postsecondary Early Childhood Education Programs: Are they viable and sustainable?

A Discussion Paper

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Background Context

As part of the 2021 federal budget, the Government of Canada announced a “plan to build a Canada-wide, community-based system of quality early learning and child care” (Government of Canada, 2021, p. 101). Canada-wide early learning and child care agreements between the federal government and all provincial and territorial governments except for Quebec,¹ detail the plan to create this system. The long-hoped-for agreements have provoked much excitement for families with young children and early childhood education professionals, including those who teach student-educators at post-secondary institutions. However, the federal and provincial/territorial governments’ committed plan to create a Canada-wide early learning and child care system requires addressing a number of ECE workforce issues.

One of these issues concerns the recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood educators needed to stabilize the sector and fulfil the promise of increased child care spaces across Canada. As faculty/professors teaching ECE student-educators at post-secondary institutions in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario, we have followed various provincial and territorial initiatives indicated in the Canada wide early learning and child care agreements to increase the number of early childhood educators in

Land Acknowledgement

Each of the authors acknowledges the lands of the First Nations, Inuit and Metis on which this discussion paper was developed. Canada’s Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework serves as an inspiration and helps us see how collaborations between governments, advocates, post-secondary faculty and early childhood educators is a “spider web’ of relations” (Little Bear, 2000, p. 79).

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to contribute to critical discussions across Canada about government initiatives to increase the role of postsecondary early childhood education (ECE) programs in addressing recruitment and retention issues in the ECE workforce sector. While specific information about the initiatives is provided the paper seeks to explore what might be their intentions and implications from the perspective of faculty in ECE post-secondary programs.

¹ “While the Government of Québec supports the general principles of the Early Learning and Child Care Framework, it does not adhere to the Framework as it intends to preserve its sole responsibility in this area on its territory. The Government of Québec expects to receive its share of the federal funding and will continue to invest significantly toward programs and services for families and children” .<https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories.html>

the workforce through postsecondary ECE programs. Particularly, we have paid attention to how these initiatives may impact current post-secondary ECE programs and the range of professional competencies that graduates of these programs require to work responsively, respectfully, and compassionately with young children, their families and communities.

A more specific motivation for our interest in the initiatives arose when the School of Education and Childhood Studies (ECCE) at Capilano University was asked to participate in a recruitment initiative launched by the B.C. provincial government that will attempt to fill “10,000 net new jobs openings for certified ECEs and assistants in the coming decade”

One of these issues concerns the recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood educators needed to stabilize the sector and fulfil the promise of increased child care spaces across Canada.

(Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2022). This initiative, called Dual Credit, allows high school students in grades 11 and 12 “to earn both high school and post-secondary credits toward careers in early childhood education” (Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2022). Students who successfully complete this program specializing in early childhood education as part of a vocational training pathway will be eligible to apply for an Early Childhood Education Assistant certificate. In response to this initiative, Capilano University’s ECCE department voted to decline participation in the dual-credit program for reasons that will be explored throughout this discussion paper.

At Mount Royal University, an early learning and child care micro credential program with English language instruction and core disciplinary courses is being developed to be delivered through Continuing Education. This initiative is in response to Alberta’s ten-year recovery plan to “strengthen the role of post-secondary institutions in the reskilling and upskilling of [the] workforce” (Government of Alberta, 2021, p. 23) and to increase capacity in the early learning and child care sector in the province (Canada- Alberta Child Care Agreement, 2021). The program is specifically designed for English as an Additional Language (EAL) and international students as a bridge to ECE diploma and degree programs and leading to Level 1 certification

in Alberta. Individuals who take the micro credential program (pending government approval) must meet the entrance criteria to be admitted into diploma and degree programs. The micro credential program aligns with a recommendation in a Muttart Foundation (2023) report that states “the introduction of induction programs and workplace supports for new staff entering the field with a Level I certification and dedicated funding to help them complete certificate and diploma credentials through public post-secondary institutions (including funding for English language supports)” (Muttart Foundation, p. 29). While bridging programs with combined English language instruction and ECE courses are important for supporting EAL and

international students to gain entry into post-secondary ECE programs, our concern is that a micro credential program will actually increase the number of educators with level 1 certification in Alberta. Currently, 40% of early childhood educators in Alberta hold a level 1 certification which requires 45 hours of approved post-secondary coursework or completion of a 54-hour online orientation course through different educational pathways. Will this percentage increase as a result of this and other micro credential programs in the province? This also raises questions about the government’s and the sector’s intention to raise the educational bar with necessary financial and learning supports to level II certification as the minimum entry requirement for ECE positions in Alberta.

In light then of what is happening in British Columbia and Alberta we wondered if other provinces and territories have launched similar initiatives. In the following section, drawing on Chart 1 (Appendix 1), we provide an overview and analysis of what different provinces and territories offer as ECE workforce retention and recruitment strategies through post-secondary institutions.

Overview and Analysis of Provincial and Territorial Retention and Recruitment Initiatives Through Post-Secondary ECE Programs

Chart 1 provides in one column an overview of provincial and territorial ECE retention and recruitment initiatives through postsecondary institutions. The second column, if known, identifies a projection of the number of new ECEs needed as provinces and territories create

more child care spaces. Information about government provincial and territorial initiatives was located in Canada-wide provincial/territorial child care agreements with the federal government, government media releases and the Childcare Resource and Research Unit's summary of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreements and Action Plans (2022). Other sources examined were workforce studies from the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (2021), the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development (2022) and the Muttart Foundation (2023), visions of the roles and responsibilities of ECEs in the BC, Alberta and Ontario early learning frameworks, ECEBC's

3. Will these initiatives contribute to creating a new kind of ECE as articulated in the early learning frameworks of many provinces?
4. Are the initiatives visionary and do they project values and understandings that rethink care, education and the work of early childhood educators in contemporary times?

In the next section, the initiatives are organized into three categories to capture the different ways governments intend to address ECE workforce recruitment and retention issues through postsecondary ECE programs.

40 percent leave between five and ten years." The Atkinson Centre (2023) concludes:

the sector is losing staff just as they should be most comfortable in their careers. It creates a revolving door of relationships, which is harmful for children and staff morale. The constant turnover requires inordinate recruitment and orientation effort; energy better spent by directors supporting their staff teams.

Therefore, it is necessary to determine what provincial/territorial governments plan to do about ECE low wages. The underlying assumption is that better wages, benefits and pensions will attract more applicants to post-secondary ECE programs and motivate them to enter and stay in the field upon graduation.

Chart 1 indicates that most provinces and territories are using wage enhancement grants to address low wages. Four governments (BC, Alberta, PEI, the Northwest Territories) are also offering ECE staff a retention incentive to encourage them to remain in the sector. For example, in Alberta, all employed ECEs who work an average 30 hours-plus are eligible to receive a one-time payment of \$900 (ToDoCanada, 2022).

At the same time, most provinces and territories acknowledge that a wage grid that recognizes, depending on the province or territory, scope of practice, educational standards and competencies, specialty training, years of experience and fair compensation a living wage is necessary. In Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador and PEI an ECE wage grid is in place. Saskatchewan, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut have established their own target dates for the design of a wage grid.

The underlying assumption is that better wages, benefits and pensions will attract more applicants to post-secondary ECE programs and motivate them to enter and stay in the field upon graduation.

visionary position paper on the role of the ECE (2021), and the Atkinson Centre's e-newsletters. While our initial interest in this discussion paper focused on British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario, we were curious about the kinds of initiatives other provinces and territories are undertaking. We hoped that an analysis of the chart would reveal some common and different directions provinces and territories are taking to address ECE recruitment and retention issues through post-secondary ECE programs. In addition, as we conducted our analysis, we were guided by several questions about the initiatives identified in Chart 1:

1. To what extent will these initiatives be successful? Will they meet their desired outcomes?
2. Are the initiatives sustainable?

Wages/Benefits/Pension Plan

While the focus of this discussion paper is on the role of post-secondary institutions in increasing the number of ECEs entering and staying in the field, every ECE workforce survey concludes that low wages along with other working conditions such as workload and paid preparation time, significantly contribute to why these institutions may struggle to recruit applicants and why their graduates fail to enter or stay in the field (AECEO, 2021, Atkinson Centre, 2022, Muttart Foundation, 2023 and OECD, 2020). For example, studies conducted by the Atkinson Centre (2023) indicate that "almost 50 percent of qualified educators leave licensed child care within the first three years. A further

Saskatchewan, for example, is developing “a renewed funding model which recognizes the wage grid and compensation as an essential feature of child care funding” (CRRU, 2023, p. 30). In Alberta, a Compensation Framework Report (2023) is underway to develop an ECE wage grid although this work is not driven or supported by the government. The next step is a refinement of wage grid based on community engagement and inclusion of competencies to be completed in 2023. British Columbia has committed to developing a wage grid without details and a target date while Ontario has not declared a commitment to a wage grid, instead introducing a wage framework that establishes a wage floor of \$18.00 per hour for registered educators and \$20.00 per hour for ECE trained supervisors through wage enhancements (increasing by \$1 per

will be tied to the proportion of increased child care spaces suggesting a delicate balance between the need for more child care spaces, the need for new educators and the need for partnerships with post-secondary institutions. Three provinces are increasing opportunities to enroll in a level 1 ECE course (Alberta), or in a two-year diploma program (Ontario, Nova Scotia with specific emphasis and/or community focus e.g. In-Person French ECE Diploma) through free tuition. In Alberta, the enrolment capacity for the free level 1 on-line child care orientation course (18 sessions or 54 hours covering a range of topics such as observations, providing for play, and guiding) is being more than doubled from 4,000 to 10,000 spaces. The assumption here is that easier and less expensive access to post-secondary education will result in

complex matrix of government and institutional requirements related to the post pandemic recovery of the economy? Overall, these initiatives signal that the focus is on training in applied skill development rather than on education that examines the complexities of pedagogical practices articulated in the province’s early learning framework.

Student bursaries ranging from \$500 to \$1500 are being offered in many provinces to generate new applicants in post-secondary ECE programs. In Alberta, BC, Newfoundland and Labrador, students registered in ECE programs can access government funding for coursework and books. The BC Canada Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreement states that “bursaries [\$500 per course for books] are a key tool to support the Province’s ECE Recruitment and Retention Strategy” (Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2022). Manitoba plans to reimburse the tuition of ECE students by up to \$5,000 per school year. Unique to Newfoundland and Labrador, a graduate bursary program will be available if the recipient works in regulated child care for a minimum of three years.

The assumption here is that easier and less expensive access to post-secondary education will result in greater student application rates and, as a consequence, more graduates will be entering the sector.

year until the cap of \$25 in reached). Beyond improvements in wages, only PEI plans to investigate a pension plan for ECEs while the Yukon and the Northwest Territories plan to make comprehensive benefits available to staff in 25 programs by 2023.

Access to Post Secondary ECE Programs

In the Canada-wide early learning and child care agreements, provinces and territories indicate a range of initiatives to increase access to post-secondary ECE programs. In some provinces, funding for these initiatives

greater student application rates and, as a consequence, more graduates will be entering the sector.

While opening up access to post-secondary education is important, examining the motivation for increasing access should be questioned. In reference to the Alberta 2030 economic recovery report, the language of ‘reskilling and upskilling’ speaks to an apprenticeship and technician focus rather than a focus on the education and profession of early childhood educators. Further, how is quality care and the education of young children by experienced and educated professionals being considered and situated within the

To recruit more high school students into ECE post-secondary programs, two approaches are apparent. First, as in New Brunswick, high school students can take an on-line course, *Introduction to ECE*, which, it is hoped, will motivate them to seek an ECE post-secondary program. Second, through a dual credit program such as the one in BC and Alberta, students in grades 11 and 12 can earn by taking courses related to ECE both high school and post-secondary credits. The apparent intention of this approach is to fast-track the completion of an ECE assistant qualification, emphasizing the rapid production of more workers to address a supply and demand problem in the sector. These

approaches highlight governments' view of early childhood education as an industry that requires workers with particular technical training rather than a profession that requires dedicated early childhood educators with caring and pedagogical commitments.

Two provinces have initiatives that target particular post-secondary applicants. In Newfoundland and Labrador, "equity seeking populations" will be targeted (CRRU, 2023, p. 27). In Nova Scotia, Mi'kmaq/Indigenous, Black/African Nova Scotians and Francophone/Acadian individuals working in regulated child care and pre-primary have been prioritized to receive training to meet a level 1 classification (e.g., Level 1 in Alberta requires an orientation course, in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador it requires an ECE certificate). Saskatchewan has partnered with Collège Mathieu, Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT) and Saskatchewan Polytechnic to make ECE training opportunities available at no charge. In New Brunswick, the plan is to recruit new immigrants by fast tracking individuals who want to work in the early childhood education field. As noted earlier, Mount Royal University in Alberta has received provincial government funding to develop an ECE bridging program through their Continuing Education department to provide immigrants and individuals with English as an Additional Language training. Participants in the program will obtain a level 1 government credential and English language instruction. Bow Valley College in Calgary has announced a \$1.4 million pilot program to train immigrant women for a level 1 or level 2 credential in partnership with the Calgary Immigration Women's Association (Bow Valley College, 2023).

Initiatives to Increase Qualified Staff and the Level of Qualifications Required for ECEs

Provinces and territories have different requirements for the amount of education staff have and the ratio of staff with various levels of education and certification required in a program. For example, Ontario, Quebec and NWT (and Nunavut which has no educational requirements for staff) have no requirements for any amount of education/training for those outside the number of required ECEs with a certificate and/or diploma, while others require something – varying from 40 hours – 120 hours as a minimum. In response to this greater variation in educational requirements for ECEs across Canada, governments have intensified initiatives to increase qualified staff

A wage grid that represents better wages that incrementally rise with years of experience and higher levels of education will begin to seriously address the recruitment and retention problem that has plagued the field.

and the level of qualification required to be a designated early childhood educator. Nunavut is at a preliminary stage of conducting a study to determine the expansion of post-secondary training and on-the-job training to increase qualifications.

One assumption underlying these initiatives is that ECE staff will be motivated to increase their qualifications (i.e., from a level 1 assistant to a diploma qualified ECE) because they will be rewarded with a higher salary potentially based on a wage grid. Furthermore, it is assumed that these educators will be more likely to invest and stay in the field if they

are more qualified. Most provinces and territories have varied initiatives to increase the qualifications of early childhood educators. In BC, bursaries are available (\$5,000 per semester) for staff employed in child care to upgrade their qualifications. ECE staff working in regulated child care in Newfoundland and Labrador can access through an accelerated workplace ECE training program on-line to upgrade to a Level 1 certification. In New Brunswick, five hundred educators will be able to complete a one-year certificate through micro credentialing and work-study integrated programs. Ontario plans to grow a qualified workforce by 3% by sponsoring two professional development days and covering tuition costs and registration fees to the College of Early Childhood Educators. Other jurisdictions have identified targets to increase the percentage of ECEs

who meet certification requirements, for example, Yukon 60% by 2023; Northwest Territories 30% by 2025-2026; Manitoba 15% by 2026; and Saskatchewan 15% by 2026.

Discussion

In the next section, we consider some potential implications of provincial and territorial government recruitment and retention initiatives outlined in the previous section.

Improving ECE wages

Chart 1 (Appendix 1) shows that most provinces and territories continue to rely on wage enhancements to improve ECE wages. The chart indicates that some governments are focused on using wage enhancements to establish a wage floor or median wage (BC) or maximum wage through yearly one-dollar increases (Ontario).

Who is the early childhood educator that federal, provincial and territorial governments envision will be produced through ECE post-secondary programs?

For example, Ontario has introduced a wage floor of \$18.00 per hour for College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) registered educators and Alberta's wage enhancement will bring an educator with Level 3 qualifications to a minimum wage of \$21.62 (the wages of level 1 and 2 educators are therefore lower). One Alberta educator describes the situation:

The low pay, no coverage, no sick days, no benefits. Why would we stick around when we can go to the schools and start at \$19.50 rather than minimum wage. At our worksite 85 percent of us have second jobs. We have to make ends meet.”(Grande Prairie focus group participant) (Muttart Foundation, 2023, p. 13).

Based on the quote above, it is clear that wage enhancements do not significantly stem the flow of early childhood educators from the field. Furthermore, wage enhancements grants do not attract high school students to ECE post-secondary programs; they know that ECE wages are very low particularly when compared to public school teacher

salaries. Once in an ECE program, students are told repeatedly by their instructors and textbooks that even if wages are low, they “can make a difference” in the lives of children and their families (Langford, 2008). However, this moral call is clearly not persuasive enough for a significant number of graduates to enter and remain in the ECE field. Indeed, unlike other professions

populated by women (e.g., nurses, teachers, midwives), only the ECE profession must rely on government wage enhancements to begin to offer professional compensation for a professional workforce. What early childhood professionals want is a good professional job with decent wages based on a wage grid, benefits, and a pension plan just like other professionals in Canada. This is what will motivate more applicants to join post-secondary ECE programs and remain in the profession upon graduation. Decent wages will ensure the sustainability of government recruitment and retention initiatives through post-secondary ECE programs.

To a certain extent, some provincial and territorial governments recognize that wage enhancements are not sustainable. Most early learning and child care agreements indicate that an ECE wage grid is under consideration or projected to be in place by a certain date, in some provinces by 2023. This is certainly an important policy development since surveys consistently report that ECEs do not enter or stay in the field because of low wages. A wage grid that represents better wages that incrementally rise with years of experience and higher

levels of education will begin to seriously address the recruitment and retention problem that has plagued the field. Failure to properly address wages and working conditions means that provinces and territories are becoming increasingly dependent on recruiting their way out of the problem creating a cyclical issue if the retention problem is not addressed. It is also noted that with the exception of PEI, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Manitoba, the issues of benefits and pensions remain unaddressed, compromising the sustainability of improvements in ECE wages.

Meeting new ECE targets through access to post-secondary ECE programs

Data collected by governments will tell us if there has been an actual increase in applications to post-secondary ECE programs as a result of their recruitment initiatives. In Ontario, College of ECE data (2021) shows that enrollment in postsecondary programs has increased but entry to the profession is declining 7% annually. This data suggests that enrollment in ECE post-secondary programs is less of an issue than entry to practice. Further, the number of new educators joining the field versus the number leaving the field will need to be determined by governments to arrive at a net increase in new educators. Other factors will also be important to consider. Will the language about an ECE career shift in high schools and job fairs to communicate that this career is well-paying? This shift is unlikely until an ECE wage grid and decent wages are in place. Furthermore, while free tuition and/or funding for textbooks may attract new applicants to ECE programs, it is likely that a significant number of students upon graduation will continue to apply to teacher education programs with the promise

of a well-respected and compensated profession. Does this mean that governments are attempting to sustain the profession by relying on hopes that unqualified staff will undertake post-secondary education through tuition supports to acquire a credential? Is this a band-aid approach to profound

2017). As Land and Kummen (2023) remark in the online publication, *The Conversation*, “Such initiatives ... sees early childhood education as a numbers game, easily and inexpensively creating educators who can quickly fill positions.” Moreover, the curriculum of minimal credentials

However, characteristics of this training in current provincial and territorial initiatives include free tuition, bursaries, a fast-tracked career, and possible permanent residency status in Canada. These characteristics may contribute to an understanding of post-secondary programs as competitive commodities and students as consumers seeking the fastest and cheapest way to get training. In some provinces/territories, students in accelerated programs will be able to even take up responsibilities and roles of a certified early childhood educator before they graduate. This then is a vision of the early childhood educator as a technical worker who through a fast-track post-secondary program learns basic skills and knowledge to be applied universally to all children (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Moss 2014). Thus, students may enter and exit from fast-track programs without fully recognizing the intensity and complexities of the relational work that is being demanded from a contemporary early childhood educator. Indeed, this lack of recognition will result in new educators becoming disillusioned and demoralized so that staff turnover and retention problems persist.

In contrast, we see our students as critical thinkers working with multiple perspectives on purposes of education, teaching, learning, growth and development. Further, we are committed to cultivating and elevating an image of an early childhood educator who is engaged ethically and politically in many social issues such as gender inequities, anti-Black racism and the decolonization of European-based pedagogies. We envision the roles and responsibilities of the early childhood educator as more than making sure children are safe and healthy. We are concerned that fast-track programs perpetuate an image of the educator as a service and care

Further, we are committed to cultivating and elevating an image of an early childhood educator who is engaged ethically and politically in many social issues such as gender inequities, anti-Black racism and the decolonization of European-based pedagogies.

systemic issues of recruitment and retention that requires addressing the core of the problem?

It is essential that recruited ECEs represent the diversity of citizens in our country. However, initiatives to increase this representation through new immigration programs and partnerships must carefully consider the following questions. Will these individuals have an opportunity to complete diploma and degree ECE programs or will they be marginalized into fast-tracked programs that prepare them to work as assistants with a minimal credential? Will provinces and territories perpetuate the extraction of labor from immigrants who are predominantly women of colour by offering quick-fix and short-term educational programs? Will the initiatives result in a double-jeopardy of lower wages that these individuals may experience as both women and as women of colour? We know that the Live in Caregiver program created exploitive conditions for foreign workers in Canada (e.g., tied to their workplace for permanent residency; Contributes to the international care drain) and there is a risk of repeating these conditions for foreign ECEs in their workplaces (Adamson,

needs to be carefully considered for its breath and depth so that participants are not limited or restricted in their ability to successfully continue their education. In addition, distinctions between levels of education must be evident in wage grids to motivate ECEs to strive for further education. Overall, government initiatives to recruit more applicants to post-secondary ECE programs reveal a heightened tension between the expediency of fast-track programs and the mandate of postsecondary institutions to educate students through sustained engagement in courses at the introductory, developmental and proficiency levels.

Educating ECEs for Contemporary Times

Who is the early childhood educator that federal, provincial and territorial governments envision will be produced through ECE post-secondary programs? Certainly, governments believe that trained “early childhood educators (ECEs) play a vital role in supporting the growth and potential of our youngest learners” (Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2022).

provider who is completely separated from the education of young children. Yet we know that care and education are inseparable. We maintain that in order for early childhood educators to thoughtfully respond to and work with the complex needs of the children and their families, they need an in-depth, relevant and comprehensive education. Finally, we want students to leave our program excited to be entering a well-paid and well-respected profession.

Our images of the early childhood educator are inspired by our provinces' early learning frameworks which powerfully describe the kind of early childhood educator needed for contemporary times. The following examples taken from three provincial frameworks capture these images:

British Columbia

Educators collaborate with children and their families as partners in research. This means educators are continually observing, listening, and experimenting with an openness to the unexpected. The role of the educator has shifted away from being a transmitter of knowledge toward being a collaborator who creates conditions so that children can invent, investigate, build theories, and learn. Educators work in relationship with children, and strive to ensure children feel safe, confident, motivated, and listened to. (Government of British Columbia. 2019, p.18).

Alberta

[Educators] work in relationships with colleagues to share information and to collaborate on planning for care routines and children, play, learning, and development. [Educators] also work in relationships with government officials to ensure policies and standards are established and maintained. At times [educators]

work in relationships with individuals who provide specialized services to families and children. [Educators] seek and build relationships with community members to enhance and extend children's learning experiences. As well, [educators] seek

What considerations are being given to sustainable funding, supports and the continuity of quality ECE post-secondary programs in the future?

relationships with the broader early childhood community for [their] own professional growth. This network of relationships supports [their] complex, dynamic, and multifaceted role as an educator. We describe [educators'] work within this network as a practice of relationships." (Makovichuk et al, 2014, pp. 51-52)

Ontario

Educators are competent and capable, curious, and rich in experience. They are knowledgeable, caring, reflective, and resourceful professionals. They bring diverse social, cultural, and linguistic perspectives. They collaborate with others to create engaging environments and experiences to foster children's learning and development. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 7)

The quotes above show that technical fast-track post-secondary ECE programs will not offer students sufficient time and space to critically, thoughtfully and sensitively examine, analyze and reflect on the complex work of early childhood education. It is particularly striking in the quotes above the high degree of respectful collaboration for complex situations required of early childhood educators. In contrast, fast-track programs by their very nature strip curriculum

of complexity thereby contributing to lowering rather than enhancing the education of early childhood educators. In addition, they show that there is a strong disconnect between the provinces' early learning frameworks and the kind of ECE

that will be educated through the recruitment and retention initiatives. This perspective is also evident in the recent Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia (ECEBC)'s, evaluation of the Early Care and Learning Recruitment and Retention Strategy in British Columbia. The report suggests that "nearly half of British Columbians surveyed were unsure of whether ECL professionals were well trained or fairly compensated" (Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. 2021).

In Alberta, government funding and program development initiatives to recruit more early childhood educators may be advantageous in terms of building capacity and increasing job opportunities. However, the development of fast-tracked applied ECE programs with a sharp focus on training and basic skill development shifts attention away from programs focused on education founded on theoretical and philosophical perspectives. Professional organizations in Alberta (i.e., AECEA) have worked diligently in past years to increase public awareness and promote a professional image of the early childhood educator who is skilled and knowledgeable about child development, diversity, play, working with families and the ECE profession. With the exception of

one college offering a micro credential intended for post ECE diploma students, the recent development of micro credential programs in post-secondary institutions raises questions about the impacts of training and efficiency models on the quality of the care and education of young children. A fast-paced efficiency model might increase the

value-based envisioning on the role of post-secondary ECE programs in addressing recruitment and retention workforce issues. Our summary and analysis of the initiatives calls into question their viability and sustainability. We have also suggested that the kind of early childhood educator produced through these initiatives will be a

are decent wages, benefits and pensions. Therefore, a wage grid establishing decent wages and benefit and pension plans for early childhood educators must be key priorities for provincial and territorial governments under federal government leadership. In some provinces, governments need to collaborate with community groups and organizations who are undertaking the development of a wage grid. Joint commitment to the outcomes of this collaboration is necessary. Public funding for the implementation of wage grids is required.

A wage grid that honours education levels and years of experience must be put in place by the government in every province and territory within the next two years.

ECE workforce and support economic recovery following the Covid pandemic, but at what cost? How will increasing skills-based training programs affect early childhood education degree level programs with a focus on theoretical, philosophical, and practical teaching and learning? What considerations are being given to sustainable funding, supports and the continuity of quality ECE post-secondary programs in the future?

Recommendations

In this section, we offer for discussion broad recommendations indicating the need for language and conceptual shifts in how we think and talk about early childhood educators and their professional preparation. We recognize that current federal investment and provincial and territories ECE recruitment and retention initiatives express that ECE in Canada is being recognized as a public benefit rather than a private concern left for the families and educators to navigate through. This gives the ECE profession a space for further dialogue and

technician armed with basic skills to be applied universally in an early childhood program. We have proposed alternative kinds of early childhood educators who, as a recent ECEBC's position paper (2022) states, are:

...leaders and hopeful for a better future, without knowing the shape of that future. Educators are emboldened to disrupt the legacies of the past in order to activate transformative change for the future. In relationship with children, families, communities, materials and places, educators engage in intentional pedagogical work in response to the complexity of our current conditions. (p. 2)

The recommendations therefore are:

- Create the conditions that will inspire early childhood educators to commit to a comprehensive and in-depth education and want to stay in the profession. Research is clear that the key conditions

- A wage grid that honours education levels and years of experience must be put in place by the government in every province and territory within the next two years. Distinctions between roles and responsibilities for different positions within the workplace must be evident in the wage grid. Such a wage grid will publicly signal that early childhood educators are professionals, and well respected for the important work they do.
- Data on post-secondary ECE program applications and graduate retention in the sector (i.e., net number of new educators) will be collected by provincial and territorial governments.
- Governments in collaboration with the ECE sector to work toward addressing the disparity between the image of the educators presented through their early learning frameworks as opposed to the technical image of the educator that is being projected through some recruitment and retention strategies. Governments need to be aware of how language such as "training" versus "education" reflects different understandings of

who the early childhood educator is or can be. In addition, any Ministry work on a competency framework for early childhood educators must be attentive to this disparity.

- Provincial and territorial governments to provide sufficient and sustained financial supports (i.e., bursaries) for students who wish to continue their education beyond different types of level 1 certification. Assess through program applications information about who continues their education and the relationship between continuation and students' racial and cultural backgrounds to assess if educational equity is evident in government initiatives.
- Governments in collaboration with the sector reevaluate the purposes and outcomes of short-term initiatives such as the dual credit program and one-time only incentives to stay in the field and consider how funding for these initiatives could be redirected to viable and sustainable initiatives such as the development of a wage grid.

To conclude, as faculty in post-secondary ECE programs we envision a time in which recruitment and retention issues in our profession and barriers to a satisfying ECE career have been significantly addressed. We imagine high school students talking to their counsellors and attending job fairs to find out more about this well-paid and respected profession. Guidance counsellors provide contact information of advisors working for ECE professional organizations/associations and post-secondary programs and encourage the students to further explore and discuss their interests with them. Friends and family members support the high school students' goals to pursue a career in early childhood education and care *and* make a difference in the lives of children, families and communities. Soon the students are enrolled in a 2-year ECE post-secondary diploma or in 4-year degree programs confident that sufficient government resources and support for their studies are in place. From their placement experiences, they learn about decent working conditions, professional wages, and health

benefits so that they can map out an employment pathway and future education goals. They feel assured that these improved working conditions will motivate them to stay within the profession and provide responsive and consistent care and education to children and families. Throughout their program, students know that one day they will be working in an early childhood program where they are guaranteed professional wages based on their educational credentials. After graduation, they gain work experience as early childhood educators in a range of community not-for-profit early childhood programs that offer comparable fair compensation based on a wage grid supported by public funding. New ECEs are mentored and inspired by their colleagues who are constantly seeking to further their education, qualifications and professional development opportunities, supported by different types of government funding. They are excited about future career prospects and confident in their abilities to work with children and families within well supported community settings and sustainable workforce systems.

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Appendix 1-Chart 1: Provincial and Territorial Recruitment and Retention Strategies/Initiatives:

Province / Territory Ministry Name	ECE Recruitment and Retention Strategy Plans	Projection: # of new ECEs needed
<p>Alberta</p> <p>Ministry of Children’s Services</p>	<p>Wages/Health Benefits/Pension Plan</p> <p>As of Oct. 1/22 - expanded paid hours for existing wage top ups to include all paid time worked during operational hours (up to 181 hours/month) and employer paid vacation time (up to 3 weeks). Wage top up model used as a salary grid. Wage top ups are not paid for all hours (e.g., sick days, statutory holidays). It is a flat rate with no steps or financial recognition for a degree.</p> <p>As of Jan 1, 2023-existing wage tops for all paid work will increase by up to 2 dollars per hour. The current wage supplement of \$8.62an hour brings an educator with Level 3 qualifications to a minimum wage of \$21.62.</p> <p>All employed ECEs who worked an average 30 hours-plus per will be eligible to receive a one-time payment of \$900. Those averaging fewer than 30 hours per week will be eligible for a \$450 payment.</p> <p>Access to Post-Secondary ECE Programs</p> <p>Increased opportunities for people to enroll in the Child Care Orientation course (level 1) at no cost. The enrolment capacity doubled from 4,000 to 10,000 spaces. The course is available to any Albertan, regardless of whether or not they are currently working in a child care program.</p> <p>Create new education pathways for ECEs (i.e., free on-line portal) and incentives (e.g., free non-line portal, bursaries) to increase enrolment in ECE post-secondary programs.</p> <p>Launch pilot programs with diverse communities to promote entry into the child-care field.</p> <p>Initiatives to Increase ECE Qualifications</p> <p>Release time for ECEs to take Flight curriculum training at no cost.</p> <p>Additional investments to PD grant to enable Level 3 ECEs access to funding to increase leadership and management skills development.</p> <p>Increase the number of ECEs certified at levels 2 and 3 by 15%</p>	<p>By 2026, 9,000</p>

<p>British Columbia</p> <p>Ministry of Education and Child Care</p>	<p>Access to Post-Secondary ECE Programs</p> <p>\$1.15 million for the dual credit program so high school students can more quickly get their ECE certification (with the province contributing an additional \$575,000 in 2021-22); students in grades 11 and 12 able to earn both high school and post-secondary credits toward careers in early childhood education with the introduction of 30 new dual-credit programs at school districts throughout B.C.</p> <p>Bursaries are available for 8,400 ECE students providing \$500 per course for books.</p> <p>Wages</p> <p>Enhance ECE compensation by \$4 per hour, bringing the median wage to \$25 per hour. Commit to developing a wage grid but no target date or further details are provided.</p> <p>Initiatives to Increase ECE Qualifications</p> <p>Bursaries are available (\$5000 per semester) for staff employed in child care to upgrade qualifications.</p> <p>\$2.3 million toward a work-integrated approach that gives ECE students the opportunity to become certified while maintaining employment as a child care professional.</p>	<p>8,600 more early childhood educators over the next decade</p>
<p>Manitoba</p> <p>Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Learning</p>	<p>Wages</p> <p>A minimum voluntary guide developed bringing the average ECE minimum wage to \$25.89 per hour, and average wage to \$27.77 an hour up from the current \$19.71 hourly average for a Level 2 ECE with a diploma. A Wage Grid Operating Supplement of \$34.7M came into effect July 2022 which is expected to impact 3,400 ECEs and CCAs. This initiative is not a wage grid as there are no steps although it does recognize position as well as classification. voluntary https://www.gov.mb.ca/education/childcare/students_workforce/wage_grid.html</p> <p>Retention incentive based on years of service.</p> <p>Access to Post-Secondary ECE programs</p> <p>The governments of Canada and Manitoba are investing more than \$4 million to reimburse the tuition of early childhood educator students by up to \$5,000 per school year to help cover tuition-related costs of recognized programs.</p> <p>Initiatives to Increase ECE Qualifications</p> <p>The province also commits to increasing the percentage of fully qualified educators by 15% by 2026.</p>	<p>4,600 to 5,750 ECE and ECE assistant jobs over the next five years</p>

<p>New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development</p>	<p>Access to Post-Secondary ECE programs Facilitate recruitment of new Canadians ensuring that they can fully benefit from the wage supports and contribute to the ECE workforce gap. fast track immigration for individuals wanting to work in the early learning and child care sector. Expanding the access to more high school students to the Introduction to Early Childhood Education online course offered as part of the Experiential Learning Program in anglophone and francophone public high schools as a method to recruit ECEs.</p> <p>Wages: an ECE wage grid is in place.</p> <p>Increasing operational funding to assist with the daily costs associated with running an early learning child care facility and increasing the wages of ECEs in facilities participating in the Designation Program.</p> <p>Initiatives to Increase ECE Qualifications By the end of 2023, EECD will support 500 educators in their completion of their one-year Early Childhood Education Certificate through the micro credentialing program and the work-study integrated program.</p> <p>By 2025-2026 increase by 60% of staff who fully meet training requirements.</p>	<p>Reduce the turnover rate by 2.9% (107 ECE) (from 37.9% to 35%)</p>
<p>Newfoundland & Labrador Department of Education</p>	<p>Access to ECE Post-Secondary Programs Temporary certification for regulated child care summer employment for post-secondary students</p> <p>Increase available post-secondary seats and provide a graduate bursary program to reduce student debt in exchange for working in regulated child care in New Brunswick for a minimum of three years after graduation.</p> <p>Provide \$250 per course for Trainee Level staff; and, up to \$2500 for students required to attend an on-campus field placement.</p> <p>Plans to increase the percentage of ECEs who fully meet legislated certification requirements to 60%.</p> <p>Wages As of October 22, an Early Childhood Education Human Resource Council to recommend a comprehensive compensation model. A wage grid to reflect the education, training, and years of experience-for implementation by April 1, 2023.</p> <p>Initiatives to Increase ECE Qualifications The ECE Trainee Bursary to support early childhood educators who are working in a licensed child care centre or regulated family child care and are taking Early Childhood Education courses online from a provincially recognized college/university to upgrade their valid Trainee Level Certification to Level One Certification.</p>	

<p>Nova Scotia</p> <p>Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Development</p>	<p>Access to Post-Secondary ECE programs</p> <p>Bursaries are available for full-time students.</p> <p>New seats to be added to ELCC diploma programs to eliminate waitlists. Mi'kmaq/Indigenous, Black/African Nova Scotians and Francophone/Acadian individuals working in regulated child care and pre-primary are prioritized to receive training to meet the level 1 classification. Specific diploma programs are designed for these students to support early learning within these communities (i.e., Mi'kmaq Early Childhood Education Diploma program)</p> <p>Wages</p> <p>A compensation framework and wage scale reflecting ECE education, specialty training, and experience completed. Wage increases began in the fall 2022 and retroactive to July 2022. Additional 3% increase beginning April 1, 2023</p> <p>Initiatives to Increase ECE Qualifications</p> <p>Upskilling fully funded initiative for immigrants (through an ECE immigration pilot) working to obtain their diploma. Accelerated ECE Diploma (with PLAR) - fully funded by EECD. Applicants must be working and have their Level 1. ECE Link Diploma Program - students earn both high school diploma and ECE diploma; funding availability and prioritization to Black/African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq/Indigenous students.</p> <p>Continuing Education Program funding available (\$1,000-5,000) for upskilling for those employed and working to obtain Level 2 or 3 classification.</p> <p>All regulated child care centres and Pre-Primary Programs led by educators with, at minimum, a diploma in Early Childhood Education by 2025-26. Currently 35% of all those working in ELCC are untrained.</p>	<p>Approx 9,000</p>
<p>Ontario</p> <p>Ministry of Education</p>	<p>Access to Post-Secondary ECE Programs</p> <p>Tuition-free compressed Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs at post-secondary institutions</p> <p>Wages</p> <p>Will introduce a wage floor of \$18 per hour for registered educators and \$20 per hour for ECE trained supervisors in 2022,</p> <p>Increase by \$1 per hour each year from 2023 to 2025 to a maximum of \$25 per hour.</p> <p>Initiatives to Increase ECE Qualifications</p> <p>Plans to grow the qualified workforce by 3% by sponsoring two professional development days and covering tuition costs and registration fees to the College of ECEs or ECE graduates.</p>	<p>14,700 new RECEs will be needed by 2025-26</p>

<p>Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Lifelong Learning</p>	<p>Wages/ Health Benefits/Pension Plans The wage scale is public and mandatory in early years centres. Increase ECE compensation by an unspecified amount for staff employed in Early Years Centres (EYCs), preschool centres and for Special Needs Assistants and Autism Assistants. Degree holders recognized on wage scale. A pension plan for ECEs to be investigated.</p> <p>Initiatives to Increase ECE Qualifications Provide training grants to increase the number of trained educators and to support EYC directors to increase their qualifications and fund float staff to cover off staff taking training.</p>	
<p>Quebec Ministry of Education</p>	<p>An asymmetrical agreement. Commits to increasing the number of qualified ECEs.</p>	
<p>Saskatchewan Ministry of Education</p>	<p>Access to Post-Secondary Programs The province partnered with Collège Mathieu, Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT) and Saskatchewan Polytechnic (Sask Polytech) to make on-line certificate and diploma training opportunities available at no charge. To begin in the 2022-23 academic year.</p> <p>Wages Invest \$5.4 million to provide up to a \$5 an hour increase for ECEs. Committed to increasing centre operating funding to enhance ECE compensation while working to develop a wage grid in 2023.</p> <p>Initiatives to Increase ECE Qualifications Increase the percentage of staff meeting certification requirements by 15 % by 2026.</p>	
<p>Northwest Territories Ministry of Education, Culture and Employment</p>	<p>Wages/Health Benefits/Pension Plans Establish a wage grid ready for implementation by 2026. A retention incentive offered until the wage grid is in place to encourage existing staff to remain in the sector. Comprehensive benefits available to ECEs in 25 programs by 2023.</p> <p>Initiatives to Increase ECE Qualifications Development of a certification process and increase the percentage of ECEs meeting requirements to 30% by 2030-31.</p>	<p>300 licensed early learning and child care spaces by 2025-2026</p>

<p>Nunavut Department of Education</p>	<p>Wages/Health Benefits/Pension Plans A labour force adjustment analysis will be conducted to inform the setting of educator compensation levels. In the interim, funding is available to support the retention of educators in licensed child care centres.</p> <p>Access to Post-Secondary ECE Programs A study to inform the expansion of post-secondary training, and on-the-job-training courses is in progress.</p> <p>Initiatives to Increase ECE Qualifications Expand ELCC certification program.</p>	<p>Will fund the creation of at least 238 new licensed spaces by 2026. Increase demand for ECEs and assistants in the territory.</p>
<p>Yukon Department of Education</p>	<p>Wages/Health Benefits/Pension Plans A wage enhancement grant in April 2021 providing \$15.31 per hour for fully trained educators in Whitehorse and \$17.11 for staff in rural areas.</p> <p>Committed to developing a wage grid. Comprehensive benefits available to ECEs in 25 programs by 2023</p> <p>Initiatives to Increase ECE Qualifications Training supports and expansion of ELCC courses in post-secondary institutions being funded with a goal of having at least 60% of the workforce fully meeting certification requirements by 2026.</p>	<p>20 new educators attracted to work in Yukon by 2023</p>

BUILDING A TRANSFORMATIVE CONFERENCE

The 2023 AECEO Provincial Conference took place between April 27th and 29th. It was a conference created by Early Childhood Educators (ECEs), for ECEs. The conference was an opportunity for early years professionals across the province to come together in community, to connect with others, to feel a strong sense of belonging, and to engage in learning that focused on educator wellbeing, together.

Over a period of eight months, an incredible committee of ECEs from across Ontario and spanning the early years sector came together to work with the AECEO to make this three-day conference happen and for it to be a success. We are incredibly grateful to (in alphabetical order) Adenike, Anisah, Ashley, Carolyn, Charlotte, Claudia, Emma, Jeannette, Jenn, Meike, Melanie, Niluka, Rachel, Simone, and Sue, without them, the conference would not have been the very special event that it was.

A lot of intentional planning took place behind the scenes to make the conference happen. It started with an understanding that the early years sector needed a conference for ECEs by ECEs. The conference committee first came together in September of 2022. In our very first meeting, during a round of introductions it became evident that most members joined the committee to network with others in the field. Over the next few weeks, the conference committee thoughtfully and critically considered the theme of the conference. Often professional development, including conferences,

focuses on educator practice and child and family outcomes. The committee considered what values we held in professional development. As a result of the current sector landscape, initial discussions focused on stress, burnout, and wellbeing. Social and emotional wellbeing was identified as being important for ECEs. One committee member shared that “growing children deserve growing adults”. With this in mind, opportunities for ECEs to grow and strengthen their community quickly became a conference priority. We wanted this conference to be about the educator as a holistic person

We wanted this conference to be about the educator as a holistic person and focus on their psychological wellbeing.

and focus on their psychological wellbeing. Our shared vision then became to host an accessible virtual conference that provided early years professionals networking and

connection opportunities (i.e., to grow our community), and sharing and learning on ways to “raise each other up” (i.e., to strengthen our community). The committee developed a theme that truly fit this vision: *We Raise Each Other Up: ECEs building leadership and learning communities of joy, curiosity and hope.*

Every decision was made through thoughtful discussion and care to meet the needs of educators. Fully aware that with the sector crisis many educators are not able to take paid time off the floor to attend, the conference was spread across two weekday evenings and a Saturday. With a sector that is built on low wages, any cost, however small it may be, can be a barrier for educators. A big thanks to the Building Leadership and Learning Communities Project funder for financially supporting us to hold the conference free of charge. The virtual option was decided upon when thinking of ways to create an accessible learning space for educators across Ontario.

The conference committee had a very clear vision on the learning space they were creating and the educator knowledge they wanted to see within this space, including who should be

sharing and facilitating this knowledge exchange. With the vision being to create a conference about educator wellbeing (and not our practice), and ways to grow and strengthen our community, it seemed natural that the presenters would also be ECEs working frontline with children, families, and ECE students, and not necessarily the well-known presenters that are often seen at conferences. ECEs often do not see themselves as presenters or experts. This limited perception of their professional identity had implications we had to carefully consider when creating the Call for Presentations - how do we encourage ECEs who do not see themselves as presenters to share their knowledge and experiences at the conference? The committee brainstormed and researched ways to make the presentation proposal submission process as accessible and uncomplicated as possible. One committee member created a survey to identify the barriers for ECEs in getting involved to present at conferences. This survey was shared with the early years community and the findings informed many of the supports that were put in place prior to the conference. Two information sessions were held to review the call for presentations process, answer questions, and provide feedback on possible presentation ideas. The AECEO team also supported potential presenters through email feedback. In addition to these supports, a professional learning session with an ECE Coach, Anisha Angella was hosted to support ECEs who may be presenting for the first time at the conference, or to any who were interested in learning about ways to expand their professional identity. Once presenters were finalized, there was also a presenter-based session scheduled with the online platform provider to go over any questions or concerns in regards to navigating the platform.

Reviewing the presentation proposals was one of the more challenging and time-consuming tasks the conference committee took on. With nearly 100 proposals, and only 25 spaces, there was a lot to narrow down. To minimize selection bias, it was decided to create a blind review process. The proposals were first anonymized (i.e., all identifying

important to the team that each person who took the time to submit a proposal was given the same thoughtfulness in our response to them.

The conference committee themselves took part in professional learning leading up to the conference, spending time with AECEO Community Organizer, Erin Filby. Together, they

The conference committee had a very clear vision on the learning space they were creating and the educator knowledge they wanted to see within this space, including who should be sharing and facilitating this knowledge exchange.

information for the proposals were removed), so the committee received only the title, description, and format of the session. The committee then spent many hours discussing and considering if each proposal fit with the conference theme. In some cases, the committee requested additional information to clarify the session focus, shared suggestions and provided opportunities to revise the proposal, before making a decision. To ensure transparency, the feedback for each proposal was not just collected verbally but was also documented through a proposal score sheet. The committee shared their decisions with the AECEO, the staff team then did another round of reviewing rejected proposals, before making a final decision. Once presenters were finalized, the AECEO staff went to work on sending individualized email responses for each proposal, thoughtfully articulating the thoughts of the committee and the reasons for the committee's decision. It was

discussed the various types of advocacy and ways that it looks as the committee prepared to discuss possible educators to invite to host the conference opening keynote panel. Possible panelists covered individual, community, and systems level advocacy as the committee hoped they had, "created this space for ECEs to be advocates for themselves and to empower each other". The committee was delighted when a member of their very own, Simone Haughton, accepted the nomination to be a keynote speaker.

Meanwhile, there were other behind the scenes tasks that were taking place by various members of the committee. The conference logo was very thoughtfully and intentionally created to be inclusive and represent the three pillars of the conference - joy, curiosity, and hope. During the logo reveal with the committee, one member commented "the people are the relationships between the pillars". A social media package was

put together to share with attendees and presenters to use during the virtual event. The AECEO prize pack for games winners was being determined. The online platform was researched, various companies met with, and finally one chosen and set up step by step, including an



online gallery that included digital, poster and/or creative submissions (artworks, videos, multimedia, etc.). Interpreters were booked for mainstage sessions. AECEO staff took part in mental-health first aid training to be prepared and available throughout the conference in case anyone was in need.

Following Thursday's incredible opening ceremony by Elder Brenda Mason, and keynote panel, Friday evening of the conference was dedicated specifically and only to networking and connecting. The conference committee determined different lounge topics, virtual rooms where participants could pop in and out to join various discussions hosted by the conference committee members, as well as members of the AECEO staff, board, and partner organizations such as the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. The lounges were meant to provide something for everyone, to come for

a chat, a laugh, to sing or meet the conference committee, or to learn about unionization or the AECEO and get connected to communities of practice. There was also a networking option available where educators were paired for 5-minute intervals to "speed-network". One participant shared that "it was quite powerful to connect with folks - there was time to

this conference." We know how important and remarkable the work of early years professionals is, but it was noted that "this conference felt more personal, it felt like community building, it was wonderful to feel like we were being prioritized and our growth instead of focusing on the care we provide."

Child care in Ontario is currently undergoing its worst workforce crisis yet, directly related to the need for professional pay and decent working conditions.

do that - that is sometimes missed in conferences - you only connect with those that you know already or you do not have time to mingle ... you are so concerned about getting to the next speaker".

Saturday was the day of presentations and workshops. The conference committee worked to moderate the sessions while the AECEO staff provided technical and background support. The presenters all did an absolutely incredible job of raising us up, creating and sharing joy, curiosity, and hope, and participants "loved the diversity of speakers and presenters - from diversity in career and experience to deep topics". Participants were grateful for sessions that "[were] not about pedagogies but how important we are to each other and the foundation of early learning in Ontario" and a conference committee member noted, "I had been to many conferences but always felt that the content was how to make my classroom better not necessarily lift the sector up. And I don't know that I would have been able to tell you that before participating in

Child care in Ontario is currently undergoing its worst workforce crisis yet, directly related to the need for professional pay and decent working conditions. Opportunities like attending the AECEO provincial conference lead to increased retention in the sector as participants begin to feel hope and inspiration. On this topic, a participant shared, "I felt such a strong sense of community. Despite the challenges within the sector I felt inspired and comforted knowing that there is a wonderful support network for ECEs." Sharing space with other educators is inspiring because "in a time when ECE's are leaving the field in large numbers, it is great to see that there are still those who want to be here." By presenting at this conference, speakers felt "more confidence in speaking about what interests me, more confident describing myself as a leader in my selected field/interests presented", and will "keep on presenting and to seek out more opportunities to do so." The very idea of leadership was shaken as one presenter shared, "I am a leader not because I present something

extraordinary to the world that makes people do what I say, but because I share something deeply resonating with my core values and it touches others and meaningful connections are formed.”

Having a conference focused on educators truly impacts and influences the lives of the children and families in their care. A committee member shared, “when we spend time like lifting each other up and helping people... step into their power and their magic, that means we can show up in those spaces with children and families more fully and with a greater capacity”. It is so important to remember that children’s learning conditions are also educators working conditions and “if we want... quality care, we need educators who feel like they are at their top quality”. Early years professionals need to be recognized and valued for the work we do because it “impacts children and families... when there are educators who are joyful, who are happy, who are thriving in their own personal and professional life... that lends to better relations with children and families.”

Being a part of the committee was a transformative experience. Committee members shared that this experience was “one of the coolest things I’ve ever done as an ECE” and that “it gave me a sense of belonging again”. There was intention in creating the space that the committee shared. It was important that we took time to gain trust and check in with each other each time we gathered. That we held space for everyone’s ideas and treated each other with kindness and respect. We were there to support each other, provide mentorship, collaborate together, and work together to create an unforgettable experience for early

years professionals. There were many skills gained in the process, from public speaking to reviewing proposals. One of the wonderful takeaways was that by taking on this role, the committee “[was able] to show other educators that they too can seek out opportunities that put themselves into leadership positions outside of their classrooms or outside of their organizations.” Committee members were also able to learn “more about what’s happening in the sector, through the work of the committee... My perceptions on the

to build relations and not feel so alone in an ever-changing sector. I have built relations that will last throughout my career.” Of course, there were a few technical hiccups which were to be expected, but even with that we could not have asked for a more meaningful, impactful, and soul-filling event with nearly 1,000 educators from all over Ontario.

Thank you to absolutely everyone who was involved. We couldn’t have done it without the support and involvement of the early years

Having a conference focused on educators truly impacts and influences the lives of the children and families in their care.

ECE field in Ontario have broadened tenfold just hearing stories and working alongside all of the different educators in different roles as well within the sector.” It was a very special experience working with this amazing group of humans and we will never stop expressing our gratitude for what you all made possible for this community.

The entire conference was an exceptionally remarkable experience. Participants shared that, “it was the BEST conference I have attended!” and that “this conference was absolutely amazing, so insightful and real!” It was recognized that, “on the floor educators [were] being highlighted and seen.” The opportunities to connect with others that were so thoughtfully planned by the conference committee were appreciated as one participant shared that, “this conference allowed me to connect with other educators across the sector - allowing me

community. We are extremely grateful for you. We hope that you will consider joining an AECEO Community of Practice or becoming an AECEO member to continue the conversation.

In solidarity,

Amber Straker
(AECEO Project Coordinator)

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Centring Relational Knowledge in Early Learning and Childcare: Implications for Pedagogy and Pedagogical Leadership

Kim Barton

Abstract

This article describes tensions between scientific and relational knowledges that have followed the author throughout her journey to become an early childhood educator and pedagogical leader. The author thinks with reconceptualist theories to explore these tensions and then offers relational understandings of pedagogy and pedagogical leadership. In an examination of *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* for references of educator-educator relationships, it is clear that such relationships are not prioritized within the Ontario Ministry of Education's view of educators. This article aims to provoke thought around centring educator relationships within Early Learning and Childcare by considering relational knowledges and pursuing parallel practices alongside children.

Key words

early childhood educators, early years pedagogy, parallel practice, pedagogical leadership, relational knowledge, relationships

Author Biography

Kim Barton (she/her) is a proud Registered Early Childhood Educator, Master of Science student at the University of Guelph, and pedagogical leader. Kim has had the humbling privilege of walking alongside incredible educators across two municipalities within southwestern Ontario as a community pedagogical leader. Kim's pedagogical pursuits and research interests revolve around educators' parallel practice, designing experiences that enhance relationships, educator well-being, human-nature connection, nature- and play-based pedagogies, and the culture of music in childhood.

Centring Relational Knowledge in Early Learning and Childcare: Implications for Pedagogy and Pedagogical Leadership

At an online institute, Ontario's well-known child psychiatrist Dr. Jean Clinton asked, "Do we ever truly wonder about relationships?" (2022), provoking reflection on which wonderings have been privileged over others within early learning and childcare (ELCC). This article reviews my history of becoming an early childhood educator (ECE) and emerging pedagogical leader, tracing the tensions of upholding scientific knowledge in the context of relationship-based work. Using the lens of reconceptualist literature, I examine *How Does Learning Happen?*, the Ontario Ministry of Education's pedagogy for early learning, for reference to educator relationships and (re)construct a relational understanding of pedagogy and pedagogical leadership that requires prioritization of both educator-educator relationships and pedagogical leader-educator relationships. These reconceptualized relationships invite the study of educator inter-relationships and interdependence.

Introducing Myself

When introducing myself to early learning professionals, I often say that I'm a proud ECE working as a pedagogical leader. The truth is that I have struggled, and continue to do so, with identifying as an ECE. For as long as I can remember, I have felt torn between scientific knowledge and relationships—or objectivism and subjectivism, as Bezaire and Johnston (2022) describe—or Western ways of knowing and ancient wisdom as Wall Kimmerer (2013) articulates. My uncertainty with self-identifying as an ECE (over other professional identities) reflects my resistance to adopting pre-determined ideas about learning and knowledge. Since the things that have mattered most to me were not always valued within my experiences in educational and caring spaces, I resisted the identity

of an educator. During my secondary education, I was drawn towards science and math courses but excelled in placements, which put me on a trajectory to complete a Bachelor of Science in psychology. This experience trained me to be a producer of evidence-based knowledge, to only trust reproducible methods, and to appeal to ways of knowing that are privileged within positivism (Moon & Blackman, 2014). For 10 years I worked alongside young children in childcare, recreational programs, mental health services, and school boards while starting and stopping my ECE training. Then, in 2018, I worked as an outdoor educator and learned what was possible for human relationships within nature, and I decided to become an ECE. From there, my experience as an ECE-in-training can be summarized in the following quotation, which demonstrates how ECEs are simultaneously asked to be connected to, but separate from, children:

Our profession is ostensibly built on relationship. However, one of the first skills taught to students in most ECE programs is to be objective observers—that is, to be detached, deny emotion, describe children's "behaviour" in clinical language, and see them as "other." (Callaghan et al., 2018, p. 24)

My ECE training highlighted contradictions between what typically constitutes *knowledge* (generated through science, objective observation, and separation) and what typically constitutes *relationships* (considered to be essential for well-being, the foundation of all learning, and an important source of information). Soon after I graduated, the COVID-19 pandemic began; I could not work as a front-line ECE but was accepted into a Master of Science (MSc) program where I could explore these contradictions further. My graduate degree helped me to recognize myself as a White, cis-gendered, able-bodied, woman-settler

with a perception of the world that is filtered through many privileges. Additionally, while completing a graduate practicum, I applied for a part-time, temporary pedagogical consultant position and was the successful candidate. Over the course of the next year, I consulted with educators from over 100 licensed programs (the project was funded through the municipality). The mission of this work was to enhance the “quality of the programs” through the pedagogical approaches outlined in Ontario’s pedagogical framework for the early years: *How Does Learning Happen? (HDLH?)*. Below, I share a reflection on my first consultation visit:

I was urgently asked to “observe the educators as they guided routines and transitions since several educators have been bit during these times.” While I knew that the work of a pedagogical leader was not synonymous with observer, under the urgency, I snapped back to “doing science”: I entered the classroom, introduced myself, and promptly found a seat in the corner of the room to take objective notes. After 30 minutes, I put the clipboard down and figured I could help with the classrooms’ transition outdoors for the remainder of my time—switching to “doing relationships”. I learned more while joining the program than I did throughout the observation, including that every adult in the room was a supply educator and that the director’s intention to loosen adherence to a pre-determined schedule by removing clocks led to the loss of a shared sense of time amongst this transient team. Learning this information relationally caused me to rethink my methods, and, within a few visits, I abandoned the note-taking approach to focus on joining the educators’ experiences.

The tension I experienced as a consultant–observer caused me to reflect on the context that led to this request, as well as my decisions, and the knowledge shared with me. I did not come close to resolving the “issue” within this one-time consultation request. Nor did I know how to quell the tension I felt. This tension led me to deconstruct the notion of “pedagogical leadership” by engaging with reconceptualist literature (e.g., Dahlberg et al., 2013; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2005), revisiting my image of the educator, and inquiring into the relational nature of ELCC.

Thinking with Theory

Both my thinking and practice can be contextualized within theoretical and epistemological values upheld in reconceptualist ECE and thinking about relationships and interdependence, including Indigenous Ways of Knowing, feminist ethics of care, affiliative neuroscience, and positive psychology.

Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education

Reconceptualist ECE scholars discuss contextualized, negotiated, and democratic learning and caring cultural identities (e.g., Dahlberg et al., 2013; Langford, 2007) and resist thinking in “either/or” capacities (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2005). Such authors propose reconceptualizations of ECE (RECE) that revisit, recreate, and redefine taken-for-granted conceptualizations of ELCC, children, childhood, families, and educators borne out of developmentalism (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2005). For example, Dahlberg et al. (2013) contest various images of the child such as the child as incomplete, the child as innocent, the child as an empty vessel or blank slate, the child as nature, the child as labour market supply factor, and the child as a co-constructor of knowledge, identity and culture. Dahlberg et al. (2013) further state that when reality and pedagogy become synonymous with psychological practices rather than ethical human encounters, “the child becomes an object of normalization, via the child-centred pedagogy that has grown out of developmental psychology, with developmental assessment acting as a technology of normalization determining how children should be” (p. 37). This quotation causes me to wonder about children being monitored, evaluated, and discussed in terms of their individual skills and ability to meet predetermined ideas of what childhood should and should not consist of, striving for childhood to look a particular way (e.g., wanting to eliminate the biting behaviour described in my reflection). Moreover, I wonder about the ways in which parallel “normalizations” occur, where educators are monitored, evaluated, and discussed in terms of their individual skills, ability to meet predetermined ideas of what an educator “should” be like, forcing educating and caring to look a particular way (e.g., observing educators to build their capacity, as described in my reflection).

Reconceptualizing the “Good” Educator

RECE questions who a “good” early childhood educator should be, which lends itself to understanding pedagogical leadership. For example, Dahlberg et al. (2013) name and disrupt several conceptualizations of educators, including that she is a technician, a substitute parent, and an entrepreneur. Langford (2007) further unearths an image “of the good teacher who is White, feminine, and middle class and who undertakes, through love, a calling and natural aptitude to save ‘at risk’ children ... has a ‘ghostly’ white presence and the cultural and racial particularity ... [that] is obscured” (p. 334). This image of a good educator “parallels that of ideal mother and feminine virtues of selflessness, self-control, patience and happiness” (Corr et al., 2017, p. 4). Alternatively, Johnston (2019) unravels the narrative of a “good educator” who follows checklists, completes tasks, meets prescribed goals, and is a “docile” warm body (p. 48) and reconstructs an image of the (not) good educator who “challenge[s] the status quo” (p. 49), resists, and evokes hope. In doing this, Johnston reconceptualizes what makes a “good educator” and invites complexity and uncertainty to the role. Johnston’s (2019) reconceptualist article embraces educators as pedagogical thinkers, co-shapers of encounters with children, and as being entangled within relationships and context. Within this reconceptualization, educators are now seen as deserving of opportunities “to grapple with complexity, diversity, and other ways of being, doing, and be(com)ing with children” (Atkinson & Biegun, 2017, p. 62). Since pedagogical leaders’ work lies within this understanding (Pelo & Carter, 2018), reconceptualizations of both pedagogical leadership and relationships lend themselves to reconceptualist thinking, transcending dualistic thinking of “good” or “not good” within ELCC (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2005; Thomas, 2020).

Reconceptualizing Pedagogical Leadership

Dominant conceptualizations of pedagogical leadership in ELCC have been conflated with the role of an “expert” who monitors, supervises, and manages, perpetuating leader/follower hierarchies, binaries, patriarchal authority, and images of educators-as-technicians, custodial caregivers, and substitute parents (Atkinson & Biegun, 2017; Thomas, 2020). These confluations “seem antithetical to the collaborative caring practices

of the work of early childhood educators” (Atkinson & Biegun, 2017, p. 61). There are several pedagogical leadership titles within Ontario ELCC, including pedagogist, pedagogical consultant, and pedagogical leader, each carrying their own implications. Such roles are inspired by the Italian pedagogista in Reggio Emilia (Vintimilla, 2018). The consultation model has the troubling potential to position the estranged visiting consultant as a curriculum expert or coach, offering solution-focused tips and tricks in pursuit of “quality,” determining what constitutes “best practice,” and identifying the “good” and “not good” ECE (Atkinson & Biegun, 2017; Johnston, 2019; Thomas, 2020; Vintimilla, 2018).

Reconceptualist thinking invites a reimagining of pedagogical leaders that resists dominant discourses of ELCC leadership where pedagogical leaders engage in parallel practices with ECEs, realizing pedagogical trajectories within the unique contexts of ELCC communities (Palaiologou & Male, 2019; Thomas, 2020). Several scholars discuss *relational* pedagogical leadership (Beaudin, 2021; Palaiologou & Male, 2019), offering descriptions of “leadership, as collaborative, relational and interdependent, rather than hierarchical” (Siraj-Blatchford & Hallet, 2014, p. 17). Understanding pedagogical leadership as relational reflects the *both/and* of objectivity and subjectivity discussed within reconceptualization of ECE (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2005) and moves beyond science–relationship knowledge divides. Further, Beaudin (2021) describes how centring relationships is core to Ontario’s ELCC pedagogy: “holding relationships central to ECE leadership aligns with ECE work pedagogically” (p. 41). In the context of pedagogical leadership, Coughlin and Baird (2021) suggest that a pedagogical leader’s responsibility becomes getting to know educators:

Who are they? What do they care about? What challenges or excites them? What are their strengths, and how do they learn best? Every person brings their own complex story, way of being, individual identity, culture and family background, history, and experience to their work. Pedagogical leaders understand that embracing the uniqueness of individuals and reject the idea that sameness is an important step in creating respectful relationships among a community of learners. (p. 52)

This quotation points to pedagogical leadership as relational leadership, dissolving prescribed educator–pedagogical leadership encounters, activating practices of knowing one another, and exploring the interdependence of pedagogical leaders and educators. Therefore, pedagogical leadership may require a reconceptualization of, and commitment to, further study of relationships, particularly amongst educators and pedagogical leaders.

Reconceptualizing Relationships and Interdependence

Several strands of literature articulate the value of relationships, including Indigenous methodologies (e.g., Wall Kimmerer, 2013; Wilson & Hughes, 2019), feminist ethics of care (e.g., Langford & White, 2019), and affective and social neuroscience and psychology (e.g., Taylor, 2006), which can be considered within ELCC and pedagogical leadership inquiries. These areas of literature provoke thought about relationships, and, more specifically, the interdependence amongst humans.

Understanding Interdependence within Indigenous Ways of Knowing

The notion of interdependence is introduced in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, where Wall Kimmerer (2013) discusses networks of fungal connections beneath the forest floor and writes:

The mycorrhizae [the association between roots and fungi] may form fungal bridges between individual trees, so that all the trees in a forest are connected. ... They weave a web of reciprocity, of giving and taking. In this way the trees all act as one because the fungi have connected them. Through unity, survival. All flourishing is mutual. Soil, fungus, tree, squirrel, boy—all are beneficiaries of reciprocity. (p. 20)

By describing unity between and among humans and nature, Wall Kimmerer articulates how living beings are connected and dependent on one another and that thriving is shared rather than individual, reflecting a valuing of relationships. Wall Kimmerer (2013) further discusses how Indigenous Peoples have known and valued an understanding that life is connected, dependent, and all related since time immemorial. Wilson and Hughes (2019) share this

sentiment and expand upon it by discussing how reality and knowledge are also interconnected: “Indigenous epistemology, or Ways of Knowing, is also relational and emergent. Indigenous Knowledge is alive, it has agency, it moves” (p. 9). While positivist psychology assumes it is possible to objectively observe, produce, and consume knowledge (Moon & Blackman, 2014), Indigenous Ways of Knowing hold another conceptualization: one that does not separate anything/anyone from their relationships, as Wilson and Hughes (2019) describe:

Indigenous ontology and epistemology—what is, and how we know what is—are based on understanding that reality is relationships. We are our relationships: to self, family, Nations (other peoples), our environment, ideas, ancestors, the cosmos, everything that is ... We are not all separate entities that are interacting within relationships—we are the relationships ... Similarly, we don’t exist outside of our relationships to place, which is continuous with our relationships to people ... Reality as relationships includes our relations to ancestors, family, and Place, as well as ideas and cultural understandings that make us who we are. (p. 8)

These understandings of knowledge reflect something different than that which can be produced, hoarded, consumed, or studied outside of the context of relationship, yet such ways of knowing have actively been erased as Western scientific, positivist epistemologies and ontologies have been privileged over relational epistemologies and ontologies (Fricker, 2017; Moon & Blackman, 2014; Wilson & Hughes, 2019). Wall Kimmerer (2013) discusses tensions between Indigenous Ways of Knowing and science, or our relationships with living beings like plants and what we think we “know” about plants, when she highlights how “science is rigorous in separating the observer from the observed, and the observed from the observer. Why two flowers are beautiful together would violate the division necessary for objectivity” (p. 12). Wilson and Hughes (2019) further discuss that researchers are implicated in how knowledge is generated, and that engaging with Indigenous epistemology is concerned with processes of knowing, not just the content of what is known, through engaging in

a methodology of attending, which has to do with caring, bringing one’s whole being to the process of engaging and communicating with the human

and more-than-human entities that make us who we are ... Whereas Western academic knowledge systems privilege cognitive knowing to the exclusion of other ways of knowing, Indigenous epistemology includes cognitive knowing as well as experiential understanding; sensory, emotional, and spiritual knowing; intuition; dreams; and cultural knowing (p. 11).

Therefore, those understanding and respecting how Indigenous epistemology pertains to ELCC must consider whose knowledge is deemed worthy, and how that knowledge comes to be known. Moreover, I wonder how the on-going separateness between myself, as a visiting pedagogical consultant, and educators impacts our relationships and knowledge construction.

Understanding Interdependence within Feminist Ethics of Care

Interdependence is also discussed within feminist ethics of care (FEC). FEC emerged from Carol Gilligan's work in moral psychology, in response to European theories of moral development in which men were considered morally superior to women due to their relational and emotional dispositions (Powell et al., 2020b). Men were viewed as active, rational agents, while women (and children) were viewed as needy and dependent (Langford, 2020). FEC has been introduced to ELCC scholarship through advocates and researchers such as Langford, Powell, and Richardson. Their work builds upon Gilligan's paradigm of care ethics, which dismantles "the binaries and its hierarchies of the self over relationality, the mind over the body, the disembodied over the embodied, and reason over emotion" (Powell et al., 2020b, p. 3).

FEC offers that to be dependent is to be human (Langford, 2020), and both interdependence and the moral significance of care (e.g., displays of nuance and variability in actions rather than universal rule-bound approaches in response to the cared-for) are central concepts to FEC (Langford & White, 2019). Thinking with FEC disrupts the notion of independence being considered the ultimate goal throughout the human experience and considers interdependence as inherent to the human experience (Langford, 2020; Langford et al., 2017; Langford & White, 2019). FEC scholars pursue interdependence through reconceptualizations of "self" and "other":

Feminist ethics of care and postcolonial responsibility create a "weakening of the boundaries between self and other [which] strengthens not only the interdependence that characterizes postcolonial relations, but also brings to light the many inequalities that inhere within global feminized postcolonial relations." (p. 9). (as cited by Powell et al., 2020b, p. 7)

Many feminist scholars conceptualize the self as "constituted in and through relationships" (Davy, 2019, p. 1–2), being nestled within social dynamics and "founded in relationality, the connection between the self and others" (Davy, 2019, p. 6). FEC positions the interdependent, relational self as inherent to the human experience, which suggests that experiences and pursuits are "inextricably interdependent" (Langford, 2020, p. 21). These conceptualizations affirm what Indigenous Peoples have always known, and continue to know, and provide avenues to value relationship-based work.

Understanding Interdependence within Neuroscience and Psychology

Relationships were a taken-for-granted concept in my psychology training, but Clinton's (2022) questions (e.g., "Do we ever truly wonder about relationships?") and convictions that humans are "wired to connect" (Clinton, 2013, p. 6), invite curiosity about relationships from a psychological and neurological perspective. Baylis (2021) shares neurological understandings of connection through the mammalian caregiving system:

Oxytocin (the "love" hormone) works on the same brain receptors as cortisol (the "stress" hormone), so it's neurologically impossible to be both stressed out and loving and kind at the same time. That means that mindfulness and self-compassion practices—especially ones that incorporate warm physical gestures and a gentle tone of voice—can generate the same sense of safety for us that counteracts the stress caused by the sympathetic nervous system (p. 11).

This quotation generates the possibility that humans are dependent on one another for protection. Humans often self-protect through the fight, flight, or freeze sympathetic responses (Taylor, 2006), which strive for survival by putting self in opposition to someone/thing that is a threat (Brach, 2021). Alternatively, "tend and befriend"

is a neurological response that is less well-known and characterized by seeking and providing care through affiliation with others (Taylor et al., 2000). This concept is theoretically aligned with attachment-caregiving and bio-behaviourism, with origins stemming from literature regarding stress responses that privileged the experience of male humans and animals (Taylor, 2006). Taylor (2006) studied the female stress response and noticed how they attended to offspring and socialized with others, naming these prosocial pursuits of bonding and connection the “tend and befriend” stress response (Taylor, 2006). This neurobiological driver of connection during stress suggests that humans need each other to heal and grow (Welch & Ludwig, 2017), which appears to reiterate similar messaging from FEC and Indigenous epistemology.

These notions of biological interconnectedness and interdependence are further explored through the literature in field of positive psychology. For example, both Seligman (2018) and Waldinger and Schulz (2023) discuss the vital role of relationships within well-being. Specifically, Waldinger and Schultz (2023) asks: “What makes for a good life? A fulfilling and satisfying life? A happy life? The answer—relationships.” Moreover, Seligman’s (2018) PERMA theory suggests that ones’ experience of well-being is sustained through relationships. PERMA stands for five central concepts that make up well-being, including positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments (Seligman, 2018). Neuroscience and psychology affirm interdependence and that well-being is communal: “...we are now approaching a full circle. Scientific knowledge is finally catching up to the ancient wisdom that has survived the test of time” (Waldinger & Schultz, 2023, p. 24). While positivist psychology has upheld distinct epistemological and ontological assumptions from Indigenous Ways of Knowing and FEC, they appear to share an understanding that relationships are scientifically essential.

Relational Knowledge and Pedagogy

Although relational knowledge is a clear tenet of reconceptualist literature, Indigenous Ways of Knowing, FEC, and affiliative neuroscience, many practices in ELCC focus on producing scientific knowledge that fails to

acknowledge interdependence. The focus on scientific knowledge perpetuates separateness between educators (the observer) and children (the observed), as Wall Kimmerer (2013) and Callaghan et al. (2018) discuss, and, I would argue, between educators as well as between educators and pedagogical leaders. It is important to examine ELCC literature in Ontario for educator relationships since these relationships are largely where relational knowledge is generated.

Separateness within ELCC Working Conditions

While educators excel in pursuing relationships with children and families, they are often stripped of their relationships with each other by their working conditions. ECEs often lack paid time for programming, pedagogical documentation, and professional learning, that occurs within their working context, that goes beyond completing functional tasks, and that supports their interrelationships (Johnston, 2019; Pelo & Carter, 2018). Moreover, relational stress among educators occurs due to insufficient resources to do their jobs, further reflecting the (lack of) respect and recognition for ECEs (e.g., Beltman et al., 2020; Cumming, 2017). For example, one educator shared that in her workplace “there’s gossip, there’s people who clash, people who just cannot work together, and it’s something that I guess you just have to kind of just ... deal with in a way” (Beltman et al., 2020, p. 311), which, is essential to consider within a relationship-based field. This relational stress may be a result of the lack of systemic and political care for educators, as FEC scholar Kelly (2017) suggests: “formal care workers enter this line of work with enthusiasm, optimism and are motivated by notions of help, yet these sentiments become diluted or dissipate when confronted with the difficult, and, at times, impossible, working conditions” (p. 12). Kelly (2017) highlights how inadequate working conditions evoke feelings of depletion and rage, which translate to unintended harm within working relationships. Within the Ontario ELCC sector, inadequate conditions include poor compensation, few benefits, cramped break rooms, and frequent engagement with child-sized equipment (Flanagan et al., 2013). While educators intend to uphold supportive relationships, lack of processes to support their collegial relationships can cause stress that can erode these intentions (Cumming, 2017). It is clear that educator relationships are not explicitly prioritized or respected within ELCC structures and processes, missing opportunities for experiences that can unite educators.

Separateness within Professional Learning Models

Models of professional learning wherein educators engage in opportunities outside of the context of their relationships further perpetuate separateness between educators. Pelo and Carter (2018) refer to “drive-through training” to describe the approach of “fast-and-ready-to-serve workshops, conference offerings, and web-based instructional seminars” that are “convenient, familiar, and quick, an easy way to take care of the requirements for ongoing training” (p. 114). Educators are often asked to bring back knowledge produced by an expert and transmit this information to their colleagues. This reinforces an image of an educator-as-technician (Dahlberg et al., 2013), rather than understanding knowledge as something co-constructed in relationship with others (Coughlin & Baird, 2021). Baird invites a focus on educators’ relationships in the *Think, Feel, Act* series when she states, “learning happens in relationship, not just with children, but with adults” (Ontario Government, 2014). This quotation demonstrates how educators learn within the context of their working relationships, not outside of them. Educators deserve nurturing, playful, hands-on, relational, and contextualized learning experiences, much in the same ways that young children do, since learning and growth are co-constructed within relationships (Coughlin & Baird, 2021). Since educator relationships are not prioritized or respected as interdependent within dominant professional learning models, this leads to further divides and fragmentations among educator practices.

Separateness within HDLH?

HDLH?, Ontario’s mandated pedagogy for the early years, is a framework that guides educators’ thinking and practices, and in essence determines what should be said and what should not be said about educators in Ontario. Does the document help navigate the tensions between scientific and relational knowledges? There are multiple ways that this can be investigated.

Arguably, HDLH? is founded in relationships and interdependence, and “helps educators focus on these interrelationships in the context of early years environments” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 5). HDLH? presents a view of educators that

promotes collaboration and belonging, stating “the expectations for programs ... help educators focus on building and maintaining relationships and supporting connections among themselves ...”. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 13). It is not clear how this collaboration suggested by HDLH? is practically achieved. The reality is that poor working conditions, lack of access to professional learning, and lack of paid time to collaborate outside of the classroom reinforce separation rather than connection between educators. Nevertheless, the document articulates that relationships “are the single most important priority for educators in early learning programs” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 24). Interestingly, most mentions of relationships are framed between/ among children, families, and community, overlooking relationships between educators. This oversight is most obvious within these reflective prompts:

Which policies and practices may be barriers to establishing relationships and ensuring the meaningful participation of all children? Of all families? What else can be done to strengthen relationships and ensure social inclusion, participation, and a sense of belonging for each child and family? (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 28)

These prompts fail to acknowledge educator relationships entirely, demonstrating that the focus on relationships within *HDLH?* does not consistently include educator relationships. With a guiding document that does not authentically prioritize educator relationships, how can ELCC really claim to centre relationships or strive to move beyond the history of educator-as-separate observer for child development or technician?

How Does HDLH? Build Relational Knowledge?

Thinking with *HDLH?* while navigating scientific and relational knowledges has revealed limitations within what counts as *knowledge*. The document makes many references to existing scientific theories but could do more to position educators’ collaborative inquiry as relational knowledge construction or pedagogy. *HDLH?* defines pedagogy as “the understanding of how learning happens and the philosophy and practice that support that understanding of learning” (Ontario Ministry of

Education, 2014, p. 16) and suggests the following pedagogical “approaches”:

- establishing positive, responsive adult-child relationships;
- providing inclusive learning environments and experiences that encourage exploration, play, and inquiry;
- engaging as co-learners with children, families/caregivers, and others;
- planning and creating environments as a “third teacher”;
- using pedagogical documentation as a means to value, discuss, and make learning visible; and
- participating in ongoing reflective practice and collaborative inquiry with others. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 16)

While these descriptions sound like “good” practices within ELCC, aligning pedagogy with “approaches,” implies its similarities with scientific “methods,” “strategies,” “philosophies,” and “quality,” which Dahlberg et al. (2013) warn of. The alignment of pedagogy and approaches suggests pedagogy is something that is present in varying degrees, can be evaluated, and is an “add on” to the decisions that exist in ELCC. Aligning pedagogy with pre-determined concepts reflects a privileging of some conceptualizations over others (e.g., educator as a technician versus a co-creator of knowledge), or one epistemology over others (e.g., developmental psychology versus Indigenous Ways of Knowing or FEC). Implying that some specific approaches evoke better pedagogical potential than others reflects a privileging of preconceived ideas from the Ministry of Education over lived experiences of educators, which Fricker (2017) refers to as epistemic injustice. In this regard, pedagogical “approaches” become concrete, teachable, and assessable skills, tempting a positioning of pedagogical leaders as coaches of these approaches, rather than as companions who work and wonder side-by-side with educators (Coughlin & Baird, 2021). I wonder about a relational understanding of pedagogy that can respect Indigenous epistemologies, FEC, and human neurological interdependence, rather than predetermined approaches.

Relational Knowledge and Pedagogical Leadership

This section offers reconceptualized understandings of pedagogical leadership as relational pedagogical leadership within ELCC based on the absence of prioritization for educator relationships within ELCC.

An Emerging Understanding of Pedagogy as Interdependence

What if pedagogy *is* relational—nestled within interactions, relationships, and day-to-day decisions and is not ever something “in addition” to these encounters and experiences? How can pedagogical leaders hold “pedagogy” so that it activates potential trajectories (Delgado-Vintimilla et al., 2023) rather than meets preconceived notions of what “good” practice in ELCC consists of? Delgado (2020) states that “pedagogical thought lives within the tension between theory and practice, between what happens and the reflection on what happened ... as an everyday practice that puts thought into action.... Pedagogy, then, is a decision—to ask its own questions, which are mostly as yet unknown.” This understanding of pedagogy centres the unknown, rather than the known. Further, Raspberry (1997) offers a metaphor that considers pedagogy as “the in-between time. Neither day nor night ... a continual dawning [that] speaks of a beginning or an opening that appears to grow light without end” (p. 130). These understandings of pedagogy provide space for Pelo and Carter’s (2018) notion of “walking” alongside the word “pedagogy,” wherein the root “ped” is understood in relation to “pedestrian,” reminiscent of how the road is made by walking—that educators do not know where they might go. This reconceptualization of pedagogy considers educators as human and moves beyond opposing, complementary, or aligned approaches to practice, to reflect the very fact that educators have distinct values, identities and life experiences that shape their practice. This conceptualization is more of a return to Indigenous Ways of Knowing described by Wall Kimmerer (2013) and invites curiosity towards educators’ embodied experiences of living relational knowledge. Therefore, when leaders understand pedagogy as relational, they hold true to an understanding that learning happens in relationship (Coughlin & Baird, 2021; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014), that knowledge is relational (Wilson

& Hughes, 2019), and that pedagogical leaders work from a framework of relationships (Thomas, 2020), not approaches.

Honouring Interdependence within Pedagogical Leadership

Understanding pedagogy and knowledge as relational and interdependent invites pedagogical leaders to engage with reconceptualist and Indigenous theories in several ways. First, it prompts pedagogical leaders to generate supportive educator relationships in the same ways educators foster children's relationships (Coughlin & Baird, 2021); educators also require joyful, robust, and rich relationships with each other to learn and grow. Pedagogical leaders can further attune to relationships between educators (Coughlin & Baird, 2021) and see new meanings inside of *HDLH?*, including that those relationships "are the single most important priority *for* educators in early learning programs" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 24). This same quotation now nudges pedagogical leaders towards centring *educator* relationships, which prompts a relationship-centred practice (Johnston, 2019; Langford, 2007; Langford & White, 2019). To focus on these relationships, pedagogical leaders can slowly work through decision-making processes by utilizing protocols that not only focus on sharing perspectives but also work from a place of supporting educators' relationships (e.g., starting from a place of discussing values and making agreements before working through group inquiry-based questions; Coughlin & Baird, 2021, or *A Thinking Lens* from Pelo & Carter, 2018).

Second, understanding pedagogy as relational suggests that all relationships in early childhood spaces are worthy of being studied in an ethical, curious, and attuned manner. The purpose of "studying" relationships is not to diagnose pathologies but to indefinitely wonder about what it means to know one another. This idea evokes a curiosity about creating conditions that help or hinder educator relationships and considers the quest to support educators' relationships as worthy and contextualized professional learning (Pelo & Carter, 2018).

Third, prioritizing educator relationships may allow ELCC to transcend its histories and live its reconceptualizations. Both reconceptualist literature (e.g., Johnston, 2019) and *HDLH?* (2014) describe educators as having distinct lived experiences, identities, values, and ideas (Coughlin &

Baird, 2021), yet I notice that ELCC lacks ways to have communal conversations about and within these differences. Perhaps by prioritizing educator relationships, pedagogical leaders can put the notion of learning happening through relationships into parallel practice, which *HDLH?* set into motion when it declared that "what is good pedagogy for children is also good pedagogy for adults" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 16). When pedagogical leaders aim to generate "answers," the result resembles decontextualized professional learning models that position "expert" visitors to "fix" issues (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Pelo & Carter, 2018; Thomas, 2020). Rather, pedagogical leaders can show that learning is never complete, and their role is to pursue quest(ion)s that draw out multiple, potential trajectories (Delgado-Vintimilla et al., 2023). It is by generating these potentials that pedagogical leaders might disrupt histories of privileging Western knowledges and circle back to earlier knowledges to see deeper nuances much as Rilke instructs the young poet:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a very foreign tongue. Do not seek the answers, which cannot be given to you now because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. (Rilke, 1903)

Rilke's quotation reminds educators to live their questions collectively and to work slowly together so that, perhaps one day, the conditions necessary to live their "answers" emerge. It might be a pedagogical leader's role to offer questions and be questioned (Vintimilla, 2018) but then also to explore these questions communally and relationally, beyond individual reflection.

Finding My Identity as a Relational Pedagogical Leader

I grappled with the lack of prioritization of educator relationships while working as a pedagogical consultant, and the struggle continued when I accepted a temporary pedagogical leader position with another municipality. In this new role I was invited into a program to support pedagogical documentation practices. In Ontario, pedagogical documentation is considered a practice of capturing encounters within ELCC programs in order to make children's

learning visible, share educators' perspectives on these experiences, inform curriculum-building, and revisit these experiences to learn how children are thinking (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). While pedagogical documentation has reconceptualist potential, it also has emerged within a history of documenting developmental skills (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Rinaldi, 2004). I held this tension in mind during my first visit, along with my commitment towards fostering educator relationships as I visited the program. I share in this reflection of my first visit:

I decided to get to know everyone: I learned who knit, who recently got married, who was a mother, and who was grieving their mother. I also learned the songs they liked and how to make their preferred mud pies. I shared that I'm a cat-mom, eldest daughter, skier, and winter-camping enthusiast. When I noticed educators watching me watching them, I considered this suspicion as a provocation for us both (Vintimilla, 2018). Since I assume pedagogy to be relational, we did not "do" any documentation that day, nor did I ask about their "documentation approach," I simply got to know them. I followed up in the form of a letter describing the joys of our time together and naming their strengths. Upon my next visit, I was greeted with gratitude for my letter and joined in the program right away. In between making mud pies, I took photos of educators as they came alive outdoors, hauling wagons, throwing snowballs, and helping children. I wrote down quotations from their conversations, and described their facial expressions, gestures, and dispositions. I printed the photos and collected quotations and descriptions into an arrangement titled "What captured my heart and mind today?" At the end of the day, we studied it together. The educators were moved and surprised to know that *this* was pedagogical documentation and started sharing their apprehensions. "They didn't teach me this when I went to school," one educator said. "I'm not very creative," another said, "This is very different than looking for ELECT (Early Learning for Every Child Today: A framework for Ontario early childhood settings)." "We've also never been the receivers of pedagogical documentation, so it is difficult to offer it," I suggested. We talked for 30 minutes, sharing

our vulnerabilities, unanswered questions, and suspicions about this practice. When I left, we had not resolved our questions but learned we could talk together about our different ideas and experiences and live our questions, together.

These encounters were inefficient, messy, and relational, and the focus on getting to know each other caused me to notice the many parallels in our work: My greetings with educators paralleled their greetings with children and families. My first day in their program reveals a child's experience on their first day. My letter paralleled educators' pedagogical documentation. The questions paralleled inquiries taken up in classrooms. This was how we mentor each other within processes of learning and teaching; none of it prescribed, and all of it fully dependent on each other.

Barriers to Relational Pedagogical Leadership

While relational pedagogical leadership seems possible, I wonder how leaders can move beyond the histories of evaluation and separation and into valuing interdependence within ELCC and studying relationships (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Langford & White, 2019;). There are many constraints that make prioritizing educator relationships within ELCC challenging. For example, while working as a visiting pedagogical leader, I longed to immerse myself more deeply into programs for long periods of time, but I could not feasibly do so more than every couple of weeks. When I left my visits, I had the privilege of returning to an office with structures for debriefing and reflecting, while educators carried on in their classrooms. While I had hours to reflect, grapple, plan, process, and question my experiences, educators would do their best without paid time to walk and talk together after hours or between tasks. While I had unlimited access to books, articles, and an incredible team of colleagues to support me, educators took their breaks efficiently in small, cramped rooms and stayed after hours to design their programming and environments. While I was sending emails to arrange our next visit, educators quit their jobs out of frustration, and my emails would bounce. In December of 2022, I decided to leave my community pedagogical leader role to become a post-secondary lab school pedagogical leader. I have since learned that the pedagogical leader-in-program

model has not quelled the tensions I felt within the pedagogical leader-as-visitor or pedagogical consultant-as-observer models, since these privileges still exist. Questions around protecting communal time, centring educator relationships, and questioning privileged epistemologies remain and are to be lived communally. This leaves the quest of pursuing educator relationships incomplete, on-going, and unknown.

Conclusion

Through thinking with reconceptualist literature, I disrupted a dichotomous understanding of scientific knowledge and relationships and formed new commitments as an ECE and pedagogical leader. Thinking with reconceptualist theory highlights how educators are in relationship with, but also separate from, children (Callaghan et al., 2018) and each other, which parallels contradictions of pedagogical leader-educator relationships when they are conflated with coaching to meet pre-determined approaches (Thomas, 2020). Several perspectives on interdependence (e.g., Langford & White, 2019; Taylor, 2006; Wall Kimmerer, 2013; Wilson & Hughes, 2019) allowed me to understand knowledge as relational, that relationships can be ethically studied to build knowledge, and that pedagogy is relational decision making. Though I am just at the beginning of fostering a practice of centring educator relationships within my role as a pedagogical leader, I take up the calling of relational leadership, to view relational encounters as “enough,” and as an inquiry to be continued.

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Jain, and the copy editor. What I ask of each of you and/or reader, is to wonder with me about:

- Who you are today because of your relationships?
- How our professional responsibilities invite us to relate to one another?
- How our relationships influence our professional priorities?
- How we come to know one another, indefinitely?
- What ways of welcoming we deem worthy; for who and what purpose?
- How we uphold our collective values in the context of individual differences?
- Which processes inform what matters most within our experiences?
- What gets in the way of forming generative adult relationships?

I encourage you to pursue these as questions: to map them out, puzzle through them, and share your ideas in response to what I have offered here. I ask this, not because I need to know the answers, but because I am curious about what might become of on-going conversation about how we are shaped by one another.

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