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A Story of Keaton and his Wisdom

ECE Voices

Peer Reviewed section

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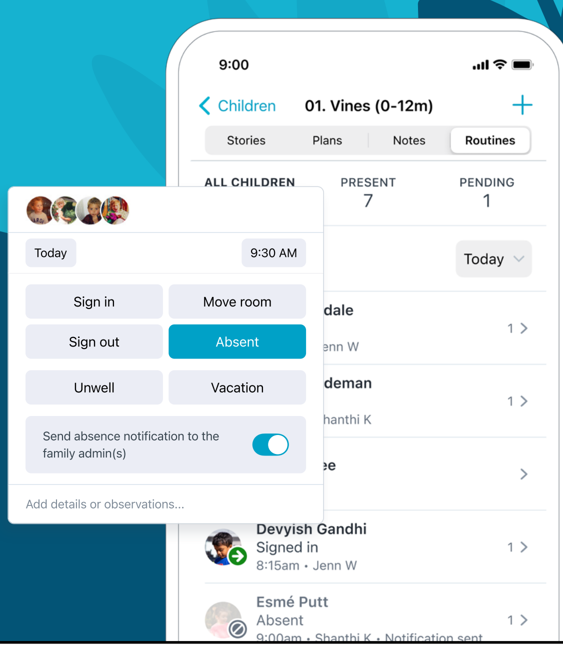

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SEPTEMBER 16, 2024 7:30PM

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Register here: https://www.aceceo.ca/board_of_directors

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COVER PHOTO: Enjoying spring at The Neighbourhood Group - Canoe Landing Child Care Centre

PHOTO CREDIT: Mark Rubin

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kim nelson design

A Story of Keaton and His Wisdom

Written by Elder Brenda Mason and Keaton Mason

As Keaton's Kookum, I would like to share a story about his wisdom. My grandson Keaton came to live with us when he was three years old. To help distract him because he missed his parents, my partner and I would take him out to the bush. We frequently visited a particular spot known as "Little Trout Bay."

Whenever we visited the bush, I would say to my grandson, " Kookum's going to put her tobacco down." I would then help him out of the car, and he would go play while I walked to the lake to offer tobacco with prayer in the water.

One Saturday, we arrived at Little Trout Bay, and as usual, I reached into the side pocket of my car door to get my tobacco, but the bag was empty. I told Keaton, "Looks like Kookum ran out of tobacco." We got out of the car, and while he played by the water, I joined him, and we started throwing rocks into the lake.

Keaton began piling rocks into a little mountain and then suddenly announced, "Kookum, I gotta go to the bathroom." I took him to the outhouse. When he came out, I told him to stay right there while I went in. When I came out, he was no longer by the outhouse. Instead, he was a bit off to the side by a tree, on his hands and knees, doing something.

I asked, "What are you doing?" He replied, "Wait." Then he got up and came running to me with something in his hand. He put the earth he had collected into my hand. I thought he wanted to play with the earth and the rocks in the water, but then he ran back to the same tree and grabbed more earth.

Keaton then said, "Let's go to the dock." I followed him to the dock, where he stopped at the center, went to the side, raised his hand towards the sky, and dropped the earth into the water. Watching him brought tears to my eyes. I followed his example: I went to the side of the dock, raised my hand towards the sky, said my prayer, and dropped the earth into the water.

Keaton was already back to playing with the rocks, and as I stood there watching him, I thought, "Wow, such a wise little boy!" He had shown me his wisdom through his actions. The message he conveyed was clear: "When you don't have tobacco, you use the earth." I realized that tobacco itself comes from the earth.

Keaton taught me that day, and even though he was just three years old, his wisdom was profound. From then on, if I didn't have tobacco, I would use earth from the ground and pray with that.

I've shared this story many times since then. Keaton is 28 years old now, but people still come up to me, recalling the story about my grandson. They tell me how they remembered it when they didn't have tobacco and used earth for their prayers.

Children are wise; they don't need to speak, and I think many of us, as adults, need to start paying attention to our children. This is the children's wisdom that doesn't always need words. As adults, we should pay more attention, listen, and observe because children can teach us through their actions. I am grateful to my grandson for showing me and us this profound wisdom that lives within the children.

Keaton's reflection on the story about him and his wisdom:

> I have always cherished this story, hearing it makes me feel connected to my Kookum and to the earth. Because I was so young, it's likely I had forgotten that moment. Distracted by the rocks that needed to be thrown and the forest that called to be explored. It wasn't until I was older I re-learned that lesson through her telling the story back to me. Where does that wisdom come from in that 3-year-old? Maybe I was influenced by my Kookum's wisdom, which gave me mine in that moment, a mix of each other. Perhaps that's a part of the cycle of wisdom. Kookum and child are teaching one another, learning and growing together.

As Keaton's reflection tells us through the cycles of wisdom between Kookum and child, even the youngest among us can offer profound lessons, reminding us of the deep connections we share with each other and the earth.

Image: Aerial view of Little Trout Bay Conservation Area Received from: https://traveltheheart.org/entries/little-trout-bay-conservation-area

We acknowledge that Little Trout Bay is located on the traditional territory of the Anishinabek, which includes the Ojibwa of Fort William First Nation, signatory to the Robinson-Superior Treaty of 1850.

To read other writings by Elder Brenda Mason for the eceLINK:

https://www.aeceo.ca/ecelink_articles

It's Time: Making the Case for Ongoing Funding for Communities of Practice Programs that Support Early Childhood Educators

Amber Straker and Laura K. Doan

Introduction

"Developing a stronger relationship with my local peers is something I know will sustain me through the challenges in my work, where I previously felt alone..."

—Early Childhood Educator, Peer Mentoring Program, survey response

Amber & Peer Mentoring Program crew-ECEBC Conference 2023

For the last several years, Amber, who is the project coordinator for the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO), and Laura, who oversees the Peer Mentoring Program for Early Childhood Educators in BC, have met regularly to share ongoing learning through the two community of practice (CoP) programs that we are involved in. Our times together are rich, as we find synergies between our two programs, despite the fact they take place in very different parts of the country. Last year, we co-authored the article, "Communities of Practice in BC and Ontario: Sharing Our Stories Across Canada" (Straker & Doan, 2023). In this article, we highlighted the impact of our two programs, including the increase in leadership, educator efficacy (confidence), and professional identity development, as well as helping educators to be sustained in their practice and avoid burnout. We also shared about the impact of our coming together as two colleagues. We are very different people (from the outside) but are both educators who share the same commitment to the work, a commitment that we became more inspired by and connected to through each of our conversations. While we met to share the impact of our programs, we found community, connection, and joy—similar to what the educators in our programs experience through connection.

In this second co-written article, we continue to share the stories of our two programs, but this time, a year later, with even more data and a different context now that the Canada-Wide Early Learning Child Care Agreements are in place, we push for programs like ours to be firmly embedded into professional associations across Canada with ongoing funding. What follows is a discussion on the context, thinking about the Canada-Wide Early Learning Child Care Agreements, sharing about the importance of ongoing funding, and action steps for early childhood educators and policymakers.

Context in British Columbia and Ontario

The Peer Mentoring Program for Early Childhood Educators in BC is in its third year of continuous funding. After a one-year hiatus, the program began again in 2020 during the pandemic. In the second year, educators were anticipating the move from the Ministry of Children and Family Development to the Ministry of Education and Child Care. In our third year, educators have received an additional wage enhancement from the provincial government. In addition, there is recognition for those educators who have additional credentials, such as Infant and Toddler Educator and/or Special Needs Educator. What this has meant is that educators who are part of a peer mentoring CoP have someone to talk to, share with, and get

mutual support from—no matter what is happening in the child care landscape in BC, or in their professional life. And this makes a significant difference. As one educator shared: "It takes away the isolation … especially when you're first starting out and the uncertainty. I wish this group had been around when I first started out…" (Doan & Mughal, 2023). In a program survey in May 2023, 68% of participants reported that the Peer Mentoring Program made a difference in their ability to stay in the field and 97% reported seeing themselves staying in the field (Doan & Mughal, 2023).

In Ontario, Communities of Practice at the AECEO were launched in 2016 with the idea of creating space for educators to come together in community and advocate for decent working conditions and professional pay. In Ontario, the College of Early Childhood Educators provides oversight and practice standards for educators while ultimately working to protect the public's interests. (To be called an early childhood educator in Ontario, one must be registered with the College of ECEs.) The AECEO is the sector's professional association in Ontario, and it supports the early learning workforce through community building, professional learning, and policy recommendations and reflections. The AECEO created communities of practice as a direct way for early childhood educators to be the driving force and a united voice for the early learning work. In 2021, the Building Leadership and Learning Communities project expanded this original work, creating additional CoPs around the province and adding relational province-wide groups. Much has happened in this time including the after-effects of the Covid-19 pandemic leaving the early childhood sector in its worst workforce crisis yet, the signing of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreement in 2022, the creation of a wage floor for registered early childhood educators in 2023, and the announcement of a minimal increase to that wage floor for 2024. Similarly to the Peer Mentoring Program in BC, AECEO Communities of Practice provide a space for those involved in the early learning sector to come together to talk, share, and find support in their work and lives.

For both provinces, our research has found that the CoPs serve as a place where educators can find mutual support, respect, and care. It is a safe enough place for educators to be able to ask questions, share ideas, advocate, listen, provoke, and grow. In a field where there seems to be so little time for gathering with colleagues, these communities create a structure where authentic sharing can happen. This is a place where educators can walk alongside one another, cheering each other on, being the voice that says, "I see you. I hear you. I'm here for you."

In BC's Peer Mentoring Program 2023 survey, 96% of participants reported an increase in learning through participation in the program. One educator put it this way: "I would not know about the new [BC] Early Learning Framework without this program. It's given me insight into supporting children in early intervention in a different way" (Doan & Mughal, 2023). Reflecting on the Peer Mentoring Program, and where we are today, with 32 peer mentoring CoPs across the province, with over 300 early childhood educators, and 42 facilitators, Laura is reminded of the significant impact of the Early Childhood Educators in British Columbia (ECEBC), the professional association representing early childhood educators in BC. The Peer Mentoring Program has been a partnership between Thompson Rivers University and ECEBC, and we truly would not be where we are today without ECEBC.

Members and leads of Ontario Communities of Practice report similar feelings and outcomes as those in the BC program. Over 90% agreed that their involvement has impacted them professionally and *"frequently listed learning, making new connections with other ECEs, and building a sense of community as ways that the CoP had impacted them"* (Matthews et al., 2023). The CoPs are spaces where educators build a sense of belonging, sharing things like, *"It provided me with confidence in my role as a RECE. It also provided me with a sense of community I didn't have before."* We are grateful to the funders who have continued to support the 10 communities of practice, 19 leads, over 120 core team members, and thousands of constituents across Ontario. The primary purpose of Ontario's AECEO is to support ECEs, and that is exactly what the CoPs do, they provide a space where educators "realize that other people [are] experiencing the same things. And that [they] have support from individuals who will be there to help if needed" (CoP member).

Thinking about the Canada-Wide Early Learning Child Care Agreements

The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreements have had a drastic impact across Canada. They have provided an opportunity to create a system in which early learning and child care is valued, and most importantly, those who provide the care and learning in this sector are respected for the pedagogical skills and knowledge and emotional intelligence and ethical care they bring to these roles. With British Columbia being the first province to sign their agreement with the federal Canadian government and

Ontario being the last, we have seen various methods that provincial governments are taking to implement the new system of child care in Canada.

A Canada-wide child care system has the potential to disrupt the current market-based system where educators have been subsidizing the costs of child care with their low wages and precarious working conditions into a system where educators are fully valued and recognized for the incredible work they do. The early learning sector was left broken after the Covid-19 pandemic. Early childhood educators worked without pause through emergency child care to provide safety for children while parents went to work. Already a crack in our system, the challenge of retention in the sector has since become one of the greatest retention crises that has ever been seen. Early childhood educators are leaving the field in droves all across the country. While often seen as a recruitment and retention challenge, we know that students are entering post-secondary institutions to become ECEs. However, they are not staying in the field. Ontario's College of ECEs 2021 membership data demonstrates that "members who work in licensed child care are twice as likely to resign their membership after just three years of membership compared to those working in education or another employment setting" (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2021). While we know that addressing the underlying systemic issues of professional pay and decent working conditions are ultimately needed to truly begin addressing the retention issue, we also know that programs such as the Peer Mentoring Program in B.C. and the Communities of Practice in Ontario are integral in the building of a system that supports educators and a profession that is not just a job, but a career.

Importance of Ongoing Funding with Programs Firmly Embedded into Professional Associations

> I believe this program is invaluable and needs to be accessible to all ECEs. This program creates relationship, which is at the heart of what we do and has a many layered trickle-down effect on our lives, both professionally and personally. I believe the reconnection that I am experiencing being a part of this program has made my professional career more meaningful because it feels good to make a positive difference in someone else's life. I feel purposeful and valued. (Early childhood educator, Peer Mentoring Program, survey response)

Can you imagine with us, a time when across Canada, every early childhood educator would have access to a community of practice, a place where they find community, trust, value, and respect? Where ECEs stay in jobs that become careers and feel a deep sense of belonging to the sector? Communities of practice are effective in supporting professional identity development, reflective practice, educator well-being, leadership, educator efficacy (confidence), and retention (Wenger, 1998). In a Peer Mentoring Program survey in 2023, 78% of participants reported increased leadership through participation in the program. One educator shared, "Interacting with experienced educators has really helped me develop leadership skills. They have shared valuable insights into how to handle daily tasks in the daycare setting, which has been truly enlightening for me. Thanks to their guidance and mentorship, my leadership capacity has grown substantially" (Doan & Mughal, 2023).

The current system does not allow all educators to experience community like this. Educators have inequitable access to opportunities for ongoing, self-directed, and meaningful relationship-building, mentorship, and learning across Canada. In most cases, it is a matter of where you live, who your employer is, and what the province or territory has prioritized for the workforce. This inequity must be remedied. All educators, no matter where they work, deserve the opportunity to engage in communities that care with and for them, and all children, no matter where they live, deserve the opportunity to be cared for by a well-supported educator.

We argue for these programs to be firmly embedded within professional associations across Canada and for these programs to be funded. It's time for Canada to recognize the importance of early childhood educators and to do so in a tangible, ongoing way. It is through the professional associations who are deeply connected to the ECE community that this can be made possible. One CoP member through the AECEO shared, "I have found that this CoP has really helped me to feel a part of the community in a way that I don't know that I would have had access to otherwise." Throughout the pandemic, early childhood educators heard about how they were "essential." In the announcement of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care plan, they were called "the heart of the system." Educators are still waiting to see changes in policy, practice, and funding that reflect this sentiment.

Action Steps

The change we need is **clear: consistent and permanent public funding to professional associations to create opportunities for all educators to experience communities of care and belonging to contribute to retention, recruitment, and a thriving and well-supported profession.** We believe it is important for early childhood educators, child care workers, professional associations, researchers, government leaders, and policymakers to work together. When we work individually, in our silos, we are only able to see things from our own perspective, but when we join with people who come from different perspectives, we start to have a more fulsome picture. Margaret Mead said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has”, and we believe this is true.

Are you an early childhood educator? Do people in your community know the issues you are facing? Are you part of a CoP? If so, this may be a place where you can come together, in collective action. We hope that you will join us to strengthen the collective voice for positive change. How can you do that?

- Share your story with families, the community, government leaders, policymakers.
- Join your professional association to contribute to building a collective voice and a better future for your profession.
- In Ontario, you can learn more at www.aeceo.ca/ and contact us at info@aeceo.ca
- In BC, you can learn more at www.ecebc.ca or find out more information at www.ecepeermentoring.trubox.ca or peermentoring@tru.ca.

Are you in government or are you a policymaker? We invite you to be part of ongoing dialogue and collaboration so that we might work together, to make a difference for children, families, educators, our communities, and our society. How can you do that?

- Ensure that you are aware of what is going on in early learning in your community.
- Build relationships with key stakeholders in the ECE community, including early childhood educators, ECE leaders, and ECE professional associations.
- Listen to ECEs and community members about what they need to thrive in your community.

Whatever your role, we encourage you to have a conversation. Let those around you know how important this is. Share your values and invite allyship. Reach out to the professional association in your area and get connected. Stay in touch and check out our websites and social media platforms where we share upcoming actions and events as well as current research and information that can be shared with family, friends, networks, government officials, and funders.

Hannah’s Story

Finally, we would like to share Hannah’s story. Hannah had been part of the Peer Mentoring Program for several years. During this time, she has moved to different communities in BC to pursue her career in early childhood education. With each move, Hannah has found a local Peer Mentoring CoP waiting for her. Recently we found out that Hannah is moving again, and we were delighted to see that a new Peer Mentoring CoP was starting in her area. Hannah’s journey, experience, and story represent what we want for all early childhood educators in every part of Canada: the opportunity to be part of a CoP, with educators who come together to walk the path together, in whatever community an educator happens to live in.

This article was originally published in Vol. 39, No. 2 of *The Early Childhood Educator*, the Early Childhood Educators of BC’s quarterly journal.

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EYP Rise Up T.O. reads… *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*

Written by: Rachel Neville & EYP Rise Up T.O.

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it's self-preservation. And that is an act of political warfare" (p. 41).

Survival is not just continuing to be alive, but continuing to live as a killjoy in the fullest sense. If we are alive but cannot be our full killjoy selves, are we truly living?

"Rolling eyes = Feminist pedagogy" (p. 44)

The truth has nothing to fear.

"I think of the joy truth as a core truth, a truth from which So much else follows. If you expose a problem, you pose a problem. If you pose a problem, you become the problem" (p. 17).

"...power often works through reversal; those who are more represented in the public domain tend to represent themselves as more censored" (p. 25).

EYP RISE UP T.O. reads...

SARA AHMED THE FEMINIST KILLJOY HANDBOOK THE RADICAL POTENTIAL OF GETTING IN THE WAY

When hard topics or conversations do come up with children and families, how are we going to meet them?

There is a hidden maintenance of the patriarchy in our spaces we think its not there because it is a femme profession, and why would women uplift a system that opresses them?

"Some people assert their right to occupy space by becoming more and more offensive toward others" (p. 25).

Being the killjoy when happiness is expected.

"when you challenge sexism, sexism is the reaction to what you challenge. That loop is the life of the killjoy; we know it well" (p. 66).

"survival can be a feminist project, a queer project, a trans project, a crip project. For some of us, to survive the world we need to transform it. But we still have to survive the world we're trying to transform" (p. 48).

What do we lose when we choose to snap a bond? What do we gain? What might happen if we made bonds more carefuklly in the first place?

The AECEO Community of Care, EYP Toronto, has launched their second Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE) Reading Group. Over the next six months, we will be reading together and exploring *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way* by Sara Ahmed (2023). The included image shares quotations, questions, and musings from participants. Thus far in our meetings, we have been discussing whether we identify as killjoys, and if we do, how this might intersect with our roles as child care workers. Among many other inquiries, we have been wondering: What might happen if I am a killjoy? What might happen if I am not?

In her work, Ahmed (2023) describes the killjoy in many ways, giving poignant examples and reference points. In essence, a killjoy is someone who acknowledges society as being racist, classist, and patriarchal, and who is willing to visibly stand up against injustice. To be a killjoy is to ruin the mood, cause a rift, snap a bond, have an outburst, roll your eyes, cause unhappiness, be oversensitive, shout, and survive. This way of being can be isolating and exhausting. Through her work, Ahmed (2023) offers feminist killjoys' guidance and support to navigate through this experience.

Participants from across Ontario are invited to our monthly discussion group. If you would like to join us, please email eypriseupto@gmail.com to express your interest. The Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE) Reading Group will be discussing this book until September 2024.

Reference

Ahmed, S. (2023). *The feminist killjoy handbook: The radical potential of getting in the way*. Seal Press.

Exploring my identity as a 'Mad', BIPOC, Early Childhood Educator & Advocate

Ishaa Vinod Chopra

Ironically, it wasn't until I began to pursue my diploma in Early Childhood at George Brown College that I really began to understand my past, especially my early years. It is a known phenomenon that the ages between 0-6 leave an impressionable impact on a child's life. When I analyzed and explored my own early childhood, I was introduced to the concept of 'ACEs' or *Adverse Childhood Experiences.* I was surprised to see how ACEs had the ability to influence me negatively and contribute to the manifestation of the symptoms of my disorder and eventual diagnosis. Possible ACEs that could have played an integral role in my ability to deal with toxic stress include the fact that one of my caregivers dealt with mental health issues. When my parents divorced when I was five years old, it was also a defining moment for me as a child, as I had to move to a boarding school. In the first boarding school at the age of five, I was a victim of neglect and physical violence in school inflicted by our teachers, and often, parents would bribe the hostel wardens to show extra affection to a select few children.

"An overarching message from an ACEs study is that it is the number of adverse life events one is exposed to that carries the greatest burden on development rather than any specific type of adversity." (Nelson, 2017).

In my early teens, I was diagnosed with a mental health diagnosis. I was an attendee of a simulation United Nations Conference in Banff, Alberta; however, on my return I did not receive stable sleep for a period of 2 weeks. At first, my parents suspected a possible exposure to drugs, however, when the doctors conducted blood tests it was confirmed that there was another factor contributing to my symptoms.

One of the biggest obstacles I faced was the real-life application of *self-regulation* when I was thrown constantly from one environment to another all my life. In the early years, I changed four schools over two continents and lived my previous married life in Eastern Germany. Relocating from an isolated hill station such as Dalhousie, situated in North India, to a metropolitan and fast-paced city such as Toronto continues to present me with new challenges daily. It helps me to grow as a person and achieve my actual potential.

Over the years, the sheer stigma, bias and discrimination that I have had to endure both in my professional and personal relationships prompted me to seek to break down the barriers that I had placed between myself and my surroundings due to *self-stigma.* I wanted to live by my values and beliefs by overcoming the fear of a label and not solely identifying myself by it. I knew this was only possible if I identified myself as a mental health advocate. My journey in advocacy took form while I was a diploma student. I engaged in student activities organized by the 'GBC Early Childhood Advocates,' then led by Professor Lisa Johnston. As students, we interact with the AECEO in 'meet and greet' events and participate in conversations with other pre-service educators and advocates.

In my career as an educator and my role as a dance teacher at Dalhousie Public School, I realized that my passion for children was immense. Not only did the children play an integral part in my healing process, but they nudged me slightly into diving deep into my curiosity and exploring my own 'inner child.' The idea that children are 'capable, competent, and curious,' the backbone of our early childhood Ontario curriculum, speaks to me in more ways than one. I often wonder, if, as children, if we are not forced into expressing ourselves in adult ways in our formative years, what impact would that have on our future generations and developmental trajectories?

I am extremely inspired by the research of Dr. Adam W.J Davies (2022, 2023) on the exploration and analysis of how pre-service early childhood educators deal with mental health challenges daily. I have lived experiences as an educator who identifies as '*mad*' and can advocate from a place of 'knowing.'

"Mad activists seek acceptance within society of who they are, rather than being seen as a problem to be fixed or seeking inclusion within a broken system." (Archibald, 2021)

'*Mental Health Advocacy*' can be applied within the early childhood sector to support educators and families with mental health challenges, improving educators' working conditions and relationships between children and their caregivers/educators. Finally, advocacy to me means forming thoughts and ideas about a specific topic that ignites or excites me and propels me into action in community settings.

Canada has the Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA) 2004 to protect patients' rights. I want to share the importance of this Act and its relevance to me as a BIPOC woman who also identifies as '*mad*': It is the right of any patient, and as in my case, any person with a mental health diagnosis, to reserve the right of whether or not to disclose it to any employer or educational institute. If it is indeed shared with a doctor or an employer, they are bound by law not to share the information with anyone. This Act provides patients self-respect, care,

and agency concerning their condition. A patient must be respected, but it is even more critical that they not be disrespected, mistreated or taken advantage of due to their diagnosis. (Government of Ontario, 2018).

I began to appreciate the concept of agency and individual rights when I started working at an early childhood centre in Mumbai when my stepmother pointed out, without my father's presence or consultation, that it was my responsibility to disclose to any employer that I had bipolar disorder; or else I would be committing '*fraud*,' she said. My younger sister replied, "Yes, if you have committed a crime, for example, it is important to disclose this to the universities when applying." At her tender age, she probably did not realize the implications of her words on me. Comparing a criminal offence to a mental health diagnosis was not only discriminating but uncalled for. This affected me a lot, and finally, I quit the job. I do not blame her since she did not have enough information about mental health advocacy, much like most people in India. In the West, I used to believe that it was different until the recent addition to the questionnaire required by the College of Early Childhood Educators for educators who face mental or physical disabilities brings up plenty of questions that I would like to explore and critically analyze, not only as an early childhood educator but also one who has a mental health diagnosis and aims to be a mental health advocate. Unfortunately, the individuals (including families) who are diagnosed are almost forced to feel guilty for their diagnosis and often bear that burden so heavily that they unknowingly admit or reveal information that need not be disclosed.

The Accessible Learning and Counseling Services of my College had an extremely positive impact on my growth as an educator. They helped me overcome barriers I continued to face in times of adversity. As a pre-service educator who often faces mental health barriers to education, I highly encourage students to access these services, contrary to the notion that one should not discuss their mental health diagnosis in professional settings.

The following is a monologue where I pretended to share with my Counselor at the college where I studied ECE:

'There are times when I question my upbringing. I think I do this because I tried to be an early childhood educator. After all, whenever most people learn anything, they connect it to their lived experiences for which the main foundation is laid in our early childhood years between ages 0-6; and I think the best way to learn about ECE (early childhood education) was indeed to use myself as a subject in my inquiries. How was I as an infant, a toddler and a school-goer?'

Respect for ECEs with Mental Health Challenges: Empathy vs. Sympathy

The College of ECE's (CECE) question #6 places educators in an uncomfortable position to reveal their mental or physical disabilities or diagnoses. Quoting a statement co-authored by Brooke Richardson, Adam Davies, and Michelle Jones, and supported by the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO): "… the College asks ECEs to disclose any diagnosis for safety reasons and goes as far as to provide a self-assessment tool that relies on medicalized, diagnostic categories for mental health, they stigmatize physical and mental health and harm ECEs while doing little to minimize safety issues in the field." (Richardson et al., 2022, p.1). In addition to this, there is a significant concern for the impact that mental barriers have on low-income women of colour and the negative repercussions it has on the "… stigmatization of mental health conditions has on the highly gendered and racialized workforce of ECEC in Ontario." (Richardson et al., 2022, p.2). This quote resonates with me as I identify myself as an educator who is '*Mad*' and a BIPOC woman who has faced several instances where not only do I feel isolated in the workspace but have also witnessed some newcomers and racialized educators who are denied the opportunity to address parents directly or take an active part in curriculum planning.

"Sanism, or the systemic discrimination and othering of individuals who either have mental health diagnoses or are thought to be 'mentally ill,' is embedded within normative images of ECEs propagated throughout the field (Davies et al., 2022)… ECEs are expected to regulate their feelings, responses, and behaviours during their work while simultaneously being on the receiving end of mental health surveillance from governing bodies." (Davies, 2023, p. 16).

There are hints of '*Sanism*' evident in the infamous question #6 that is required to be filled out by educators to be registered with the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE), which pressurizes educators with mental or physical disabilities to reveal their diagnosis with a hidden implication of having repercussions if not done. To this effect, the AECEO Board of Directors and staff have supported a statement prepared by Brooke Richardson, Adam Davies, and Michelle Jones to outline the urgency of the issues of ethics, safety, mental health, and well-being. The concept of 'agency' and 'privacy' related to the Ontario human rights code is also openly ignored. Due to the systemic and systematic issues such as stigma that are deeply rooted within the minds of pre-service educators, both to others and themselves (self-stigma), the struggle that educators are forced to face is profound. The services offered to pre-service educators are *"…often entrenched in medical model approaches and risk labelling*

the help-seeker as incompetent, thus impacting future career prospects." (Davies, 2023, p.15). Davies further argues that "*there is also evidence that similar processes in higher education institutions push out disabled and mad students," as cited by Shanouda, 2019.* (Davies, 2023, p.15).

Often, educators who cope with mental health challenges experience the universe in a different way, which gives them high emotional intelligence and engagement with creative expression, such as creative writing, art, dance, and musical therapies. It is also important to note that by supporting educators who cope with mental health issues, we can drastically improve the quality of life in the EC workplaces, which can foster healthy bonds between educators and their colleagues, children, families, and the systems within which they interact. This positive impact can then be felt not only in professional workspaces but may also be translated into home environments as well. After all, the lived experiences of both educators and children in early childhood settings can positively or negatively impact their daily lives, including their physical and mental health and well-being.

For all educators who are coping with mental health barriers (including myself), it is essential to remind ourselves that it is the work that we do in the sector that defines us and not our 'diagnosis,' if any. If my doctor feels that I am stable and fit to work, then by no means do I require 'supervision' at work. This not only exposes educators who may not feel comfortable being forced into revealing their diagnosis but adds to the stigma associated with mental health and well-being, which educators face outside the sector as well. It is, therefore, a collective responsibility to care for the sector regardless of whether they cope with challenges. Prevention is always more than a 'cure,' and for more chronic conditions, relying on preventing serious episodes is the only hope. Also, it is not merely digesting medicines that aid patients but also the positive human connections we rely on for survival. What would then a workplace look like where the stress, exhaustion, and mental strain are not only reduced but tended to by the very system that controls its inner frameworks? How can educators and policymakers who directly impact the mental health of educators (especially in their work environments) be a catalyst for providing ECEs with a safe space to express themselves without the fear of being rejected by society?

The Value and Treatment of ECEs by Society

The lens through which we perceive ourselves as educators is highly impacted by how our society treats us; one of the obvious ways of measuring this would be our hourly salary. However, I have experienced a disregard for the worth of an educator, where it is often only the roles of educators in leadership positions that are given importance. At the same time, the frontline workers are not included in decision-making processes. They are not provided with sufficient support through employment and access to community organizations to support their physical wellness, mental health and well-being. It, therefore, comes as no surprise that so many educators, including myself, have considered exiting the early childhood sector due to poor pay, which can further contribute to mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, ADHD, etc. Sadly, due to the systemic stigma that is so heavily ingrained in our society, most educators mask their struggles due to the fear of being rejected or judged by their peers. As social beings, we thrive on human connections, and the feelings of not being included and rejected by our community can instill social anxiety and further erode self-esteem.

For educators to be respected in society for their work and be treated as professionals is essential. The crux of the phrase '*ECEs are worth more*' advocated by the AECEO is not merely a cry or complaint educators have of the current political climate regarding policies. It includes frontline workers' voices being heard and incorporated in collectively arriving at solutions for the EC sector. When we consider the mental health and well-being of ECEs, it is not only avoided but seldom discussed in the literature, with a focus primarily on children and families. *How Does Learning Happen?* (2014), Ontario's Pedagogy for the early years, clearly states that it is the interaction of all three entities within the various systems of early childhood: Children, Families and Educators, along with their environments and how they finally interact with each other; but more importantly, that they play an equally significant role in the workings of the inner frameworks in early childhood. Extrapolating from my personal experiences, how would educators interact with their colleagues and the children at childcare centres when they are emotionally drained and exhausted and cannot share about the job's adverse effects on them out of fear of being judged or fired? I can speak to these feelings as an educator, and hence, know that I am probably not the only one experiencing these emotions; a safe space for educators where they can discuss their issues should be a top priority in the sector, and of course, finding solutions collectively that speak to the pressing issues faced daily by educators.

I am not aware of the health legislation of my birth country of India, but I can say this much: It is always a good idea to research the law of the land, depending on where you reside. Always remaining one step ahead- and knowing all the laws concerning health and mental health, especially if you are a patient or a loved one of a patient, will always work in your favour. It is not only empowering but provides one with agency in their mental well-being, which is, according to my lived experiences, one of the fundamental coping mechanisms for mental health.

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Indigenizing Curricula: Developing a Pedagogy of Relationship that Centers on the Child

Yvette Manitowabi, Wiikwemkoong Board of Education
Sandra Peltier, Wiikwemkoong Board of Education
Jeffrey Wood, Laurentian University
Shelley Stagg Peterson, OISE/University of Toronto
Nicola Friedrich, OISE/University of Toronto

We believe that efforts to Indigenize curriculum are long overdue, given the damaging impact on the wellbeing of Indigenous children in public and Indigenous schools arising from assimilationist policies, such as residential schooling and the colonialist nature of school curricula. The impact of these policies has continued across many generations, as many Indigenous parents and grandparents feel ill-prepared to pass on their traditional languages and knowledge to their children. Some Indigenous parents are resisting the teaching of their community's language to their children.

Indigenizing curricula starts with a recognition that current curricula promote non-Indigenous values and worldviews, implicitly teaching all Ontario children to value non-Indigenous ways of being. There are few to no opportunities for Indigenous children to learn about who they are, nor to learn their Indigenous language and the culture within which it is grounded. Additionally, the truths of historical and contemporary relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples have been hidden and/or distorted.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Calls to Action* (2015) awakened all Ontarians to the need for Indigenous representation in curriculum development to provide Indigenous truths about the contributions of our Elders throughout Canada's history. The Calls also heighten awareness of the need to fulfill responsibilities of treaties between governments and First Nations, and to recognize and honour the First Peoples of the territory on which we live and teach.

In response, efforts to Indigenize curricula are underway. For example, the Ontario Teacher's Federation (OTF) ran a pilot project to assist teachers in a community of schools servicing a First Nations community to use experiential learning as a way to integrate Indigenous content into the existing curriculum (see https://www.otffeo.on.ca/en/learning/tlc/report/integration-of-indigenous-content-through-experiential-learning-into-existing-curriculum/#?area_of_focus%5B%5D=1558).

> *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (2015) awakened all Ontarians to the need for Indigenous representation in curriculum development to provide Indigenous truths about the contributions of our Elders throughout Canada's history.*

To extend and enrich these efforts, we propose that curricula in Ontario classrooms should include *local* Indigenous knowledge, and should introduce important concepts of Indigenous identity, land, history, values and beliefs, culture, and worldview. We further argue that Indigenous ancestral knowledge, worldviews, and life skills would enrich teaching and learning in classrooms across Ontario, as all children and teachers would benefit from learning essential life concepts, such

as the Anishinaabek concept of *Bimaadiziwin*, which we translate to mean *living a good life while being a good person*.

Our proposed approach to the Indigenizing of curriculum is based on the Odawa, Potawatomi and Ojibway (Anishinaabemowin) knowledge and experience of Yvette Manitowabi and Sandra Peltier, educators in the Wiikwemkoong Board of Education. Yvette is an Anishnaabe Kwe (woman), Odawa and an Educator who prides herself in being Gashi (mother) and Nokomis (Grandmother) as she continues her journey of giving her students a strong sense of identity, their ancestral language and connection to Creator while learning together through Anishnaabe Niin). Sandra Peltier learned the Odawa language at home from her parents and has always believed that her First Nations' Languages are the foundation of Anishinaabe peoples' identities. Yvette and Sandra are also research practitioners in a partnership project, Northern Oral language and Writing through Play (NOW Play), together with the other authors: Jeffrey Wood (early learning lead for Moosonee & Moose Factory Island District School Area Boards & a professor of education at Laurentian University, who is of Métis and settler ancestry), Shelley Stagg Peterson (former rural Alberta teacher who taught Indigenous children in Lac La Biche and Wetaskiwin elementary schools, now a professor at OISE/University of Toronto and NOW Play project director), and Nicola Friedrich (former Ontario elementary teacher and contributor to the Aboriginal Family and Community Literacy Curriculum (AFCLC) Mixed Mode Training, now project and data coordinator with the NOW Play project). We have been working together on collaborative action research to support Indigenous children's Anishinaabe language and cultural learning through the Northern Oral language and Writing through Play (NOW Play) partnership project.

We present four foundational principles that can be adapted by teachers in public and Indigenous schools across Ontario. We emphasize that our specific examples are appropriate for our children because the knowledge comes from the land and the people of our community. It is important for teachers to develop relationships with the Indigenous peoples of the land on which they are teaching when adapting the principles to their classrooms.

The first principle for Indigenizing curricula is *Anishinaabe Niin*: Centering curriculum on the child in relation with the knowledge and experience of their ancestors. In this way, children come to know who they are and where they have come from. Yvette helps children recognize that the beat of their heart is the spirit living within them. She tells children that they have to nourish the spirit by continuing to learn their Indigenous languages, worldviews, and ways of being, and by striving to stay connected to the Creator and to all creation.

> *The first principle for Indigenizing curricula is Anishinaabe Niin: Centering curriculum on the child in relation with the knowledge and experience of their ancestors.*

Bimaadiziwin is the second principle for Indigenizing the curriculum. Yvette tells a story about a boy in her kindergarten class that exemplifies teaching centered on *Bimaadiziwin* and the Anishnaabek Seven Grandfather Teachings:

> *One day a student did something wrong. Yvette asked the class, "Who did it?" Students replied, "Not me, not, me." She spoke briefly about the Grandfather Teaching of Truth and invited whoever was responsible to approach her later. As the children played, one student approached Yvette and in a quiet voice said, "I did it." Yvette smiled and recognized the ways that the student's actions embodied all of the Grandfather Teachings. She said, "Awe miigwech (thank you) for telling me the truth. That took a lot of courage and humility to admit it was you." Yvette continued: "Miigwech for being honest with me and yourself for telling me the truth. My heart is full of love and respect." She then said, "You have just shown how you have learned all the Seven Grandfather Teachings (Truth, Humility, Courage, Honesty, Respect, Love, and Wisdom). Now you carry the gift of Wisdom." Yvette asked the child for permission to share his story with classmates and to use his story to teach the Seven Grandfather Teachings to others. He was beaming with pride and said "yes".*

Taking up an Indigenous pedagogical approach, Yvette used the situation to teach the child the ways of

Bimaadiziwin, rather than the typical non-Indigenous approach of providing some form of consequence for a wrongdoing.

> *When teaching Indigenous words and concepts, it is important to recognize the complexities of the language, coming to know the cultural understandings that have been interwoven to create the complex meanings of each word.*

A third principle for the Indigenizing of curriculum is for teachers to develop relationships with the family and community members of the Indigenous children in their classrooms, recognizing the First Peoples of the land on which they are teaching. Just as the knowledge that Yvette and Sandra have imparted to us comes from grandparents and other relatives, teachers can invite Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers to share ancestral knowledge and worldviews with them and with children in their class. One of the legacies of residential schools is that many Indigenous parents and other family members mistrust schools and other institutions. As such, we recommend that teachers initiate the development of relationships, finding ways to involve themselves in activities in the Indigenous communities, and seeking ways that the community members feel is appropriate for learning from Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

A fourth principle is to recognize that the concepts embedded within the words of Indigenous languages come from thousands of years of relationships with the land. The complexities embedded within these generations of learning and experience are incomplete and partial if we simply try to match Indigenous words with English words. When learning Indigenous languages, it is important to start with the complex interweaving of the Indigenous language's concepts. We must start with whole concept and then strive to understand the rich layers of meaning and interconnections of concepts and experiences within Indigenous words.

When considering how Indigenous worldviews and pedagogies enrich all children's and teachers' lives, we propose that school success be reconceptualized as more than achievement of curriculum objectives. Essential goals for our teaching should be to nurture the spirit within each child, to come to know Indigenous children by reaching out to their families and communities, and to support all children in living a good life (*Bimaadiziwin*) that embodies the Seven Grandfather Teachings. When teaching Indigenous words and concepts, it is important to recognize the complexities of the language, coming to know the cultural understandings that have been interwoven to create the complex meanings of each word.

Taking these steps is a beginning toward reconciliation in our classrooms. The move toward decolonizing the curriculum and our schools is a much broader project. In the meantime, we challenge all teachers reading our article to take up these principles to confront the colonizing nature of the curriculum that has led to the stolen spirits of Indigenous children, as Yvette expresses in her poem:

Dedicated in memory of my parents.

Before You Stole Me

I was that child learner before you took me
I was that child whose playground was Mother Earth
I was that child who was taught by the four legged and plant life
I was that child who learned how Mother Earth sustains all my Relations
Only to be stolen because of who I am Anishinaabe
Now it has taken the death of many Relations to have our historical perspective told from a child's eyes.

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(Not) Overcoming Depression: Depressive Ruptures and Disordering Professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care

Dr. Adam W.J. Davies

Abstract

In this article, the author engages in reflections regarding the political importance of discussions regarding depression and "negative" emotions and affects in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Through autobiographical and Mad poetic writings, the author explores their childhood and adult experiences living with depression while theorizing the regulatory nature of happiness and joy on images of both children/childhoods and educators in early childhood education. The author concludes by writing about the important of ruptures in ECEC as new ways of thinking, being, and becoming for both educators and children.

Key words

affect theory, childhood, depression, mad studies, mad poetry, ruptures

Author Biography

Dr. Adam W.J. Davies (they/them), PhD, RECE, OCT is an Assistant Professor in the College of Arts at the University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario. Adam's research interests are critical disability studies, mad studies, queer theory, and post structural feminism in Early Childhood Education and Care. Adam's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council funded research includes an investigation of men and masculinities in ECEC in Ontario, Canada; issues of gay, bisexual, and queer men, masculinities and body image; and mental health and illness and professional identity in pre-service ECEC. Adam holds a PhD in Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development, Sexual Diversity Studies, and Women and Gender Studies from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario.

(Not) Overcoming Depression: Depressive Ruptures and Disordering Professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care

"If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive." (Lorde, 2007, p. 127)

In *Doctor Who* Season 3, Episode 10 (titled "Blink"), the main character of the episode, Sally Sparrow (Carey Mulligan), enters an old, decrepit abandoned home, wandering through the various rooms and exploring the falling-apart furniture and peeling wallpaper with her friend. In an early scene, Sally tells her friend about her enjoyment and love of investigating older homes and items with a history:

> Sally Sparrow: *"I love old things. They make me sad."*
>
> Kathy Nightingale: *"What's good about sad?"*
>
> Sally Sparrow: *"It's* happy *for deep people."* (Moffat & Macdonald, 2007)

I instantly related to this sentiment when I watched this scene. While sadness as an emotional state is commonly described by psychological and psychiatric definitions as momentary and fleeting, clinical depression is diagnosed as continual and self-diminishing, with feelings of hopelessness that are intricately connected to feelings of sadness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Relatedly, depression can also be considered a response to political, social, and/or cultural conditions that are not ideal for flourishing; that is, depression can be thought of as less an individual attribute that one has or does not have and more as a reasonable response to conditions that are oppressive in nature (Berlant, 2011; Cvetkovich, 2012).

A Life Out of Alignment with Emotional Norms

Depression has been a constant companion of mine as I have navigated my life. It has trailed closely behind me – sometimes quite vocally, and other times, gently tiptoeing. Depression has been like a ghost – haunting me before I had a name to describe it. Conversely, it is happiness that has felt like something that is momentary – almost fleeting as it comes and stays with me for a moment and then vanishes as quickly as it arrives. As a child, I did not know what to make of my emotional landscape and the multitude of feelings I would experience throughout the day. While throughout my childhood, I did not fear that I would not get the physical necessities to survive on a day-to-day basis – my house always had food, was warm, and bills were paid – I held a constant yearning for deep and rich emotional exploration, affirmation, and connection. I did not yet have the words to describe this yearning; however, I knew that I was seeking a kind of kinship, belonging, and emotional expressivity that I had yet to encounter. I longed to allow myself to *feel* something deeply and engage the tapestry of my emotions with permission to holistically embrace the diversity of human emotional currents. I desired to feel and gain a sense of knowing in my feeling (Lorde, 2007).

Black feminist and cultural critic bell hooks (1991) theorizes *yearning* as a "uniting force" that brings together like-minded individuals who seek a more socially just and free society. For hooks (1991), yearning is "the depths of longing in many of us" (p. 12), and one that "opens up the possibility of common ground where all these differences might meet and engage one another" (p. 13). This resonates for me as I reflect upon my childhood and educational experiences. I often felt my emotions were "wrong" or potentially even "pathological." Certainly, my experiences with depression did not have a name and were not to be spoken of. However, the mixture of introspective depth and often overwhelming – and sudden – sadness left me with emotional cadences that I did not know how to name or linguistically mark. Such moments of *rupture* with what seemed to be expected left me without words to describe my emotions and feelings. I just knew that there were many moments where it seemed as though others around me were generally happy and gleeful and I felt sad. By feeling constant sadness while others around

me were experiencing joy, I eventually realized that I was continually out of alignment (Ahmed, 2004) with the emotional states of others around me, or at least what I perceived to be their emotional states. I turned to books and videogames as an escape from the present since my desires oriented me towards dreaming and creating new worlds instead of focusing on a present where I continually felt sadness (Davies, 2024).

Throughout my life, I have felt what has been described as a "bittersweet" disposition. In her book, *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole*, Susan Cain (2022) describes "the melancholic direction, which I call the 'bittersweet'; a tendency to states of longing, poignancy, and sorrow; an acute awareness of passing time; and a curiosity piercing joy at the beauty of the world" (p. xxiii). This "melancholic direction" continued with me from childhood to adulthood. While I did not necessarily conceptualize my depression as something that I needed to leave behind, during my post-secondary education I felt that I did not fit the dominant image of educators in the early years.[1] Moreover, I was not exposed to curricular content that openly discussed mental health or illness in an affirming or positive manner in any courses throughout my undergraduate or graduate degrees. As appreciative as I am for my education and the many mentors who worked with me throughout my degrees, it was not until my doctoral studies that I discovered course content and curricula that spoke to my lived experiences (Davies, 2021, 2024).[2]

Ruptures with the Norms of ECEC Professionalism

My questions about joy, care, and happiness in ECEC came from a place of intense burnout and mental health challenges, as well as feelings of non-belonging in post-secondary early childhood education. As chronic depression intensified and my energy levels diminished, I felt a constant pressure to self-present as confident, energetic, and fun when I did not feel that way in the inside. Essentially, I felt like my mental health *ruptured* my ability to perform the normative ideas of professionalism. Engaging with ruptures, or *rupturing* as an educational praxis, involves "disrupt[ing] commonplace, long-established educational structures" (p. 5). In my thinking with *ruptures*, I seek to find value in that which is typically deemed valueless by the post-secondary early childhood, such as pop culture, critical theory, and autobiographical writing, sharing what Manning (2020) articulates as "a pragmatics of the useless" that "celebrates the share of experience that is affirmed not because of what it is but because of how it affects experience in the making" (Manning, 2020, p. 21). My writing emphasizes aesthetic and sensorial experiences that are typically ignored, dismissed, or devalued within early childhood education and care (ECEC), such as depression and pop culture. These experiences and affects offer ruptures in the developmentalist cannon and onto-epistemology of ECEC.

In their foreword to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's (2013) text, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Halberstam describes Harney and Moten's "undercommons" as "a space and time which is always here. Our goal… is not to end the troubles but to end the world that created those particular troubles as the ones that must be opposed" (Halberstam, 2013, pp. 5–6). In *The Undercommons*, Harney and Moten explore how universities and higher education institutions reinforce docility and conformity, casting those who are societally considered undesirable outside higher education to organize and work together underground or within the undercommons. Halberstam (2013) notes the affective relationship between hope and despair that orients those within the undercommons who "must make common cause with those desires and (non) positions that seem crazy and unimaginable: we must, on behalf of this alignment, refuse that which was first refused to us and in this refusal reshape desire, reorient hope, reimagine possibility" (pp. 11–12). By thinking with what might seem "crazy and unimaginable" and seeking to confront a world that defined specific "troubles" as "ones that must

1 I have noted this in other publications, but it is important to note here that I am not critiquing those who are happy in self-presentation in their care with children, nor am I implying a moral judgment on educators who have a happy or joyful disposition. As I have theorized in other works (Davies, 2021; Davies & Neustifter, 2023), I actually feel that how my queerness is read in relationship with male femininity constructs me as potentially "unprofessional" in educational settings. However, my femininity is constructed through gendered matrices that mark me as queer automatically and a gender failure in ECEC settings. The crux of my critique of joy and happiness in ECEC focuses on the unspoken expectation that one must be endlessly joyful; the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) that is expected of early years' educators in their professional work can be emotionally and psychologically damaging.

2 I write this article as a nonbinary, queer, and neurodivergent faculty member who has experienced forms of regulation and surveillance within professionalized settings related to my gender expression and/or identity, sexual orientation, and disabilities. I have written about this in previous publications (Davies, 2021; Davies & Neustifter, 2023).

be opposed," as Halberstam articulates, I am seeking to *rupture* the normative emotional logics that inform ECEC. Such forms of *professional ruptures* (Davies, 2022), as I have called them, are necessary to allow ECEC to move away from the theories, logics, and ideas that produce exclusion.

In my thinking with *ruptures*, I think with Snyder et al.'s (2019) description of emergent "professional practice ruptures" (p. 496) in introducing mad studies to post-secondary social work students. Such forms of "profound ruptures" (Snyder et al., 2019, p. 496) offer opportunities to rethink taken-for-granted practices and assumptions about what constitutes fields such as ECEC, and the specific kinds of base knowledge that such fields value (Davies, 2022). This thinking is aligned with Harney and Moten's theorizing around the "undercommons" as an underground collective where citizens who are considered to be outside respectability gather to make collective meaning. As Halberstam (2013) theorizes, "The mission then for the denizens of the undercommons is to recognize that when you seek to make things better, you are not just doing it for the Other, you must also be doing it for yourself." (Halberstam, 2013, p. 10).

Disrupting Professionalized Norms within ECEC

In this article, I take a speculative approach, writing/thinking my experiences as a post-secondary student and faculty in the fields of education and early childhood education who experiences chronic depression. Instead of only conceptualizing depression as a psychological state or a signifier of mental illness, I draw from affect theory (Ahmed, 2004; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010) and mad studies (LeFrançois et al., 2013; Beresford & Russo, 2021) to conceptualize how depression – and, in particular, the refusal to overcome depression (DeVolder, 2013)[3] – might offer avenues for rethinking dominant professional images of educators and children/childhood in ECEC that are often reinforced through developmental theories.

This writing draws from various elements in my life, including pop culture, through a "scavenger" approach. Halberstam (1998) casts scavenger methodologies as a queer methodology that "uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior" (p. 13). This includes pop culture and the psychological and emotional importance of elements of pop culture, such as videogames, film, and television, in making meaning of subjectivity. Such an approach refuses positivist notions of coherence and linearity as well as "the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 13). It is politically important for me to bring together knowledges that are typically cast outside of the disciplinary realm of ECEC.

This emphasis on cultural productions, feelings, and experiences that are typically excluded from ECEC also draws from Halberstam's (2011) theorizing of "low theory." Halberstam theorizes "low theory" based on Stuart Hall's (1980) work on high culture and low culture to "locate all the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony and speared by the seductions of the gift shop" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 2). My thinking with Halberstam's low theory here invites theories, experiences, and pop culture mediums such as videogames to be considered within early childhood education's theoretical cannon.

Methodologically and affectively, my approach engages in a refusal that "makes its peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 2). My refusal seeks to make new meanings from experiences and feelings that might otherwise be pathologized or constructed as a deficit through normative developmentalist theories. This approach demands a "theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 16). This is a theoretical approach that explicitly critiques the legitimization of dominant developmentalist ways of knowing by emphasizing the experiences of that which is typically discarded or silenced within ECEC.

Reassessing "Neoliberal Fun and Happiness" in ECEC: The Images of the Child and the Educator

Within ECEC, it is without a doubt that joyful and happy emotions and feelings are privileged within hierarchical notions of acceptable and unacceptable emotional expressions (Lipponen & Pursi, 2022). As Vintimilla (2014) writes in her article describing "Neoliberal

3 I also think with DeVolder (2013) in Karmiris and Davies (2024).

Fun and Happiness in Early Childhood Education," neoliberalism,[4] as a political, economic, and social structure, regulates and produces the subjectivities of early childhood educators and children in ECEC and enacts regulatory regimes that render happiness, fun, and joy as the idealized characteristics of a "good" educator (Vintimilla, 2014). The seeming "innocence" of childhood is thereby connected with happiness and fun to "reduce our important and diverse experiences in early childhood education" (p. 82). Essentially, the expected educator in ECEC is constantly happy, joyous, and "sane" (Davies, 2022; Davies, Watson, et al., 2022). Vintimilla (2014) articulates how neoliberalism promotes a politic in ECEC whereby ambivalent, difficult, or even potentially negative emotions are disavowed by articulating how educators might avoid conversations with young children about death or other topics deemed to be difficult or negative. Ultimately, the social, emotional, political, and affective landscape of ECEC is expected to remain constantly effervescent and joyful – a nearly impossible ideal for children, let alone educators.

The image of the ECEC educator is marked by contention and debates around the place of love and care, which are associated with feminine ethics of relationality, and universalized ethics and codes (Davies & Hoskin, 2021). For example, Taggart (2011) notes how emotional labour is connected to the professionalized image of the educator in ECEC through "the (unrecognised) emotional work of its predominantly female workforce where it has a particular intensity. In contrast to other fields of care, for example, early years practitioners often refer to 'love' as a key professional quality" (p. 89). Similarly, Langford (2006) notes how the dominant image of the ECE is one connected with "the historical reproduction of a particular pedagogical representation of the good ECE as passionate, happy, patient and attuned to children's needs" (p. 117). Astutely, Campbell-Barr (2018) writes how the notion of ECE as a practical and technocratic profession based on "natural" instincts and application comes from how "practical wisdom and the influence of attitudes in ECEC can be attributed to historical constructs of ECEC professionalism that draw upon attributes of being warm, kind and maternal" (p. 81). As such, professionalism in ECEC involves tensions between a managerial model that focuses on rules and regulations and a more caring approach that has "shaped perceptions of people who work with infants, toddlers, and young children as having gendered 'mothering' skills, working with low pay and less favourable conditions than teachers in other education sectors" (Warren, 2019, p. 29).

Vintimilla (2014) theorizes a "politics of niceness" within ECEC that "presupposes the unity of community rather than the diversity of difference" and reinforces a "generalized conception of early childhood educators (most of them female) first and foremost as care providers and protectors" (p. 84). This "politics of niceness" can be connected to a neoliberal emphasis on developmentalism as the mandatory forms of professional knowledge for future and current ECEs (Wood, 2020). In this sense, developmentalism offers a promise for happiness and good feelings for both educators and children (Ahmed, as cited in Vintimilla, 2014). Therefore, to critique developmentalism in ECEC or bring critique and "negativity" into ECEC – can be considered a potential threat to the professionalized status quo. Knowledge of child development and developmental theories is ingrained in the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* by the provincial College of Early Childhood Educators (2017) here in Ontario, not unlike many other regions in the world. Additionally, the Ontario Early Childhood Education Program Standard (Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2018) emphasizes that early childhood education graduates are expected to learn child development theories, therefore further reinforcing the notion that a "good" professional is also one who is knowledgeable about child development theories and values child development as *the* most important framework for understanding children and families (Langford, 2007).[5]

4 Neoliberalism is a social, political, cultural, and economic project that has gained prominence since the 1980s. It emphasizes free-market economic principles, hyper individualism, competition, and privatization (Duggan, 2002). Neoliberalism has a particular influence on early childhood education politics and policies in Ontario, where educators are paid low wages, experience high workplace expectations with blame if they are considered to be failing professional expectations, and experience forms of professional regulation that reinforce child development as the idealized way of constructing children and childhoods through measurement and continual observation (Johnston, 2019, 2021, 2022; Richardson et al., 2023).

5 I bring in neoliberalism here to emphasize how both this "politics of niceness" (Vintimilla, 2014) and the emphasis on child development theories in post-secondary ECEC and beyond, are ultimately about conformity and normalization. What this connection between neoliberalism, child development theories, and early childhood education produces is a politic that discourages critique and disruptions of the status quo, with child development representing the taken-for-granted dominant knowledge (i.e., child development is considered the most practical and useful knowledge for educators to know – it represents one's status as a professional in ECEC). This is an avenue I am exploring/

What then do educators do with the professional who might have "bad" feelings? What to do with the educator who refuses/resists overcoming depression to become happy and joyful? What is to be made of the depressed ECE? For example, DeVolder (2013) describes how "compulsory heroism" promotes a rhetoric of "overcoming" that is inherently tied to disabled people. Such a rhetoric, according to DeVolder, is "intimately related to the construction of the 'normal'" and is "the main social role available, not only to persons with disability, but also to anyone facing 'adversity,'" thereby defining "who has the courage to come 'back,' and who, by extension, remains outside" (p. 750). Freire (1970/2018) theorizes how, in education, those who are societally marginalized often feel pressure to conform to the dominant norms and ways of knowing and being of those in power. Freire (1970/2018) explicitly states how even those who try to lead revolutionary change "have ended up using the 'educational' methods employed by the oppressor. They deny pedagogical action in the liberation process, but they use propaganda to convince" (p. 68). In this, I want to reflect upon my childhood and educational experiences with depression and ask what they might offer the field in terms of rupturing dominant understandings and images of early childhood educators and children.

Affect Theory and Mad Studies: In Conversation

Theoretically, this article draws from both affect theory (Ahmed, 2004; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010) and mad studies (LeFrançois et al., 2013; Beresford & Russo, 2021; smith, 2018, 2020) to explore the politics of depression and related "negative" affects and feelings in ECEC. I engage with these frameworks to explore the socio-cultural politics of emotions (Ahmed, 2004) and how certain emotional states and affects are deemed "negative" and medicalized/psychiatrized[6] (LeFrançois et al., 2013; Beresford & Russo, 2021). For example, Ahmed (2004) articulates how "emotions accumulate over time, as a form of affective value. Objects only seem to have such value, by an erasure of these [emotional] histories, as histories of production and labour" (p. 11). In essence, how some emotions become *valued* or seen to have *value* has a history behind it and such histories are often erased or silenced (Ahmed, 2004). Similarly, affect can be "found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds" (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1). As Berlant (2011) describes, affect theory "registers the conditions of life that move across persons and worlds, play out in lived time, and energize attachments" (p. 16). As such, affect theory is interested in how emotional attachments – to norms, to people, to institutions, to list a few – maintain unequal relations and structures (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2011).

Mad Studies (LeFrançois et al., 2013; Beresford & Russo, 2021) is a theoretical and activist analytic that critiques the psychiatrization and medicalization of diverse emotions, feelings, and behaviours. Mad Studies considers the variety of emotional states as everyday facets of life and important components of existence (Harbusch, 2022). For example, McLeay and Powell (2022) theorize how "attempts to make children's emotions 'well' may work in favour of burgeoning mental health and 'troubled person's' industries" (p. 49). In this, Mad Studies critiques how the mental health and psychiatric fields seek to pathologize various feelings and behavioural responses. For example, Snyder et al. (2019) describe how "Mad Studies is a reminder that we must consider the dialectical and affective intensifications that make up any experience" (p. 488). In this, it is important to resist the urge to label or name certain feelings or intensities as inherently "good" or "bad" and to pause and take note of the socio-cultural meanings and learnings that can be gained by paying attention to emotions and responses typically pathologized. Voronka (2017) warns that forms of "affective labour" can take place within the helping professions that can "help orient service users toward feelings and emotions that actually cooperate with psy regimes of governance" (Voronka, 2017, p. 333). In essence, psychological discourses can orient individuals towards regulating their responses to conditions that do not support thriving. By placing affect theory and Mad Studies in conversation, I follow Voronka (2017) and other Mad Studies writing "that moves madness beyond individually confined deficit models thus offer[ing] new promises for mad futurities" (Voronka, 2017, p. 333).

critiquing in other writings.

6 Medicalization is a social process whereby disability is constituted and only becomes knowable through medical authorities, thereby positioning disability as an inherent deficit and lack and in need of medical intervention to attain? normalcy (Dasgupta, 2015). Similar to medicalization, psychiatrization is a socially constituted process that positions diverse behaviours, feelings, and thoughts as "abnormal" and in need of psychiatric intervention – in this sense, "madness" becomes only considered a pathology (Foucault, 2003; Gilman, 2014).

Breaching the Positivist Divide

In what proceeds, I problematize how these dominant affective regimes in ECEC – constant happiness, fun, and joy – specifically exclude depression as a necessary and important affective contribution to ECEC. The questions I ask are *epistemic*[7] in nature – they are questions about who has a voice, what can be shared, who remains silenced, and whose theories, experiences, and knowledge are believed and considered valid and *true*. In order to engage in this work, I combine curriculum studies' autobiographical methodologies (Pinar, 1975, 2022) with autotheoretical approaches (Fournier, 2021) and poetics (smith, 2018, 2020). In this work, I engage theorizing with art and lived experiences (Fournier, 2021; Pinar, 2015) in a way that guides the reader through connections between my lived experiences and theorizing (Pinar, 1975, 2015, 2022). In my poetics, I draw from phil smith's (2018, 2020) work on mad poetics (see also Cosantino, 2021). smith (2020) notes how

> What we know
> depends on who does the knowing.
> Because Mad people are crazy
> they are by definition
> unreliable knowers.
> Their knowledge is literally
> unknown
> meaningless
> outside of knowledge
> nonsense
> at least to those holding to the dominating psy-complex ideology of sanism. (smith, 2020, p. 371)

In this sense, my poetics are *both* art and academic theorizing and writing, thereby refusing any kind of positivist divide between "valid" academic writing and research and artistry (Fournier, 2021). In this vein, my writing is experimental, non-linear, and challenges typical notions of temporality and progress. Important to my work and artistry is a revisitation and exploration of my childhood and adult educational experiences, following Pinar's (1975, 2022) currere approach with Mad poetic writing. In his writings on currere, Pinar (1975) asks autobiographical writers to engage with the question of "What has been and what is now the nature of my educational experience?" (Pinar, 1975, p. 397). In exploring my childhood and adult educational experiences, I explicitly theorize my experiences with depression throughout my life in a non-linear fashion. Accordingly, Pinar (1975) writes how:

> And if I chart these choices and circumstances on a time line, and then begin to describe (as I remember it now), the transitions from that situation to the one that followed, I see that there is a coherence. Not necessarily a logical one, but a lived one, a felt one. The point of coherence is the biography as it is lived (Pinar, 1975, p. 398)

This "felt" approach to writing engages affectively with my childhood and adult educational experiences and theorizes depression as a form of resistance and refusal to accept professionalized and developmental images of both children/childhood and educators. This emphasizes the negative feelings and affects, such as loss, grief, and loneliness, that can emerge throughout both education and childhood. While I am writing this poetry and reflection as an adult, I am aiming to problematize romanticized images of childhood that are constituted through idealized frames – essentially, I strive to find the aesthetic value in "in non-belonging, through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities" (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1).

A Refusal to "Get Over" Depression

hiding
is not the same
for **<u>everyone</u>**

some
hide by
running away

others
hide by
running into

a -book-
a -videogame-
a **world**

other than
the one

7 By epistemic, I am raising questions about *who* can know, *how* they can know, and *what* they can know (Fricker, 2007).

<u>we</u> exist
within

the book
that is
always under
my desk
is a key
to a world
where i can be and become
other than the
here
and
now.
sometimes
i feel
everything
sometimes
i feel
nothing
does anyone else
ever feel this
way?

depression
is funny
because
it
is like
a compression
of the soul
one
that can be
so very
<u>distressing</u>
depression
compression
d-i-s-t-r-e-s-s-i-n-g.

yet, depression can be
freeing
there can be

freedom
in being sad.

they
called
me
sensitive
because
i
felt
things
others
couldn't
or
wouldn't
feel.

instead
~~I~~
~~i~~
i
learned
to:
~~cross me out~~
~~i~~
~~learned to survive~~
~~by staying~~
~~quiet~~
shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

molding
my ~~self~~
into whatever version
is socially
acceptable.
tired.
tired.
tired.
tired.
tired.
tired.
tired.

am i good?
are we good?
am I good enough for this image
ideal
goal
criteria
checking the boxes
the boxes of who
and what
an educator
should be
and become
am i good?
a good educator? (Langford, 2007)

i just want to be ~~myself~~.

i kept
and keep
asking
"am i good?"
because i genuinely
wanted
and still want to
know
if i am good.

my favourite part
of the day
is when i play
The Sims. (Davies, 2024)

an old videogame
where i could create a world
a world
different from my own.
it was my escape.

playing this game
it is like
revisiting
when i was eight

like an old friend.
a blanket.
a world.
it was my world.
The Sims was my escape.

creating people
    stories
        narratives
            a life
                a life in *The Sims* [a videogame]
                spent recovering a green energy bar
            where life is as easy
        as clicking on a bed
    and going to sleep
in *The Sims*
    being tired
is a temporary state
    not a way of living.
but in real life
i'm always
    tired
so tired
    until it feels like
who
    i am
is
    tired.

smiling
smiling
smiling.
there's nothing underneath this smile.

these theories
have no names
to describe me
that are kind.

post-secondary education
is like a club
i knew i had snuck in

i wasn't expected.
i wasn't supposed to be here.
they didn't know
who i was
when they let me in.

they told me
not
to feel
so much
so i
felt nothing.

they told me
not
to feel
nothing
so i
felt everything.

they told me
not to be
so mad
so
i
made
madness

my identity.

i sit
you sit.
we sit.
and learn
how to "work" with
children
like me. (Davies, 2023, 2024b)
but i'm still here.

still **Mad**.

Depressive Ruptures in ECEC Professionalization: An Invitation

"...life without any emotion would be life without any meaning" (Jaggar, 1989, p. 161)

In writing my poetry, I realize that much of what is said here remains unsaid – mentioned but unmentioned and left for the reader to interpret. I do not intend this poetry to indicate that I have "overcome" depression or that my status as an academic in an institution of higher learning signals that depression is no longer a facet of my daily living – I continue to experience depression as a component of my intellectual, physical, sensorial, embodied, and emotional life daily. The "overcoming" narrative is often imposed upon marginalized people who navigate conditions not made for their/our flourishing:

> Most people elevated to hero status for overcoming adversity do not see themselves as heroic. They say they simply did what they had to do. While this is repeatedly acknowledged in the narration of overcoming stories, it is either discounted or taken as evidence of further heroism (DeVolder, 2013, p. 378).

My intention is to emphasize the affective intensities and moments within both my childhood and educational experiences – as a student and an educator – where depression presented itself as a form of *rupture* with the norms. This rupture might have been small and momentary, or it could have been much larger for me, but regardless, these memories have left an impression that shapes my orientation (Ahmed, 2004) towards questions of care, education, and childhood.

Farley (2018) notes in her work on de-pathologizing childhood how "we examine the stories we tell for what they can and cannot say, with attention to the ways in which both told and untold stories impact how children are represented and received" (Farley, 2018, p. 8). My Mad poetry is both written by me and represents me in a fractional and partial manner through traces from my past and present (Davies, 2021, 2024). Childhood is also a time of ambivalence, disappointment, and loss; however, childhood is typically imagined through ideas of innocence and joyful emotions (Breslow, 2021; Shanahan, 2007). Those other experiences and emotions are not acknowledged. As Dyer notes "Under the ideological sway of innocence, negative affects are often expected to be divorced from childhood experience. The symbolic value of innocence is, in part, its ability to raise public alarm about the child's potential exposure to negative affects" (Dyer, 2019, p. 8). What is made of the depressed child, the sad child, or the "mad" child? (Davies, 2023b)

Similarly, what is to be made of the "depressed" educator? Perhaps, "depressed educators" are those who "refuse to be constrained and directed by the promise of a pedagogy of fun and its resulting condition of a passive and impoverished conception of happiness" (Vintimilla, 2014, p. 85). When I type in "early childhood educator" on Google, "burnout" appears as one of the listed search phrases.[8] My concern here – in terms of both individual educators' mental health and norms within our sector – is that the emphasis on child-centred pedagogies[9] and the requirement for emotional labour from ECEs actively regulates the subjectivities of ECEs and encourages self-presentations that only emphasize performed notions of joy and happiness. How can educators make space for the complex and nuanced tapestry of ECEs' lived emotional experiences? Langford (2010) in her critique of child-centred pedagogies notes how:

> the reconstruction of the early childhood teacher, particularly the female teacher, at a pedagogical centre is vulnerable to the current intensification of a human capital rationale for early childhood education and care, quality measures and the teacher as a technician focused on meeting certain learning outcomes (Langford, 2010, p. 120).

Importantly, I have also had concerns about child-centred pedagogies and their historic and ongoing connections with developmental psychology, which I have noted in other publications (Davies, Watson, et al., 2022; Davies, Richardson, & Abawi, 2024; Davies, 2024). Can the depressed educator, who might not always convey the expected "happy" self-presentation expected through child-centred pedagogies, also be a "good" educator? Langford (2007) describes how, within her qualitative research consisting of reviewing pre-service ECEC textbooks, interviewing college ECEC faculty/instructors, and student assignments, themes of "passion, happiness,

8 I realize here that many folks might have different algorithms and that this might yield different results for everyone. I use this as an illustrative point – not to suggest that this will appear the same on everyone's Google search. I make no claims about having any understanding of how Google algorithms work.

9 My critique of child-centred pedagogies is connected to the way in which it is defined and enforced in the sector as the model and ideal pedagogical approach, and how this is validated and verified through child development research. I've noted this in other articles (e.g., Davies, 2023a, 2023b, 2024).

inner strength, caring, and alertness to individual children's needs" (p. 340) became apparent. Where is the space for the educator who is unhappy? The educator who experiences sadness?

The ongoing professionalization of ECEC is the driver of this conversation and is also connected with the imbued nature of sanism[10] within ECEC (Davies, Brewer, & Shay, 2022; Davies, Watson, et al., 2022). Critical work (e.g., Johnston, 2021, 2022; Stronach, 2023) has deconstructed the effects of neoliberalism on early childhood education in Ontario and the interconnections between neoliberalism and professionalization. Although many regions are currently advocating for regulatory colleges to govern the professional practices and policies of ECEs, including mandatory registration, there are concerns from critical advocates regarding the often restrictive approach that governing colleges take with regulation and codification (i.e., governing Codes of Ethics)[11] that promote certain versions of respectability and acceptability for ECEs (Davies et al., 2022; Davies et al., 2024). In essence, through the increased reliance on professionalized Codes of Ethics (e.g., College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017), there comes increased scrutiny and surveillance of individual educators, as well as risk of reporting those who might not be able to conform to the dominant professionalized understandings and expectations of ECEs (i.e., those with mental health diagnoses). Given the lack of support for mental health and liveable wages in the field of early childhood education in Ontario and elsewhere, the increased scrutiny of educators with mental health diagnoses, their experiences, and the fears of reporting and surveillance based on their mental health diagnoses will not benefit the profession (Davies, 2022; Davies et al., 2022).

10 *Sanism* is defined by Poole (2024) as "type of discrimination against and oppression of those who are deemed mentally 'unwell' or 'ill' or who have cognitive impairment" (p. 14). I have written extensively about how sanism is embedded within the fabric of and assumptions within ECEC post-secondary education and the sector widely.

11 My critique of the professionalization of early childhood education in Ontario through codes and ethics follows other critical early childhood education scholars, such as Johnston (2019, 2022), who argue that neoliberal ethos are inscribed in the Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators' regulator codes and ethics, which then, ECEs, themselves/ourselves, internalize. Johnston (2022) theorizes how "RECEs internalize the code of ethics and standards of practice governing themselves according to these codes and standards and acting autonomously within them, they come to recognize themselves and are recognizable by their knowledge of adherence to the code of ethics" (p. 91). This shows how the "good ECE" is the one who internalizes the codes, abides by the codes, and also polices themselves and other educators based on policy (Johnston, 2019).

Refusing to Overcome Depression in ECEC

A refusal to overcome depression (DeVolder, 2013) might end up politically offering ECEC real benefits. This is not to argue that educators should be depressed – what I offer here is a consideration of what depression might provide politically. Affect theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) engages critically with questions regarding societal emotional and psychologically attachments: "Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies — say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work — when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?" (p. 2). Thinking with Berlant here, I believe that negative emotions and feelings – ones that might even be pathologized, medicalized, or psychiatrized – can offer moments of reflection for challenging dominant politics. In Ontario, ECEs are "estranged from their relational, ethical, and emotional selves, disappearing as they are transformed into technicians through the masculinist and instrumentalizing technologies of professionalism" (Johnston, 2022, p. 84). While the "good life" might be the ideal forwarded within ECEC, the working conditions and ongoing professionalization of ECEC knowledge and subjectivities can be considered flattening the emotional tapestry and landscape of ECEs themselves. For some of us, presenting ourselves as consistently joyful and happy might be more psychologically and emotionally challenging, with the continued barriers within ECEs' work environments causing further structural marginalization.

Philosopher Judith Butler (2012) articulates how "'Critical' does not mean destructive, but only willing to examine what we sometimes presuppose in our way of thinking, and that gets in the way of making a more livable world" (para. 12). Following Butler, I think that there is a political imperative to consider the potentially "negative" emotions and feelings that can come with critiquing the status quo – discontentment, sadness, unhappiness, even feelings of loss – and how these inform educators' subjectivities and emotional landscapes. Vintimilla (2014) notes in her writing the resistance and pushback she has received when addressing critical conversations with students and colleagues in ECEC, particularly around neoliberalism: "A colleague asked me once, 'Why should one teach neoliberalism in an early childhood degree?' My students have asked: 'Why should we bother studying this?'; 'Why should we bother with neoliberalism when

we have to learn how to teach children?'" (Vintimilla, 2014, p. 79). I have experienced similar questions as I have navigated working within post-secondary ECEC; however, I believe that asking these questions can offer opportunities for students to analyze structures and systems that ECEs are positioned within.

In this, I return to a *rupture* – one that is affective and epistemic. My journey with depression has provided me with these questions as I have continually felt out of alignment with the affective and emotional norms that surround me. This longing – yearning – to find others who could relate to these feelings has led me to self-writing and theorizing and poetic writing. The percolation of discourses of "innocence" within ECEC continues to propagate idealized images of both educators and children that are often reinforced by normative developmental theories. Children are sad sometimes; educators are sad sometimes. Often that sadness manifests as fatigue, low energy, or a disposition that is more introspective or introverted. These are not pathological traits and cannot be disconnected from forms of structural oppression that children and educators experience within their family, care, and educational lives. Educators (and children) cannot be removed from their emotional experiences, memories, and histories.

In her work on "breaks and ruptures," Karmiris (2016) writes how a rupture "considers a hopeful place to situate ourselves as we lose and find ourselves in the midst of exploring our relationships to, with, and for one another" (p. 219). Whatever madness is, or the emotions, feelings, and behaviours that are typically deemed mad, they are certainly a *rupture* to the normative fabrics of ECEC. These "mad" – or perhaps, "maddening" – ruptures that I am proposing entail expanding conventional thinking of who a child or an ECEC educator is, or can be and become. By considering the relationship between ECEC and the previously unthought – madness and maddening feelings, emotions, affects – there can be space, following DeVolder (2013) — "space for an influx of stories, knowledges and perspectives that we cannot even begin to imagine" (p. 751).

My proposition here, through my poetry about both my childhood and educational experiences, is to disrupt normative images of children and childhood by making space for depression in ECEC. What if the "sad child" does not wish to stop being sad? What if their sadness is not a sign of incompleteness, deficit, or pathology, but rather, a signification of a deeply affective and emotional way of being? I suggest here that the potential affective *ruptures* that could emerge through valuing depression as a political, affective, and psychological state can provide ECEC with new ways of (re)imagining who belongs in the field and different stories to be heard. Telling personal stories is scary. However, telling those stories can be a rupture for both the storyteller and others. Especially when sharing stories that include depression, days where we might not want to get out of bed, smiling so hard because we do not want anyone to know how we are really feeling, being so exhausted all the time but not knowing how to keep going. Kafai (2021) describes this in her writing on disability justice and arts activism by asking:

> what can happen when we tell our own bodymind stories, when we resist erasure and write ourselves *in*. How can telling our bodymind stories instigate change? How do we alter our timelines and collaboratively create new futures when we learn our histories and share our bodymind stories? (Kafai, 2021, p. 25)

The vulnerability involved in writing and sharing personal stories is real – and for ECEs, who are already structurally marginalized and often underpaid, there are great risks that are intensified by the movement to professionalize and regulate the field. How can ECEs envision themselves/ourselves as mattering if our stories are deemed "inappropriate" or too risky to share? In this, I turn back to Pinar (1975), who asks, "What is the contribution of my scholarly and professional work to my present? Do they illuminate the present? Obscure it?" (p. 414). I truly believe that educators are also cultural workers who are actively producing culture and making meaning of their own lives, as well as those of children and families, as they teach, learn, and care for others and themselves (Giroux & McLaren, 1994). In this, I envision a future whereby sadness – and even depression – are important affective, aesthetic, pedagogical, psychological, and cultural facets of work in ECEC – not ones to be diminished or overcome.

Concluding Thoughts

To finish, I want to ask what happens to those who do not neatly, or even at all, recover from their depression? What does this have to offer ECEC in terms of potential epistemic ruptures? The ruptures that I am

emphasizing here are ones that spark questions about belonging, education, care, and child development. I am particularly interested in how the affective norms and orientations towards happiness in ECEC regulate the very *image* of the ECE and children/childhoods in ECEC (Davies et al., 2024). As I have already asked, what is to be made of the ECE who is always depressed? What is to be made of the child who is quiet, shy, reserved? How quickly are these figures labelled as "abnormal" or even, potentially pathological? Depression is not a common discussion in ECEC, and when it – or mental health in general – is discussed, it is connected to the current state of the workforce (Richardson et al., 2023).

These are important questions, and I believe it is necessary to address the entrenched sanism within the normative images of ECEs and expectations of emotional labour of educators in the field. While many might wonder if a depressed educator *can* or *should be* working with children and families, I refuse to provide an answer here because I believe that it is this question that limits the definition of who is expected to belong in early childhood education. It is also my belief that many educators who experience depression – whether chronically, occasionally, momentarily, or any combination of this – already exist, live, love, and work with children and families in the early childhood sector. By refusing to provide a neat answer to such a question, this is my way of seeking to expand the imagination of depression in ECEC.

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Bordering Points and Practices in Toronto's Licensed Childcare Sector: Investigating Access for Families with Precarious Legal Status (updated version)

Andrea Lewis, Julie E.E. Young

Abstract

For families with precarious legal status, navigating their local childcare system poses unique challenges. This study investigates access to licensed childcare services for legally precarious families in Toronto, Canada, through a mapping of the sector to identify what the authors term bordering points – junctures within the system where access can be refused or facilitated. We review a number of empirical studies of these bordering and gatekeeping practices. The mapping that ensued was limited to an examination of publicly available texts and documents about different aspects of the sector. We did not carry out interviews or engage in participant observation for this project, but both could be important approaches for future research. The work sheds light on where access regulations are enforced, the role of frontline workers as gatekeepers of access, and important areas for future research and intervention. The authors propose that a formal entity addressing immigration status issues could improve support for families with precarious legal status and improve sector inclusivity.

Key words

bordering, childcare access, precarious legal status, mapping, Toronto, Canada

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Bordering Points and Practices in Toronto's Licensed Childcare Sector: Investigating Access for Families with Precarious Legal Status (updated version)[i]

> Several years ago, a mother with a terminal illness enrolled her two-year-old child in a non-profit childcare centre in Toronto. As a single mother who was in and out of the hospital, she was often too weak to bring her child to and from the centre, so the child's aunt moved in with them and took on this responsibility. After several months of this routine, the centre manager informed the staff that there had been an immigration raid at the family's apartment and that the child's aunt had been detained and was awaiting deportation. Out of desperation, the mother reached out to the centre for support, disclosing the family's mixed immigration status and the challenging circumstances that had arisen. Fortunately, the childcare centre staff were willing to help and did so by quickly creating an informal arrangement of bringing the child to and from the centre daily. This continued for several more months, until the child aged out of the childcare program and began attending kindergarten at a public school (Lewis, 2022).

While an isolated story, this family's experience speaks to the larger question of how bordering practices—in this case, the enforcement and navigation of eligibility requirements for social services—work within Toronto's childcare sector, while highlighting the fact that families with a range of immigration statuses are attempting to access childcare services in the city. The story also makes it clear that for many families, childcare programs serve as an important source of support, but that stigma and lack of awareness surrounding precarious legal status within the sector result in a lack of preparedness and limitations on the ability of childcare workers to support such families. Fundamentally, the story demonstrates the importance of better understanding how immigration status and childcare services intersect. As a starting point in this work, we examined and mapped the policy and practice frameworks that structure the sector in order to identify potential areas for intervention and future research.

Precarious Legal Status and Canadian Policy Responses

In the Canadian context, *precarious legal status* encompasses a broad range of situations. The term captures the complexities of legal status, recognizing that there are multiple pathways that lead to precarity, and that precarity is not static; rather it is dynamic and can shift according to circumstances, policies, and regulations (Goldring et al., 2009). There are many different categories and experiences that fall under this term, including refugee claimants awaiting a decision on their case, students, temporary workers, and people without formal documentation. The number of people living with precarious legal status has been exacerbated by Canada's immigration policies, which have increasingly promoted temporary residency over permanent immigration options.

Once in the country, people wishing to stay longer are left navigating a complex bureaucracy that results in people shifting among the categories and struggling to access social services as a result. Consideration for the existence and circumstances of the children in families with precarious legal status has been limited, but there is no doubt that such families likely struggle to access many necessary social services due to eligibility requirements and/or decisions made by service providers (see, for example, Bernhard, Young & Goldring 2023).

Across Canada, a common policy response to the need to support people with precarious legal status has been municipal "sanctuary city" policies[ii], intended to facilitate better access to services. Paquet and Joy (2022) found that these policies largely provide support by way of information dissemination, but that they fail to explicitly commit to providing protection from immigration enforcement or to limiting collaboration between local law enforcement and immigration authorities. Paquet and Joy's resulting criticism is that Canadian sanctuary

city policies are largely symbolic, lacking the scope to meaningfully address barriers to accessing services. This limited scope is evident in Toronto's sanctuary city policy, *Access to City Services for Undocumented Torontonians* (shortened to Access T.O.), which extends only to municipally operated social services (City of Toronto, 2014). Municipal officials then largely excuse themselves from explicitly committing to or supporting families in accessing many essential—but often privately operated—social services, including most licensed childcare services in Toronto. While acknowledging the shortcomings of sanctuary city policies, it is argued that the municipalities that implemented them represent a best-case scenario for people with precarious status as it is a rare, explicit statement of recognition from Canadian municipal governments of not only their existence but of the need to support all residents of a municipality. This informed the selection of Toronto for the present analysis.

Access to Childcare Services in Canada

Childcare is an integral service for many working parents with young children. For children, the main benefits of licensed childcare services come from the strong developmental foundation they provide. From a children's rights perspective, every child is entitled to fully participate in their community and society at large (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Limited public funding and a predominantly market-based delivery model have resulted in high user costs and scarce availability and prevent many Canadian families from accessing the service. The newly implemented Canada-wide Early Learning Child Care (CWELCC) system was introduced in the 2021 federal government's budget in an effort to address these barriers and create a more accessible childcare sector. With an investment of $21 billion over five years, CWELCC is expected to lower the cost of licensed childcare to an average of $10 a day by 2026 and increase the number of licensed childcare spaces across the country (Government of Canada, 2022). Implementation of fee reductions has been gradual. As of 2024, CWELCC participating programs in Toronto are mandated by the City to reduce their fees by 52.75%, to a minimum fee of $12 a day (City of Toronto, 2024c). The province, meanwhile, has recently announced a fee cap of $22 per day starting in January 2025 (Province of Ontario, 2024). Though a notable decrease in fees charged to parents, these costs remain unaffordable for many low-income families, continuing the financial barriers to accessing licensed childcare for some. These families may be eligible for the existing means-tested fee subsidy system, funded by the Province of Ontario and administered by the City of Toronto, which has continued alongside CWELCC.

Even with the CWELCC agreements and action plans now being implemented, barriers to accessing Ontario's childcare sector are likely to persist for marginalized populations, limiting the inclusivity and universality of the federally envisioned transformative childcare initiative (Friendly, Nguyễn & Taylor, 2023). Discussions surrounding building an inclusive childcare sector through CWELCC have largely neglected to consider exactly what barriers are presented by immigration status and related documentation issues, nor has consideration been given to improving access for families with precarious legal status. Crucially, public policy in this area determines children's access based on the circumstances of their parents. For children of parents with precarious status, the result is what Enriquez (2015) describes as *multigenerational punishment*, a process wherein children are negatively impacted by their parents' legal status regardless of their own citizenship or immigration status.

Beyond the absence of immigration status from the broader national conversation about access to childcare, the sector itself has failed to consider the different ways precarious legal status affects families receiving childcare services. This study focuses on the gatekeepers—those who control movement or access to licensed childcare programs in Toronto and proposes how they can address the impact of internal bordering practices within the sector.

Informed by existing research, the concept of *bordering points* was developed to refer to specific instances and places in which gatekeepers within Toronto's licensed childcare sector can threaten, complicate, or refuse access. Importantly, these bordering points are also areas where access can be facilitated or where policy and practice interventions could be helpful.

Gatekeeping Practices Affecting Childcare Services

The concept of *gatekeeping* is frequently invoked when discussing the challenges of access to services and experiences of services. Scholars note that gatekeeping

is experienced in a range of places beyond external points of entry of a country: it is experienced in the spaces of everyday social life, subsequently creating *internal bordering* practices that see a variety of actors and institutions participating in the scrutiny and policing of citizenship and belonging (Menjívar, 2014; Wright, 2013; Young, 2015; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Gatekeeping is a process of filtering or selecting that assesses and delineates who belongs and under what conditions.

This power to delineate belonging positions frontline workers in a range of service-providing contexts as gatekeepers, with the decision-making power to preside over access to and participation in social services (Villegas, 2013). Gatekeeping can occur anywhere within a space and is informed by multiple factors, making the outcome uncertain. This process is unpredictable and inconsistent in practice because there are a multitude of pathways gatekeepers may follow when it comes to interactions with families with precarious status. This includes acting with outright hostility, either through denial of access or involving immigration authorities; acting in a way that neither hampers nor supports but that perhaps puts the family in harm's way unknowingly; or acting supportively by providing resources to families in need, which may entail bending the rules or finding alternate ways to grant access. The limited scholarship on childcare services and immigration status makes it necessary to consider findings from research on similar situations in healthcare and education sectors to better understand how gatekeeping and bordering practices influence access to and experience of services for precarious status families and their children.

The unpredictability of gatekeepers' decision-making can be partially explained by the range of attitudes and beliefs towards precarious legal status. Studies focused on the healthcare sector revealed a wide range of personal opinions among healthcare workers in Toronto and Montreal regarding provision of services for children and parents with precarious status (Landolt, 2022; Vanthuyne et al., 2013). Ruiz-Casares et al. (2013) found that service providers' stances on the matter varied based on their job title and duties, calling into question occupational education and training, professional mandates, and job positions. For example, Bhuyan (2012) interviewed management personnel and funding bodies for service providers dealing with violence against women regarding encounters with clients with precarious legal status. Participants expressed unanimous concern for women with precarious status and their children in individual interviews with the researcher, yet in professional contexts, these service providers commonly spoke of precarious status women as a burden on their limited resources. This points to the tension that can exist between personal beliefs and professional obligations.

This focus on financial capacity was also found in a study conducted with Toronto education administrators, wherein participants' cited school revenues as reasoning for refusing children from precarious families access to public schools (Villegas, 2018). Divergence between organizational policies and the actions of frontline workers also affects access. In Toronto, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) implemented its *Students Without Legal Immigration Status* policy in 2007 to welcome all children into their schools regardless of immigration status (Toronto District School Board, 2007). Yet in the years following, precarious status families spoke of multiple unsuccessful efforts to register at schools when interacting with frontline school workers (Sidhu, 2008). In Montreal's education sector, Meloni et al. (2017) found similar frustrations with that city's public school system. The research team then aided families in their school registration efforts in order to explore the issue. The research team found school administrations' decisions to be arbitrary, still with no predictability in gaining access. The ability to register for school came down to the circumstances and documentation of each family and their child, the ability of the research network to advocate and leverage service worker knowledge, and the willingness of individual school principals.

Regardless of the policy framework guiding a particular institution or sector, individual frontline workers maintain—or at least exercise—a great deal of discretion in individual encounters, leading to uncertainty and anxiety for precarious status parents.

When gatekeepers decide to grant access, they often do so quietly. Individuals within institutions learn to counteract hostility and exclusionary practices through bypassing formal procedures and exploiting gaps in policies, facilitating access through informal networks of likeminded service providers (Bhuyan, 2012; Landolt, 2022). For example, Villegas (2013) conducted focus groups with healthcare workers in Toronto, wherein participants spoke of personal strategies they employ to facilitate access, including networking and referring clients to other service providers known to be accepting of precarious status clients. From this, it is clear that access is

an ongoing, constant negotiation with others. Drawing on the framing of access by migrant justice groups, Villegas (2017) argues that for access to be successful it must be accompanied by efforts to foster feelings of safety, meaning that access extends to the entire experience of using a service. For childcare, this means not just enrollment in a program, but the child's and parents' experiences in their daily interactions with the staff, other children, and other families.

The topic of accessing childcare for families with precarious status is understudied. Bernhard et al. (2007) focused on how precarious status affected people's well-being and considered how parents' status impacted their children. At that time, several participants spoke of their inability to pay childcare fees and their ineligibility for fee subsidies. The research team concluded that this is one of the ways in which children can face negative repercussions from their parents' legal status. Morantz et al. (2013) interviewed refugee claimant families in Montreal about their settlement experiences, where inability to access formal childcare emerged as the most common challenge of participants. Families could not afford the fees and were ineligible for fee subsidies, which were under provincial jurisdiction, due to their immigration status. Families also spoke of challenges accessing informal childcare, as they had few support networks, pointing to a need for formal care arrangements. The inability to access childcare was a frustration for all members of the family, as it complicated parents' ability to work and prevented children from gaining the developmental benefits of attending quality licensed childcare programs. Morantz et al. (2013) suggested this was a contributing factor to high unemployment rates among refugee claimants in Montreal. The researchers also examined childcare subsidy policies across Canada and found that several provinces – Quebec, Saskatchewan, Alberta[iii], and British Columbia—excluded refugee claimants in 2013, leading to a patchwork of access across the country[iv]. More recently Bernhard et al. (2023) suggested that documentation requirements in Toronto would make accessing the childcare subsidy for families with precarious status challenging. As they note, these barriers to licensed childcare for children in precarious status families again point to multigenerational punishment (Enriquez, 2015).

This work is timely given the rolling out of CWELCC agreements and related programs that are designed to increase access to childcare across Canada. Based on the reviewed literature, this potential is cast into doubt for families with precarious status who encounter internal bordering practices in a range of institutional and everyday spaces (Dennler, 2020; Menjívar, 2014; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Below we present a mapping of Toronto's childcare sector to identify what we term bordering points, which allows a better understanding of the role of professionals, policies, and practices within the sector in determining access to licensed childcare for families with precarious legal status. Through this work, we hope to inspire discussions in the sector as well as future research about the lived experiences of precarious status families in accessing childcare.

Methodology

Our approach was to carry out a mapping to identify where bordering points might be found in Toronto's licensed childcare sector. Mapping was chosen as a methodological approach for its ability to help visualize the interconnections and multiple scales of a particular system or sector, while also considering these elements independently (Futch & Fine, 2013). Moreover, when focused on mapping a system or institution, mapping can help to clarify the rules and processes that govern and manage what happens in practice and point to ways in which they might influence lived experiences of interactions with that system (Underwood, Smith & Martin, 2019). In our case, this allowed us to bring childcare actors, spaces, and policies into the same frame in order to consider the ways in which their jurisdictions and potential impacts intersect. The mapping process began with the question, "who works in licensed childcare centres and what informs their decision-making when interacting with families?". The mapping that ensued was limited to an examination of publicly available texts and documents about different aspects of the sector. We did not carry out interviews or engage in participant observation for this project, but both could be important approaches for future research. Mapping is also an accessible methodology, presenting visually compelling data for both readers and future researchers (Marx, 2022). Exploratory critical analysis by way of mapping contributes to a better understanding of how bordering practices may occur within the licensed childcare sector—that is, where actions that allow or deny access take place, and points to areas for future research.

The mapping presented in Figure 1 is a visualization of the complex web of actors in the licensed childcare sector in Toronto and their connections to policies, legislation, and the spaces in which they work. It also offers an organizing structure to the analysis that follows. The lines hold as much weight as the nodes, showing the hierarchal connections

and the exploratory process of visualizing the sector. The lines also represent the movement of information within the sector, offering insight into how relationships and professional requirements might inform frontline workers' decision-making and interactions with families. Guiding this process is Villegas's (2013) broad definition of gatekeeping, in which the actors implicitly or explicitly take upon themselves the responsibility for maintaining and enforcing the borders of access, whether because that is their professional role or because they negotiate it in their day-to-day work. Frontline workers are gatekeepers of borders that are often set by other actors. The sector mapping makes it possible to better understand how this might occur.

We acknowledge that due to the fragmented service delivery of licensed childcare, there is likely considerable variation within individual sites due to the influence of program managers and/or owners. The aforementioned range of perspectives of frontline workers, from positive to negative views, contributes to this variation and would be an important area for future research. Due to feasibility constraints, the mapping exercise was limited to publicly available information, including legislative statutes, professional regulatory body policies, and licensed childcare program registration forms.

Mapping the Aspects of Access

The mapping depicts the regulations and policies, the sites, and the actors that influence Toronto's licensed childcare sector by shape. These influences are then further defined by colour at the broadest level of the border setters (green), the sites (orange), and frontline actors (blue) who work within these sites. The professional context of the gatekeepers, i.e., any actor who directly interacts with families is represented by the yellow squares, which help explain or predict the pathways the actors might choose as gatekeepers. Considering these three components in concert, they can be realized as interdependent aspects of access, wherein border setters create policies and parameters that determine the practices and procedures of sites that frontline actors must uphold in their interactions with families. This dynamic culminates in bordering points where we can anticipate how families might interact with components of the system, located throughout Toronto's licensed childcare sector. To be clear, the mapping is a visualization of how the sector is designed to work based on a review of policies and programmatic descriptions; it does not capture how it works in practice, which is an important area for future research. Nevertheless, it offers important insights into and questions about some of the challenges of accessing childcare for families with precarious status.

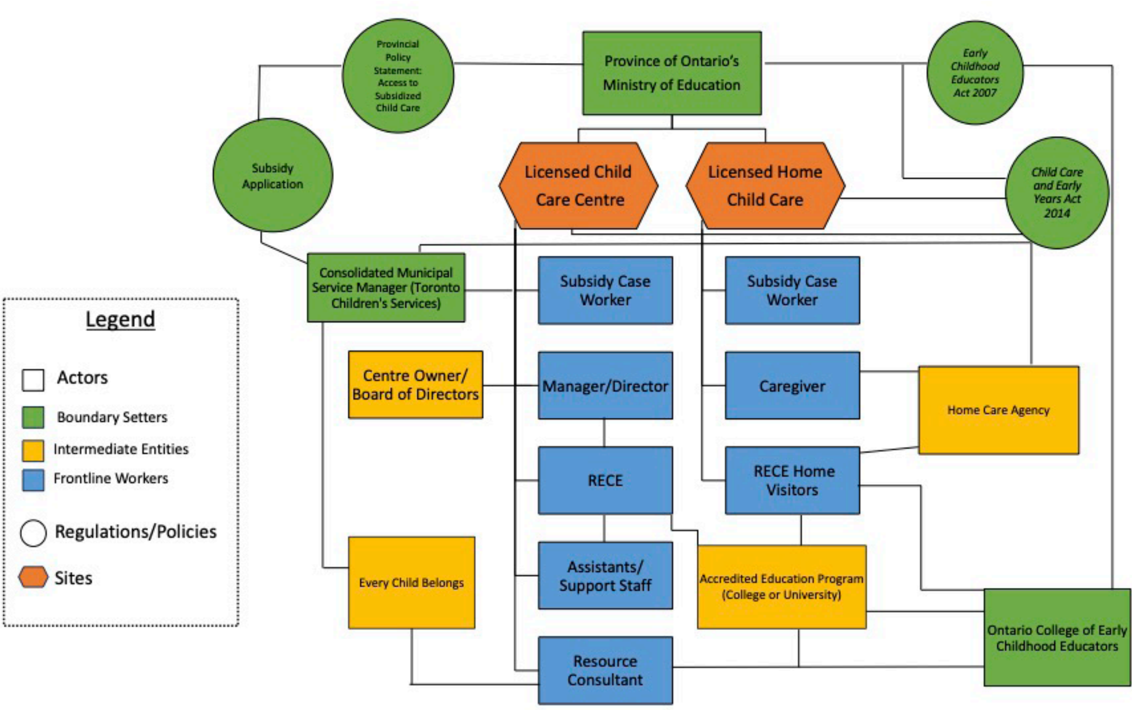

Figure 1 *Mapping of Toronto's Licensed Childcare Sector*

Border Setters

The term *border setters* is used to refer to the actors and entities responsible for determining the policies, regulations, and procedures that organize Toronto's childcare sector. These in turn influence the behaviour of frontline actors, the existence of bordering points, and ultimately, how access is negotiated throughout the sector. As evident in the reviewed literature, border setters act as gatekeepers and also embolden frontline actors to take on this bordering work. The main border setter of childcare programs in Toronto is the Government of Ontario's Ministry of Education via the *Early Childhood Educators Act 2007* and the *Childcare and Early Years Act 2014* (CCEYA), which set out the regulatory requirements and policies of the sector.

The wider trend of downloading responsibilities has seen municipal governments in Ontario increasingly tasked with overseeing the early years sector, delegating the City of Toronto to control access to childcare services (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2022; Graham & Phillips, 2008). The creation of the Consolidated Municipal Service Manager (CMSM) system in the 1990s resulted in a cost-sharing agreement that continues today, with the City of Toronto contributing funding towards administration, financing, and local service management for all services relating to young children, including licensed childcare, while Ontario's Ministry of Education determines policies and procedures (Spicer, 2015).

The College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE), mandated by the *Early Childhood Educators Act*, sets the parameters for the professional conduct and standards of practice for Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs). The ethical and professional standards set out by the CECE outline the expectations for RECEs' behaviour, skills, and knowledge base (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017). The CECE also grants accreditation to early childhood education programs at colleges and universities, thus overseeing the professional knowledge base of ECE students. The CECE and accredited post-secondary programs can then be understood as mechanisms for implementing the provincial government's regulations and policies. Both are also highly influential in framing expectations and practices in the early childhood sector.

Sites

Sites are the physical spaces where families with children negotiate access and receive services. The sites included in the mapping are licensed childcare programs, which include home childcare and childcare centres. Licensed home childcare services are operated out of individuals' homes, under contract with an agency. Home childcare agencies are licensed by the Ontario Ministry of Education and are responsible for monitoring individual providers for regulatory compliance (City of Toronto, 2022b). The City of Toronto operates a home childcare agency, Toronto Home Childcare, serving the outer areas of Toronto. Licensed childcare centres are childcare services that are operated in commercial settings, whether through rental lease agreements or ownership.

Both childcare centres and home childcare agencies can apply to enroll in Toronto's fee subsidy system through a service agreement, though not all do so. Fee subsidies are a support measure for lower-income families using licensed childcare. To be eligible to enter a service agreement for childcare fee subsidy with Toronto's Children's Services department, programs must be licensed, not-for-profit programs that are in compliance with all legislative and policy requirements (City of Toronto, 2022c). This excludes private, for-profit programs from participating in the subsidy system. To align with the scope of CWELCC, the research scope for the study includes all licensed childcare programs, both for-profit and non-profit. Subsequent discussions regarding the fee subsidy system in this study are only applicable to non-profit centres. The methodological decision to focus on licensed childcare programs was in recognition that the regulatory oversight of the licensing system promotes higher-quality programs. Children in precarious status families should be able to access the same higher-quality childcare programs that other children across Toronto do.

Actors/Gatekeepers

The label of *gatekeeper* is applicable to any actor within Toronto's licensed childcare sector that is in a position to either affirm or deny access through their decisions and actions. This is true of all the actors identified in Figure 1 to varying degrees. Classroom RECEs are central to the functioning and quality of Toronto's early years programs, and those working in licensed childcare are in regular direct contact with both parents and children, placing them in a position where they can support or deny access daily. RECEs working as managers or supervisors in licensed childcare centres are in direct contact with parents during the registration and enrolment process, which requires the collection of personal information. This is a crucial interaction for families to gain access to childcare programs. Each of these settings and job duties place RECEs in positions of possible gatekeeping and internal bordering.

Two CECE standards of practice for RECEs are particularly important to consider with regard to supporting families with precarious legal status: Standard I: caring and responsive relationships, and Standard VI: confidentiality, release of information, and duty to report. Standard I highlights a core job duty of RECEs, which is to develop caring relationships with the children and families with whom they work. The CECE states that, in practice, this means that RECEs should be aware of the relevant family circumstances of children and the factors that contribute to shaping individual and family identities (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017). This obligation to inquire about family circumstances may inadvertently provide the fuel for RECEs to act as gatekeepers. For families with precarious legal status, this practice may heighten fears more than calm them, as they must attempt to gauge service providers' intentions and attitudes. Standard of Practice VI, which addresses confidentiality, release of information, and duty to report, can also place RECEs in a position of gatekeeping. RECEs, along with members of other professions working closely with vulnerable populations, have a particular duty to report suspicions of abuse, neglect, or maltreatment to authorities. While this is a well-intentioned practice, it encourages RECEs to perform surveillance on families and places other punitive entities such as legal authorities and children's aid in close proximity to childcare settings.

RECEs are only one aspect of the professional team in the childcare sector. Licensed home childcare and licensed childcare operations all rely on a workforce of support workers, assistants, or general caregivers for their program delivery. These professionals may have educational training, but it is not a legislated mandate, therefore the educational background of this workforce varies. In the case of licensed childcare centres, individual centres or organizations may have expectations for employee training, such as the Early Childhood Assistant post-secondary education programs, but there is no standardized requirement. Having a workforce wherein frontline workers have a range of professional training and work experience compromises the consistency of the knowledge base of these workers and contexts. The likelihood of negative bordering experiences is greater as more actors interact with families. Each additional person presents a new interaction that families must navigate and with whom they must negotiate an outcome. Having so many actors in direct contact with families contributes to the unpredictability and uncertainty of access that families must face.

A final set of actors to consider is the caseworkers who are responsible for monitoring families receiving fee subsidies, ensuring that the families have submitted the required documents and that they are continuing to meet all eligibility requirements. Families are subject to scrutiny for the duration of their contact with Toronto's CMSM. Even once successful in obtaining a fee subsidy, the scrutiny continues, placing families in a situation of constant surveillance.

Bordering Points

After carrying out a mapping to visualize the policy and practice frameworks and structures as well as the actors that comprise Toronto's licensed childcare sector, we identified the fee subsidy system, the program registration process, and the knowledge base and professional obligations of frontline actors as potential bordering points where legally precarious families with children negotiate access. As a system-level critical analysis, the mapping allows us to identify important junctures of the sector, areas where we anticipate the most potential for gatekeeping and subsequently those junctures that represent key areas for potential interventions. We suggest that these bordering points require conscious attention and improvement. The first two points concern gaining access to licensed childcare, while the latter is focused on the potential challenges of lack of information and misinformation among personnel working in the sector.

Fee Subsidy System

Under the current service delivery model, the provincial fee subsidy system remains necessary for low-income families in Toronto to access licensed childcare. Childcare fee subsidies are the responsibility of CMSMs, which in the City of Toronto is Toronto Children's Services. They conduct extensive vetting of applicants, as set out by provincial policy. To qualify for fee subsidies in Toronto, families must submit household income and address verification, personal identification, and employment or school documentation and/or verification (City of Toronto, 2022a). Though Toronto Children's Services do not ask for any immigration documentation and therefore are unaware of the immigration statuses of the families receiving subsidy support, the income verification, as mandated by the province, requires a notice of assessment from the Canada Revenue Agency. We argue that making tax filings a prerequisite for accessing childcare fee subsidy is an act of internal bordering.

Bordering practices continue if families are successful in obtaining a fee subsidy, through an assigned subsidy caseworker. Parents must renew their subsidy annually,

therefore having to file their income tax returns on time and report any family changes to their subsidy caseworker (City of Toronto, 2024b). They must also respond to any requests for information from their caseworker. While there are some grace periods, such as a parent becoming unemployed or a parent becoming pregnant, failure to meet the requirements results in revocation of the subsidy. If a family experiences a sudden change in immigration status, such as the rejection of their refugee claim or the expiry of a visa, and subsequently fails to file their taxes, surveillance from their subsidy caseworker threatens their access to subsidized care and creates the possibility of being reported to law enforcement. This process of receiving and maintaining a fee subsidy is an example of how bordering points and gatekeeping continue to occur after access is first granted.

Addressing the fee subsidy bordering point requires the cooperation of the provincial government. The 2022 provincial funding guidelines state that the only anticipated change to the subsidy system will be a 25 percent reduction in parental fee contributions (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022). We argue that changing the fee subsidy requirements would be a realistic policy shift based on examples in other jurisdictions. Reducing the stringency of subsidy eligibility requirements would immediately improve access, as the United States has done with the eligibility criteria of the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant, which makes US citizen children of low-income families eligible for childcare subsidy, regardless of their parents' immigration status and eligibility for other public benefits (Ferrette, 2021).

Program Registration Process

Program registration and in-take processes involve collecting personal information from the family, such as parents' employment details and the child's immunization records. These provincially legislated requirements may be difficult for families with precarious status to meet, stemming from the challenges of living with precarity. Again, these inquiries into the family's circumstances may evoke fear in parents. Required information includes the child's date of birth, home address of the child and parents, telephone numbers of parents, and the child's previous history of communicable diseases and record of immunizations (Government of Ontario, 2019). If families do not have all of the required information, they could be questioned or denied access by the service provider, in this case the program manager. For families with precarious status, this process of providing personal information may exacerbate their reluctance to interact with and provide personal information to childcare service providers. A more specific part of this process information that could present as a barrier is the child's immunization records[v]. Under the CCEYA, operators must ensure that every child is immunized and maintain records of their status. Families with precarious status who face challenges in accessing healthcare services can easily fall behind in their child's immunization schedule. In this sense, the practice of collecting personal information has the capacity to create a bordering point. Though it is not done to specifically target families with precarious status, it is an interaction that can influence access to childcare likely by delaying or complicating the child's enrollment.

This bordering point highlights the role of procedures in gatekeeping. The practice of gathering personal information is universal across childcare programs, but procedures specific to individual managers inform the magnitude of the bordering point. Ontario's childcare licensing manual recognizes that parents may not wish to divulge certain information, providing instructions for operators to indicate "parent did not wish to provide" on the forms in lieu of recording the information. While on the one hand, the reluctance to provide personal information can raise questions on the part of centre managers, the provision in the licensing manual could be an example of how frontline workers might negotiate access for families. The scope of our mapping does not allow us to definitively conclude how the intake process and collection of personal information is experienced by families with precarious status or program staff. We view this as a valuable area for future research to better understand how access is experienced and negotiated by actors.

Professional Training and Knowledge Base

Research conducted with people with precarious status consistently points to misinformation and lack of knowledge of service providers about their circumstances (Hare, 2007; Merry et al., 2011; Rink et al., 2017). Another factor that could influence misinformation is the different knowledge and training backgrounds of childcare support staff and assistant educators. Lack of knowledge can foster stigma and heighten families' fear of disclosing their status or being "found out" by childcare staff. This bordering point is an area for further research as the training and knowledge base of RECEs in regards to precarious legal status has not been investigated. Anticipated areas of future research include examining how educational programs and training address precarious status and the experiences of RECEs working in the sector navigating these questions.

By way of the CECE Code of Ethics, RECEs are taught to build relationships with families while respecting families' privacy and not intruding or inquiring about personal issues. While this affords privacy to families with precarious status, it also may contribute to a knowledge gap and misinformation surrounding immigration status in the sector. The invisibility of precarious legal status leads to institutional practices that may inadvertently extend bordering into childcare services. For families who are successful in gaining entry into childcare programs, the practices of childcare staff considering their deservingness may give rise to negative experiences.

Given that access as an ongoing negotiation between families and service providers, the daily interactions of families with RECEs and support staff become significant. The settings and job duties of RECEs place them in a position of gatekeeping due to the nature of their professional duties. It is highly relational work, where connections between staff and families dictate the experience of access and service for families. Yet for families with precarious status, the experience is likely complicated by the limited formal inclusion or consideration of immigration status in the sector.

To appropriately extend RECEs' professional duty to be inclusive of families with precarious legal status, professional knowledge on the realities of precarious status is needed. At present, there is no research on RECEs' knowledge of, perceptions of, or experiences working with precarious status families. The mapping process does not allow for a definitive conclusion on this, but understanding access and service as an ongoing negotiation between frontline actors and families is a crucial area for further research. Interviewing post-secondary program directors and instructors at accredited ECE programs would be a rich area for future research. Future study could also consider whether attitudes towards access to childcare are influenced by the job categories of childcare workers, akin to Ruiz-Casares et al.'s (2013) findings of lower support for access to health services among clinic support staff than the physicians, nurses, or social workers.

Discussion

Families living with precarious legal status in Canada face a multitude of challenges. Constant uncertainty about their immigration status creates a pervasive atmosphere of instability, impacting family dynamics and making it difficult to plan for the future and access essential services. Many parents live in fear of deportation that would result in family separations and emotional distress. Precarious status often restricts access to stable employment, worsening families' financial circumstances.

In the face of these barriers to access, many of these families have to seek out informal, alternative childcare services. Extended family members and trusted acquaintances can and do act as important informal social service providers for many families with precarious legal status (Bragg & Wong, 2015; Eremenko & Unterreiner, 2023). That said, it is crucial that formal, on-the-ground access to social services such as childcare be available to alleviate uncertainties, fear, and instability, and lessen experiences of marginalization by providing more secure economic and social support for precarious status families and developmental benefits for their children.

CWELCC is heralded as a means to increasing access to childcare across Canada—striving for "all families" to "have access to high-quality, affordable, flexible and inclusive [Early Learning and Child Care] no matter where they live" (Government of Canada, 2021)—but this potential is in doubt for families with precarious status. While CWELCC presents an opportunity to rethink the entire childcare system and equitably expand services, much of the focus has been on lowering fees for middle-class families. To what extent have staff at municipal and provincial government departments and childcare sector actors discussed the question of access to childcare for children of precarious status families? This is an area that should be investigated further.

The mapping highlights that the provincial government is the central force dictating bordering in the childcare sector. Considering this in the context of critiques of sanctuary city policies as being "conflict-avoidant" with senior levels of government and limited by jurisdictional powers (Hudson, 2021; Paquet & Joy, 2022), it would be important to examine to what extent and how Access T.O. addresses bordering points within Toronto's licensed childcare sector. Moreover, this study highlights the need to strengthen the sector's capacity to support families with precarious legal status rather than relying on changes at the provincial level. For example, we propose building a formal entity focused on matters of families' immigration status within the ECEC sector to support both program staff and families as they navigate the system. The closest example of formal, sector-wide support infrastructure within Toronto's licensed childcare sector is the Every Child Belongs (ECB) program (City of Toronto, 2024a).

The program connects centres across the city with service agencies for children who require additional support, most often for developmental or behavioural needs. Crucially, families do not need to go elsewhere to access these supports; instead, the ECB resources are dispatched to the centre where a particular child and their educators are based.

Avenues for adapting this to serve precarious status families include expanding the mandate of ECB and/or the creation of a service agency focused on immigration status and family social support, akin to Peel Region's Child Welfare Immigration Centre of Excellence (2021). Embedding support for families with precarious legal status into the existing licensed childcare system in Toronto would strengthen the ability of programs and educators to respond to the needs of families, thereby improving the inclusivity and accessibility of the sector.

As leaders in the sector respond to Ontario's CWELCC agreement, there is an opportunity to consider current practices and move towards implementing a deeper experience of access for all families living in Toronto, including those with precarious legal status.

Endnotes

i Note: this article replaces the version published in the Spring/Summer 2024 edition of the journal.

ii Sanctuary City policies are municipal efforts to support people with precarious immigration status in accessing local services, without fear of their immigration status resulting in the denial of services or being reported to immigration authorities. Several Canadian cities have adopted sanctuary city policies, the details and scope of which are varied (Paquet and Joy, 2022).

iii As of 2023, Alberta has reversed this policy (Government of Alberta, 2023).

iv Regarding childcare subsidies, as of 2022, New Brunswick included Convention refugee claimants on a case-by-case basis, while immigration status is an "informal requirement" in Manitoba. Within the federal context, refugee claimants and other precarious status individuals are excluded from the Canada Child Benefit subsidy (Arce, 2022).

v Families must fill out the Toronto Public Health form "Immunization form for registrants of child care centres offers". This form provides a phone number for families to call if they do not have a health card, to find out locations where they can receive free vaccinations (Toronto Public Health, 2017). There is also the option to fill out a vaccine exemption form, for either medical or religious reasons.

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2024-2025 AECEO Provincial Board Nominations

Would you like to take on a leadership role in shaping the future for ECEs in Ontario? Becoming a member of the AECEO Board of Directors is an important way to do that.

The AECEO is in the process of recruiting for its Provincial Board of Directors 2024-2025 term.

Provincial Board members are elected for a one-year term of office with a limit of six consecutive years for any individual on the Board. This is a working board and members are expected to lend their expertise and skills in support of the AECEO's mission and in serving on Committees as needed.

The AECEO values diverse voices that reflect our membership and encourages nominations from a range of backgrounds to bring a variety of ideas, perspectives and experiences that will better inform the Board's work. We strongly encourage Black, Indigenous, and other racialized members to apply. Most meetings are held remotely and, in the evening, to facilitate participation by members from all areas of the province and early childhood profession.

General Duties: A Director is fully informed on organizational matters and participates in the Board's deliberations and decisions on matters of policy, finance, human resources and planning during monthly Board meetings and at other meetings as required.

Members should forward nominations to the Nominations Committee c/o AECEO Provincial Office.

Nominations Deadline Date: August 6, 2024

Name: ______________________________ Membership #______________

Please include the following information:

- A short profile/bio that can be published as part of the election process that includes strengths, experience, passions or concerns you would bring to the Board of the AECEO and what you see as the key issues for ECEs in Ontario.

I am an AECEO member in good standing and would like to put my name forward as a nominee to stand for an AECEO Provincial Board Position in the 2024 elections. I understand that my nomination information will be made public on the AECEO website and in communications with AECEO members. I do hereby agree that, if I am declared elected, I will ensure that I perform my duties to support, uphold and work towards the fulfillment of the mission and goals of the AECEO.

Signature:______________________________ Date signed:______________

Phone: ______________________________

Email: ______________________________

(Please attach a separate sheet as needed.)

Nomination form must be submitted by August 6, 2024 to:

AECEO Nominations Committee c/o AECEO Provincial Office
Email to: info@aeceo.ca or Fax: (416) 487-3758

Or by mail:
3003 Danforth Ave., P.O. Box 93618 Toronto, ON M4C 5R4

Member's Motion Guidelines/Form

This form provides you, an AECEO member, with the opportunity to propose a motion for consideration by the general membership during the 2024 election process. The motion will be shared via email or mail (for members without a valid email address).

Deadline date for submission is: August 6, 2024

Send completed forms by August 6, 2024 to:

AECEO Provincial Office

Fax (416) 487-3758 | Email: info@aeceo.ca

Or by mail: 3003 Danforth Ave., P.O. Box 93618 Toronto, ON M4C 5R4

(Use separate page as required)

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Submitted by (Name of Member): ______________________________

Member #: ____________________

Date: ____________________ Signature: ____________________

OFFICIAL LIST OF AECEO CERTIFIED MEMBERS

The names listed are those who have successfully completed the AECEO Certification Process and hold current AECEO membership. They are entitled to use the AECEO.C designation to denote their achievement.

Cynthia Abel AECEO.C.

Deborah Ainlay AECEO.C.

Amarpreet Anand AECEO.C.

Carol Ankenmann AECEO.C.

Bonnie Arthur AECEO.C.

Michelle Arvelin AECEO.C.

Delia Avarell AECEO.C.

Kim Ayres AECEO.C.

Dawn Baetens-Snelgrove AECEO.C.

Shirley Bainbridge AECEO.C.

Gayle Ballard AECEO.C.

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Tracey Webster AECEO.C.

Julia Weiche AECEO.C.

Wendy Wells AECEO.C.

Andrea Welz AECEO.C.

Karen Wilcox AECEO.C.

Mary Williamson AECEO.C.

Dawna Wojkowski AECEO.C.

Lisa Wood AECEO.C.

Kathy Yach AECEO.C.

Heather Yeo AECEO.C.

Sarah Young AECEO.C.

Helen Young-Armstrong AECEO.C.

Marian Yuill AECEO.C.

Leah Yuyitung AECEO.C.

Nicole Zara AECEO.C.

Fran Zeppieri AECEO.C.

Yvonne Ziobroski AECEO.C.

Ashley Zurevinski AECEO.C

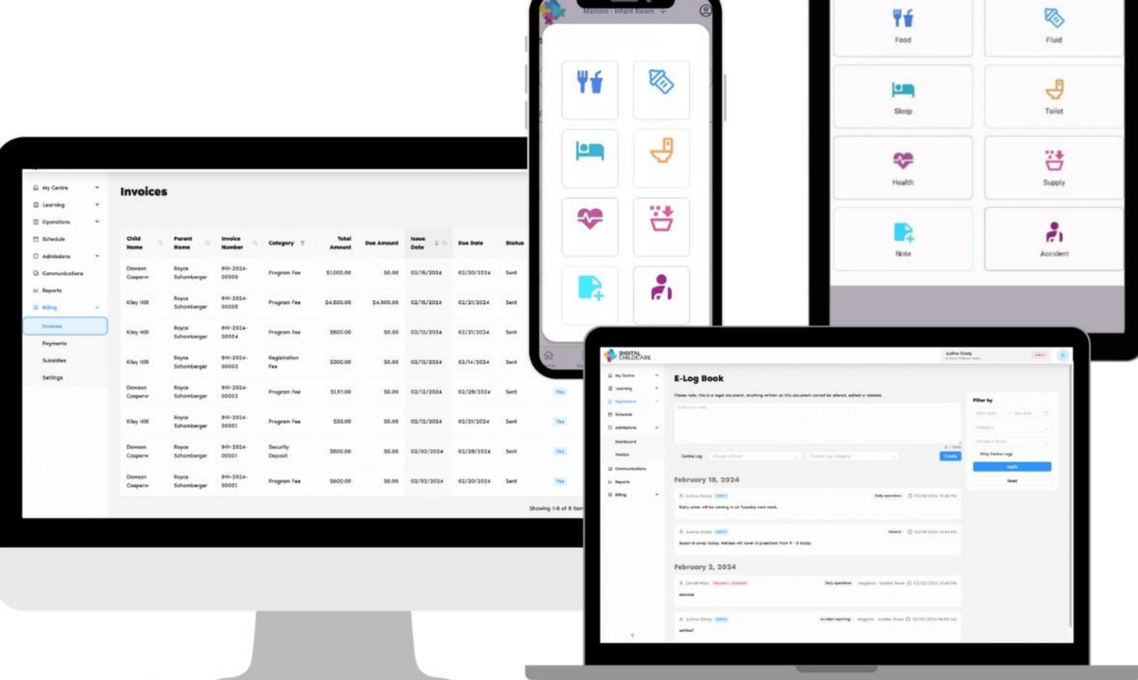
Save the Date!

AECEO ANNUAL MEMBERS' MEETING

SEPTEMBER 16, 2024 7:30PM

Please join us to discuss AECEO activities during 2023-24, meet your Board of Directors nominees and more!

Register here: https://www.aeceo.ca/board_of_directors



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