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

Kim Barton

Abstract

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

Key words

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

Author Biography

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

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

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

Introducing Myself

When introducing myself to early learning professionals, I often say that I'm a proud ECE working as a pedagogical leader. The truth is that I have struggled, and continue to do so, with identifying as an ECE. For as long as I can remember, I have felt torn between scientific knowledge and relationships—or objectivism and subjectivism, as Bezaire and Johnston (2022) describe—or Western ways of knowing and ancient wisdom as Wall Kimmerer (2013) articulates. My uncertainty with self-identifying as an ECE (over other professional identities) reflects my resistance to adopting pre-determined ideas about learning and knowledge. Since the things that have mattered most to me were not always valued within my experiences in educational and caring spaces, I resisted the identity of an educator. During my secondary education, I was drawn towards science and math courses but excelled in placements, which put me on a trajectory to complete a Bachelor of Science in psychology. This experience trained me to be a producer of evidence-based knowledge, to only trust reproducible methods, and to appeal to ways of knowing that are privileged within positivism (Moon & Blackman, 2014). For 10 years I worked alongside young children in childcare, recreational programs, mental health services, and school boards while starting and stopping my ECE training. Then, in 2018, I worked as an outdoor educator and learned what was possible for human relationships within nature, and I decided to become an ECE. From there, my experience as an ECE-in-training can be summarized in the following quotation, which demonstrates how ECEs are simultaneously asked to be connected to, but separate from, children:

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

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

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

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

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

Thinking with Theory

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

Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education

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

Reconceptualizing the "Good" Educator

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

Reconceptualizing Pedagogical Leadership

Dominant conceptualizations of pedagogical leadership in ELCC have been conflated with the role of an "expert" who monitors, supervises, and manages, perpetuating leader/follower hierarchies, binaries, patriarchal authority, and images of educators-as-technicians, custodial caregivers, and substitute parents (Atkinson & Biegun, 2017; Thomas, 2020). These conflations "seem antithetical to the collaborative caring practices of the work of early childhood educators" (Atkison & Biegun, 2017, p. 61). There are several pedagogical leadership titles within Ontario ELCC, including pedagogist, pedagogical consultant, and pedagogical leader, each carrying their own implications. Such roles are inspired by the Italian pedagogista in Reggio Emilia (Vintimilla, 2018). The consultation model has the troubling potential to position the estranged visiting consultant as a curriculum expert or coach, offering solution-focused tips and tricks in pursuit of "quality," determining what constitutes "best practice," and identifying the "good" and "not good" ECE (Atkinson & Biegun, 2017; Johnston, 2019; Thomas, 2020; Vintimilla, 2018).

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

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

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

Reconceptualizing Relationships and Interdependence

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

Understanding Interdependence within Indigenous Ways of Knowing

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

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

By describing unity between and among humans and nature, Wall Kimmerer articulates how living beings are connected and dependent on one another and that thriving is shared rather than individual, reflecting a valuing of relationships. Wall Kimmerer (2013) further discusses how Indigenous Peoples have known and valued an understanding that life is connected, dependent, and all related since time immemorial. Wilson and Hughes (2019) share this sentiment and expand upon it by discussing how reality and knowledge are also interconnected: "Indigenous epistemology, or Ways of Knowing, is also relational and emergent. Indigenous Knowledge is alive, it has agency, it moves" (p. 9). While positivist psychology assumes it is possible to objectively observe, produce, and consume knowledge (Moon & Blackman, 2014), Indigenous Ways of Knowing hold another conceptualization: one that does not separate anything/anyone from their relationships, as Wilson and Hughes (2019) describe:

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

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

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

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

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

Understanding Interdependence within Feminist Ethics of Care

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

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

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

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

Understanding Interdependence within Neuroscience and Psychology

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

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

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

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

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

Relational Knowledge and Pedagogy

Although relational knowledge is a clear tenet of reconceptualist literature, Indigenous Ways of Knowing, FEC, and affiliative neuroscience, many practices in ELCC focus on producing scientific knowledge that fails to acknowledge interdependence. The focus on scientific knowledge perpetuates separateness between educators (the observer) and children (the observed), as Wall Kimmerer (2013) and Callaghan et al. (2018) discuss, and, I would argue, between educators as well as between educators and pedagogical leaders. It is important to examine ELCC literature in Ontario for educator relationships since these relationships are largely where relational knowledge is generated.

Separateness within ELCC Working Conditions

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

Separateness within Professional Learning Models

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

Separateness within *HDLH?*

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

Arguably, HDLH? is founded in relationships and interdependence, and "helps educators focus on these interrelationships in the context of early years environments" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 5). HDLH? presents a view of educators that promotes collaboration and belonging, stating "the expectations for programs … help educators focus on building and maintaining relationships and supporting connections among themselves …". (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 13). It is not clear how this collaboration suggested by HDLH? is practically achieved. The reality is that poor working conditions, lack of access to professional learning, and lack of paid time to collaborate outside of the classroom reinforce separation rather than connection between educators. Nevertheless, the document articulates that relationships "are the single most important priority for educators in early learning programs" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 24). Interestingly, most mentions of relationships are framed between/among children, families, and community, overlooking relationships between educators. This oversight is most obvious within these reflective prompts:

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

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

How Does HDLH? Build Relational Knowledge?

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

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

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

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

Relational Knowledge and Pedagogical Leadership

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

An Emerging Understanding of Pedagogy as Interdependence

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

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

Honouring Interdependence within Pedagogical Leadership

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

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

Third, prioritizing educator relationships may allow ELCC to transcend its histories and live its reconceptualizations. Both reconceptualist literature (e.g., Johnston, 2019) and *HDLH?* (2014) describe educators as having distinct lived experiences, identities, values, and ideas (Coughlin & Baird, 2021), yet I notice that ELCC lacks ways to have communal conversations about and within these differences. Perhaps by prioritizing educator relationships, pedagogical leaders can put the notion of learning happening through relationships into parallel practice, which *HDLH?* set into motion when it declared that "what is good pedagogy for children is also good pedagogy for adults" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 16). When pedagogical leaders aim to generate "answers," the result resembles decontextualized professional learning models that position "expert" visitors to "fix" issues (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Pelo & Carter, 2018; Thomas, 2020). Rather, pedagogical leaders can show that learning is never complete, and their role is to pursue quest(ion)s that draw out multiple, potential trajectories (Delgado-Vintimilla et al., 2023). It is by generating these potentials that pedagogical leaders might disrupt histories of privileging Western knowledges and circle back to earlier knowledges to see deeper nuances much as Rilke instructs the young poet:

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

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

Finding My Identity as a Relational Pedagogical Leader

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

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

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

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

Barriers to Relational Pedagogical Leadership

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

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

Conclusion

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

Acknowledgements

While written by me, this article it reflects all of those whom I am in relation with, including Cheryl Anderson, Ann Wilke, Amber Holmes, Kendra Schempp, Melissa Campbell, and Shyanne Favaro. I am also indebted with gratitude to Kimberly Squires, Tricia van Rhijn, Harmony Simard, Eric Munshaw, Paul Gifford, and Mike Elrick as my first mentors in pedagogy. This article was written with an immense amount of support from the anonymous peer reviewer, Brooke Richardson, Shailja Jain, and the copy editor. What I ask of each of you and/or reader, is to wonder with me about:

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

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

References

Atkinson, K., & Biegun, L. (2017). An uncertain tale: Alternative conceptualizations of pedagogical leadership. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 61–68. https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs.v42i4.18104

Baylis, L. (2021). *Self-compassion for educators: Mindful practices to awaken your well-being and grow resilience*. Eau Claire, WI: PESI Publishing, Inc.

Beaudin, H. (2021). Leading Post-pandemic Organizational Change in Early Childhood Education: How Self-Awareness as a Leader and Distributed Leadership are Foundational to the Change Process. eceLINK 2021, 34-45. Toronto, ON: AECEO. https://assets.nationbuilder.com/aeceo/pages/2524/attachments/original/1636046436/eceLINK_Fall_2021-Leading_Post-pandemic_Org_Change.pdf?1636046436

Beltman, S., Dobson, M.R., Mansfield, C.F., & Jay, J. (2020). "The thing that keeps me going": Educator resilience in early learning settings. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, *28*(4), 303–318. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2019.1605885

Bezaire, K.P., & Johnston, L.K. (2022). Stop "under-mind-ing" early childhood educators: Honouring subjectivity in pre-service education to build intellectual and relational capacities. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, *23*(4), 435–451. https://doi.org/10.1177/14639491221128242

Brach, T. (2021, May 12). Bridging the divide: Learning to tend and befriend. [Video podcast]. Retrieved from https://tarabrach.libsyn.com/bridging-the-divide-learning-to-tend-and-befriend

Callaghan, H., Hale, F., Taylor-Leonhardi, M., & Lavalle, M. (2018). Decolonizing and co-constructing contexts that welcome indigenous practices and knowledges in early childhood education., *eceLINK* 2018, 17–26. Toronto, ON: AECEO.

Clinton, J. (2013). The power of positive adult–child relationships: Connection is the key. *Think, feel, act: Lessons from research about young children*, 3–10. https://files.ontario.ca/edu-think-feel-act-lessons-from-research-about-young-children-en-2021-01-29.pdf

Clinton, J.M. (2022, October 11). *Finding hope and agency in times of great change.* Panel discussion with Dr. Jean Clinton, Lorrie McGee Baird, and Anne Marie Coughlin. Virtual Conference hosted by Compass Early Learning & Care. https://www.eventbrite.ca/e/finding-hope-and-agency-in-time-of-great-change-tickets-407461076047

Corr, L., Cook, K., LaMontagne, A. D., Davis, E., & Waters, E. (2017). Early childhood educator mental health: Performing the national quality standard. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, *42*(4), 97-105, https://doi.org/10.23965/AJEC.42.4.11

Coughlin, A.M., & Baird, L. (2021). *Creating a culture of reflective practice: The role of pedagogical leadership in early childhood programs*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Cumming, T. (2017). Early childhood educators' well-being: An updated review of the literature. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *45*(5), 583–593. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-016-0818-6

Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (2013). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Languages of evaluation*. Philadelphia, PA: Routledge.

Davy, L. (2019). Between an ethic of care and an ethic of autonomy: Negotiating relational autonomy, disability, and dependency. *Angelaki*, *24*(3), 101–114. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1620461

Delgado, C.V. (December 2020). What is pedagogy? *Pedagogist Network of Ontario Magazine, 1*(1). Retrieved from https://pedagogistnetworkontario.com/what-is-pedagogy

Delgado-Vintimilla, C., Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., & Land, N. (2023). Manifesting living knowledges: A pedagogists' working manifesto. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, *20*(1), 4–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2021.1955051

Flanagan, K., Beach, J., & Varmuza, P. (2013). *You bet we still care: A survey of centre-based early childhood education and care in Canada*. Highlights report. Ottawa, ON, Canada: Child Care Human Resources Sector Council. Available at: https://www.ccsc-cssge.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/Projects-Pubs-Docs/EN%20Pub%20Chart/YouBetSurveyReport_Final.pdf

Fricker, M. (2017). Evolving concepts of epistemic injustice. In I.J. Kidd, J. Medina, & G. Pohlhaus Jr, (Eds.), Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice. *Routledge Handbooks in Philosophy.* Philadelphia, PA: Routledge, pp. 53–60. https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/110047

Johnston, L. (2019). The (not) good educator: Reconceptualizing the image of the educator. *eceLINK* 2019, 40–54. Toronto, ON: AECEO. https://www.aeceo.ca/peer_reviewed_articles

Kelly, C. (2017). Care and violence through the lens of personal support workers. *International Journal of Care and Caring*, *1*(1), 97–113. https://doi.org/10.1332/239788217X14866305589260

Langford, R. (2007). Who is a good early childhood educator? A critical study of differences within a universal professional identity in early childhood education preparation programs. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, *28*(4), 333–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/10901020701686609

Langford, R. (2020). Navigating reconceptualist and feminist ethics of care scholarship to find a conceptual space for rethinking children's needs in early childhood education. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, *45*(4), 20–34. https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs00019308

Langford, R., & White, J. (2019). Conceptualizing care as being and doing in ethical interactions and sustained care relationships in the early childhood institution. *Theorizing feminist ethics of care in early childhood practice: Possibilities and dangers*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 59–77. http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350067509.ch-004

Langford, R., Richardson, B., Albanese, P., Bezanson, K., Prentice, S., & White, J. (2017). Caring about care: Reasserting care as integral to early childhood education and care practice, politics and policies in Canada. *Global Studies of Childhood*, *7*(4), 311-322. https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610617747978

Moon, K., & Blackman, D. (2014). A guide to understanding social science research for natural scientists. *Conservation biology*, *28*(5), 1167-1177. https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.12326

Ontario Government. (2014, December 23). *Pedagogical leadership: Building strong relationships with educators in early years settings* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zt1Ne9Yhvs

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2014). *How does learning happen? Ontario's pedagogy for the early years.* http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/childcare/howlearninghappens.pdf

Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., & Pence, A. (2005). Contextualizing the reconceptualist movement in Canadian early childhood education. *Early childhood education in motion: The reconceptualist movement in Canada*, 5–20.

Palaiologou, I., & Male, T. (2019). Leadership in early childhood education: The case for pedagogical praxis. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, *20*(1), 23–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949118819100

Pelo, A., & Carter, M. (2018). *From teaching to thinking: A pedagogy for reimagining our work*. Lincoln, NB: Exchange Press.

Powell, A., Langford, R., Albanese, P., Prentice, S., & Bezanson, K. (2020a). Who cares for carers? How discursive constructions of care work marginalized early childhood educators in Ontario's 2018 provincial election. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, *21*(2), 153–164. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1463949120928433

Powell, A., Langford, R., Bruce, M. (2020b). Insights from Feminist Ethics of Care as a Contemporary Critical Theory for Contesting Binaries and Imagining Possibilities. Presentation at the Canadian Association for Research in Early Childhood Online Symposium Early Childhood in a Gendered World: Contesting Binaries and Imagining Possibilities June 4, 2020.

Rasberry, G. W. (1997). Imagining the curious time of researching pedagogy (Doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia). https://open.library.ubc.ca/media/stream/pdf/831/1.0054997/2

Rilke, R.M. (1903). *Letters to a young poet (Letter four).* https://rilkepoetry.com/letters-to-a-young-poet/letter-four/

Rinaldi, C. (2004). The relationship between documentation and assessment. *Innovations in early childhood: The International Reggio Exchange*, *11*, 1–4. https://www.reggioalliance.org/downloads/relationship:rinaldi.pdf

Seligman, M. (2018). PERMA and the building blocks of well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *13*(4), 333–335. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2018.1437466

Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Hallet, E. (2014). Effective and caring leadership in the early years. London, UK: Routledge.

Taylor, S.E. (2006). Tend and befriend: Biobehavioral bases of affiliation under stress. *Current directions in psychological science*, *15*(6), 273–277. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2006.0045

Taylor, S.E., Klein, L.C., Lewis, B.P., Gruenewald, T.L., Gurung, R.A., & Updegraff, J.A. (2000). Biobehavioral responses to stress in females: Tend-and-befriend, not fight-or-flight. *Psychological review*, *107*(3), 411–429. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.107.3.411

Thomas, N. (2020). Exploring pedagogical leadership in Alberta's early childhood education and care. University of Portland, Pilot Scholars: Graduate Theses and Dissertations. 75. https://pilotscholars.up.edu/etd/75

Vintimilla, C. D. (2018). Encounters with a pedagogista. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, *19*(1), 20-30. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949116684886

Waldinger, R., & Schulz, M. (2023). *The good life: Lessons from the world's longest study on happiness*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Wall Kimmerer, R. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.

Welch, M.G., & Ludwig, R.J. (2017). Calming cycle theory and the co-regulation of oxytocin. *Psychodynamic psychiatry*, *45*(4), 519–540. https://doi.org/10.1521/pdps.2017.45.4.519

Wilson, S., & Hughes, M. (2019). Why research is reconciliation. In S. Wilson, A.V. Breen, & L. DuPré (Eds.), *Research and reconciliation: Unsettling ways of knowing through Indigenous relationships* (pp. 6–19). Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars.