

Help Us Stay: A Message to Yukon's Policy Makers

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Article abstract

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Help Us Stay: A Message to Yukon's Policy Makers

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Emerging from a larger study that focused on stories of becoming and being an early childhood educator (ECE) in Yukon, this paper presents an exploration of Yukon's current early learning context from the perspective of six ECEs. By focusing on their lived experiences, this paper highlights the challenges ECEs face in their daily practices and presents the wisdom generated from their voices as they share their policy and curriculum recommendations, aiming to inform government decision makers and stakeholders in Yukon's early learning sector.

Key words: early childhood educator, voices, Yukon, policy

Something big needs to happen for [early childhood education] to continue to be something that I can participate in, in a loving and holistic way without compromising myself. (study participant Kat, September 2022)

It is no secret that serious challenges face the early learning sector in Canada. Across the country, the early learning field continues to contend with shortages in spaces and struggles to recruit and retain qualified early childhood educators (Archer, 2021). In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, early learning policies dominated by neoliberalism have become the focus of many debates as issues around equity, affordability, and quality within Canada's early learning field have been brought to the attention of a much wider audience (Archer, 2021; Statistics

Canada, 2022). While there is a growing recognition of the need for active discussion and attention to these issues, the voices of ECEs often remain marginalized from public concerns, resulting in a notable gap in the ongoing discourse. Media coverage tends to amplify the perspectives of parents seeking early learning spaces and the challenges faced by centre directors in hiring and retaining qualified educators. The Canadian government, meanwhile, primarily frames discussions on early learning within the context of a return-on-investment narrative that focuses on economic needs such as women's workforce participation, financial independence, and the development of productive citizens of the state (Arndt et al., 2021, Government of Canada, 2022, Moss, 2017).

The recent increased attention placed on the early learning sector has led to an upsurge in federal funding. In the fall of 2020, the Canadian federal government responded to public concerns with an announcement of \$30 billion in federal funding over the following five years to support a national childcare program for all Canadians and has committed to providing \$9.2 billion every year thereafter, permanently (Government of Canada, 2022). According to the Government of Canada's Federal Secretariat on Early Learning and Child Care, the federal funding for provinces and territories is intended to achieve several goals, including:

- ongoing annual growth in quality affordable child care spaces across the country; and
- a growing, qualified early learning workforce—by valuing the work of early childhood educators and

providing them with the training and development opportunities needed to support their growth (Government of Canada, 2022, “Creating a Canada-Wide ELCC System,” para. 3).

This unprecedented attention and increased funding have the potential to be a positive driver of change within Canada’s early learning sector. However, it is not entirely clear what the government means by “quality” in terms of early childhood education nor “qualified” in terms of the early learning workforce. As Peter Moss and Gunilla Dahlberg (2008) point out, “quality” talk in early childhood education is problematic because quality is a constructed concept based on an objective universal reality that fails to recognize the importance of culture, context, and diversity. What one group perceives as quality can differ significantly from another group’s perspective.

Given the ongoing recruitment and retention difficulties faced within the field, it is apparent that Canada’s existing early learning system is not working. Unless we want more of the same narratives, policies, and practices to shape our field (and I am assuming that the majority of ECEs do not), now presents an urgent juncture where we have the opportunity to ride the surging wave of heightened attention, elevate our voices, and establish a new shared conceptualization of *meaningful* early childhood education that reflects the professional needs and standards of ECEs in this country. Moss (2017) terms this work “the resistance movement” and invites those of us in the early learning realm to contest the current projection for the future of early childhood education presented by the dominant voices and join forces in shaping an alternative and sustainable path that promotes “democracy, experimentation and potentiality, within a common, inclusive and supportive framework” (Moss, 2017, p. 25).

As a master’s student, I focused my thesis on exploring how a group of six ECEs in Yukon perceived their professional identity. Specifically, I was interested in capturing the participants’ personal narratives regarding their journey of *becoming* and *being* an ECE with an aim to explore how they perceived the purpose of their work and their professional identity. During semistructured interviews the participants shared their specific situations, experiences, and daily contexts, providing valuable insights into the lived realities of ECEs who are deeply involved with children, families, and their colleagues and who, like others in the field, experience frustration with the existing government policies that shape their work. Although these ECEs are committed to the field, each expressed apprehensions as to whether or not they would remain working in early learning settings unless substantial changes are made within Yukon’s early learning context. In this article, I provide an overview of the early learning context in Yukon, drawing attention to the issues identified in existing literature. I then delve into the findings of my thesis study, which shed light on how these issues are influenced by dominant discourses and their impact on the lived experiences of ECEs in Yukon. At the heart of this article are the voices of ECEs and the power they generate as they share their policy and curriculum recommendations aimed at informing government decision makers and stakeholders in Yukon’s early learning sector.

Contextualizing early childhood education: Systems shaping the field

ECEs have a long history of struggling for recognition of the profession (Friendly & Prentice, 2009; Harwood & Tukonic, 2017). Throughout much of the early learning literature, the early learning profession is framed as an undervalued and somewhat exploited sector with low remuneration, poor training opportunities, high attrition rates, and few career development opportunities (Cumming, 2015; Friendly & Prentice, 2009; Harwood & Tukonic, 2017; Moss, 2004).

Currently, nearly 302,000 individuals are employed as ECEs across Canada, making up 1.6% of the total employed population (Government of Canada, 2022). Of this population, 95% identify as female, approximately

33% identify as newcomers or nonpermanent residents (compared with 25% among all other occupations) and 28.4 % identify as belonging to a visible minority group (compared with 21.2 % among all other occupations; Uppal & Savage, 2021). The vast majority of these ECEs work in early learning programs that operate in a neoliberal private market system (Arndt et al., 2021; Friendly et al., 2020). Within this market model, early education is regarded as a commodity that parents acquire as consumers, rather than being recognized as a fundamental right or a systematically planned and developed public good (see Arndt et al., 2021; Friendly et al., 2020; Langford et al., 2017; Moss, 2006).

Within this market-based system, early learning and child care programs are staffed by college-trained ECEs (although none of the provinces/territories requires all staff to have postsecondary education in early childhood education; a four-year degree in early childhood education is not required (nor recognized) in many jurisdictions; and centre directors/owners are not required to have any ECE education or training in several regions, including Yukon (Alexander et al., 2017, p. 32; Friendly et al., 2020).

Reflecting neoliberal ideals that prioritize competition, limited government intervention, and individual choice, each of the ten provincial and three territorial governments in Canada assumes responsibility for various aspects of ECE, including legislated requirements under provincial/territorial acts or laws, regulations for service delivery and monitoring, education requirements for ECE professionals, child-to-staff ratios, and funding arrangements (Friendly et al., 2020, p. xii).

Yukon's early learning field

In recent times, the early learning field in Yukon Territory has undergone numerous changes and developments. In 2020 the Government of Yukon adopted recommendations from the "Putting People First" report to move toward a fully funded universal early childhood education program for children aged 1 and above (Government of Canada, 2021). In April of 2021 the responsibility for early childhood education moved from the Department of Health and Social Services to the Department of Education under the newly established Yukon Early Learning and Child Care Unit (Akbari et al., 2021). In the same month, Yukon introduced a universal childcare system that provides funding to licenced ECE operators to address affordability and ensure that average parent fees are less than \$10 per day (Government of Canada, 2021). As of the fiscal year 2021 to 2022, Yukon has committed to investing nearly \$25.2 million annually in its early learning system to address issues of affordability, accessibility, and quality within the field (Government of Canada, 2021). And, in an effort to move toward a "fully qualified" early learning field, in April 2022, Yukon Government launched the Professional Diploma Pathway (PDP), an accelerated education pathway for ECEs who are credentialed as level 3 equivalent (a credential [not found in legislation] that was previously given to ECEs with a degree in another field of study) to access education at Yukon University to achieve full level 3 credential status (Government of Yukon, 2022).

Despite these changes, Yukon's early learning system remains a blend of nonprofit, for-profit, family day home, and First Nations government-operated facilities. Approximately 70% of programs are for-profit owner/operator models; this number includes centres in remote northern communities and family day homes (Government of Canada, 2021). Commercial and nonprofit operators must meet legislated and regulatory requirements and are inspected and monitored by department officials (Government of Canada, 2021). Unlike many other provinces, Yukon does not have an early learning framework; instead, the field is governed through the Yukon Child Care Act and Regulations, which date back to 1990. The qualifications of ECEs (referred to as childcare workers on Yukon Government websites and in Yukon's Child Care Act) are recognized and paid through a tiered levelling system with level 3 (diploma certification) as the highest recognized level of education within the field (Akbari

et al., 2021). According to Yukon’s Child Care Act (1993), licenced programs must ensure that 50% of staff are level 1 (60-hour course in early childhood development [ECD]); 30% are level 2 (1-year ECD certificate); and 20% are level 3 (2-year ECD diploma; pp. 5–6). Despite these requirements, the Government of Yukon states that programs may receive exemptions if the program does not meet levelling requirements but has a training plan in place and staff are taking training and working toward compliance (Government of Yukon, 2022). The government website, however, fails to stipulate a time frame for meeting these requirements.

An additional way to enter Yukon’s ECE profession is through a level 3 equivalency. This entryway was commonly taken by people with degrees or diplomas from countries other than Canada. Level 3 equivalency is ascertained at the discretion of the director of early learning and child care and requires a yearly 45-hour postsecondary accredited ECD course to maintain (Government of Yukon, 2022). Considering that Yukon’s newly developed PDP program looks to move educators from level 3 with equivalent to “full Level 3 status” (Government of Yukon, 2022), it is assumed that level 3 with equivalent is not considered to be at the same level of expertise as a level 3 status. Other than a wage increase, there are no requirements for ECEs in Yukon to reach a diploma level of education. Professional development is not a requirement to maintain ECE levels (Akbari et al., 2021).

Table 1. Yukon’s Early Childhood Education Standards for ECEs

Accreditation Level	Education Requirement	Wage Enhancement	Annual Professional Development requirement
1	60 hours coursework	\$4.12	None
1a	195 hours coursework + 135 practicum hours	\$4.77	None
2	315 hours coursework + 390 practicum hours (1-year full-time study)	\$6.01	None
2a	495 hours coursework + 645 practicum hours	\$9.96	None
3 with equivalence	Degree in “related” field (determined at the discretion of the Early Learning and Child Care Department)	\$12.31	Every year the ECE must complete a 45-hour postsecondary accredited early learning and childhood development course to maintain level
3	Diploma consisting of 720 hours coursework + 900 practicum hours (2 years full time study)	\$15.31	None
Not recognized	Degree	Not recognized	None
Not recognized	Master’s degree	Not recognized	None

(Government of Yukon, 2020, 2021)

Methodology and method

As previously stated, this article stems from a larger qualitative thesis study that aimed to make sense of how a group of six ECEs in Yukon narrated their professional identities through their personal accounts of *becoming* and *being* an ECE. Approved by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board, the larger study was grounded within a social constructivist perspective that danced with a bricolage approach to research. Generally speaking, bricolage works to uncover the *artifacts of power and culture* that shape all ways of knowing and theorizing about the world (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). In its embrace of complexity, bricolage research allows for the social reality and circumstances of the participant(s) to shape the methods employed in research (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). Through employing multiple and, at times, contradictory ways of seeing and interpreting the world, the bricolage perspective endeavours to offer new insights into research and knowledge production that are directly connected to specific social, cultural, psychological, and educational contexts (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004).

Within the context of the semistructured interviews, many of the participants expressed that their experiences of *being* an ECE and the perceived lack of support they received from Yukon's early learning governing system left them questioning whether or not they would remain working in the field. During their interviews, the participants also shared the changes that would keep them engaged and supported within their roles as ECEs. As a researcher and fellow ECE, I was humbled by my participants' willingness to share their stories, their successes, their heartbreaks, and their visions for the future of early learning. Hence, I initially approached this article from a bricolage perspective that sought to

transform realities, truths, policies, etc. that privilege the few and marginalize and/or oppress many... to create new realities that are inclusive, diverse, socially just, equitable, and respectful of agency and democratic, equal participation. (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004, p. 130)

However, when I submitted this article to the *Journal of Childhood Studies*, it was returned with a request for major revisions. Along with this feedback came a suggestion to review Peter Moss's (2017) article "Power and Resistance in Early Childhood Education: From Dominant Discourse to Democratic Experimentalism." Moss's article resonated with me like an irresistible song that compels you to dance. The article beautifully captured the essence of what the ECEs in my study had accomplished—their contribution to the resistance movement. After spending much time tangled in Moss's ideas, I recrafted this article with his inspiring call to action to join the resistance movement at the forefront of my thinking.

Participant recruitment

Participants for the larger study were sought through ECE membership organizations and via open calls for participation on social media (i.e., Facebook). A total of 13 ECEs responded to the call out. Of these 13 respondents, 100% were female and 61% identified as a person of colour. Participants were selected based on convenience, time spent in Yukon, and stratified purposive sampling. Sixty percent of participants in the study identified as newcomers to Canada. Anecdotally, based on my experiences as a faculty member at Yukon University and my various positions in Yukon's early learning field, this number of newcomers reflects the ECE demographics in Whitehorse (a conservative estimate would be that up to 70% of ECEs in Whitehorse identify as newcomers to Canada). The six participants selected for the study varied in ethnicity, age, and experience. Their varied social positionings provided the study with depth and richness in human experience.

An outline of the ECEs' background experiences pertinent to the larger study is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants at a Glance

Name	Marianna	Lauren	Kat	Kelly	May	Harriet
Ethnicity	Thai	Protected	Millbrook Mi'kmaq First Nation and Dutch	White	iTaukei (Indigenous Fijian)	Han Chinese
Age	40	22	24	57	41	38
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
No. of years in the field	10	3.5	9	20+	3	3
Level of education when first started working in the field	Level 3 with equivalence	No level	No level	No level	No level	Level 1
Current level of education	Level 3 with equivalence	Level 3	Level 1	Level 3	Level 3	Level 3
No. of years to complete current level	8	2	2	7	3	3
No. of years in Yukon	12	3.5	24	35	3	6

Data collection

Data for the thesis study was collected in two phases over a one-month period. In phase 1, a two-hour group gathering was conducted that focused on participants' experiences in their working environments and their past experiences that led them to the early learning field. During this phase the participants were offered a variety of mediums (paints, clay, charcoal, etc.) with which to create an artistic representation of their experience of becoming and being an ECE. Field notes were recorded during this stage as the participants conversed with one another while they created their art pieces. The participants' art pieces, along with field notes, were used to formulate the questions posed during the semistructured interviews and to triangulate data sources during the analysis stage of the study. The second phase of the study was conducted over a three-week period and involved one-hour semistructured in-depth interviews with each participant. During the interviews the participants reflected with their visual art piece and added to their stories, providing richness and depth to their personal narratives.

Results

As previously mentioned, this article stems from a larger thesis study that focused on personal accounts of *becoming* and *being* an ECE to gain understanding of Yukon's ECE professional identity. The stories emerging from the larger study provided insight into Yukon's early learning field and reflected the ways ECEs expressed or rejected a sense of professional identity. Findings from the larger study indicated that (1) the dominant discourse surrounding the early learning field shaped the social contexts of many ECE workplaces and influenced each

participant's reason for entering the field; (2) prevalent in each participant's story was an experience of being seen and treated as a caregiver rather than an educator; and (3) interwoven throughout the ECEs' stories was a pervasive culture of isolation in the field that caused participants to experience feelings of being unseen and unheard. The overarching findings indicated that while current investments have the potential to positively influence how the territory prioritizes the child's right to education (UNICEF, 2015), there is still a long way to go before early childhood education in Yukon meets the professional needs of the ECEs working within the sector.

Discourse tensions and their impact on experiences

Dominant discourse refers to the ways a society speaks about a given topic. Through continued messaging, dominant discourse becomes internalized and tends to shape how we view the world (Moss, 2017). Thus, uncovering the dominant discourse(s) surrounding the early learning field will help to make visible the assumptions and values dominant society places on the early learning sector and the educators working in the field. The narratives shared by the ECEs in this study align with previous research findings that situate early learning spaces as sites where contradicting narratives meet (Arndt et al., 2021; Langford et al., 2017; Lightfoot & Frost, 2014; Tukonic & Hardwood, 2016, 2017). In the following section I highlight some of the discourse tensions found in the larger study and briefly describe how they showed up in the participants' experiences.

Yukon's "quality" narrative

The early childhood education policy context in Canada is historically and continually framed within economic investment discourses (Akbari et al., 2021; Friendly et al., 2020; Government of Canada, 2022). As identified in the introduction of this article, federal funding for Canada's early learning field is contextualized within a promise of certain economic and social goals, including workforce participation of women, financial independence, and producing more productive citizens for the state (Arndt et al., 2021). Although the Yukon government claims to have created a new universal childcare model based on key principles of "affordability, quality and accessibility" (Government of Yukon, 2022), systematic moves to define and address issues of quality within Yukon's early learning spaces have been largely neglected. The very title of the initiative (and the Child Care Act) reflect what the government seems to think early childhood education is all about, and perhaps we should not be surprised that the Yukon government's role in supporting "quality" aspects in early learning spaces is limited to setting and monitoring regulations that establish health and safety requirements (the Child Care Act) and providing funding for families to access "childcare services."

Furthermore, the above-referenced government rhetoric is perhaps a shining example of what Moss (2017) terms "the story of quality and high returns" (p. 14). According to Moss, the story of quality and high returns is a dominant narrative that is currently shaping the early learning sector and can be summarized by the following equation: early intervention + quality = increased human capital + national success (Moss, 2017). The story's emphasis on financial outcomes has influenced how society perceives the importance of early education, and it legitimizes the current policies and practices within the field (Moss, 2017). Underpinning the story of quality and high returns are neoliberal ideals that prioritize competition, limited government intervention, individual choice, and the privatization of sectors such as education, healthcare, and public services (Moss, 2017). Within this narrative, human lives are reduced to mere economic transactions, where the emphasis is placed on implementing quick technical fixes, often labelled as evidence based, to ensure the provision of "quality" early learning programs (Moss, 2017, p. 19). Rather than tackling the intricate and deeply ingrained social and economic injustices that demand significant political engagement, ECEs within this model are expected to function as mere technicians responsible for implementing universally standardized evidence-

based programming (Moss, 2017). However, given the absence of guiding documents such as a framework or a code of ethics to guide Yukon's ECEs in their work with children, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what Yukon government is identifying as evidence-based practices within this narrative. The underlying message here is an apparent disregard of the importance of culturally responsive and democratic practices tailored to specific contexts.

Fundamentally missing from the Yukon government's quality narrative is the child's right to education. The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

formally and explicitly calls all governments at all levels to acknowledge the rights of children in international law, recognising that children are subjects of rights, rather than merely recipients of adult protection and that those rights demand that children themselves are entitled to be heard. (UNICEF, 2015, para 3)

This includes safeguarding children's right to have a voice (Articles 12 & 13), to have access to education (Article 28), to have their basic needs met, and to be provided with every opportunity to reach their full potential (UNICEF, 2015). Despite the child's right to participate in making decisions that affect them (which results in the imperative to listen to children's views and respect their evolving capacities; see UNICEF, 2015) and the consensus in the early learning literature that positions young children as capable and competent change agents, not a single mention of children's rights was found in the Yukon government's rhetoric, nor was there any representation of the child's voice. The concern here is that access to early learning is framed, not a rights-based opportunity that would require highly trained and knowledgeable educators, but rather as an investment in the economy where children need to be babysat so their parents can work. The inadequacies of Yukon's current early learning system were evident in the stories participants in this study shared, particularly when they discussed the job expectations within their centres and the nature of their conversations with families. For example, Harriet shared:

Reflecting back on my role in my first centre, I was a nanny. I didn't have a lot of conversations with the children. At the end of the day when I saw parents, I just told them [their child] had a good sleep, how much they ate, how many times they pee and poo. That sounds like a nanny conversation. It doesn't sound like educator at all.

Caregiver and women's roles as opposed to educator role

In Canada, there is a long and pervasive history of division between the K–12 education system and early childhood education, which separates the *care* for our youngest children from the *education* of our older children (Friendly & Prentice, 2009; Harwood & Tukonic, 2017; Langford, et al., 2017). Although both kindergarten and early childhood education initially started as private initiatives in Canada, kindergartens began being incorporated into the public school system during the late 1800s, while early childhood education continued to be delivered within a market-based system (Varga, 2000). The divided origins of the two systems persist in policy, administration, socioeconomic status, government responsibility, programming, access, cost, funding, regulation, and in the structure and education of the workforce, and they continue until the present day (Friendly & Prentice, 2009; Harwood & Tukonic, 2017; Moss, 2004). Typically, one system produces early childhood educators who work in early learning centres, while the other produces teachers who work in schools. The latter have higher levels of education, better pay and other employment conditions, and greater social status (Friendly & Prentice, 2009; Harwood & Tukonic, 2017; Langford et al., 2017; Moss, 2004).

The participants' narratives aligned with the literature and indicated that the organizational structures governing

Yukon's early learning centres have been framed within dominant discourses that situate early childhood education within a neoliberal, private market system that oftentimes enables and legitimizes a dominant discourse that views ECEs as caregivers rather than professionals (Arndt et al., 2021; Friendly et al., 2020; Langford et al., 2017; Moss, 2006). Arndt et al. (2021) explain that ECEs' professional identities continue to be embedded in an understanding of women's work and that the role remains understood as natural and normal for women rather than a skill that is acquired through training and education. This gendered positioning of ECEs within feminine roles assumes that little or no education is necessary to undertake the work (Friendly & Prentice, 2009; Harwood & Tukonic, 2017; Langford et al., 2017; Moss, 2004).

This study's participants shared a common experience: a glaring lack of preparation to enter the field. No educational requirements were in place, and they found themselves thrust into positions of responsibility without any on-the-job training. This unsettling reality not only shaped their initial perceptions of the field but also reinforced the notion that, as women, they were expected to inherently possess a "natural" ability to effortlessly care for a group of children. These experiences indicated a lack of clarity in their roles as ECEs, a lack of leadership within the centres, and a lack of systemic support surrounding the field, which has resulted in each of the participants grappling with the uncertainties in their workplace and their roles within it.

Yukon ECEs' contribution to the resistance movement

Amid media coverage and government rhetoric that seemingly sideline the voices of ECEs, there have always been those who staunchly reject the prescribed identity and subjectivity imposed by the dominant discourse surrounding early childhood education (Moss, 2017). Throughout their interviews, the participating ECEs exhibited resistance to the prevailing narratives that shape the field. Instead of being viewed as mere technicians responsible for implementing standardized quality programming, the participants shared a perception of children as extraordinary individuals—capable, competent, and brimming with intelligence and potential (Moss, 2017). By envisioning a future that aligns with their deeply held values, these ECEs contribute to what Moss (2017) refers to as the resistance movement. Their vision actively paves the way for a sustainable alternative path that upholds democratic principles, recognizes the right of every child to receive an education, and legitimizes early childhood education as a full-fledged profession. The following section presents the participants' vision for an alternative future of early learning in Yukon.

ECEs want a framework and a code of ethics

Glaringly missing from Yukon's early learning field are guiding documents that provide direction around curriculum and pedagogy to ensure that children's experiences in ECE settings support their development, learning, and well-being. The absence of a framework curriculum and a code of ethics is a huge detriment to the field of early childhood education in Yukon. A profession, according to the Australian Council of Professionals (2003):

is a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards. This group positions itself as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognized body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and is by the public as such. A profession is also prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others.

A professional is a member of a profession. Professionals are governed by codes of ethics and profess commitment to competence, integrity, morality, altruism, and the promotion of the public good within their domain of expertise. Professionals are accountable to those they serve and to society.

Without basic guiding documents such as a framework and a code of ethics, early childhood education in Yukon does not fit the definition of a profession. Many of the participants in this study expressed their frustration with the absence of a framework to inspire and support their own pedagogy, but more than that, ECEs expressed that the lack of guiding documents causes discrepancies between ECEs and their colleagues in how they view their role and approach their work. Findings indicate that an absence of clear direction and a shared vision at a systems level within the early learning field exacerbates educational discrepancies, fuels defensiveness or reactionary responses among educators, and contributes to ECEs' feelings of isolation.

ECEs in this study yearned for professional direction.

First, I would love to have a Yukon framework. (Lauren)

I think the needs up here are very different than the needs in any of the other provinces, so having a universal approach to [early learning] philosophy and theory would help a lot. (Kat)

I would love for people to have the same kind of like ideas and goals that I have. (May)

Guiding documents that provide direction around curriculum and pedagogy would ensure that children's experiences in ECE settings support their development, learning, and well-being and would set a professional standard for practice.

ECEs want educated educators working in the field

Since the launch of Yukon's \$10 per day "universal childcare system," there has been an increase in families enrolling their children in early learning centres (Government of Canada, 2022), but this increase has placed a strain on an already flawed system that did not consist of enough qualified ECEs to begin with. Within the current system's policies, a person can be employed in the early learning field so long as they intend to enroll in an early learning class. Many of the participants expressed frustration with this system as they spoke of their experiences of entering the field without first obtaining an education in early learning. In each of their stories, the ECEs shared that they had little to no education and no training when they were left on their own with a group of children. The consensus was that these experiences were overwhelming and, as Marianna so eloquently conveyed, "horrible." Harriet expanded:

There's no on-the-job training. Just a bunch of crying toddlers on your first day, and I remember I didn't know what to do.

May echoed:

I didn't know any regulations. I didn't know what was going on when I started [working as an ECE]. At least I knew how to change a diaper because I'm a mum.

Lack of educational requirements to enter the field is not only problematic for ECEs' self-esteem (e.g., Harriet felt she was "losing confidence every day"), but there are also serious implications for children's well-being. When ECEs are uneducated, unprepared, and unaware of the importance of early learning and their own role and responsibilities within the system, early learning spaces become akin to child storage provided by well-meaning yet unqualified child minders. Kat expanded:

I would say that [early learning centres in Yukon] don't necessarily expect you to have education because there is a huge need for more educators up here right now. But that means that people who don't necessarily care about the kids so much as they care about making money end up in the field.

And they're just here to make sure the kids survive the day. And that's so wrong, it's about so much more than that. And that's why we get looked at as babysitters sometimes. But I think that that's one of the biggest things right now is the lack of educated educators.

The lack of educational requirements to enter the early learning field sends the message “you don't need an education to work with young children” and perpetuates dominant conceptions of ECEs as being “less educated which, in turn, is rationalised by ‘childcare services’ requiring less well-qualified workers” (Moss, 2006, p. 33). These moves devalue the specialized pedagogy of the early learning field and categorize early childhood education work as unskilled labour (Moss, 2006). Harriet explained:

As long as you have the intention to enroll in [an early learning class] you're already hired. I understand this because we are desperately needing people, but again, if we do that, then the image of nanny will never go away. Seriously, it's like they just ask around—who wants to be an ECE? Oh, you are a woman, okay, come on. It feels like that sometimes.

Participants further expressed that the lack of educational requirements to enter the field and the current levelling system has resulted in a hierarchy and an absence of a shared foundation of knowledge. which has contributed to a divide among ECE colleagues. According to Agnes Makhene (2022), a foundation of knowledge is “made up of the facts, skills, terminology, and modes of reasoning that are essential to an academic discipline” (p. 7). The findings of this study suggest that without a shared foundation of knowledge, ECEs experienced difficulty relating to their colleagues and were not able to engage in critical pedagogy because this would require what is referred to as *sustained shared thinking*. Kathy Sylva and her colleagues (2004) define sustained shared thinking as

two or more individuals work[ing] together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept [or] evaluate an activity.... Both parties must contribute to the thinking, and it must develop and extend the understanding. (p. 6)

Findings of this study indicate that the lack of a shared foundation of knowledge stemmed from systemic causes such as the levelling system, a lack of education required to enter the field, variances in where and how people were taught, and a lack of ongoing educational requirements. May expressed her frustration this way:

The way we teach inside the daycare, it's so different [depending on] where you were taught. If you get level one to three from here [Yukon] and then [other ECEs] whose getting [education] from some other [place] like online or somewhere, I've noticed that there is a big difference.... Some of my coworkers, the ones [who] have the different temporary thingy [level 3 with equivalence], some of them really don't know what they're doing. It's so different and so difficult to explain to them because they have their own way of whatever they learn, they think that's the right thing.

ECEs want to know that their education is respected and supported. Like those in many other professions, ECEs want education to come before entering the field and they want to eliminate certification levels 1 and 2. ECEs want everyone working in the early learning field to have at least a diploma level of education.

We should set up an entry-level barrier for whoever we hire in the field, [be]cause those are children we are talking about and many of them, they're infants, toddlers, they don't even know who they should complain to if they are mistreated. And I know many teachers nowadays who don't even have a level 1. (Harriet)

Educated educators. I would love to see that. (Kat)

[The field needs] all level threes. Education is important.... I wouldn't want anybody to work [without a level 3]. (May)

A qualified workforce is the critical foundation of the field. Increasing the level of education required to work in the field will enhance practice and increase professional recognition.

ECEs want higher levels of education

Within the current levelling system, the highest recognized level of education is a diploma (level 3). The ECEs in this study want more for themselves and more for the early learning profession. When a degree level of education is encouraged and recognized in Yukon, ECEs can build a shared vision and a culture of collaboration together.

Why stop at level 3? ... [We need to] go even higher based on education. (Kelly)

I feel like diploma is not enough, we [ECEs] just want to do more. (Lauren)

A diploma takes you two years.... This is just halfway, right? I think it's not professional. [We need] two more years to get a degree. (Marianna)

I thought level 3 is just a dead end for our field, but it's not. I wish there could be more learning opportunities for higher levels. (Harriet)

Furthermore, ECEs want to be on the same playing field as other educators. A degree level of education would be a good start.

ECEs want ongoing professional development requirements

Training and ongoing professional development are viewed as vital elements in professional practice. In the current system, a person could obtain a level one and never take another class in early learning again (Government of Yukon, 2022). The larger study found that a lack of ongoing professional development opportunities was linked to a lack of value and understanding for ECEs' work as skillful and professional and contributed to a lack of professional collaboration in the workplace.

Given that the trends in educational practices and the supporting research in neuroscience are constantly evolving and the ways in which an educator needs to respond to them are fluid, the lack of professional development requirements is problematic, to say the least. When educators are practicing out of past understandings of what it means to be an ECE, it anchors the field in a bygone era and does not respond to the educational needs of the present. May explained:

There's so much difference you can see even if [ECEs are] older. Some of them still bring their ideas from the [19]80s, I don't know, 60s or 70s. And it pulls you back, it's not like propelling you forward ... but it's kind of like their ideas are giving you what to [do] to go back and not go forward.

Current theoretical and cultural perspectives and trends in Canada's early learning field require ECEs to participate in reflective practice as well as in-depth professional discussions to create a culture of collaborative learning within the centre (McFadyen Christensen & Aldridge, 2013). This study's participants expressed a strong desire for ongoing learning.

Ongoing professional development is a must.... I would love to see everyone trained up. (Kelly)

[ECEs need] more workshops and professional development. (Lauren)

I would love to see professional development. (May)

[ECEs need] a lot of professional development opportunities and continuous learning opportunities. (Harriet)

[ECEs need] some way to bring all of the ECEs together ... [an ongoing] giant professional development workshop [where ECEs can] talk with each other and help and support each other. (Kat)

When ongoing professional development is a requirement to work in the field, early childhood education is recognized as a profession with its own strong and unique identity.

ECEs want directors with leadership training

The larger study found that regardless of the participants' role or level of accreditation, all ECEs indicated a need for recognition for their specialized education, their experience with children, their culture, the value of their job, and their aspirations for themselves and the children they educate. Unfortunately, within the stories, very few examples of recognition were shared. In fact, many of the ECEs described an overall sense of feeling unseen or unimportant. Within the current governing system, ongoing professional development is not required for educators, and owners or directors of early learning centres are not required to take any form of leadership training, nor are they required to obtain level 3 certification before opening their doors; further, workplace practices such as scheduling regular meetings are up to the discretion of the employer (Akbari et al., 2021; Friendly et al., 2020). This approach has generated many early learning programs that provide childcare so that parents can work as opposed to well-educated professionals providing quality education for all children (UNICEF, 2015).

The findings of this study indicate that the lack of educational requirements needed to run an early learning program, combined with the neoliberal market model approach, have resulted in a lack of leadership and organizational structure within the participants' experiences of many early learning centres. This lack of leadership has caused negativity within their professional relationships and devalued ECEs' work.

Lauren's story highlights problems with a neoliberal market model approach to early learning; she described how a director was seemingly focused on profit margins rather than education. This director's attitude toward early learning was so disconnected from Lauren's values and beliefs about early childhood education that it caused her to leave that workplace.

I could tell [the director] that you need to change this, this, this, this. But [the director] doesn't care. Only thing [the director] wants is money. That's what [the director's] getting [from the early learning business]. So why should I waste my energy?

Harriet and Marianna experienced a lack of recognition and direction in their workplaces(s) when they were left on their own with a group of toddlers with no guidance or support. Harriet explained how this experience felt.

I don't get a sense of achievement [be]cause no one really sees you, no one really sees you are making an effort, and also you don't know which direction you should be working towards, no one is there to tell you that. I felt I'm losing confidence every day.

These experiences point to much-needed programmatic changes in early learning centres that will support the retention of ECEs. Participants identified that programmatic changes begin with responsive leadership in the workplace.

[ECEs want] a place where [they] can see leadership, teamwork. (Lauren)

From the director level will be the most effective way [to make changes in the] centres that we have at this time. (Harriet)

ECEs want to reconceptualize ratios

Numerous studies agree that one of the key elements that determines the excellence of an early childhood education program is the ratio of adults to children. In their systematic review on adult/child ratios in the early learning field, Dalgaard et al. (2020) found that lower adult/child ratios (provided by educated ECEs) led to an

increase in nurturing and stimulating adult/child interactions, meaning less detached and controlling caregiver behaviours, fewer conflicts and aggressive child behaviour, more prosocial child behaviour and fewer children who are aimlessly wandering around without being meaningfully engaged in activities. (p. 3)

Within the current system, ratios are broken down into age groupings and are often interpreted as how many children an ECE is left alone with. A common experience storied within the larger study was that of ECEs being left on their own with a group of children. This caused intense feelings of isolation among the participants and contributed to a workplace culture of separateness. Findings revealed that where ECEs were left to work alone with groups of children in separate classrooms, they found very little time to engage in dialogue with colleagues about teaching practice. Harriet stated:

Sometimes ECEs feel lonely, especially those who are in charge of a group by themselves, they don't have a lot of time to chat, to do reflective thinking with another ECE.

As a result of professional isolation, the ECEs in the study felt that no one cared about what they did and often lost energy for their work. Marianna's story reflected a strong sense of isolation.

I work in my day home by myself, and I work 7:30 [am] to 5:30 [pm] ten hours a day ... working with children who are speaking a different language. I just thinking how, how, how, how, how I can [how] I gonna deal, [how] I gonna work with? and after I work with the children, how I gonna talk to the parents?

There was a time when Marianna did work with a colleague; however, it was in an environment with twelve toddlers and two adults in the room. Marianna described this experience as "really crazy" and expressed that there was very little time to engage in critical and emergent pedagogy when all she seemed to be doing was putting out fires. These findings indicate that within the current ratio requirements, ECEs are unable to meet the standards of excellent professional practice (Ødegaard, 2021). Harriet elaborated:

[Be]cause you don't even know if your colleagues are thinking the same way as you. And there's no one motivating you to go even further.

When ECEs are isolated in their workplace they are not able to engage in collaborative practices such as critical pedagogy and sustained shared thinking with others (which are foundational to ECE philosophy and practice) and the children and the program are disadvantaged. Simply lowering the ratios will not solve the issue of ECEs being isolated in rooms apart from their colleagues. Instead, these ECEs want a coteaching model where they can participate in peer mentorship. The ECEs in this study recognize the value of mentoring relationships and want more mentorship opportunities within the early learning field so every ECE in Yukon can benefit.

[ECEs need mentorship] so we can learn together ... we can do [early childhood education work]

together. (Marianna)

[ECEs need] a lot more mentoring, a lot more. [ECEs] need mentoring from the beginning to the end of the day. (Kelly)

In order to meet the critical and emergent pedagogy demands of their work, ECEs require lower ratios and coteaching models of practice so they are able to develop meaningful relationship(s) with children and their colleagues.

I would love to see lower numbers, lower ratios so that [ECEs] can get that attachment [with children] so that you can have that relationship and not be stressed with eight kids. (Kelly)

[ECEs] need lower ratios so they can chat to do reflective thinking with another ECE. (Harriet)

Lower ratios combined with a coteaching model provide ECEs with a sense of being valued and supported through facilitated learning.

In closing

This article has shed light on the early learning landscape in Yukon by focusing on the firsthand experiences of ECEs. The accounts of these educators offer a genuine understanding of the difficulties they face working in isolated programs without adequate support. Despite their dedication to the field, many of the ECE participants expressed uncertainty about their future in Yukon's early learning system unless significant changes are made. By sharing their visions for the future of early learning in Yukon, these ECEs have actively resisted the prevailing discourses surrounding the field, disrupted the notion that they are merely caregivers, and instead asserted their role as early childhood educators. Their aspirations contribute to Moss's (2017) concept of a resistance movement in support of a sustainable future of early learning that promotes democracy, recognizes the child's right to education, and establishes early childhood education as a respected profession.

For ECEs to continue their work effectively and provide meaningful support to children and families, their voices must be acknowledged and systemic changes must be implemented. Policy makers must not only listen to ECEs but also incorporate their perspectives and recommendations into meaningful reforms. To create a thriving early learning field, we need more ECE voices. This is a critical time for those of us who have conducted research in the early learning domain, no matter how small the study or how scary writing academic work may seem, to seize this opportunity. By amplifying the voices and expertise of ECEs, we can make room for their invaluable insights and experiences to actively inform policy. Only when working conditions proposed by ECEs themselves are in place can we expect that ECEs will feel valued, professionally connected, and academically and emotionally supported to stay.

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