Navigating “Innocent” Conversations: Early childhood educator’s rationales’ for addressing topics of gender and sexuality with young children

by
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Abstract

This study examines how Ontario early childhood educators rationalize their decisions on how to address discussions of gender, sexuality, bodies, sex, and consent in their early year classrooms. Utilizing Michel Foucault's (1980) concept of power/knowledge and Virginia Held's (2006) ethics of care, I analyze how educators described their experiences of navigating these discussions with children in their care to explore how these professionals—as facilitators of children's learning—have increasingly become the gatekeepers of such topics. This shift has emerged due to the systematic pressures placed upon them from both provincial policies and cultural norms that limit children's access to information about gender, sexuality, and sexual health. The participants discussed the dilemma of serving needs of children while also maintaining compliance with institutional norms and managing the perceived "risks" associated with these sensitive topics. In this context, educators often feel compelled to filter, limit, or avoid certain discussions altogether, which ultimately affects the depth and nature of children's engagement with these issues. Given these assertions, I seek to uncover how power dynamics and ethical responsibilities influence the educators' professional identities and the educational experiences of the children under their care.

Keywords: early childhood educators, Ontario, children, childhood, gender, sexuality, sex-ed

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Chapter One: Integrating Intimate Knowledge and Theoretical Foundations

In 2016, fresh out of high school, I was unsure what path I wanted to take. I had a passion for education and enjoyed working with children, so I sought opportunities to gain exposure to early childhood education and see if it was a field I could pursue long-term. At 18, stepping into a daycare setting was a steep learning curve. I had never changed a diaper or helped potty-train a child, let alone navigated the complexities of managing a classroom. However, as challenging as those first months were, I discovered a deep love for the work. I enrolled in an Early Childhood Education (ECE) program at Algonquin College, hoping to gain practical skills and theoretical knowledge to support my career and provide me with the credentials to work with children and their families in early years settings. However, as I juggled full-time work and part-time school, I began to feel uneasy about the education I was receiving. While the program taught me how to engage children with activities and foster their development, it offered little guidance on my broader role as an educator. I often found myself caught in conflicting expectations: institutional policies, parental decisions, children's needs, and personal beliefs.

One day, a new child was being integrated into our classroom. We stayed late to meet the child and their parents as part of the process. During this meeting, the parents disclosed, "We prefer that [child's name] uses the pronouns *they/them*." At the time, this was an entirely new concept to me. The sex education I had received in high school had never touched on gender identity, and my early childhood education program did not include any discussion of gender or sexuality education. While I did not initially think too much about what this might mean, many of my colleagues were visibly frustrated by the request. Comments like "*The child is too young to understand*" or "*I do not even know what that means*" dominated our discussions afterward.

The parents' request sparked a cascade of questions among the staff: How do we address this with the other children in the classroom? Do we correct them if they use the wrong pronouns? Should we mention this with other parents? In the end, little action was taken. The issue was brushed aside, and the educators did not receive meaningful guidance or support. Little discussion was provided to the other children and parents in the classroom. While we respected the parent and the child's request, little was done concerning how other children or parents interacted with the child.

This experience stayed with me. It exposed a glaring gap in ECE training and support systems and underscored the daily tensions that early childhood educators face. We are expected to uphold policies such as The College of Early Childhood Educator's Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, respect parental wishes, meet children's needs, and somehow reconcile all of this with our personal beliefs—all without the tools to navigate these sensitive and complex dynamics. This experience left me asking: How do early childhood educators navigate discussions with children considered "sensitive," especially in today's political climate?

This question was driven from personal experience and aided by the broader societal debates. The growing tensions around gender and sexuality in education are reflected by conservative movements such as 'parental rights' campaign known as the 1 Million March 4 Children, which purports to "protect" children from what they describe as "woke ideologies" in sex education curriculum (Mason & Hamilton, 2023). According to the leaders of this far-right movement, these ideologies incorporate LGBTQ+ identities, as well as inclusive curriculum practices that uphold children's rights to use chosen names and pronouns in schools. This reaction against sexual education and gender identification in schools is driven by a widespread

moral panic over what is perceived as a loss of children's innocence (Garlen, 2021; Davies, 2023). These understandings are especially relevant in early childhood education and care (ECEC) environments, often regarded as "sacred spaces" where discussions of gender and sexuality may be considered incompatible with children's wellbeing (Munoz, 2023). However, evidence shows that children actively explore these concepts early and seek guidance from their early childhood educators (ECE) (Balter et al., 2016). However, due to the controversial nature of sex education in early childhood settings, there exists little literature that explores how educators have or should approach these concepts or consider the factors influencing their reasoning when interacting with children in their care (Robinson, et al., 2016; Davies et al., 2021).

Thus, my interest in this topic emerges from my experiences as an early childhood educator. I witnessed children exploring and engaging with ideas related to gender, sexuality, consent, and bodily autonomy during their everyday play activities. Despite how frequently such topics arose, I hesitated to engage in conversations about them with the children as I felt I lacked preparedness and was concerned about the potential backlash from parents and supervisors. However, early childhood educators must be equipped with such skills, given that children have a right to information relevant to their experiences and the experiences of others for their mental health and well-being (Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018). My research will position educators as essential experts in understanding and addressing children's needs and experiences, despite claims that such responsibilities extend beyond their professional role.

In this study, I investigate prevailing discourses of childhood "innocence" and "protection" and their impact on ECE perceptions of children as gendered and sexual beings. I

explore how a group of early childhood educators, the majority of whom are women and identify as mothers, often felt compelled to blend their maternal identity with their professional role due to the societal and systematic pressures placed upon them in today's political climate. This shifting of identity reinforces the idea that children need to be protected, with educators and mothers sharing the responsibility of providing this protection. This dynamic affects the knowledge children receive and shapes the broader understanding of early childhood education and care.

Thus, this study is situated within critical childhood studies, guided by the idea that childhood is socially and historically constructed (Robinson, 2012; Garlen 2019). Drawing from poststructuralism and ethics of care, I aim to challenge and provide alternatives to normative discourses of early childhood education that prioritize developmental logics, which limit how we perceive children's capabilities. Following a series of two focus groups conducted with 5 practicing early childhood educators, I used a thematic analysis to discover themes in the ways that educators describe their decision-making and experiences with discussing gender, sexuality, consent, and bodies with children. Through these conversations with educators, I explored how one's professional training, ethical responsibility, and role as a mother influence how one addresses questions children ask. The goal of this study is to emphasize the importance of further investigation into how to assist educators in supporting children in an ethical and caring way while bringing attention to the overall struggle of being situated in society to be as both facilitators *and* gatekeepers of knowledge. To contextualize these challenges, the following literature review examines historical and contemporary discourses surrounding gender and sexuality in early childhood, the impact of these discourses on educational practices, and the socio-political factors shaping parental rights and educators' roles.

Literature Review

Discussions around gender and sexuality with or in the company of children have been historically viewed as inappropriate and potentially risky (Preston, 2013). The conception of childhood has been rooted in Romantic ideals and has long been framed as a time of "blissful ignorance" (Garlen, 2021). Romantics viewed children as angelic and believed that they are intrinsically naïve and that we must maintain their purity until they reach a designated time of maturity (Garlen, 2021; Robinson, 2012). Such perspectives gave rise to the "purity movement," which defined childhood as a time of "purity, naivety, selflessness—a state of unknowingness" **(**Robinson & Davies, 2017, p. 221). This narrative proceeded to inflict a moral panic among parents, inquiring that the parents must surveil, intervene, and control their child and bar their access to sexual knowledge (Bhana, 2008, 2009, as cited in Robinson & Davies, 2017; Egan & Hawkes, 2007, p. 444). Over time, this discourse and the mechanisms that come with it have resulted in strict regulatory practices that permeated the education system (Robinson & Davies, 2017).

These historical discourses are echoed in contemporary political movements. Large protests and campaigns across Canada have been acting under the name "1 Million March 4 Children" (Mason & Hamilton, 2023; Council of Canadians, 2023) that encourages similar moral panic rhetoric, where these protestors want to eliminate sexual orientation and gender identity curriculum (SOGI), pronouns and gender-neutral bathrooms in order to "protect their children" (Council of Canadians, 2023). They emphasized the need to uphold "parental rights," further stating that educators should not be engaging in gender identity and sexuality topics with their children as it is the responsibility and rights of the parents to determine whether children are allowed to engage in such sensitive topics (Council of Canadians, 2023). This socio-political

climate creates significant challenges for early childhood educators who play a prominent role in fostering children's social-emotional development. **(**Davies et al., 2023; Balter et al., 2016; Penney, Young, Butler, Maich & Philpott, 2019).

Educators play a substantial role in children's social-emotional development; a large part of this is how they honour and support children's sexuality and gender identity (Balter et al., 2016). While supporting the children's varying identities is a vital part of their social-emotional development, educators often feel unprepared due to the lack of training, limited policy and curriculum support, and the societal pressures to uphold the discourses of childhood innocence. (Bialystok's, 2019; McGinn, Stone, Inghams & Bengry-Howell, 2016; Reddington, 2023; Davies, Balter & van Rhijn, 2023; Preston, 2013; Chapman, 2022; Balter, van Rhijn, Davies, 2016).

Huntington (2024) further explores one relevant and often referred to by educators as the most significant barrier to addressing children's questions concerning gender and sexuality topics–and that is the rhetoric of "Parental Rights." Huntington (2024) discusses the "doctrine shield" that parents and other stakeholders utilize to defend themselves and protect their claims. Huntington (2024) writes:

> "Across the country, political leaders and advocates are claiming that these rights mean parents can control school curricula, minors cannot access reproductive health care without parental involvement, and parents must know about a child's exploration of gender identity outside the home. This invocation of parental rights is not an attempt to recalibrate doctrine. It is a political strategy for advancing a worldview. Furthermore, it is highly effective,

leading to considerable legislative success, at least for the moment" (Huntington, 2024, p 504.)

Huntington's work builds on ideas from scholar Josh Gupta-Kagan, who advocates for a Restatement of Children and Law—a comprehensive coverage of legal regulation of children in area's such as "parental rights and state intervention in cases of abuse and neglect; the rights of students and the limits of state authority in public schools; the rights and special protections of youth in both the juvenile and criminal justice systems, from police contact to dispositions and sentencing; and children as legal persons, covering free-speech rights and the authority of minors to consent to certain medical decisions, among other things" (The American Law Institute, 2024: Huntington & Scott, 2020). Additionally, according to Huntington (2024) and Gupta-Kagan (2024), the Restatement would protect the child-parent relationship while limiting state intervention in this domain. While this proposal is complex, controversial, and flawed, it offers a potential middle ground between the conservative emphasis on parental rights and the liberal push for reduced state involvement in family matters.

Huntington (2024) argues that the Restatement could help ensure that marginalized families—economically, socially, or racially disadvantaged—receive the same recognition and rights as more privileged families. Additionally, Huntington (2024) notes that such a Restatement could shift public debates on issues like gender discrimination and racial injustice away from the state's control, allowing these discussions to be handled outside of government intervention. Huntington gives the example of how conservative stakeholders often use the rhetoric of "parental rights" to advance their agendas, such as opposing the teaching of Critical Race Theory in schools. This predicament mirrors the situation in Canada, where conservative

parents and stakeholders frequently invoke “parental rights” to pressure the state to intervene in matters like sex education or policies regarding children's gender identities in schools. Huntington and Gupta-Kagan (2024) believe parents are seen as the best judges of their child’s needs and that if the state intervenes in such decisions, it could alter family relationships and dynamics. Huntington's (2024) and Gupta-Kagan's (2024) argument for the Restatement of Children and the Law allow the opportunity for a nuanced exploration of how we might balance parental authority with children's rights, particularly in areas concerning how educators can discuss gender identity and sexuality with children.

Thus, the challenge lies in finding a balance that respects both the rights of parents and children's autonomy, ensuring that educational spaces are inclusive, supportive, and informed by the best interests of all children. The discourse surrounding “parental rights” and its implications for school curricula and policy will likely continue to evolve. However, this evolution must prioritize children's well-being rather than adults' comfort.

Chapter three provides further details on the long-standing discourses surrounding childhood innocence and moral panic that have shaped contemporary challenges for educators addressing gender and sexuality. I emphasize a crucial gap in the literature: the lack of recognition of the challenges early childhood educators face when addressing complex topics such as parental rights, children’s diverse identities, and societal expectations in the classroom, with a focus on sex education. I will seek to bridge this gap by exploring the nuanced role of educators in fostering inclusive environments.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter two explores two key theoretical frameworks: Foucault's Power/Knowledge Framework, and Virginia Held's Ethics of Care. Foucault's framework analyzes how power operates through discourses, shaping societal "truths" and norms, particularly regarding gender and sexuality, while critiquing the regulation of children's access to knowledge. Held's Ethics of Care emphasizes relational connections and emotions in ethical decision-making, advocating for inclusivity and recognizing children's agency. As I will explain further, these frameworks, taken together provided a nuanced understanding of the societal, ethical, and cultural factors shaping educators' practices

Chapter three examines how the perceptions of childhood and children's sexuality has evolved over time, particularly in Western, liberal democratic societies. I discuss the historical context of how childhood has been viewed as a period of innocence, leading to reluctance in discussing topics like gender, sex, sexuality, consent and anatomy with children. The chapter is divided into two parts: first, I trace the historical progression of Western childhood and the development of understanding of children's sexuality. The second section focuses on the history of sex education, with a specific focus on Canada and Ontario. I explore how societal views of childhood shape our understanding of children's gender and sexuality and, in turn, how these views influence the sexual knowledge provided to children.

Chapter four details the research methodology and methods used to investigate how Ontario's early childhood educators (ECEs) navigate conversations about gender, sexuality, consent, and bodies with the children in their care. In this chapter, I discuss the participants involved in the study, providing a brief background on the participants and the ECE in Ontario. Finally, I briefly outline limitations and challenges.

Chapter five presents the main findings drawing on focus group data. It is divided into three sections. The first section, *ECE Training and Developmentally Appropriate Practices*, discusses the challenges educators face in navigating sensitive topics like gender and sexuality due to inadequate training. It critiques the reliance on developmentally appropriate practices (DAP), which often reinforce heteronormative perspectives and limit children's understanding of diverse identities. I call for better training to challenge restrictive narratives and acknowledge children's agency in these areas. The second section, *The Ethics of Care and Power Dynamics in Early Childhood Education*, uses Foucault's Power/Knowledge and Held's Ethics of Care to explore how external power structures, such as institutional policies, influence educators' caregiving roles. It highlights the tension between adhering to external expectations and prioritizing children's needs, with some educators resisting societal norms and others feeling constrained by institutional regulations. The section critiques the neoliberal perspective that reduces children to economic outcomes, advocating for a shift towards a relational approach to care that promotes inclusivity and challenges restrictive power dynamics. The final section, *Balancing Maternal and Professional Roles in Early Childhood Educatio*n, examines how educators' personal experiences as mothers influence their professional decisions on sensitive topics like gender, sexuality, and consent. It explores the tensions between maternal instincts and professional duties, drawing on concepts from scholars such as Ruddick (1989), Callahan (2021), Foucault (1980), and Held (2006). The section argues for focusing on the unique needs of each child rather than abstract caregiving roles and advocating for a more empathetic and inclusive approach to sensitive topics.

Chapter six serves as the conclusion of this thesis, summarizing the key findings of this study on how early childhood educators approach discussions of gender, sexuality, bodies, sex,

and consent with young children. It examines the impact of dominant discourses, professional ethics, and personal identities on educators' decision-making, using Foucault's Power/Knowledge and Held's Ethics of Care as theoretical frameworks. This chapter also outlines the study's limitations, such as the small sample size and methodological constraints, while suggesting directions for future research. Finally, it discusses the broader implications of the findings, calling for changes in ECE training, policy, and practice to promote a more inclusive and relational approach to early childhood education.

Chapter Two: The Theoretical Frameworks

This chapter outlines the theoretical perspectives that guide this study, positioning educators as key figures in shaping discussions of gender and sexuality in early childhood education. The research is grounded in two primary theoretical frameworks: Foucauldian concepts of power and knowledge and Virginia Held's Ethics of Care. Foucauldian theories provide a lens for examining how dominant discourses construct childhood innocence and define educators' roles and knowledge, while the Ethics of Care framework emphasizes relational, inclusive, and responsive teaching practices.

To deepen this analysis, I use supporting feminist and sociocultural concepts further contextualize the study. Specifically, Callahan's (2021) concept of *Moral load* \offers insight into the emotional and ethical burden educators carry, while Reay's (2000) critique of Bourdieu's Social Cultural Reproduction theory helps explain how societal power dynamics shape knowledge production and dissemination. Despite being distinct from Foucault's work, Bourdieu's theories share a focus on how social structures maintain power hierarchies particularly in education. Similarly, Held's Ethics of Care, though separate from post-structuralist thought, provides a lens for understanding how power operates within relationships and social structures. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study critical examines how early childhood educators' decision-making is shaped by broader societal power structures, knowledge systems, and ethical considerations in their caregiving practices.

Foucault's Power/Knowledge

Michel Foucault, a renowned French philosopher and best known as a central figure in the development of postmodernism (Olsson, 2010). Some scholars call his concept of power/knowledge the "Battle of Truth" (Olsson, 2010). Foucault's work has significantly impacted various academic fields, including education, healthcare, and the justice system. His work often challenged systems of power, uncovering how these systems shape our understanding of the world.

Foucault's theory of power/knowledge provides a complementary lens to social and cultural reproduction theory and Held's ethics of care. It offers a more nuanced understanding of how power operates through social relationships. Foucault (1980) rejects the idea that power is something one possesses. Instead, he argues that power is relational and rooted in various social interactions, causing it to be dynamic and negotiated through discourses. Unlike traditional views rooted in Marxist and Weberian thought, where power is tied to economic or political factors, Foucault argues that social, institutional, economic, and political structures are all intimately connected and shape one's identity Foucault, (1980). For Foucault, power is not just about authority or coercion but also about shaping knowledge, perspectives, and behaviours through discourse to maintain domination and control. Thus, power and knowledge are inseparable and collectively shape our understanding of "truths" within our society. These "truths" can be as simple as educators believing children should always raise their hands before speaking in class. This behaviour is framed as the "truth" and seen as the correct way to participate in an educational setting, shaping children's understanding of their place in the classroom and the power dynamics at play. However, a more complex example of how "truths" can operate can be understood in how ECEs reinforce gender binary norms through classroom materials and

discourse. Many developmental theories in ECE programs use the gender binary to describe children's interests: girls are thought to enjoy reading, artistic activities, or dramatic play, while boys are believed to prefer gross motor activities like moving cars or climbing structures.

This knowledge influences educators to encourage gender-specific behaviours, thereby generating a "truth" that children internalize, shaping their understanding of what is acceptable for their gender. Educators, therefore, not only teach children what is considered appropriate behaviour for their gender but also reinforce societal views on what it means to be male or female. Over time, children internalize these truths, shaping their identities within these norms. Thus, Power/knowledge operates through discursive practices. How specific knowledge is constructed, communicated, and institutionalized reflects what holds the most power. Truth claims, such as those surrounding gender and sexuality in education, are legitimized through dominant discourses that reflect and reinforce existing power hierarchies. As Foucault suggests, these discourses privilege certain forms of knowledge while marginalizing others, sustaining societal inequities.

Robinson (2012) discusses the regulation of children's sexual citizenship utilizing a Foucauldian lens to make their claims. Robinson argues that specific knowledge is often dismissed or made difficult for some to access. Sexual and gendered knowledge is often considered exclusive to adults while being restricted or shielded from children. This power struggle determines what knowledge is considered "valid" or "acceptable," helping those in power maintain control. Robinson explains how the maintenance of cultural taboos—such as teen pregnancy or HIV/AIDS—often result in denying children access to important knowledge about sexuality and gender. This results in what Robinson argues children's "sexual citizenship"

to be voided as they are viewed as not having the appropriate knowledge or rights to understand and make decisions about their bodies and sexual health simply due to the dominant discourses at play concerning children's innocence.

Davies et al. (2023) also utilized Foucault's theories in their work *Sexuality Education and Early Childhood Educators in Ontario, Canada: A Foucauldian Exploration of Constraints and Possibilities*. They explore how societal power and discourse regulate discussions of gender and sexuality in early childhood education. Three key themes emerge in their analysis. First, the notion that children are "innocent" and should be shielded from topics like gender and sexuality perpetuates the idea that such discussions would affect their innocence. Second, developmentally appropriate practices are often used to justify the absence of these discussions in early childhood care. Lastly, Davies et al. examine the gender binary, noting that many educators are ill-equipped to navigate these socially constructed concepts, making it challenging to address or affirm diverse identities.

Through these ideas, Davies et al. expose the heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions embedded in early childhood education spaces, reinforcing societal power structures and discourses. In Davies et al. work, Foucault's theory helps explain how childhood innocence operates in the education system and how it is used to regulate and define children's sexuality and childhood (Davies et al., 2023, McClelland & Hunter, 2013; Robinson, 2008, as cited in Robinson & Davies, 2017, p. 221). This framework also deepens our understanding of childhood innocence as an "untouchable construct" or "truth" (Garlen et al., 2021; Feder, 2014, p. 55; Robinson & Davies, 2008). It allows us to understand how knowledge operates through power, which is not always explicitly visible but is implicitly maintained through accepting this

knowledge as “true” (Feder, 2014). For this study, I look towards Egan & Hawkes (2009) Framework of Recognition as a potential way to reconceptualize how parents understand children as sexual and gendered beings. Egan and Hawkes (2009) describe the framework as an “ethic of recognition that could promote a more nuanced and collaborative vision that moves beyond a cultural conception of ‘the child and its sexuality’ towards children’s sexuality in all of its complexity” (pg. 359). Through this framework, I use this as a foundation to how I approached my study, thinking about the way existing power structures and discourse operate to create knowledge. I acquired Foucault to aid this analysis and layer it with Held’s Ethics of Care framework.

These dual theoretical frameworks work together to uncover the existing power dynamics in early childhood education and care settings. They also help find ways to affirm children as sexual subjects and challenge existing power structures. Unlike Egan & Hawkes, this study focuses more on educators' decision-making in addressing topics of gender and sexuality with young children, rather than on parents.

Virginia Held’s Ethics of Care

This study also draws upon Virginia Held's (2006) Ethics of Care Theory to examine educators' moral decision-making, highlighting the relational connections they maintain with both those in their care (children) and with others (such as parents and policymakers) in their social environments. Held's framework complements Foucault’s Power/Knowledge theory, by emphasizing the relational aspects of power, knowledge, and social structures while utilizing a care perspective. These elements are interconnected, demonstrating that power and knowledge are not isolated but relational. Through Held's framework, caregiving is framed not as a private

act but as one shaped by social power, cultural expectations, and societal values on knowledge. Ethic of Care presents an alternative to traditional rationalistic moral theories by emphasizing the role of emotions in moral decision-making (Held, p. 11). Many conventional theories dismiss emotions as irrelevant to relationships, as they perceive that they impair one's moral judgment (Huebner, Dwyer & Hauser, 2008). By contrast, Ethics of Care recognizes that emotions are central to moral reasoning, particularly in interpersonal contexts. For this study examining the educator's decision-making, it is essential to account for the emotional and relational dimensions that influence their choices, especially in complex situations involving children. Ignoring emotions could overlook how the educator's empathy and emotional connections with children, whether in their class or their own, guide educators' decisions. This encounter is especially relevant in terms of early childhood educators who are predominantly women and mothers within the field and who, as we see within the data, would call upon their roles as mothers and how these roles inadvertently would impact their emotional connection to the children in their care (Lassalle & Urban, 2024; Coffey, 2022; Held, 2006, p. 27).

Virginia Held, who often challenges the binary view of gender in terms of gender roles, recognized this phenomenon in how mothers regularly connect their care work to their mothering experiences (Held, 1987). In her recognition, she called upon Sara Ruddick's (1980) essay "*Maternal Thinking*" to explain how women's experiences in roles like mothering can form a distinct moral perspective in which values and standards that emerge from these perspectives can be applied to broader context such as promoting inclusivity or fostering well-being in educational settings. For Held, she sees women's experiences in caregiving roles as central to understanding moral issues within society and the family at large. Held explained that before Ruddick's (1980) work, the experiences of mothers were largely ignored as they were not

considered to be “thinkers” (Ruddick, 1980 Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth, p. 29/30). This historical background and understanding of the intersection of women, mothers, and caregivers further stresses the importance of conducting research that recognizes these women and all their qualities and attributes through an ethics of care lens to position them as important thinkers and knowledge holders—challenging the idea that emotions or emotional connections are inherently “prejudiced” and advocating for their recognition as valid and valuable forms of knowledge that are equal to scientific inquiry.

Held’s (2006) theory is built around three key components: relational focus, moral reasoning, and ethical responsibility. Relational focus is central to the ethics of care framework, emphasizing the dynamic relationships between caregivers and recipients of care. Held draws on Eva Kittay’s criticism of the idea that individuals are entirely independent and self-sufficient, noting that society often hides the interdependence inherent in human life. Kittay argues that the notion of a society composed of free, equal, and independent individuals obscures the reality of dependency during various stages of life—whether during childhood, illness, old age, or disability. Kittay (1995, as cited in Held, 2006, p. 45) writes:

> Foster the illusion that society is composed of free, equal, and independent individuals who can choose to associate with one another or not. It obscures the very real facts of dependency for everyone when they are young, for most people at various periods in their lives when they are ill or old and infirm, for some who are disabled, and for all those engaged in unpaid dependency work. And it obscures the innumerable ways persons and groups are interdependent in the modern world” Acknowledging this interdependence is essential as it

underpins the way we function within society and how this is then connected to the education system.

Moral reasoning, the second component, involves the process by which individuals determine right or wrong based on ethical principles, values and standards (Held, 2006, p. 28). One's access to knowledge is often shaped by power dynamics at play. Such application inevitably influences moral decision-making, which could significantly influence this moral decision-making. For example, limited access to information can restrict how educators navigate relationships and ethical dilemmas. As Foucault observes (1980), power influences one's access to knowledge and, therefore, affects the moral decisions made within those relationships. This interconnectedness is evident when considering how moral reasoning around complex topics—such as children's access to discussions about gender and sexuality—requires a nuanced approach that incorporates the influence of power, knowledge, and cultural frameworks.

The third component of Held's (2006) framework is understood as the ethical responsibility of the caregiver. In this section, Held emphasizes the ethical obligation of caregivers to protect those in their care, especially those she describes as "vulnerable" (p. 45). Held's portrayal of children as passive care recipients' risks reinforcing a power imbalance between educators and children. This perspective can limit our understanding of children as active agents of their bodily autonomy. Scholars who critique Held's framework argue that vulnerability should not imply helplessness but rather advocate for recognizing children's agency to create a more equitable power dynamic. Held's discussion on ethical responsibility provides an important entryway to how we include ethical responsibility in the moral framework. Labelling those in care as "vulnerable" can reinforce power imbalances, contradicting the concept of interdependence,

which she holds in high regard. Instead, this study will emphasize that this responsibility involves contributing to societal change. In other words, I center the ethical responsibility of educators to be one that supports global care policies that address legal, economic, political, and cultural issues and moves away from their ethical responsibility to be centered on protection discourses.

By bridging Foucault's Power/Knowledge framework with Held's Ethics of Care, this study critically examines how early childhood educators' decision-making is influenced by broader socio-cultural power structures, dominant knowledge systems, and ethical responsibilities within their caregiving practices. When used collectively, these frameworks help explore how educational policies, normative discourses, and personal identities intersect to shape educators' approaches to discussing gender, sexuality, bodies, sex, and consent with young children. This analysis highlights the tensions between professional expectations and relational care, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and relational approach to early childhood education.

Chapter Three: The Evolution of Western Childhood, Children's Sexuality, and Ontario's Sex Education

In this chapter, I examine the concept of childhood within the Western world, focusing specifically on communities in Western and Northern Europe, North America, and Australasia (Fass, 2012). These regions share cultural, political, and economic systems that influence how childhood is understood and experienced (Fass, 2012). One key aspect is the way children are perceived within society, particularly in relation to topics such as gender, sex, sexuality, consent, and anatomy—areas that have historically been considered controversial and potentially risky by adults across the Western world. In the 19th century, societies in Europe and North America began to reconceptualize childhood as a period of innocence (Garlen, 2019). During this time, it became widely accepted that children should be raised within families, that early life experiences significantly shape adult identity, and that children possess distinct rights and entitlements (Cunningham, 2021). However, this understanding of childhood has evolved over time and continues to be redefined.

Examining historical shifts in attitudes toward children and childhood highlights how these perspectives evolve alongside broader societal changes, underscoring the relevance of this study in contemporary discussions. To better understand these evolving perceptions, this chapter is structured into two segments. The first segment aims to trace the progression of Western childhood and the development of understanding of children's sexuality. The second segment offers a historical examination of sex education, focusing mainly on the contexts of Canada and Ontario. Through this exploration, I consider how our perceptions of childhood shape our understanding of children's gender and sexuality. Specifically, I examine how such

understandings of childhood and children's sexuality influence the sexual knowledge provided to children.

Western Childhood

During the 15th century, childhood was viewed as a period of "deficiency" (Grant, p. 104), wherein children were often treated as miniature adults and engaged in adult-like activities (Ariès, 1965). Adults either neglected children or regarded them as resembling adults in many ways, explicitly extending to matters concerning sexuality, gender, and sex. Children across social classes were exposed to sexual acts, as there was a strong emphasis on marriage and reproduction among young females, leading to most children gaining awareness of sexual facts at an early age. Furthermore, children frequently participated in songs, jokes, and stories containing sexual references, serving as a channel through which they acquire sexual knowledge. However, the emergence of conservatism in society transformed the concept of childhood. These changes were shaped by White European colonialists who embraced Puritanism and advocated for moral discipline, purity, and the establishment of a society grounded in Christian values. These beliefs were rooted in heteronormative, able-bodied, and cisgender notions of identity, reflecting similar ideologies concerning children and childhood.

For instance, Puritans believed all humans were inherently corrupt and harbored malicious intentions, leading to the conviction that children needed strict discipline to achieve redemption. They emphasized the importance of child-rearing practices in moral development, promoting the idea that children should spend significant time with adults to learn culturally accepted behaviors rather than solely interacting with peers, which they feared could lead to immoral conduct (McKnight, 2003). Consequently, the Puritans aimed to prepare children for

adulthood rather than allowing them to navigate their moral dilemmas or life journeys (McKnight, 2003). They applied adult moral standards to children, viewing moral problems as universal across age groups (McKnight, 2003). The Puritans' beliefs were heavily influenced by religious interpretations of the world and the goal of guiding children toward righteousness. Education played a pivotal role in achieving this virtue. As McKnight (2003) observes, cultural leaders no longer expected parents to employ their methods and personalized understandings of child-rearing; instead, schools began to assume this role. McKnight (2003) further argues that "the child, parents, the community, and the nation would be better served if schools were given the authority to direct the moral development of all American children" (p. 80). Consequently, during this period, it was implied that children were expected to adopt and internalize a predetermined set of morals influenced by their cultural, personal, and future circumstances (p. 88). For example, while most middle-class white children were seen as capable of redemption and virtue, racialized and disabled children often encountered discrimination and were unfairly labelled as inherently evil.

Michel Desjardins (2012) explored the categorization of intellectually disabled children in his work "The Sexualized Body of the Child." He introduced the terms "Seraphic idiot" and "Mephistophelic idiot" (p. 69). The former was depicted as pure and devoid of sexual characteristics, posing no threat to society. In contrast, the latter was portrayed as a sinister figure, part beast and part demon, lacking moral judgment and exhibiting hyper-sexuality (p. 69). Additionally, scholars such as Solevåg (2018) have explored how children with disabilities such as muteness and deafness were often perceived as manifestations of "demon possession." These attitudes toward diverse abilities, race, and sexualities often raised questions about individuals' moral and societal worth (Wickham, 2001, p. 147; Berg, 1975; Oaks, 1978). Despite some shifts

in the conceptualization of childhood during the 18th century, many attitudes toward non-white, Queer, and disabled individuals remained unchanged. These conceptualizations of differing children are important as they outline how the discourse of 'childhood innocence' was and continues to be a privilege. Children who are cisgender, heterosexual, white, able-bodied, and middle-to-upper class were granted such innocence. Meanwhile, 'other' children were framed as lacking the ability or need for innocence.

The late 17th and 18th centuries are marked by the Enlightenment Era, characterized by the rise of the middle class propelled by the Industrial Revolution, which underscored the importance of education in achieving social status (p. 5). Notable figures during this period included influential thinkers such as John Locke, who conceptualized the child's mind as 'Tabula Rasa' (blank slate), suggesting that adult influences significantly mould children's development and emphasizing the need to protect childhood to ensure the well-being of both the child and future society (Wolf, 2013, p. 89). Jacques Rousseau was another prominent figure who analyzed childhood, particularly in his memoir "*The Confessions*" (1780). Rousseau reflected on his childhood experiences of corporal punishment and contemplated how it shaped his adult identity (p. 91). He stressed the importance of shielding childhood from adult influences, allowing children to maintain their innocence for as long as possible (p. 90). This desire to safeguard childhood led to institutionalization through education, law, and medicine, with childhood development being theorized and norms of a "normal child" established (p. 211). Moreover, Rousseau's pronouncement of childhood being a time of innocence was taken up by churches and medical professionals, where they drew their concerns surrounding the danger of children masturbating (Sauerteig & Davidson, 2009).

In the 19th century, scientific discourse emerged as a prominent voice in the Child Study Movement discussions. The Child Study Movement marked a time when children were increasingly recognized as individuals with unique identities and needs. It distinguished children's needs from those of adults, prompting scientific investigation into how best to support and promote children's development and well-being (Brooks-Gunn & Johnson, 2006). Backing such discourse, Stanley G. Hall, an American scholar with a Ph.D. in Psychology, challenged the notion that researching children held little value. In addition to such a notion, Hall was a key leader in education pedagogical practices. Hall's ideas influenced Ralph Waldo Emerson's utilization of science rooted in spiritual and religious ideologies, Charles Darwin's concept of evolution, Ernest Haeckel's theory of recapitulation and Herbert Spencer's notions that consciousness constituted a component of humanity's evolution (Goodchild, 2012). These theorists and their corresponding ideologies influenced Hall's research and his student John Dewey. Hall and Dewey's educational ideas were grounded in evolutionary principles highlighting the importance of individualized learning and social development. In other words, these two theorists often advocated for freedom in education to allow students to grow according to their innate abilities and social needs (Goodchild, 2012). Although these assertions sound plausible, they carried implicit tones of racism, sexism, ableism and homophobia (Ballard, 1995; Albee, 1996). The work of Hall and Dewey brought attention to other theorists, leading them to view childhood as a rich field of research with immense potential. However, this focus also exposed childhood to scrutiny and examination within an already troubled framework.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Canadian college and undergraduate university programs related to ECE are driven by developmentalist content (Richardson & Langford, 2022). As part of their training, educators

learn about theorists such as Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Erik Erikson, Albert Bandura, and John Blowby to develop classroom environment and activities that align with developmental principles and support children's growth (Richardson & Langford, 2022). This reliance on developmental theories and heightened focus on developmental stages can be traced back to the foundational principles of early childhood education. Friedrich Froebel, a German educator and a key figure in the early childhood education movement, held views that differed significantly from theorists like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Locke viewed children as malleable, and Rousseau believed they were inherently good. Froebel, in contrast, emphasized that children progress through distinct cognitive developmental stages.

However, he argued that for these stages to unfold successfully, the learning environment must be carefully designed to support them. Froebel believed middle-class women were best suited to create and nurture such environments (McNair & Powell, 2020). By encouraging women to enter the teaching profession, he reinforced the idea that their "innate" maternal qualities made them naturally suited for caregiving roles, effectively limiting them to these responsibilities (McNair & Powell, 2020). Over 100 years later, the influence of this discourse remains evident as developmental theories continue to shape educational policy and practice.

Developmental theorists Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson centred their theories around the "age of reason," rooted in evolutionary-inspired childhood frameworks as a time of "becoming." Jean Piaget centers his framework on cognitive approaches to psychology, learning, and development. Piaget's framework proposed that children endure a variety of processes throughout their childhood that pertain to integrating new knowledge, building upon existing knowledge, and adjusting previously obtained information to accommodate the new knowledge

they have obtained. One notable stage in the framework is the “concrete operational” stage, where Piaget claims children between the ages of 7-11 become more “logical” in their thinking processes. This cognitive framework has dominated much of the discourse on childhood development, especially in children's early education. Numerous scholars (Walkerdine, 1998) have tracked the impact of such a framework on early childhood education and care. Walkerdine (1998) discusses how developmental psychology has constructed an idealized portrayal of a normative, civilized, and rational child.

Consequently, these popular beliefs have become ingrained within education or medicine, making it challenging to perceive children differently. Piaget is one of the many thinkers who have become highly referred to in Canadian post-secondary early childhood education (ECE) programs (Richardson & Langford, 2022). Many scholars have cited Piaget’s framework as problematic, suggesting that his work is a barrier to understanding the ‘other.’ However, little attention has been given to Erik Erikson’s framework on human psychosocial development, which arguably holds a more significant impact on our understanding of children and their sexuality.

Erikson’s Psychosocial Development theory is centred on the belief that many stages of human development illustrate how an individual engages in society (Batra, 2013, p. 250). Erikson acquires most of his inspiration from theorist Sigmund Freud and his psychosexual development theory to understand that certain social aspects can influence one's identity (p. 250). It is believed that humans must learn how to regulate their behaviour, emotions, and actions to abide by certain expectations and norms within their social context, which is crucial for healthy personal development. The most prominent factor in Erikson's framework is the belief that if a

child does not overcome the stage of development, they will be emotionally, socially, and physiologically entangled in that development stage until they can overcome such obstacles. Erikson highlights the significance of developmental psychology as he writes:

> I employ the repetition of the words tending, concern and caring, not for poetic effect, but to underscore the fundamental fact that, in life in general and human life in particular, the vulnerability of being newly born and the meekness of innocent needfulness have a power all their own. Defenceless, as babies are, they have at their command families to protect the mothers, societies to support the structure of families, and traditions to give a cultural continuity to systems of tending and training. All of this, however, is necessary for the human infant to evolve humanly, for his environment must provide that outer wholeness and continuity which, like a second womb, permits the child to develop his separate capacities in distinct steps and to unify them in a series of psychosocial crises the children's lives (Erikson, 1964, as cited in Batra, 2013, p. 250).

In this passage, Erikson employs words such as “tending,” “concern," and “caring” to emphasize the innate vulnerability and dependence newborns and young children possess. These terms highlight the crucial responsibility of adults in ensuring the protection and well-being of the child and their development. Erikson's framework contributes to the overall discourse of childhood and children's sexuality by portraying the child as inherently innocent and in need of adult protection. Within this framework, there is no space for understanding children differently, as doing so would imply that they fall outside the norm, resulting in the understanding that they are developmentally stuck. Such understandings influence the policies and practices that impact the child's welfare, given the direct link between the child’s welfare and universal and

developmental understandings of children. Consequently, children who do not conform to cisnormative, heteronormative, or ableist norms are often overlooked or subject to significant oppression (Davies & Kenneally, 2020; Joosten, 2024).

These understandings of childhood and children's development became deeply ingrained in society to the extent that many perceive them as unchangeable rules or "truths" (Foucault, 1977). To such an extent that as the socio-cultural and political landscape shifted, numerous scholars, policymakers, educational and medical professionals, and parents began to experience panic for their children. This panic was particularly noticeable during the rise of technology.

In the mid to late 1900s, numerous technological advancements, including literature, television, the internet and additional online media platforms, sparked significant anxiety among parents, particularly regarding the impact of these media outlets on children and their development. The gradual rise in media distribution and consumption, transitioning from comic books and television to the internet, heightened adults' concerns regarding destroying a child's innocence and the need for protection (Egan & Hawkes, 2012, p. 276).

Scholar Neil Postman shares such concerns in his book *Disappearing Childhood* (1982), which cautions adults about the danger television holds. Postman believed that television "destigmatized hitherto 'dark and fugitive' secrets of adulthood such as incest, violence, homosexuality, and mental illness" (Postman, 1982, p. 87). It was believed that such exposure would corrupt the ideal conditions of childhood, "in which children are 'immersed in a world of secrets, surrounded by mystery and awe; a world that will be made intelligible to them by adults" (Postman, 1982, p. 86 as cited in Garlen & Crane, *Forthcoming*). In other words, children's

engagement with media, whether it be the internet or television, poses a significant risk to their innocence and the adult perception of children and their sexuality.

Egan and Hawkes (2012) drew upon scholars who discussed concerns surrounding the rise of social media consumption. Specifically, they use Maggie Hamilton's (2009) *What's Happening to Our Girls* to show that conservative discourse has co-opted the rise of media to be viewed as dangerous and have severe consequences on the development and well-being of children. Egan & Hawkes reference Hamilton's discussion in which she stated that "children have become desensitized by the media, and that they have come to believe oral and anal sex are 'just like kissing' "(Hamilton, 2009, p. 56 as cited by Egan and Hawkes, 2012, p. 275). The scholars further highlight how work such as Hamilton's lays the belief that "innocence is particularly fragile state and thus [girls] susceptible to becoming 'slutty' quickly (and inevitable) upon exposure" (Hamilton, 2007 as cited in Egan and Hawkes, 2012, p. 276). Hamilton and Postman emphasize the connection between media exposure and shaping discourses surrounding childhood innocence. Their work warns adults about the dangers of media and how it affects children's development and, subsequently, their childhood.

While these scholars have a hyper-conservative understanding of childhood, their ideas represent larger discourses around childhood innocence and protection. They illustrate how such discussions enhance our understanding of what constitutes a "normal" child, including aspects of their identity such as sexuality and gender. Amplifying such ideas prompts adults to have concerns regarding children's gender and sexuality, specifically in the type of sexual knowledge they receive and how it would alter their innocence.

The historical framing of childhood innocence as a privilege that is granted to white, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied children continues to shape debates on children's rights, education, and identity. In this study, tracing the historical discourses of childhood innocence provides insight into how these ideas emerged and how they continue to shape contemporary debates. This understanding could explain how historical discourses might influence how educators approach discussions of gender and sexuality with children in their care. Additionally, it provides opportunities to challenge these discourses and instead encourage more caring and affirming approaches that recognize all children's identities and experiences.

Sex Education

G. Stanley Hall's theory of adolescence significantly influenced the sexual and social purity movements of the 20th century. Rooted in colonial notions of "civilized" and "rational" individuals, Hall's work often reflected whiteness and heteropatriarchal ideas, initially overlooking racialized individuals and later asserting that only "white men" could facilitate their growth and prosperity (Ott & Sawyer, 2022, p. 260). Within his theories on children's and youths' growth and development, Hall also explored sexual development, drawing from Freudian and Darwinian frameworks. He suggested that issues like "chronic masturbation" or "repression of sexual function" could lead to psychological and psychosomatic problems, proposing education for men and avoidance of education for women as remedies (Sauerteig, 2012; Ott & Sawyer, 2022, p. 260). Despite challenges to many of Hall's ideas, the legacy of defining children as "innocent" and adolescents as "potential sexual deviants" influenced the development models, legal frameworks, and educational practices that shaped age-based categories surrounding sexual agency in the 20th century.

In the 20th century, there was a significant increase in discussions regarding the protection of children's sexual innocence and the regulation of youth's sexual desires. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the introduction of "nature study education" aimed to educate children and youth about reproductive behaviours and biological principles, though its permanence was short-lived (Sethna, 1994). However, the Post-World War II era, particularly the 1940s and 1950s, brought about notable changes in the social and political landscape, with shifting family structures and concerns about venereal diseases prompting the government to encourage schools to incorporate some level of sex education (Sethna, 2010; Rathus et al., 2019). However, the government's hesitancy provided space for religious communities to become heavily involved in promoting the sexual purity movement. This movement advocated for children to be aware of potential issues related to sexual activities, leading to debates about how and by whom such information should be provided. While some argued for maternal responsibility, others advocated for school-based education aligned with purist ideals. Public schools emerged as central institutions for fostering national identity and promoting the concept of "*Save the Children, Save the Nation*." The Woman's Christian Temperance Union was pivotal in advocating for "Scientific Temperance Instruction" in classrooms, promoting sexual and substance abstinence (Tupper, 2014; Sethna, 210). Purity campaigners viewed substance use and sexual activity as interconnected, believing that abstaining from both would uphold morality and contribute to the nation's well-being (Tupper, 2014). Notions of "sexual morality" were linked to one's character, control, and regulation, which was the foundation of maintaining social order (Valverde, 2008).

During the 1960s and 70s, a significant societal shift occurred, commonly called the "sexual revolution" or the "era of sexual liberation" (Grodin, 2015). During this period, youth

increasingly rejected traditional gender roles and evaluated popular moral standards. This era saw a rise in sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and adolescent pregnancy, which finally compelled the federal government of Canada to get involved and create policy decisions regarding the education and health of children and youth. Some scholars believe this involvement was also due to the AIDS epidemic, but more specifically, with the news that AIDS also affects heterosexual individuals, leading there to be greater empathy and concern for these individuals (Grodin, 2015; Heller, 2015). Consequently, the government introduced measures that would change the lives of children and youth. First, in 1969, Pierre Trudeau introduced Bill C-150, which legalized the distribution of birth control. Later, in the 1990s, the federal government mandated provincial governments to develop and implement their sex education curricula.

Sex education has been considered a "risky" and controversial topic among children and youth in Ontario. The controversy centered on determining who is allowed to engage with children in discussions around gender, sex, and sexuality and in what capacity these discussions may take place (Bialystok, 2018). In Fall 2023, the 'parental rights' movement known as the 1 Million March 4 Children purports to "protect" children from what they describe as "woke ideologies" in sex education curriculum (Mason & Hamilton, 2023). According to the leaders of this far-right movement, these ideologies incorporate LGBTQ+ identities as well as inclusive curriculum practices that uphold children's rights to use chosen names and pronouns in schools. This reaction against sexual education and gender identification in schools is driven by a widespread moral panic over what is perceived as a loss of children's innocence, especially relevant in early childhood education and care (ECEC) environments, often regarded as "sacred spaces" where discussions of gender and sexuality are inappropriate.

However, evidence shows that children actively explore these concepts early and seek guidance from their early childhood educators (ECE) (Balter et al., 2016). Nevertheless, due to the controversial nature of sex education in early childhood settings, there exists little literature that explores how educators have or should approach these concepts or consider the factors influencing their reasoning when interacting with children in their care. The reluctance to provide educators with resources and support is not surprising, given the long history of the provincial government attempting to intervene and regulate, sometimes in a more progressive but restrictive manner. However, this narrative is far from new; the rhetoric of "parental rights" and protecting children has been used as a foundation to oppose LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion for decades (Ronson, 2023). However, in Ontario, the "culture war" traces back to Kathleen Wynne's tenure as Premier of Ontario (Bialystok, 2019; Bialystok, Wright, Berzins, Guy, 2020). During her time in office, she spearheaded the creation and implementation of a new sex education curriculum, surprising many Ontarians. This move came after her predecessor, Dalton McGuinty, faced significant backlash for attempting to alter the curriculum, ultimately withdrawing his proposal (Saarreharju et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, Wynne remained undeterred and pushed forward with her plan to update the curriculum despite encountering substantial resistance from various stakeholders. Some stakeholders criticized Wynne for allegedly infringing parental rights, arguing that teachers should focus on teaching factual information about sex education while leaving values education to parents (The Canadian Press, 2015). Others contended that Wynne's curriculum was influencing children's thinking in a distorted manner and was not age appropriate (The Canadian Press, 2015). Introducing the new curriculum has unsettled many parents, prompting some to withdraw their children from school (The Canadian Press, 2015). However, despite opposition

from these groups, many parents welcomed the updated curriculum and appreciated the change it brought about.

In 2018, Conservative leader Doug Ford was elected premier, promptly repealing Kathleen Wynne's curriculum and reinstating the 1998 version until a new one could be developed. This revision was purportedly a response to conservative populism, echoing the sentiment that Wynne's curriculum was unsuitable for children and youth (Bialystok et al., 2020). Ford's introduced curriculum sparked discontent among many parents who had initially welcomed Kathleen Wynne's progressive approach. They argued that the new curriculum failed to adequately address the needs and identities of today's children (Molina, 2019). A parent of a gender-diverse child criticized the revised curriculum because their child experienced bullying during their gender-affirming transition, which was believed to stem from students' lack of knowledge about diverse genders. Ultimately, the mother had to withdraw her child from the school due to the ongoing violence and the school board's failure to intervene (Molina, 2019).

Many students have also begun to stage walkouts and protests to plead to the government to reinstate the previous curriculum (Teotonio, 2018). One youth, known as Rayne-Fisher-Quann, was shown to be the driving force in the walk-out and advocated for youth engagement in curriculum and policy decision-making. She stated, “We want to talk, and we want our voices to be heard” (Teotonio, 2018). Another 11-year-old trans youth spoke about the revision at Ontario’s human rights tribunal and discussed the curriculum’s impacts on LGBTQ students and their community (Loriggio, 2019). These youth feared how their classmates would treat them due to their limited knowledge of gender identity and expression. Furthermore, these youth advocated for comprehensive sex education that discusses gender identity and expression at an

early age. However, these youth voices were regularly ignored due to the popular discourse being framed as naive and innocent, perpetuating the idea that they need protection, and that sex is a risky topic (Egan & Hawkes, 2007).

These notions have been prolonged for decades, leading to education curricula, such as Ford's 2019 curriculum, to stay in place, and have little ability to be challenged or changed. Instead, they were solidified further as Ford had acquired a policy that allowed parents to exempt their children from the instruction of Ontario's sex education. The exemption policy seems to balance the progressive needs of today's youth and parents by offering an "olive branch to those who consider their values to be at odds with evolving liberal norms" (Molina, 2019). This policy remains fragmented and fails to recognize the numerous issues at play, including treating children as secondary citizens and portraying educators as less ill-equipped compared to parents when it comes to educating children on sex education.

To this day, debates between parental rights, educators' responsibilities and children's needs continue to be a contentious issue, impacting not only the sex education of children but also early childhood educators' education. Research has shown that educators find it challenging to navigate this debate as they lack resources and support and are frequently viewed as potential villains in the eyes of parental rights and religious groups (Bialystok, 2019; Rooks-Ellis, Sulinski, Howorth & Achey 2020; Giles, Juando-Prats, McPherson & Gesink, 2023). Understanding educators' rationale and how they navigate conversations that arise with children on topics of gender, sex, sexuality, body, and consent is crucial. It ensures that early childhood education and care programs promote inclusive, informed, and respectful learning environments that fulfill the needs of children to thrive and have a sense of belonging.

Chapter Four: A Qualitative Approach Using Focus Groups and Thematic Analysis

This project explores how Ontario's early childhood educators (ECE) navigate conversations about gender, sexuality, consent, and bodies with the children in their care. The aim is to provide ECEs with a platform to share their insights and experiences with fellow practitioners in the childcare sector. Through these shared dialogues, the goals is to foster a sense of community of practices where educators can learn from one another, exchange strategies, and collaboratively address the challenges of discussing these topics with children. By creating this reflective environment, the project seeks to empower ECEs, support their professional growth, and ultimately enhance the overall quality of early childhood education in Ontario.

The early childhood education sector is a tumultuous environment for educators, children, and their families for several reasons, including (but not limited to) minimal childcare spaces, waitlists, poor funding, overworked and underpaid. There is a need for early childhood education research to be completed in order to bring attention to and recognize the urgency of understanding the ways children build meaning around their own and the identities of others concerning gender, sexuality, bodies, and consent. This project centers on Early Childhood Educators as one aspect of the knowledge holders of children’s experiences as the focus as they

are children's first point of contact as they begin transitioning from home to school. They help the children explore this new “world,” where they are exposed to new ideas and identities surrounding the topic of gender and sexuality. For these reasons, this research aims to provide educational advisors and policymakers with a clearer understanding of how early childhood sexuality education is implemented.

Participants

In Ontario, the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workforce consists of registered early childhood educators and additional support staff who work with children across various age groups, from infant care to preschool. Registered early childhood educators are trained professionals, each holding at least a two-year post-secondary diploma. They must adhere to a code of ethics and standards of practice, and they are required to engage in continuous professional development to maintain their membership with the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE).

The College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) was established in 2008 following the passage of the Early Childhood Educators Act by the Ontario government (The College of ECE, 2024). This legislation created the “College”, defined the profession, and set membership requirements to outline what early childhood educators are legally allowed to practice. It also implemented a “title protection”, which enforces a legal framework in which allows those who are members of the College to use the titles “early childhood educator” or “registered early childhood educator” and those who are not to face certain penalties. Furthermore, the act clarified the roles and responsibilities of the registrar and outlined procedures for registration appeals, complaints, discipline, and fitness to practice (College of ECE, 2024). This regulation

highlights the need for increased attention to early childhood education, including greater funding, policy reform, and stronger recognition of early childhood educators as legitimate care provide and educators in Ontario.

The College has also become a valuable source of data on the ECE sector, which has lent credibility and support to this study. The data provides important quantitative insights into the current state of the field. For instance, the most recent membership data for the fiscal year 2022-2023 reveals key demographic information regarding gender in the sector. The early childhood workforce is predominantly female identified, with women making up 97% of the sector compared to just 3% men. This statistic has remained relatively stable over the last few years (College of ECE, 2024). Another notable statistic related to "Resignation by Reasons," This chart, sourced from the College of ECE, highlights the challenges within the field. It shows that 48.74% of early childhood educators resign from their positions. While there is limited qualitative data to explain why educators leave the field, it is of importance in this study as many of the educators have brought up significant factors in how the limited training, societal pressures, and mother identities have created tensions within their jobs.

Finally, the college's newest annual report for 2023/2024 has highlighted common concerns among the registered early childhood educators. This includes 33% reporting inappropriate supervision, which the college describes as "typically seen during transitions from one area or activity another and often caused by lack of communication during staffing changes and lack of situational awareness on the part of members". (The College of Early childhood Educator, 2024, p. 27). Another notable and relevant statistic to this study is that the college reported 31% of its registered early childhood educators most common concern is the

inappropriate guidance. The College describes this concern as being “typically seen in RECEs not knowing how to deal with difficult behaviours, exhibiting frustration and forceful redirecting children’s behavior” (The College of Early Childhood Educators, 2024, p. 27). These most recent reports on concerns, relates to this study as they speak to the gaps in training and support, which may extend to how educators approach sensitive topics like gender and sexuality. The issues of inappropriate supervision and guidance (e.g., not knowing how to manage behaviors or handle transitions effectively) could affect the way ECEs engage with children on these topics, potentially influencing their approach to gender and sexuality discussions. Additionally, these concerns speak to a larger context in which ECEs may be navigating various challenges in their professional roles, potentially impacting their comfort, confidence, and competence in addressing complex topics such as gender and sexuality. Acknowledging these concerns grounds our understanding in how these current issues might shape educators' rationales and practices.

The study's focus groups consisted of five adult Ontario Early Childhood Educators (ECEs); aged 30 to 60 years old. All participants identified as cisgender females, self-identified as “straight” or heterosexual. None of the participants shared whether they have a disability. All participants were Canadian-born and identified as either “White” or Caucasian. Each educator held a diploma in early childhood education and was a Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE). Three educators graduated from Algonquin College, one from Mohawk College, and one from St. Lawrence College. In addition, only one participant completed her diploma online; the rest attended in-person classes. The educators were employed across various early childhood settings: two worked within school boards in Toronto and Ottawa, three were employed in daycare centers, and one worked with a non-profit childcare service located within a school. All participants identified as mothers.

Recruitment and Ethics

The Carleton University Research Ethics Board (CUREB) approved the study before data collection began. All recruitment was done virtually, by posting a call for research participants posted on the researcher's social, professional and/or social media networks, and general Facebook groups “Register Ontario Early Childhood Educators,” “Early Childhood Educators of Ontario,” “Ottawa ECE Connection,” “Ottawa RECE Career Postings Connections,” and “ECE Teachers Ontario”. In addition to social media outreach, recruitment emails were sent to various daycares across Ontario, including the Recruitment Poster (Appendix A) to expand outreach beyond online social media networks. Once participants expressed their interest, they received an email providing the Letter of Recruitment (Appendix B), Informed Consent Form (Appendix C) and were asked the following questions to ensure the participants fit the sampling criteria:

1. Are you located and working in Ontario?
2. Are you an early childhood educator who currently works with children ages 0-8 years?
3. Are you working at a licensed early childhood program or home daycare center?
4. Did you graduate with a diploma in Early Childhood Education from a community college?
5. Are you a Registered Early childhood educator with the College of ECE?
6. Are you available during the week (Monday-Friday) after 5:00 pm and on Weekends between 11-12? (Please share dates that work for you this Month)

Once participants reviewed all documents and answered the questions, I obtained audio and video-recorded consent from the educators before the focus group began. All the collected data,

including notes from the focus group, audio recordings, and transcriptions, were coded and deidentified to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Recruitment Challenges

As described above, the recruitment process for this study began with an outreach to potential participants through various channels, including designated Ontario Early Childhood Educators Facebook groups, recruitment posters distributed to undergraduates in Child Studies programs, and emails sent to daycares across Ontario. Initially, I received over 100 emails from varying interested "participants." However, after sifting and verifying all the "interested participants," nearly 90% were noted as fraudulent emails. Second, some participants were initially interested but were only available within limited hours. Some participants expressed only being available "After their children go to bed*"* or were worried they could not complete the entire two hours as they had other extracurricular activities (usually around care work within the home).

Finally, some participants were initially interested. However, after some thought, they recognized they did not have "enough time" or "energy" to make it work. Much of these results aligned with current literature describing the correlation between the female field and restricted income opportunities, as well as the added responsibility of being the primary caretaker within the home. Studies have shown that early childhood education, a profession predominantly occupied by women, is often undervalued and underfunded, resulting in lower wages compared to other sectors. The dual burden of paid work and unpaid caregiving responsibilities can limit their ability to engage in opportunities outside of their immediate caregiving roles. Macdonald, Richardson, and Langford (2016) discuss how the shift of responsibility for social reproduction has dramatically affected women, specifically mothers, who are dominantly in these roles (p.

103). They explain that mothers often struggle to balance paid work with unpaid domestic and caregiving work, which causes tension in their professional and personal lives. For these reasons, many of the prospective educator participants, who identified as mothers, could not commit to participating in the study.

Thus, after four months of recruiting attempts, only (5) educators joined the study, forming one focus group with (2) ECEs and another (3) ECEs. These groups were conducted separately due to logistical constraints and participant availability. The first and second focus groups were held approximately four weeks apart, as ECEs became interested at different times. Given the challenges in recruitment, I prioritized accommodating participants limited availability rather than waiting to form a larger group, which risked losing interested educators. Conducting two smaller groups, while isn't ideal, still allowed for meaningful discussion while ensuring that all willing participants could contribute to the study.

Data Collection

To understand ECEs experiences I conducted two small focus groups with a total of five educators. Focus groups were chosen because they offer a versatile "methodological toolkit" in qualitative research, providing flexibility and an opportunity for participants to share their perspectives while being influenced by others (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998, as cited in William & Katz, 2001) This environment allows for dynamic interaction, where participants can both express their own views and react to the thoughts and perspectives of others (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Research has shown that such collaborative discussions enhance professional development, as educators share stories, ideas, and experiences (Kess & Einarsdóttir, 2023). In this context, the focus groups served as a space to explore educators' perceptions, feelings, and

thinking on early childhood sex education, as well as to imagine potential future programs and policy developments.

In analyzing the insights gathered from the focus groups, I turned to thematic analysis, method successfully employed in similar research projects (Davies et al., 2023; Cooke et al., 2020; Stone et al., 2013). This approach is particularly useful in uncovering the socio-cultural and structural conditions that shape educators' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006, as cited in., Davies et al., 2023). A thematic analysis identifies patterns in the data and helps theorize how educators use language to represent and construct meaning, particularly in how they describe decision-making and experiences that shape knowledge among children (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 8). The flexibility of this approach, especially when combined with the NVivo 14 software, allowed for a close examination of the data, which was distilled into key thematic categories: ECE Training and Developmentally Appropriate Practices, The Ethics of Care and Power Dynamics in Early Childhood Education and Balancing Maternal and Professional roles in Early Childhood Education. These themes were identified not only for their frequency but also for their significance in understanding early childhood experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the focus groups, educators noted a lack of training in sexuality education but referenced developmentally appropriate discourses to justify how they navigate these discussions with children. This theme was significant as it provided insight into how educators often bridge the gap in their training by relying on developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) to guide their decisions on sexuality education with young children. Secondly, educators described their relationships with parents, children, superiors, and the broader community, which shapes power dynamics within the early childhood education and care sector. Educators described these

relationships as hierarchical, using this framework to explain who holds the authority to make decisions about discussions on sex, gender, sexuality, bodies, and consent with children. This perspective is important as it reveals whether educators view themselves as “experts in the field.” In many cases, however, they did not see themselves in this role. Finally, I include how educators drew on their experiences as mothers. They compared how they address these topics with their own children versus the children in their care and expressed their beliefs about who should be responsible for these discussions, based on their personal understanding of parental rights. This theme is crucial for understanding how motherhood influences educators’ professionalism when approaching sensitive topics.

In the following chapter, these findings will be discussed in detail, focusing on how each contributes to a broader understanding of educators' decision-making. It is important to note that educators' personal values, biases, and prior experiences also influenced this process. Ultimately, the ECEs in the study highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of educators' decision-making when addressing gender, sexuality, and related topics in early childhood settings.

Chapter Five: The Interplay of Professional Training, Ethical Responsibility, and Role as a mother in Early Childhood Educators' Decision-Making

In this chapter, I explore key themes that emerged from conversations with early childhood educators in Ontario regarding how they navigate topics such as gender, sex, sexuality, consent, and autonomy with children. A growing 'panic' has emerged over decisions about who, when, and how these topics, should be addressed in early childhood education. Many parents assert that they, rather than educators, should control what their children learn about these topics (Bialystok, 2018). For these reasons, several critical questions are raised: If parents are unwilling to discuss these sensitive topics, but children still have questions, how do educators navigate this complex struggle over power and knowledge? How do educators balance external pressures, societal expectations, and internal conflicts?

This chapter presents the key themes from focus groups with ECEs, specifically addressing how they discuss gender, sexuality, sex, bodies, and consent with children. The findings include the lack of professional training, reliance on developmentally appropriate

practices (DAP), ethical responsibilities, and the influence of motherhood on educators' approaches to sensitive conversations.

ECE Training and Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP)

This section highlights educators' experiences navigating conversations with children, emphasizing the limited training they receive and their reliance on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). Due to the lack of preparation, educators often avoid addressing specific topics or approach them through a developmental lens that reinforces heteronormative and cis-normative perspectives. This approach can inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes, marginalize non-normative experiences, and limit children's understanding of different gender and sexual identities. Throughout the focus groups, educators frequently expressed dissatisfaction with their training, attributing it to the limited content typically offered in early childhood education college programs. They noted that these programs often assume that early childhood educators will acquire the necessary knowledge during their practicum and draw on their maternal experience and instincts. These assumptions leave educators feeling unprepared to address children's questions, leading them to defer such discussions to parents. This reliance on DAP and limited training invertedly perpetuates the belief that topics of gender, sexuality, bodies, consent, and sex are inappropriate for young children and the early childhood settings.

Educators in this study reported receiving minimal training in gender and sexuality education. For instance, their training often focused on correct terminology for body parts to enable children to report abuse. One educator shared:

> My training was like that of social workers with the Catholic Children's Aid Society, tailored to my role as a camp counsellor. We worked with a specific demographic, many

> children in foster care or crown wards, some of whom had experienced physical or sexual abuse. We learned to recognize behaviors stemming from these experiences, knowing that a child may tell an adult up to 11 times before receiving help. As an ECE, I was also trained to use proper names for body parts with children from an early age, avoiding nicknames to help them express themselves clearly.

Another educator reflected:

> Reflecting on it, the training focused on using correct names for body parts and terms like 'BM' and 'urinate,' emphasizing the importance of enabling children to report sexual abuse. While knowing proper terms is important—Thinking back, I graduated in 2014, and there really was not much—less than I initially thought.

The emphasis on abuse prevention aligns with the discourse of childhood innocence, framing children as vulnerable and in need of protection. While I do not negate the reality of child abuse or the importance of including this in educators' training, making it the sole basis of their training regarding gender, sexuality, body, and consent further reinforces the notion that children are in constant danger. It implies that it is up to us—educators, mothers, and adults—to protect them and preserve their innocence. Egan and Hawkes (2009) argue that it is not that children should not be protected or do not need protection; rather, there is a need to recognize children as sexual and gendered beings, while ensuring their safety and well-being.

In line with Egan and Hawkes (2009), I share the belief that while it is important for educators to receive training on sexual violence and child abuse, additional training is also necessary. By focusing solely on this type of training, we perpetuate the narrative that children are constantly at risk, presenting them as passive beings incapable of exercising agency or

autonomy. This framing of children as vulnerable not only shapes how educators approach their role in the classroom but also how society views children in relation to issues of sex education. This view creates an inevitable cycle where societal beliefs about children influence how educators are primarily trained on sexual violence and abuse prevention without addressing the broader aspects of children's sexual and gendered agency. As a result, children are left in a position where their questions about gender, sexuality, bodies, and consent go unanswered.

There is abundant literature discussing the limited training, education, and overall support that early childhood educators receive (Underwood & Killoran, 2009; Richardson et al., 2023). In the case of this study, this is even more sparse when it comes to sexuality and gender identity education. Within the focus group, most participants justified avoiding specific topics together by citing developmental discourses. As Prioletta (2024) notes, some educators often perceive children to be "too young" to understand gender and sexuality topics (Prioletta, 2024, p. 255., as cited in Bhana, 2003; Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000; Prioletta, 2020a; Renold, 2002). This belief reinforces societal narratives about childhood innocence and limits educators' ability to provide inclusive sex education to children.

During one focus group, one educator shared:

> I have had parents approach me because of what is happening in the school [Discussions of sexuality and gender identity education] since we are a third-party daycare that serves that school. Some parents ask at the end of the day, 'Do you talk about this in daycare, too?' I always reassure them that we are open to answering any questions the children have. We have pride flags and diversity posters displayed everywhere because we are an inclusive daycare.

In response, another educator questioned:

> Do you feel like you get questions about there being a 'push' where we should not push too much of this down on the kids and let the kids be and answer the questions as they happen, rather than force some of these? Very abstract thoughts on these young minds at such an early age

This interaction highlights the tension between inclusive education and conservative beliefs, illustrating how societal expectation shapes educator's approaches. Davies et al. (2021) explain the interconnected ways in which knowledge, power, and social practices construct gender and sexuality in early childhood environments. Like Davies et al. (2021), I draw on Foucault's (1972-1977) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* to explore how educators' rationales for addressing topics of gender and sexuality are influenced by broader societal expectations, policies, and professional training, all of which shape what is deemed appropriate or permissible in early childhood education. Foucault's concept of "regime of truth" helps us understand how these influences determine what is accepted as valid knowledge. As Foucault explains:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (*Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977)*

The educator questioning whether such inclusive initiatives are appropriate for children illustrates how power and knowledge operate within childhood education to produce "truths"

about what children should learn. In this context, the “regime of truth” dictates that the notion of childhood innocence is a truth that must be preserved. The educator questioning another's rationalization or decision-making reinforces the regime and subtly polices the boundaries of what is acceptable to discuss in early childhood education. At the same time, Foucault (1990) helps us understand how specific ideas are constructed to hold some level of validity. I also turn to social and cultural reproduction theories to further support how the educators' questioning is not an individual act but a part of broader systematic processes— and, in this case, perpetuated through education systems.

While Foucault’s ideas help explain how power and knowledge shape “truths” in early childhood education, another important factor to consider is the emotional and cultural investments educators bring to their work. In this study, all the educators identified as women and mothers. They frequently expressed that their approach to caring for children was influenced by how they would want their own children to be treated. As a result, some chose to avoid conversations about gender and sexuality, viewing this to protect children and preserve their innocence, in line with their personal beliefs (Prioletta, 2020; Reddington, 2023).

As previously discussed, the belief that women— and particularly mothers—are the most effective facilitators of children's education stems from the long-standing societal notions around the expectations of women in our society. These notions shape how women are integrated into caregiving professions and influence the support they receive as early childhood educators. This blurring of the educator's ethical role and their maternal role reveals how their instinct to protect children functions as a form of emotional capital (Reay, 2000). This emotional capital is shaped by social norms and passed down through culture, reinforcing dominant ideas about what is considered “normal” or “truth” in child development and education. Ultimately, emotional

capital becomes embedded in the broader social fabric, shaping both individual and collective beliefs about childhood, protection, and education. This is where Reay's (2000) extension of Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural reproduction is particularly useful, complementing my principal frameworks.

While Bourdieu uses the concept of capital to explore how different forms—economic, social, and cultural are interconnected and mutually reinforce socio-cultural and economic outcomes (1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Reay, 2000). Reay (2000) critiqued the lack of explicit notions that emotional capital has within his conceptual framework. Reay (2000) extends Boudrieau's theory by using emotional capital to understand mothers' involvement in their children's education. Reay (2000) explains how Bourdieu encouraged scholars to "develop his theoretical framework to make sense of their empirical findings." Thus, she defines emotional capital in her theoretical framework as a 'heuristic device rather than an overarching conceptual frame and recognizes that it requires further refining both theoretically and empirically" (p. 569).

This scholarly input supports the idea that emotional capital should be included with the other capital concepts that are a part of Bourdieu's (1990) conceptual framework and can help illuminate a fuller understanding of social dynamics, especially in gendered contexts. For educators, this becomes even more relevant as this emotional capital is what impacts the way they navigate children's questions concerning gender, sexuality, sex, bodies, and consent. Garlen (2019) explores how Childhood Innocence has been shaped by emotional investments and social tensions, which affect how early childhood education and care are structured (p. 55). The concept of emotional capital provides a key framework for understanding how the idea of 'childhood innocence' shapes what ECEs consider appropriate to instruct children regarding sensitive topics. It explains how these societal beliefs are embedded in a broader 'regime of truth'

that influences educational practices. In this context, the focus on developmentally appropriate practices reinforces these beliefs, positioning them as the primary means of ensuring children's growth, health, and well-being.

Some educators viewed topics like consent as appropriate for young children but were more hesitant to discuss gender and sexuality. When determining what children understand and when these topics should be introduced, they considered factors such as age, culture, religion, and (dis)ability. However, when asked how they respond to a child questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation, many avoided engaging in the conversation, as one educator shared:

> I am in kindergarten, so we do not go into much depth about, you know, sexuality and consent. But we absolutely talk about consent as far as saying, 'No, you do not need a reason to say no, even if it is a high-five or a hug or something harmless. It is your body. For example, when we had pride day, I really did not agree with introducing it in kindergarten. First, I am not comfortable. Second, I know other parents might not feel comfortable. They might want to have that talk with their kids. But I do not want to put that in their heads. Now, if you want to be a cat, you can be a cat. You know, so I am inclusive, but I just do not think kindergarten needs to be bothered with that. But the consent, yes, that is huge.

Foucault's power/knowledge and Held's ethical care framework provide a valuable lens for understanding how educators navigate sensitive topics, like gender, sexuality, bodies, and consent. While many educators recognize the importance of discussing consent, their reluctance to engage in discussions about gender and sexuality reveals the broader societal influences that upholds notions of childhood innocence and protection. These perspectives are reinforced

through developmentally appropriate practices, professional training, and socio-cultural expectations, particularly for educators who are also mothers. By recognizing and understanding these influences and their impacts on educators' decision-making, we can gain insight into the systemic barriers that limit these discussions and work towards a more inclusive and informed approach.

The Ethics of Care and Power Dynamics in Early Childhood Education

This section explores how educators navigate internal and external challenges when deciding how to approach gender, sexuality, sex, consent, and anatomy topics with children. Throughout the discussion, I illustrate how educators often struggle with internal and external conflicts, constantly weighing the question of 'What is best for the child' against 'What is best for adults." While some educators often expressed a desire to integrate themes of inclusivity and diversity into their curriculum, they often faced institutional constraints, affecting how they view their roles as educators in the classroom.

A diverse understanding of their roles as caregivers emerged in discussions with educators from both focus groups. When asked about who they "work for" or "care for" the educators shared the following:

One educator explained:

> I like to think of it as a direct service for the children. But, you know, we pay into the College of ECEs, and that is not for us—it is for the public. So, in a way, they go hand in hand.

Another educator echoed a similar sentiment, stating:

> Yeah, I am the same way. By all means, I'm there for the children, but we also must keep their parents and their home situation in mind. And then there are also our bosses because they hire us and oversee everything. So, it is for all of them.

These statements from the educators highlight a tension between their role as caregivers for children and their accountability to parents and institutional structures, shaping their caregiving responsibilities. The educators' perspectives reflect an awareness of the impact that various relationships, both inside and outside the classroom, have on their roles. This awareness acknowledges the interconnectedness of their caregiving responsibilities. At the same time, it illustrates the role of power in shaping knowledge, as Foucault has discussed. The educators recognize several sources of power, such as the College of Early Childhood Educators, their "bosses," and parents, all of which shape how their roles are regulated. This reflects the influence of "top-down" regulatory practices, where higher authorities impose decisions on educators, affecting how they engage with children. The educators' comments show how decision-making in early childhood education is directed by governing bodies that enforce certain standards, leaving educators with little room to influence or challenge these decisions. This top-down structure of ECE suggests that educators feel compelled to follow directives from higher authorities, often sidelining their own experiences, values, and professional judgment in the process. These regulatory power systems prevent educators from providing ethical care that supports inclusivity, empathy, and interdependence and continue to undermine the role and agency of the children under their care.

Educators reveal how their experiences of feeling constrained by top-down regulatory practices often challenge their understanding of their roles as "carers" and shape how they approach discussions on topics such as gender, sexuality, sex, consent, and bodies. Despite these

challenges, many educators demonstrated creative ways of adapting care ethics to meet the needs of children, while also addressing external expectations. Langford et al. (2017) reconceptualize care in early childhood by grounding it in four key principles:

(1) Care is a universal and fundamental aspect of human life.

(2) Care extends beyond basic custodial tasks.

(3) Care in early childhood settings should be evaluated based on its ability to promote well-being.

(4) Care must be central to the development and deliberation of early childhood education and care policies (p. 312).

Using these key principles, I will demonstrate how educators navigate external pressures from regulatory practices while striving to incorporate the foundations of the ethics of care into their classrooms. Moss et al. (2016) discuss the neo-liberal perspective that views early childhood education as an "investment." In this view, the belief is that providing "early intervention" and ensuring high-quality early childhood education and care will yield significant long-term benefits, benefiting the nation economically. This perspective rests on the idea that supporting children's development in their early years will generate positive economic and societal outcomes. However, this approach to early childhood education is troubling because it emphasizes the financial returns of education rather than centering the child and their individual needs. By framing early childhood education as an economic investment, we risk reducing children's experiences and identities heavily on developmentalist discourses prioritizing measurable achievements over the intrinsic value of care, well-being, and the relational aspects of early childhood education. Moreover, framing "early intervention" and "investment" in terms of children's developing identities, including gender and sexuality, raises concerns. This model

may inadvertently reinforce restrictive societal norms and expectations about children as gendered and sexual beings.

In focusing so heavily on producing "successful" outcomes, we overlook the complexity of children's diverse identities is dangerous. This perspective creates a tension between the economic motivations driving early childhood education policy and the ethical and moral responsibility to support children. Jones, Richardson and Powell (2019) discuss how to dismantle these neo-liberal discourses that are embedded in our thinking of being an educator; we must first "stop internalizing the injustice as a personal failure and see it as a systematic issue" (Jones, Richardson, Powell, 2019). Identifying this issue as one that is outside our identity disrupts the thinking of being a caring educator as invaluable and positions all professionals in early childhood education and care as worthy (Jones, Richardson, & Powell, 2019). Collectively changing our thinking and understanding and integrating ethics of care perspectives could allow for mutual respect and positive interactions between educators and children.

Throughout the focus group, there were entry points where educators would begin challenging the discourses through their relationships with the children in their care. Often, a power dynamic occurs between the educator and the child in early childhood education and care classrooms. The educator is often shown as the knowledge holder, caregiver, and facilitator of learning (Blasco et al. 2021). Children are viewed as dependent, learners, and vulnerable individuals. This framing reinforces a power dynamic that positions the educator as superior to the children, situates the children as passive and incompetent, and encourages an instrumental rather than ethical approach to care. Instrumental care can be described as "an action of assistance is how the interaction was completed (Langford & Richardson, 2020). For the educators in the study, they perceive their roles as caregivers as instruments of care for parents.

Moreover, the College of ECE and their "bosses" reject the complexities of care and deny the child the participation in their own care as competent social agents" (Langford & Richardson, 2020). However, other educators shared that they understand that children are embodied subjects with complex needs (Langford, 2020). For example, one educator shared:

> In my experience, we have had a few children over the years, but currently, we have one little boy who likes to wear his sister's dresses on and off for the past couple of years. He is not saying he is a girl; he just enjoys wearing dresses. We are inclusive and open-minded about it. Even though I have had some supply staff or students I have mentored question it—sometimes because of their religious backgrounds or other beliefs—I have always stood firm. If he wants to wear a dress, that is okay. We are not going to discourage or shame him. He is allowed to wear what makes him comfortable, whether it is seen as a costume or just his choice for the day.

The educator practices ethics of care and challenges power systems that normalize specific beliefs about gender and sexuality. The educator integrates ethics of care by utilizing relational responsiveness, rejecting hierarchical norms, and practicing empathy and inclusivity. By acknowledging and supporting the child's autonomy, the educator fosters a caring relationship that respects the child's identity and choice to wear dresses. They also resist the societal or cultural norms that often attempt to dictate rigid gender roles upon children in early childhood education. Through their empathy and need to provide an inclusive environment, they prioritized the child's comfort and happiness over the external pressures they were facing.

The educator's response epitomizes Langford and Richardson's (2020) conceptualization of care through an ethics of care lens. These phases are defined as caring about (recognizing a need), caring for (taking responsibility), caregiving (the act of providing care), and care receiving

(the response from the care recipient) (Langford & Richardson, 2020, p. 32). The educator demonstrates these phases of care by first recognizing the child's desire to wear dresses as a legitimate need (caring about). They then create a supportive environment that allows the child to freely express their gender identity (caring for) and prioritize the child's comfort over external societal or cultural pressures (caregiving). Finally, the child's continuous comfort and happiness serve as evidence of the successful care received. Integrating this perspective into early childhood education enables educators to see each child as an individual, granting them a greater sense of competency and agency (Langford & Richardson, 2020, p. 34). Furthermore, this approach fosters relationships built on trust, care, and empathy, enhancing the overall experiences of both educators and children in early childhood education and care settings.

Using a Foucauldian lens, the educator actively challenges the power systems that by questioning and resisting societal discourses that define and enforce rigid norms of gender and sexuality. The educator refuses to conform to norms perpetuated by institutions and positioned as "truths". Instead, they create a space in the classroom for alternative ways of being. This resistance benefits the child by affirming their choices and influences supply staff and early childhood education students. By modelling this rejection of institutional influence, the educator exposes how power structures often privilege adult perspectives over children's.

As previously shown, educators shared how they integrated the ethics of care into their relationships with children. There were instances when educators demonstrated how it can be incorporated into ECE curricula. While the administration and understanding of care can be complex due to external pressures, it is important to recognize that early childhood education and care should be viewed as equally valuable. Early childhood education is more than an "investment"; it is a caring space, with care being regarded as inferior to educational practices

(Gribbions, 2007, p. 125, as cited in Woods, 2015). Educators displayed this balance in how they recognized children's questions and behaviours regarding exploring their own gender and sexual identities. One educator shared:

> I had a little boy in Grade 4 who was in after-school care with me and his educators. One day, he came out to us—he was not a boy, he was a girl. He had told his parents over the weekend; they were divorced, so he spent Friday with his mom before going to his dads on Saturday. He told both when his dad picked him up, and they were both very shocked but supportive in their own ways. It was interesting, and I will share more about that later. He came to us and started talking about it. He was telling his friends, who were at the table with him, so they were also finding out for the first time. The questions started: "What do you mean? You are not a boy? Well, you are still you, like, what? Why?" And he just said, "I'm not a boy inside." He explained it to them, and that is when we had to sit down with the boys and have a conversation about it. Because of the nature of the conversation, we also had to inform the parents that it happened. We brought in storybooks appropriate for their grade level, and he was still shy about it. He started letting his hair grow and doing other things like that. One of the books I lent him was Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress.

The educator is helping guide a difficult conversation through responsive care by listening to the child and acknowledging other children's questions. The educators' choices are reflected in Nel Noddings (1984) quote that "caring requires that we attend to the needs of the other, that we present in a relationship and that we are willing to be vulnerable to the other in a way that opens us to change" (Noddings, 1984). Nodding's notions encapsulate how the educator attends to the child's needs by fostering a caring and supportive environment for the child and

their peers. The educator shows their support by listening to the child's decisions to express their gender identity while ensuring that the other children who have questions about their friend's experience receive clear explanations and answers. The educator reshaped curriculum to respond to the children's questions with thoughtful resources, such as books that addressed topics like gender, sexuality, and consent. *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* explores themes of self-expression and embracing one's identity, aligns with the child's journey of self-discovery. By incorporating such books, the educator provides support through stories that normalize and celebrate diverse identities.

This educator's approach becomes especially pertinent as broad societal shifts in recent years expands the state's reach when regulating citizen's gender and sexual identities. State regulations have led to stricter enforcement of heteronormative and cisnormative values, using surveillance and governance to uphold these beliefs (Garlen & Crane, 2024). Foucault (1980) discusses how in today's modern societies, they utilize surveillance and governance as a tool of power to control individuals and regulate their gender and sexual identities. Foucault states:

> "The Panopticon must be understood as a figure of political technology that can only be used for the purpose of increasing the power of the state and its subject's submission." (Foucault, 1975).

Foucault's conceptualization is manifested in the context of early childhood education through policies like the Florida "Book Ban," which mandates the removal of certain books from the curriculum for specific grade levels. Disguised as a "child pro-ban", the policy uses the rhetoric of childhood innocence to provoke panic among parents. This discourse undermines the efforts to create a more inclusive and empathetic early childhood education environment and disrupts educators' ability to provide ethical care to children. While these policies have taken root

in the United States, Canada is gradually incorporating similar ideas into its educational frameworks. For example, New Brunswick and Saskatchewan have introduced “Notwithstanding clauses” that force educators to inform parents if their child wishes to use a different name or pronoun. This shift reflects the growing influence of state-driven surveillance and governance that seeks to regulate gender and sexuality. By adhering to such policies and not challenging them, we reinforce the neo-liberal conception of children’s citizenship as “dependent,” preventing them from being fully recognized as active citizens (Morris, 2001, as cited in Wood, 2015, p. 261). This issue becomes more prevalent when discussing queer children, as they are often positioned as the “problem group for society” (Woods, 2015). The educator's approach described above challenges such ideas and seeks to meet the ethical care needs of the child and models values of care, inclusivity, and interdependence (Wood, 2015). Overall, it will create an inclusive environment for both children and educators and position care as a powerful interdependence relationship.

Balancing Maternal and Professional Roles in Early Childhood Education

The early childhood educators who participated in the study described themselves as mothers and frequently drew on their individual experiences of motherhood when deciding how to teach in the classroom. This dual perspective—interweaving their roles as mothers and educators—prompted me to consider how “motherhood” and “early childhood education” influence one another. In this section, I examine how early childhood educators often rely on their maternal lens to navigate questions posed by children about gender, sexuality, the body, and consent. Using Foucault’s Power/Knowledge framework, I analyze how this protective lens reinforces power dynamics that prioritize parental authority over children’s autonomy. Additionally, I engage Held’s Ethics of Care to critique how such approaches, while well-

intentioned, may conflict with educators' ethical responsibility to prioritize children's rights and well-being.

First, we must understand what we mean when educators describe themselves as mothers by examining what scholars have discussed surrounding "mothering" and "maternal thinking." I turn to Sara Ruddick's (1989) who argues that the practice of "mothering" requires "maternal thinking," —which is "characterized by the deliberation about how to achieve the ends of the preservation, growth and social acceptability of children" (p. 53). Ruddick states that "Mothers" or "women" are to be understood not as the biological birth giver to the child but instead as one who entails the demands of a child. Ruddick (1989, p. xi) writes:

> This conception of mothering as a kind of caring labour undermines the myth that mothers are 'naturally' loving. There is nothing foreordained about maternal response. Birth givers or legal guardians may respond to children with indifference, assault, or active neglect. Nor is there a single emotion—love—that children inspire in mothers. A mother's emotions can vary within the course of a day, and certainly vary over time, depending on the behaviour of her children, the space, time, and services available to her, and myriad other desires and frustrations. Maternal love itself is a mic of many feelings, among them: infatuation, delight, fascination, pride, shame, guilt, anger, and loss.

Although maternal work is often entrenched in passion and, as I argue in Chapter 3, is provoked and tested by emotion, the idea of work puts the emphasis on what mothers attempt to do, not what they feel. Additionally, Ruddick believes that mothering is used to "preserve the life of children, foster their physical, emotional and intellectual growth, and teach them to be socially acceptable" (O'Reilly, 2010). Numerous scholars have highly critiqued this understanding of maternal thinking or mothering. Khanna (2009) critiques Ruddick's conceptualization for

overemphasizing maternal thinking as a form of rational and political engagement. Khanna (2009) asks for reconsideration of the essentialist ideas surrounding gender and identity towards a more intersectional approach to maternal thinking that recognizes the diverse ways motherhood is experienced across diverse cultures, classes, and races. Ruddick motherhood and maternal thinking to biological birth givers. However, there is room to reimagine Ruddick's work using a more intersectional lens that acknowledges the diverse experiences of gender-diverse individuals, racialized, from lower socio-economic backgrounds, or belonging to different religious groups. With these considerations in mind, this study defines "maternal thinking" as qualities of protection, nurturing, or care toward a child, regardless of whether the individual is the biological birth giver. These qualities then shape the individual's heightened awareness and a sense of moral responsibility, driving them to ensure the child's preservation, growth, and social acceptance.

The educators in the focus group regularly alluded to the complexity of decision-making often thinking about how their answers must be developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive, and aligned with parental beliefs. Callahan (2021) understands this as the "Moral Load," a concept developed by and inspired by Emma's comic: "Mental Load: A Feminist Comic" (2017). For Emma (2017), the mental load is "incessant, gnawing, exhausting, and disproportionately falls to women". Her drawings often depict how individuals carry some form of mental load, whether work responsibility or care work at home. Emma interrogates what "to be a woman" means in today's world and the "mental" toll women endure during their everyday lives. Callahan (2021) builds on the notion of moral responsibility often endured by caretakers, as Moral Load – the burden placed on caregivers when faced with morally complex questions for which no universal rule applies. Mothers endure most of this burden, as they are frequently

placed in situations where they are expected to make critical decisions regarding the care, education, and well-being of children, often becoming scapegoats in the process. She writes:

> For when a question is morally complex – when there's no general moral pronouncement but instead what's morally [best/valuable/required/permitted/etc.] is unclear and depends on subtle particularities of a mum's situation – it becomes incumbent on a mum to responsibly decide what's morally best (or required, permitted, etc.) to do, in her own case. Freeing mums from the burden of a false, black-and-white pronouncement on what should and should not be done saddles them with a hefty share of what I will call the 'moral load' (taking inspiration from feminist comic artist Emma's concept, the 'mental load' (Callahan, 2021, p. 56).

Callahan's (2021) concept of "Moral Load" and Ruddick's (1995) idea of "maternal thinking" share a common focus on the ethical responsibilities placed on caregivers. Ruddick's maternal thinking emphasizes the reflective practices that ensure a child's preservation, growth, and social acceptability (p.53). Similarly, Callahan's *moral load* examines the ethical burden caregivers bear when navigating morally complex decisions. While I draw on these conceptual tools to explore how educators' self-identified "mother" identities influence their decision-making when addressing children's questions about gender, sexuality, the body, and consent; my primary frameworks are Foucault's power/knowledge and Held's ethics of care. These frameworks allow for a critical examination of both the systemic forces that shape educators' perspectives and the personal, relational ethics that guide their interactions with children.

Educators explained that discussing any sensitive topic involves careful deliberation, influenced greatly by their own moral and parental values. This means that the education

children receive is sporadic and to the educator's discretion. One educator shares their frustration with this moral responsibility:

> "It is also kind of unfortunate that it is really left up to the morals and values of a particular teacher. Rather than be part of something that is across the board."

Another educator shared that their responses to children's questions are "contingent on the situation":

> We all have our personal beliefs, and I have no issues with gay pride or anything like that. But it feels a bit too young when it comes to kindergarten children—2, 3, 4, or even 5-year-olds—understanding concepts like being a boy or a girl.

These insights shared by the educators illustrate how both moral load and maternal thinking impact their decision-making. The first educator expresses frustration with the lack of clear guidance from education policies, highlighting the moral load placed on caregivers to decide how to address children's questions. The educator points out that this responsibility is left to the teacher's personal moral values and beliefs, which can directly affect the knowledge a child receives. As a result of this *moral load*, educators experience an ethical strain as they reconcile their moral values with their professional responsibility. The second educator echoes similar concerns and engages with Ruddick's concept of maternal thinking, particularly in their reflections on what is developmentally appropriate for young children. The educator's thoughts on when children should begin learning about gender, sexuality, and other sensitive topics suggest a "protective" instinct; the educator justifies their decision based on the child's well-being. This protective instinct connects to Ruddick's maternal thinking, which emphasizes the care, deliberation, and responsibility of ensuring a child's growth, social acceptability, and well-being. Expanding on "moral load" and "maternal thinking," I further engage with Foucault's

power/knowledge Framework and Held's Ethics of Care to provide a broader lens through which to understand how educators navigate the complexities of addressing children's questions about topics like gender, sexuality, the body, and consent.

For Foucault, power and knowledge are interconnected and reinforce power structures. This lens can be applied to the moral load, as it helps us understand how individuals, particularly caregivers, are influenced by broader societal and institutional norms, which shape their moral decisions. As Foucault (1972-1977) argues, power operates through the creation and dissemination of norms—such as what is "acceptable" or "morally" approved, this often impacts the way caregivers internalize certain beliefs or understandings. For example, suppose a parent clearly states that they do not want their child to learn about sex education and pulls their child from the class when it takes place. These explicit notions of what is acceptable or morally approved will affect how the educator perceives such topics. However, it is not always explicitly stated. Instead, it can also be shown through implicit notions. For example, the educator who shared the lack of educational policies available to guide them in deciding how to address these questions with children—this can be seen as an implicit notion of how power/knowledge can operate through institutions. Suppose there are no intuitional policies on how one addresses questions. In that case, this can shape the educators' understanding that such discussions are morally wrong, leading them to believe that they are inappropriate for children in their early years. Additionally, the power/knowledge framework helps explain why educators often feel that discussing specific topics is "the parent's responsibility." One educator explained that when asked questions like "How are babies made?" they view it as "not their job," stating:

> When I am asked questions like, 'How are babies made?' at school—in kindergarten, that is not my job to answer. It is up to the parents. If a child asks me how babies are made,

> even when I was pregnant, and they ask how the baby got in there, I will say, ‘That is a wonderful question. You should ask your parents or grown-ups at home and have that conversation with them.

This perspective reflects the broader cultural and historical forces that shape the role of educators in relation to children and their parents. The notion of “parental responsibility” or “parental authority” ties into the historical dynamics of the parent/child relationship, where parents are seen as the primary protectors of their child's innocence. Foucault's power/knowledge framework helps illuminate how these norms are not merely personal beliefs but are regularly produced and reinforced by societal and institutional structures. Power operates through establishing norms—such as what is “appropriate” or “morally acceptable” —which educators internalize and use to rationalize their roles and responsibilities.

The discourse of innocence has been central to constructing these norms to encourage parents to safeguard their children’s social and moral wellbeing by framing childhood expressions of sexuality as abnormal (Egan & Hawkes, 2007, p. 449) This emphasis on purity and protection extends beyond individual parental practices and influences educator's roles. Garlen (2021) builds on this history, examining how the 19th-century conceptions of childhood established children as a distinct and vulnerable social category, requiring that they be deliberately separated from the responsibilities and realities of adult life. Adults of this time empathized with the need to shield children from the onerous and damaging adult experiences, further entrenching the view of childhood as a state of blissful ignorance (Suchness, 1978, as cited in Garlen 2021).

In contemporary , liberal democratic societies, this discourse has evolved but remains profoundly influential. Children are seen as “emotional capital,” embodying the “sentimentality,

romanticism, and nostalgia" of their parents (Robinson, 2012; Garlen, 2021). Parents and other stakeholders project their idealized notions of childhood onto children, reinforcing the cultural construction of the innocent child. This construction, in turn, regulates the type of knowledge deemed appropriate for children and the boundaries of the educators' roles in providing it. For educators, this regularity power shapes their sense of professional responsibility. The absence of clear institutional policies on topics like gender, sexuality, and reproduction leaves educators to navigate these issues within the constraints of parental expectations and societal norms. As one educator noted, the lack of guidance often leads them to interpret these topics as falling outside their professional scope. This rationalization reflects how power/knowledge operates through institutions, subtly discouraging educators from engaging in discussions that challenge the discourse of innocence.

The power/knowledge framework reveals how the historical and cultural construction of innocence influences educators' decisions, limiting the knowledge children receive. While some stakeholders prioritize preserving the figure of the innocent child by delaying exposure to specific topics, others recognize the risks of withholding knowledge, particularly for children exploring questions of identity, sexuality, or their bodies. This tension underscores the influential role of discourse in regulating children's access to knowledge and shaping educators' practices. Additionally, it emphasizes the need for an Ethics of Care framework to be included in educators' education to challenge these dominant discourses and theories to provide children with the care they need. Held (2006) writes:

> The ethics of care respects rather than removes itself from the claims of others with whom we share actual relationships. It calls into question the universalistic and abstract rules of the dominant theories. When the latter consider such actual relations as between a parent

> and child, if they say anything about them at all, they may see them as permitted and cultivate a preference that a person may have. Or they may recognize a universal obligation for all parents to care for their children. But they do not permit actual relations ever to take priority over the requirements of impartiality (Held, 2006, p. 11)

Held (2006) critiques the dominant ethical theories surrounding care by challenging the prioritization of universal principles over actual, specific relationships. She argues that we should focus on unique relationships, such as the educator-child, rather than treating all child relationships equally, as some traditional ethical theories suggest. For example, Held (2006) questions theories like the concept of childhood innocence, which asserts that parents have the sole obligation of care and authority for their children, prioritizing those over relationships with the educators. This concept of childhood innocence reinforces the idea that educators must respect the parent's relationship with the child rather than their relationship with the child.

However, Held (2006) argues that we need to rethink our approach to personal relationships. In the context of this study, for instance, we must view each child as an individual on their journey of understanding their gender and sexuality. When a child asks questions about these topics, educators should not apply a “one-size-fits-all” approach or rely solely on universal rules. Instead, Held (2006) advocates for recognizing that specific child's circumstances and relational dynamics and tailoring the response to the child’s needs and experiences. This approach respects care's individuality and challenges the dominant discourse that prioritizes impartiality—held states that personal relationships should always take precedence over treating everyone equally. This approach leads to better care practices and reinforces the educator's ethical responsibility by prioritizing the child’s well-being first.

Chapter Six: The Conclusion

This thesis has explored the complex dynamics that early childhood educators navigate when discussing sensitive topics such as gender, sexuality, bodies, sex, and consent with young children. By employing Foucault's (1980) concept of Power/Knowledge with Held's (2006) Ethics of Care, this study reveals how educators' professional identities, along with children's educational experiences, are profoundly shaped by societal norms, institutional policies, ethical responsibilities and personal identities.

Summary of Findings

Conversations with participants about the ECE Training, which includes developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP), reveals how limited training on alternative frames results in their reliance on DAP. Educators avoid addressing specific topics because of the DAP frame and in

turn reinforce heteronormative and cisnormative perspectives (Davies et al., 2021), further perpetuate the marginalization non-normative experiences, and restrict children's understanding of diverse gender and sexual identities.

Educators' decision-making is shaped by power dynamics, professional ethics, and broader social structures. Using Foucault's (1980) power/knowledge framework and Held's (2005) *ethics of care*, I examine how some educators resist dominant discourses to support children's diverse identities, while others conform to traditional views. I argue for a shift from an individualistic model of care to a relational approach–one that actively challenges the power structures that constrains discussions of gender, sexuality, consent, and bodies in early childhood education settings.

Building on Foucault's Power/Knowledge, I think about Valerie Walkerdine's (1993) analysis of developmental psychology as a "Grand Narrative" (p. 452). Walkerdine argues that developmental psychology merely a scientific explanation of growth, but a dominant narrative that has shaped our perception of children. The reluctance of some educators to discuss gender and sexuality reflects this powerful discourse, which dictates what is considered appropriate for children's learning. As Walkerdine (1993) explains:

> By claiming that developmental psychology is a kind of story, I am not doing anything particularly new—what is important here is the kind of story which developmental psychology claims to be: the grand, totalizing story, the story of children's development, a scientific story testable, within limits, in relation to the methodological guarantees given about the treatment of scientific data, science's claims to truth. But this is no mere debate about true scientific stories versus false pseudo-scientific or ideological ones. Rather, it is about the place of developmental psychological stories not in telling a biased

> or distorted story and obscuring a true and proper story about children, but in producing, fashioning 'the child' and 'development.' The claim is that these objects are not simply well or badly represented but produced within signifying relations themselves (p. 452).

Walkerdine highlights that these narratives are not just biased but actively produce and reinforce societal understandings of childhood. As these stories become deeply embedding in profession training and practices, early childhood educators internalize and reproduce them, limiting the ways they approach gender and sexuality in their classrooms.

Additionally, the focus groups revealed how educators' self-identified maternal identities shape their professional decision-making. Many reporting drawing on their personal experiences as parents when responding to gender, sexuality, bodies and consent. This intersection of professional ethics and personal morality raises critical questions about how educators reconcile their responsibilities to children with their own values and beliefs. I argue that these tensions warrant further exploration to better understand how maternal identity influences pedagogical choices in early childhood education.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into how early childhood educators navigate discussions of gender, sexuality, bodies, sex, and consent with young children, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, I draw on sights from a small sample. The focus groups comprised of only five early childhood educators, all identified as cisgender white middle-aged females who self-identify as heterosexual. This limited sample does not fully capture the diverse experiences and perspectives of educators in Ontario. Second, the recruitment challenges–such as the high number of fraudulent emails and the demanding schedules of potential participants resulted in a smaller sample sized than what the original target was. The use of a focus group

also presents limitations. While focus groups allow for rich, in-depth discussions, they can also be influenced by group dynamics, such as dominant voices overshadowing quieter participants. This dynamic may result in some perspectives being underrepresented or overlooked.

Additionally, the presence of peers may influence participants' willingness to share openly about controversial topics. Future research in the area should consider a diverse sample of ECEs, including different ages, race, cultural backgrounds, family status, ability, and provinces in Canada. Alternative recruitment strategies could reach a more representative sample. Finally, other social research methods can help triangulate these findings towards a more comprehensive understanding of educators' experiences.

Despite challenges, the study offers an entry point to understanding how educators rationalize their approaches to sensitive topics. Theoretically, it highlights how post-structuralist theories and ethics of care—though they may seem to work in tension—can work together to provide a more critical analysis. These frameworks reveal that educators' discussions and practices of care are shaped by broader social and political structures. This perspective encourages an ethics of care that is inclusive, respects children's autonomy and recognizes that care itself is not fixed but socially constructed–and therefore open to challenge and change. Future research should aim to include more diverse samples of ECEs, representing a wider range of ages, racial and cultural backgrounds, family structures, abilities, and geographic regions across Canada. Alternative recruitment strategies could help reach a more representative group. Additionally, employing a mixed research method–such as individual interviews, ethnographic observations, or surveys–could provide a more comprehensive understanding of educators' experiences and decision-making processes.

Concluding Remarks

Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics that early childhood educators navigate when discussing sensitive/controversial topics with young children in their professional capacities. Drawing on a variety of theoretical frames, I show the interplay between societal norms, institutional policies, and educators' decision-making processes while also thinking about relational care. Additionally, the study contributes to the broader discourse on early childhood education by challenging existing power structures and advocating for systemic changes that prioritize children's and educators' well-being and agency. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing children as active agents in their learning journeys and the need for inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Finally, this study brings forth new ways of thinking about the current dynamics in early childhood education. The College of Early Childhood Educators' current annual report states that the field comprises of 97% women while also thinking through the participants in this study who self-identified as mothers (The College of Early Childhood Educators, 2024). Using this data, along with Sara Ruddick's (1989) concept of maternal thinking, highlights the reflective practices and thought processes that ensure a child's preservation, growth and social acceptability (p. 53)—showing how early childhood educators regularly draw on their experiences as mothers when addressing specific topics with children. This result opens new discussions about how this maternal lens adds complexity to their professional role as they navigate motherhood's moral and ethical responsibilities and an educator's role. Their *moral load* is layered and dynamic as educators must navigate morally complex decisions without clear guidance from intuitional policies. This ethical burden often leads educators to make decisions based on their values and beliefs, which can vary widely and impact children's education.

Implications of ECEs *and* Children in Early Learning Spaces

This study shows the urgent need for a re-evaluation of early childhood education (ECE) policies and training to better support educators in addressing gender and sexuality. The current professional landscape often prioritizes fundamental or foundational topics, like developmental milestones or abuse prevention, while leaving educators ill-prepared to navigate more complex issues like diverse gender identities, sexuality, family structures, etc. This approach calls for a shift in the training models–one that expands on the topics of care and ethical responsibility and fosters relational learning through community of practice (CoP) frameworks. Wenger (1998) explains the community of practice:

> On the one hand, a community of practice is a living context that can give newcomers access to competence and also can invite a personal experience of engagement by which to incorporate that competence into an identity of participation. On the other hand, a well-functioning community of practice is a good context to explore radically new insights without becoming fools or stuck in some dead end. A history of mutual engagement around a joint enterprise is an ideal context for this kind of leading-edge learning, which requires a strong bond of communal competence along with a deep respect for the particularity of experience. When these conditions are in place, communities of practice are a privileged locus for the creation of knowledge (Wenger, 1998, p. 214).

For this study, I use as an invitation to education scholars and ECEs to think more deeply about how the CoP framework could inform future research and policy decisions in ECE training programs. Many educators in the study expressed gratitude for professional development opportunities, noting that time for such engagements is rare in their daily routines. They also highlighted the isolating nature of many existing professional opportunities, which do not offer space for collaborative reflection or mutual support. By adopting the CoP model, which fosters

relational learning, educators would gain a much-needed space for shared experiences, knowledge exchange, and collective problem-solving.

This invitation to scholars and practitioners is strengthened by the theoretical frames invoked in the study – Foucault and Held – that extend care beyond meeting children's developmental needs to include a more relational responsibility, which involves moral obligations toward others. These frames recognize the need for relational caring and learning approaches while challenging traditional understandings of early childhood education and care. More specifically, it draws attention to the need to recognize that through collaborative efforts, counter-discourses can challenge normative understandings of gender and sexuality in early childhood education—but these spaces must be created.

Communities of Practice (CoP) could serve as such spaces, encouraging all of those in the early childhood education sector to have an opportunity for open dialogue and critical reflection, where educators can question the cultural and institutional norms shaping their practices. By fostering a CoP grounded in relational ethics and collaborative learning, educators become more confident in addressing sensitive topics, allowing children to have their questions answered and identities validated.

Overall, this thesis challenges the traditional view of educators as mere facilitators or gatekeepers of knowledge, proposing instead a more dynamic role as co-constructors of inclusive, open, and affirming learning environments. Institutional structures and individual ECEs should recognize children as agents of their own lives while fostering critical dialogue that validates early learners and respects their developing sense of identity.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Teaching approaches and training:

1. How many of you received some kind of education or training on how to address questions concerning gender, sexuality, body, and consent. (Show of hands)
2. (to those who raised hands) Can you tell us about the kind of training or guidance that you received?

Organisational guidelines:

1. How many of you work in an organisation that has some kind of policy or guidance about how you should address questions concerning children's gender, sexuality, consent, body, etc. (Show of hands)
2. (to those who raised their hands) Can you share some examples of these policies or guidelines?

Children's questions and concerns:

1. How many of you had children in your care ask you questions that are related to sexuality, bodies, gender, or consent? (Show of hands)
2. Can anyone describe a time a child asked you this kind of question? (Call on volunteers and ask for others who can share until no one else volunteers).

Addressing Student Questions and concerns

1. Does anyone have ("other," if examples have been shared) examples of ways that you have addressed students' concerns regarding gender, sexuality, body, and/or consent.
2. Does anyone incorporate materials or activities into your classroom that might help address children's concerns and understandings? (If yes, ask them to share).

3. Does anyone have ways that they evaluate the effectiveness of your approaches to addressing students' questions and concerns?

Outcomes and Ethics:

1. Do you believe that these topics should be discussed with young children?
2. How do your personal values influence your beliefs about whether and how these topics should be discussed?
3. (For those who said yes) What do you think the outcome of addressing these topics with young children should be?
4. What kinds of ethical considerations come to mind when you think about these kinds of discussions? (If needed, prompt further: are there considerations related to, for example, age? Individual/ cultural differences? Family structures? Parental/guardian rights?

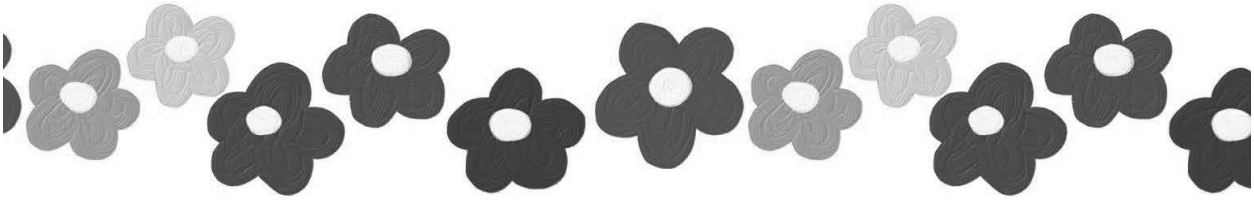
Future Directions:

1. What do you think should be the direction of early childhood sexuality education in the future?

Wrapping up:

Are there any other comments or thoughts that you would like to share that you think would give insight into this topic?

Appendix B



Calling on Early Childhood Educators

I am interested in talking to Ontario early childhood educators about discussing topics of gender, sexuality, bodies and/or consent with children. Participation in the project requires a 2-hour virtual focus group. Participants will receive a $10.00 Tim Hortons Gift Card. To join the study, please contact Brittany Crane at brittanycrane@cmail.carleton.ca

This project was reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board **(clearance number: 121393)**. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact Carleton University Research Ethics Board (by phone at 613-520-2600 [ext. 2517 for CUREB] or by email at ethics@carleton.ca).

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