

Conditions for Moving Beyond “Quality” in Canadian Early Childhood Education

~ an occasional paper ~

EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGIES COLLABORATORY¹

Since 2004, Canadian early childhood education has struggled to respond to key recommendations for the field. A report commissioned by the Canadian government to assess, for the OECD, the state of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Canada identified four main challenges: (1) to formulate a unified vision for ECEC across the country; (2) to create a coherent system that supports parental labour force participation, healthy child development, and populations needing particular supports; (3) to build on what is known about achieving quality; and (4) to foster collaboration among the federal, provincial/territorial and local governments and between these governments and Indigenous communities (Doherty, Friendly, & Beach, 2004, p. 12). Many provinces and territories have made inroads in engaging with the report’s recommendations, most notably Quebec with its implementation of a universally funded and publicly managed system. In terms of quality, however, most Canadian jurisdictions have failed to move past discussions of quality as an issue of school readiness and survival in a poorly funded system. During these challenging times when pedagogical leadership is sorely needed (Peeters et al., 2015), Canada is being challenged to imagine early childhood education beyond a service delivery model that defines quality as a product.

Service narratives of quality preclude possibilities for early childhood spaces that welcome diversity, plurality, inclusion, democracy and the experimentation necessary for today’s complex conditions (Moss, 2017). Pedagogy and curriculum become marginalized by conversations focused on profit and efficiency (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013; Moss, 2019). A service model of early childhood education (ECE) sees parents as consumers purchasing a commodity in a childcare marketplace; it values business principles above educational intentions (Moss, 2019). It relies on universal, measurable indicators of quality such as child/caregiver ratios, educator qualifications, the presence or absence of particular classroom materials, and adherence to routines and practices understood as developmentally appropriate. For example, the ECERS scale, used by some jurisdictions to rate an early childhood centre’s schedule, states that a centre lacking a predictable sequence of events is not a quality environment for young children (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2014). Further, the desire for measurable and definable quality necessitates strict adherence to fixed daily routines, thereby recreating ECE as the epitome of the mid nineteenth century Fordist factory

¹ Early Childhood Pedagogies Collaboratory (<https://www.earlychildhoodcollaboratory.net>) is a hybrid experimental space where educators and pedagogues trace and experiment with the contours, conditions, and complexities of early childhood education pedagogies in the 21st century. On behalf of the Collaboratory, this discussion of pedagogical work in Canada has been cowritten by Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kathleen Kummen, Cristina Delgado Vintimilla, Denise Hodgins, Narda Nelson, Cory Jobb, Meagan Montpetit, Sylvia Kind, Fikile Nxumalo, Iris Berger, Randa Khattar, Bo Sun Kim, Nicole Land, Kelly-Ann MacAlpine, Laurie Kocher, Kim Atkinson, Sherry-Lynn Yazbeck, Alex Berry, and Ildikó Danis.

model in which standardized operations collapse when faced with disruptions (Kummen, 2010). We witnessed such a collapse when COVID-19 emerged and most early childhood centres were unable to quickly and nimbly respond to the challenges of the pandemic.

The service model of ECE was brought into Canada's new Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework (Government of Canada, 2019). While the document articulates the complex nature of early childhood environments and recognizes the importance of a well-trained workforce, and while it calls for accessible, affordable, flexible, inclusive, high-quality centres that provide rich learning experiences, it falls short on integrating pedagogical leadership as a vital condition for this transformation of early childhood education. This failure means that Canada is now even farther away from meeting the OECD recommendations (Doherty et al., 2004; OECD, 2019).

To be clear, some positive steps have been taken through government initiatives, innovative research, and community commitment. Most significantly, at the national level, the new Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework recognizes the inherent rights of Indigenous governments to determine early years programs for First Nation, Inuit and Métis children across Canada. At the provincial level, several provinces have developed curriculum frameworks that envision ECE as a pedagogical space, and most have transferred responsibilities for ECE partly or completely from ministries of social services or health to ministries of education. At the research level, in British Columbia the results of the long-term Investigating Quality (IQ) Project led to the role of pedagogist now being implemented provincewide through the Early Childhood Pedagogy Network (funded by the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development), providing educators with the type of pedagogical leadership the OECD recommends and Eurofound (Peeters et al., 2015) considers a necessary condition for quality. Ontario began to implement IQ Project results through a new Provincial Centre of Excellence for Early Years and Child Care. Regrettably, the current conservative government of Ontario cancelled the initiative in favour of a service model.

Why has Canada been unable to address quality in early childhood education?

Quality will remain elusive as long as the field keeps searching for universal statements of a known understanding of quality. What is lacking is attention to how quality is created in specific local contexts. Quality in ECE is a constant *doing*, not a matter of applying decontextualized elements in every early childhood centre across the country. In other words, quality requires engaging with the contingencies that emerge – differently and every day – through and within the pedagogical processes that are activated and enacted in encounters in an early childhood education space.

To put it bluntly, the quality discourse is a dead end (Dahlberg et al., 2013). In its place, early childhood education needs to engage with the discourse of meaning making, which “first and foremost [is] about constructing and deepening *understanding*” of early childhood education and pedagogical work (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 106, emphasis in original). Deepening understanding requires contesting assumptions and limited visions, through dialogue.

This occasional paper is inspired by our two decades of research and pedagogical engagements with the growing body of ECE literature loosely named postdevelopmental or reconceptualist. Agreeing that early childhood education is first and foremost an educational project that must constantly deepen its understanding of pedagogy, we argue that certain conditions must be in place for such deepening to occur. These conditions assume the government of Canada will honour its commitment to work with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation partners to support both continued implementation of the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework and a future shift to Indigenous administration. These conditions must, of course, be supported by a political commitment to maintain long-term infrastructure, governance and sustained funding.

Education holds enormous potential as a conduit for positive social change. Realizing this potential, however, requires early childhood educators and the Canadian state to respect children and their communities within their local cultural and political contexts and to offer them more than universally prescribed approaches to early childhood education (Government of British Columbia, 2018; Moss, 2014; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015; Vintimilla & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020). Thus, rather than working toward decontextualized indicators of quality, this paper offers seven conditions for creating opportunities to deepen the pedagogical work in early childhood education spaces.

Condition #1. Provincial curriculum frameworks outline a pedagogical vision of early childhood education that responds to 21st-century challenges.

Children in the 21st century face a complex array of urgent problems, from climate change to global pandemics to racism, violence, political polarization and much more. The COVID-19 pandemic has made visible the limitations of an education system ill prepared for the challenges young children are facing – and will continue to face into the future. An effective curriculum framework must support children to develop the dispositions to think collectively about how to respond to these problems. Such a framework is a lively conceptual document that does not prescribe but rather challenges educators to collaborate with families and communities in creating pedagogies that support children to imagine new possibilities and understandings beyond the knowledge that created the problems they face.

Condition #2. Early childhood educators require a level of education and compensation that allows them to deepen the pedagogical work in early childhood education.

Despite repeated calls for improvements to the education and working conditions of early childhood educators (Anderson, Sing, & Haber, 2020; Bennett, 2005; Doherty et al., 2004), there has not been significant change. Poor wages, low professional status, inadequate initial professional preparation, and lack of access to continuing professional development (CPD) result in ongoing challenges with recruitment and retention (Akbari & McCuaig, 2014; Anderson et al., 2020; ESDC,

2019). Most of the provinces have tried to address high turnover in the field by *lowering* educational requirements (e.g., by bringing in educational assistants, responsible adults). These responses not only contradict research findings regarding the importance of higher education for educators, they go hand in hand with the low-quality service delivery model of ECE. Recruitment and retention are also addressed by training programs driven by cost-efficiency principles aimed at producing a cheap labour force to maintain economic growth through the increased participation of women in the workforce at the expense of children and, often, racialized women. This business model is reflected in training programs for future early childhood educators that focus primarily on the acquisition of technical knowledge based on predetermined universal practice outcomes (Lazzari et al., 2013). This model, framed in developmental theory, maintains a system of minimum standards, perpetuating low quality in early childhood spaces. In other words, current training programs and standards are not conducive to transformational change.

Research consistently suggests that when early childhood educators hold (at a minimum) a bachelor's degree, they are more likely to enter and commit to the profession long term (Akbari & McCuaig, 2014; Anderson et al., 2020; McLachlan, 2011; Urban et al., 2011). In addition to educators' initial professional preparation, the literature recognizes the importance of increased investment in CPD as a critical factor to enhancing pedagogical work in early childhood spaces (Peeters et al., 2015; Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2007, 2008; Lazzari et al., 2013; OECD, 2019; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Hodgins, 2016; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kummen, & Hodgins, 2020; Urban et al., 2011). Rather than focusing on the application of developmental theory, education for early childhood educators needs to focus on pedagogical theory that creates conditions for deepening young children's experiences with and in the world. Education of early childhood educators should strive to prepare educators through many different disciplines to be intellectually curious and deeply engaged with the responsibilities of living in a settler colonial society in times of truth and reconciliation, ecological breakdown, mass species extinction, global migration and other challenges. Educators need to critically think and engage in pedagogical practices that respond to an increasingly complex world (Common Worlds Research Collective, 2020; Nxumalo, 2019; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, Kocher, Elliot & Sanchez, 2015; Vintimilla & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020).

Condition #3: Early childhood education spaces orient themselves through pedagogical commitments.

Pedagogy has become a fashionable term in early childhood education. For example, it is included in most provincial curriculum frameworks. However, it is widely misunderstood as a set of teaching/learning methods (Vintimilla & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020). This confusion has resulted in ECE centres simply applying prescribed methods (e.g., developmentally appropriate techniques, play-based principles, Montessori-inspired skills, Reggio-Emilia-inspired activities) that reflect a service delivery model appealing to market demands rather than to educational values. In practice, this model results in rudderless ECE programs with no goal other than moving through a daily routine that occupies children and adheres to health and safety guidelines. This simple application of decontextualized skills, which drives both ECE programs and the education of future educators, precludes the deepening of pedagogical practice.

With a curriculum framework that draws on educational research (not developmental research), ECE spaces engage deeply with the concept of pedagogy. In this context, pedagogy “thinks, studies, and orients education, including its purposes, protagonists, histories, relations, and processes” (Vintimilla & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020, p. 3). Early childhood centres use the provincial curriculum framework to develop a nimble set of pedagogical commitments that define the purposes and processes that would orient educational decisions.

Pedagogical commitments are understood as the particular values of a centre that respond to specific local challenges the children and families within the centre face. Pedagogical commitments allow the centre to make decisions around curriculum and orient the centre to practices that address the identified challenges.

Condition #4. Pedagogical commitments link the centre to broader issues and concerns.

Perhaps systemic racism and poverty are the challenges the children and families within an ECE centre face. Another community and ECE centre might be dealing with poor air quality, or a lack of clean drinking water. Pedagogical commitments are informed by these specific challenges, and by several important historical and conceptual moves in education. Early childhood spaces look at the complexity of children’s relationships with places and spaces (Nxumalo, 2018; Nxumalo & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2017) to orient pedagogical commitments that are generated locally and grounded in community knowledges and global relations. In other words, pedagogical commitments do not exist outside of particular social, cultural and political contexts (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001). The pedagogical commitments ground the educational project and respond to the everyday challenges children and communities face.

Early childhood educators experiment with and live pedagogical commitments through their practice. And, while always situated within specific ECE contexts, pedagogical commitments also link to broader issues and concerns. For example, early childhood spaces engage in pedagogies that challenge anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism. This engagement would include confronting the specific ways in which anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racisms emerge in the local centre and the community, drawing inspiration from social movements that connect the struggles of Black and Indigenous people in Canada (Habtom & Scribe, 2020).

In early childhood education, responding to racial difference has tended to rely on celebratory multicultural approaches and accompanying static views of difference and diversity. Multicultural approaches, in the absence of criticality, perpetuate Indigenous erasure, ignore Indigenous sovereignty, and maintain the othering of Black and Indigenous children and families (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015). Such approaches also rely on developmental, individualist approaches to responding to racial differences (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015). A developmental approach to difference maintains deficit perspectives of racially marginalized children and families (Pérez & Saavedra, 2017). In addition, discourses of tolerating and accepting difference ignore the impacts of structural racisms on young children and their families (Nxumalo, 2012; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Berikoff, 2008). Furthermore, superficial multicultural approaches are inadequate to educate

children to respond to the urgent challenges of racial injustices against Black and Indigenous people in Canada. As an alternative to these developmental and multicultural approaches, early childhood spaces need to centre anti-oppressive, strength-based perspectives in their practice, such as those brought by antiracist feminist and anticolonial feminist lenses (Nxumalo, 2019; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015). Such lenses provide orientations for responding both to the situated ways in which racisms emerge in the classroom and to the workings of systemic and intersectional racisms in the communities where early childhood centres are located.

Condition #5. Pedagogical commitments orient an early childhood centre's curriculum and culture (e.g., its rhythms and flows).

Early childhood education curriculum is widely understood as a series of activities designed to attract children and hold their interest. While this idea might seem to empower children, it risks missing rich possibilities that emerge from daily encounters in early childhood spaces. Pedagogical encounters attend to how we live collectively, and to the multiple ways that children and educators can invent and respond to what emerges in the classroom. A child-centred curriculum risks proposing an image of the early childhood educator as a passive supervisor of play, a creator of developmentally appropriate activities, or a mere caregiver monitoring children's well-being and encouraging exploration of various activities (Vintimilla, 2018). In this equation, the educator is a provider of experiences and children are the consumers (Vintimilla, 2014). Often these experiences are fragmented and rushed, with no connection to the pedagogical commitments a specific early childhood centre has, or they are shut off from dialogues with the world. In other words, curriculum is seen as part of a broader service rather than intimately related to pedagogical values.

Curriculum is living inquiry; it is intimately related to the arts and infused in responsive encounters with the world (Kind, 2010, 2013, 2018; Kind & Lee, 2017). This dialogical character of curriculum grounds us in the world and, at the same time, activates fields of experience that slowly, day by day, project after project, create an ethos (Vintimilla & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020) and a collective dwelling space (Kind, 2018; Vintimilla & Kind, in press). Curriculum cultivates relational situations and spaces of investigating and composing understandings together so that it takes shape as a co-compositional and interactive inquiry process where educators, children, materials and ideas are in dialogue with the world and each other—each as protagonists—in entangled and interdependent ways. Curriculum becomes a formative process marked by rhythms, temporalities, relationality, collaboration, experimentation, kinships, ecologies and living knowledges. Thus, curriculum becomes a way of investigating, thinking, and being together, not just a series of activities. In this, materials are reconceptualized, not as objects to be used and consumed or as a medium for self-expression, but as active participants in the creation of projects (Kind, 2013; Kind, Vintimilla, & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2018; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, & Kocher, 2016). In other words, materials have an active role in shaping what emerges and how an experience might unfold. Materials propose multiple ways of thinking and knowing, and they are deeply embedded in the ways of the world. In this way, curriculum demands pedagogical and artistic dispositions, sensitivities and decisions (Nxumalo, Vintimilla, & Nelson, 2018).

Condition #6. Educators engage in the practice of pedagogical documentation/narration to coconstruct curriculum with children.

Pedagogical documentation is a buzz term in Canadian early childhood education, mentioned in the majority of provincial curriculum frameworks. A practice carefully developed by Italian pedagogue Loris Malaguzzi in the 1960s, pedagogical documentation provides the world with a glimpse of the essence of early childhood education. As Malaguzzi envisioned it, pedagogical documentation is an instrument of collective memory that makes educational processes visible. Thus, it is closely related to curriculum making.

An ECE system that attends to pedagogical processes for imagining more just societies needs to think pedagogical documentation carefully. In the Canadian context, pedagogical documentation (also known as pedagogical narration) is frequently positioned as a tool to observe and assess individual children, or to make children's learning visible to their families. When viewed as an assessment tool, pedagogical documentation/narration reinscribes a service delivery model. When pedagogical documentation focuses on the developmental progress of individual children, opportunities for collectively constructing curriculum are lost. When documentation is used primarily to prove that educators are engaging in provincially mandated developmentally appropriate practices with children, educators are positioned as passive facilitators of predetermined curriculum, which contributes to a lack of educator agency and engagement in their pedagogical practice. When viewed only as an instrument of assessment or of making children's learning visible, documentation becomes a tool of surveillance and compliance rather than a process for deepening pedagogical work.

In contrast, when pedagogical documentation/narration fosters an educational vision, it is integral to pedagogical and curricular processes (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015; Peeters et al., 2015; Vandebroek & Peeters, 2013). Pedagogical values and commitments unfold and are reshaped as educators engage in curriculum making through the practice of pedagogical documentation/narration. In other words, through pedagogical documentation/narration, educators critically examine, with complexity, their pedagogical values and commitments (Kim & Hughes, 2018). The practice of pedagogical documentation/narration creates opportunities for educators, children, families and communities to collectively participate in the ongoing process of curriculum making (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Kim, 2019; Rinaldi, 2006; Kummen & Hodgins, 2019). In this way, the sharing of pedagogical and curricular processes invites public engagement around the questions and concerns pertaining to the education of young children (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Berger, 2010; Vandebroek & Peeters, 2013). For this to happen, the practice of pedagogical documentation/narration involves educators, children and families revisiting, interpreting and negotiating the encounters and events that weave curriculum (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Kummen & Hodgins, 2019).

Condition #7. Educators work with pedagogists to meet conditions #1–6.

A key factor for deepening professional development is providing enabling working conditions, including the presence of a pedagogic leader – a role that operates in several European contexts (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Gunnarson et al., 1999; Lazzari et al., 2013; Moss, 2000, 2014; Vandenbroeck et al., 2016). Inspired by this tradition, particularly the Italian *pedagogista*, a new professional role – pedagogist – is currently being integrated into the BC and Ontario ECE systems (Land et al., 2020). Substantial evidence from literature and case studies suggests that systematic, continuing pedagogical work led by this specialized role raises ECE professional competences far more than short-term in-service workshops (Kummen & Hodgins, 2019; Urban et al., 2011).

Pedagogists play a vital role in creating conditions for transformative change in ECE (Cagliari et al., 2016; Moss, 2014; Urban et al., 2011; Vintimilla, 2018; Vintimilla & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020). Working closely with children and educators over time, a pedagogist promotes democratic processes of engagement for creating new pedagogic knowledge in response to the unique needs of ECE centres in their local community contexts (Early Childhood Pedagogy Network, 2020; Lazzari et al., 2011; Moss, 2013). A pedagogist asks political questions, such as “What values are embedded in our curriculum?” Whereas licensing bodies uphold compliance with provincial health and safety guidelines (Government of British Columbia, 2020; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019), pedagogists work with the particularities of ECE settings to foster quality ECE and create conditions for a curriculum-as-lived approach with children and educators (Aoki, 1993; Nxumalo et al., 2018). Pedagogists are committed to unsettling status-quo ways of thinking and doing to open up new pedagogical possibilities by (a) creating space for collective attunement to the question of what kind of subject is needed to respond to the changing conditions our times (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Moss, 2020); (b) supporting educators to break with the habit of administering prescribed, theme-based activities; and (c) promoting dialogic, critically reflective practices capable of disrupting dominant discourses that contribute to the challenging times in which we now find ourselves (Vintimilla & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020).

The work of a pedagogist is interdisciplinary (Land et al., 2020). Pedagogists pose questions that broaden curricular possibilities beyond developmentalism to create conditions for educators to critically reflect on what is happening in their pedagogical practices (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015) and on their role as active participants in constructing the conditions of the early childhood environment (Blaise et al., 2017; Hewes et al., 2019). This critical reflection results in the systemic improvement of pedagogical work (Peeters et al., 2015).

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