

THE PERSPECTIVES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS ON PARTICIPATION,
AGENCY AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

MA CHYS – Masters Thesis

The Perspectives of Early Childhood Educators on Participation, Agency and Children's Rights

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Abstract

Participation, agency and children's rights are trending topics in children's research. Their definitions are yet to be concretely defined at the empirical level leaving their practical implementation even more fluid. The purpose of this research project was to investigate the current perspectives of Early Childhood Educators in Nova Scotia on the aforementioned three topics.

Using semi-structured interviews five ECE's were asked a series of questions on their perspectives not just on participation, agency and right's but what they feel are components to these concepts and what construct barriers to practice.

Participants to this research study share that currently participation is more closely defined as engagement. The difference to these two topics being one is a contribution to one's own life and the other is taking part in the experience of life. Agency although a frequently heard topic is not well understood and definitions vary greatly between participants. Finally children's rights are well received but not necessarily labelled or recalled.

The implications for this study are that any of this topics could be more specifically researched as Nova Scotia is a population not yet interviewed in this aspect.

Introduction

The study of children and the variety of ways they interconnect with adult society is complex. The desire for more scientific knowledge on child governance has existed for over a century (Mentha, Church and Page, 2015). Mentha, Church and Page emphasize Kantian philosophy when examining child governance, agency and participation: "how do I cultivate freedom when there is restraint" (Kant, 1899/2003, p. 27 through Mentha, Church and Page,

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2015 p. 625). In this project, I too, will ask this question. My intention was to explore the perspectives of Nova Scotian Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) on participation, agency and children's rights. My focus on how we do (or do not) provide/integrate opportunities to build the skill of agency and true participation into the restraint of a preschool day. Going into this project I had a guiding question in mind: why ECE's feel the way they do about agency, participation and children's rights? Whether or not ECE's implement these skills is important to know, I believe that the "why" will provides critical insight into the climate of early childhood education in Nova Scotia.

In 1989, the United Nations drafted a document to standardize the rights and treatment of people typically under the age of 18 (Harcourt & Haggland, 2013): The United Nations Convention of Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This document was the first of its kind; a legally binding convention with the intention to begin a universal dialogue around both welfare and agency (Herczog, 2013). This document could be legally enforced alongside the laws of any ratifying State Party. However, it was a document that was created for children without the consultation of children (Harcourt & Haggland, 2013; Theobald & Ailwood, 2011; Freeman, 2000; Stasiulis, 2002). The right to participation is considered a right in itself and an overarching paradigm that should be considered when implementing all the articles of the UNCRC (Keanally, 2017; Schneider, 2017. Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). By 2015 the UNCRC was ratified by 196 nations (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023). As previously mentioned ratification implies that a nation is agreeing to implement rights alongside national laws and practices. There is only one nation that has not ratified this document to date: the United States of America. The Committee on the Rights of the Child states that "Only one State is missing in order to reach universal ratification. This number is unprecedented in the field of human rights." (Committee on

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the Rights of the Child, 2023, retrieved from: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crc/background-convention>) The idea of a universal standard of care is highly discussed in the literature. It can be demonstrated in the fact that despite African countries being within the first 20 Member States to ratify the UNCRC; after its ratification they felt it was not reflective of their children's experiences (Mbsie, 2016). In 1990, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (AWRC) was drafted by the UN as a regional treaty (African Union, 1990). However, this treaty was not acknowledged within practice until 1999 (African Union, 1990). This is all pertinent to the thesis project: How do we implement a universal right? Is there one way to implement a universal right? Is it ethical to establish a code of universal rights? Is the concept of a universal right in actuality the enforcement of a hegemonic norm? The findings of this project show us that, before we begin to implement, we must first understand. When I began this thesis project, I intended to ask great questions of established concepts. However, what I learned was that the foundation for the answers was not in place. Over the course of this project, I examined the perspectives of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) in Nova Scotia on participation and agency in the framework of the children's rights perspectives afforded by article 12 of the UNCRC. I shed light on their perspectives and their implementation practices when it comes to the participation and agency of children in early learning facilities in Nova Scotia. In my analysis, I learned of the importance of article 42, as without adequate education about rights, we have to ask ourselves how we can practice them fully. I explored educator experiences and perspectives about their preparation and education surrounding participation and agency during their education and experience leading up to teaching. Article 42 of the UNCRC states: States Parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike (UNCRC, 1989, p. 12). The precedent set by the United

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Nations is that both adults and children should be educated about children's rights and all that fall under that conceptual umbrella by mandate of the Convention itself; I, as principal investigator researched the current climate in Nova Scotia. I found that in Nova Scotia, despite a collective positive attitude towards children's rights, general knowledge was lacking.

For this thesis I interviewed five Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) in Nova Scotia. I used a semi-structured interview method to gather their experiences and personal perspectives in regard to agency and participation. Agency for the purpose of this paper will be defined as the "capacity to choose, act and influence" (Mentha, Church & Page, 2015, pg. 626). Participation is defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary simply as "the act of participating" (2021). In this paper: participation in the early childhood context will be defined as contributing and having ethically allotted control over one's own circumstance. My research goal was to contribute to the greater context of early childhood care in Nova Scotia by identifying perspectives both geographically and empirically not yet uncovered. In my literature review, I found that the documentation surrounding ECE perspectives on children's rights is small but growing. However, the documented rights perspectives of Nova Scotian ECEs is very small to none. The intended contribution of this thesis is to give a small insight into why ECEs in Nova Scotia practice the way they do regarding participation and agency and their knowledge of children's rights.

To answer my research question I needed a structure: I begin with a theoretical framework based in the sociology of childhood and Standpoint Theory. The interpretation of my findings was based on the idea's that everything must be considered relative to society's current perception of that subject. I followed that with a literature review of the current empirical research on children's participation, agency and children's rights. Focusing intently on the

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UNCRC and how that pertains Early Childhood Educators and education. This drew me to concepts of child centered education and decision making as they are directly related to how Early Childhood Educators exercise their understanding of the UNCRC in early learning environments. My research project is a case study on Early Childhood Educators in Nova Scotia. I interviewed five participants with a varying level of certification using a semi-structured interview style. I coded their responses into three broad themes: participation, agency and children's rights. Within those themes I documented that Early Childhood Educators in Nova Scotia have a different perspective on those concepts than I had anticipated. I found that the concept of participation and engagement are tightly intertwined. Agency, despite its consensus as a current "buzzword" is not universally understood or defined. Finally, Children's Rights however thoroughly valued were not recognized by project participants when compared to theoretical standards. This was a thought-provoking and theoretically challenging process that adds value to the current body of literature of children's participation especially in Nova Scotia.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

1.1 Childhood as Social Construct

Childhood is both a time in human life and a social class. Humans pass through the period of their life typically labelled childhood. Alternatively, there is typically a place in society termed childhood (Qvortrup, 2009). Therefore, childhood is simultaneously a temporary and a permanent sociological construct. However, there is no universal childhood experience (James & Prout, 1997; Stasiulis, 2002; Corsaro, 2015). It is recognized cross culturally that children hold a different place in society than adults. Childhood is a social construct (James & Prout, 1997; Corsaro, 2015, Qvortrup, 2009).

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When we describe childhood as a social class, we are viewing it as a structural form in society (Corsaro, 2015). When we look at childhood as a structure in society, we can expand our knowledge and practice beyond that which is based on the individual child. We can view children as a group in society and can expand our lens from exclusively the adult experience. When looking at childhood as a time period it begs the question: is there a universal time period of childhood? The UNCRC states that childhood spans from 0-18 years unless there is a pre-existing state policy that mandates differently. The universal document attempting to legally bind children's rights makes room for cultural reflexivity when it comes to the time period of childhood. Sociologist Jens Qvortrup describes three assumptions that must be met when describing the criteria for childhood: 1) Childhood is a structure in society, 2) childhood experiences the same forces as adulthood and 3) children are the ones co-constructing childhood and society alongside adults (2009). According to this framework the act of simply being a child isn't the only qualification for experiencing childhood. A child must be experiencing society and contributing back to society in order to be experiencing a childhood in the social sense. Qvortrup theorized further that when we view children as co-constructing society alongside adults we are viewing them as a social group. When we view children in the context of existing within a society, we can ask questions about the experiences of being a child in that society, as opposed to being an individual in that society or every individual's childhood experience (2009). The framework of childhood as a social construct reinforces the idea of childhood participation. As children need to participate in the construction of their own childhood in order for it to fit the criteria of childhood (Qvortup, 2009).

As children are active participants in constructing their lives, childhood can be considered a social practice. A social practice is a habitual set of practices performed by a social

group (MacMillan, 2017 as defined by Garlen, 2018). Childhood as a practice reaffirms the social nature of childhood. Childhood can be a ritual, or a pre-set norm expected within society for children to experience. When childhood is viewed as a social practice, it is an example of how they use “interpretive reproduction” (Corsaro, 2015) as an active process that will both affect children and adults (Garlen, 2018). Children enacting agency over their practice of childhood is key to understanding the ways that childhood changes over time, and between individuals.

1.2 Sociology of Childhood and Childhood Studies, the Paradigm of Agency

“Children are and must be seen as active in the construction of their own lives” (James and Prout via James, 2009).

Before the 1960s and 1970s, most theories around childhood were focused on what children would become. These approaches were termed “anticipatory approaches”. An example from Kingsley Davis (1940), stated that “an individual’s most important functions for society are performed when he is fully adult” (p. 217). This paints a picture that childhood is a by-product on the way to adulthood (Corsaro, 2015; Qvortrup, 2009). The 1950’s mark a peak for ideas like Talcott Parson’s “socialization theory”: that children could be changed to have different traits based on the way they are raised (and that the education system was a critical part in this process) (Leonard, 2016). If children could be changed by the environment around them, why couldn’t they be active participants in this change themselves? In the late 1970’s children were starting to be identified as social agents per a combination of socialization theory and developmental psychology (Sorbring & Kuczynski, 2018). However, in 1998 Prout, James and Jenks wrote “Theorizing Childhood” which is remarked at being the first book to consider the nuclear

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importance of childhood in sociology and the impact of social construction in childhood (Sorbring & Kuzynski, 2018; Prout, James & Jenks, 1998).

The work of Corsaro describes children as active participants in their lives. Children are not just accepting and regurgitating the adult world around them. Children are recreating experiences and recreating society themselves. This reproduced society, affects adult society. Children are both taking on contributions from adult society and thus, contributing to adult society itself. Children are “active, creative, social, agents” (Corsaro, 2015 p. 7).

Corsaro argues that children do not simply absorb adult culture and internalize it. Children are constantly processing information from society around them, and “rearticulating” it (2015, p.18). This contributes to and change society, “interpretive reproduction” is a cycle of change (p.19). Corsaro demonstrates this visually through the “orb web model”. A visual representation where the spokes of the web represent various social institutions the child will intersect with as they pass through four fluid stages of life (represented by a spiral): preschool, preadolescent, adolescent, and adult. Institutions represented by the spokes include cultural institutions, family institutions, and occupational institutions (Corsaro, 2015, p. 24). Corsaro explains that a multitude of different experiences and interactions can occur at any of these intersections. It is during this variety of interactions that a transaction of production can be made. Typically, the institutions represented by the spokes remain stagnant, however, the variety of locations and situations that can take place within them is ever changing (Corsaro, 2015).

Corsaro viewed the child in the context of the society that they were existing and changing in. A second critical theorist was Lev Vygotsky. The work of Lev Vygotsky began in the early 20th century, and it was at this time he began championing the importance of children in

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relation to culture and society. Vygotsky emphasizes that children must be viewed in the context of their culture: notably developing the Socio-Cultural Theory of Cognitive Development (Vygotsky, 1978). 30 years later, Vygotsky's theories are applied to teaching children problem solving and critical thinking approaches (Harland, 2003). As described below, Vygotsky's theories surrounding children in relation to guidance by those around them act as an intuitive framework for this thesis project.

Vygotsky viewed change in the context of action taking place in society. Vygotsky maintained that children are active agents of change in their own lives but emphasized that these changes were taking place in relationship with other people, places and things. (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky concludes that the most vital moments in children's cognitive development is when both speech and "practical activity" are happening simultaneously (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 24). He emphasized the importance of children internalizing the culture in which they existed. He hypothesized that before a child began to develop any "mastery" or skill development in relation to their own behaviour; they must first begin to understand and develop relationships with their environment (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 25). Vygotsky hypothesized that everything must happen more than once in development, once in the exterior environment and than once internally (cognitively) (see also Corsaro 2015). Vygotsky's model also includes the zone of proximal development: "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development can be applied to the notion of "due weight" in article 12 of the UNCRC. In a meaningful participatory process, adults will provide children with as many and as substantial contribution opportunities as possible,

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achieving the best outcome for the decision and situation. The child's best interest will be maintained while keeping in line with the guiding frameworks of the UNCRC. The child will participate as much as possible (Campbell and Rose-Krasnor, 2007). Paired with article 5 of the UNCRC: to provide guidance in children exercising their rights (UNCRC, 1989). The zone of proximal development is a theoretical model to base real life application of article 12.

1.3 Agency and Participation

The section above discussed children participating in society, making changes based on their own interpretations. In order for this to take place children will need to know how to execute their own decisions and thought processes. This is the concept of agency; sometimes the idea of doing what you think might seem like an automated process. Yet, agency is both an innate skill and one that needs opportunities to be refined and exercised. Agency is a difficult word to define linguistically as it can mean different things in different contexts (Van Leeuwen, 1995). Agency for the purpose of this thesis will be defined as the "capacity to choose, act and influence" (Mentha, Church & Page, 2015, pg. 626). Agency is both an innate ability to be developed, while in contrast, being a capacity that relies heavily on others giving you the opportunity to exercise it. For example, a child may have a fully developed sense of agency that they learned in a non-educational context, but when they come to school, they are no longer allowed to exercise their agency. In this example, it is difficult to say whether or not the child truly has agency, but we are still recognizing them as social actors. Children act with intention and 'typically have more social competence than we give them credit for' (Moran-Ellis, 2013, p. 313). When we acknowledge that children are social actors and consistently putting thought into their actions, plans and desires, we acknowledge their inherent agentic abilities. Children who are given opportunities to exercise their right to agency have opportunities to refine their skill.

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Agency is viewed as one of the skills that teachers need to build a relationship of trust to give more opportunities for (Shaik & Ebrahim, 2015). It is this continued cycle, of facilitated agency and the subsequent impact that children will make by actualizing their interpretations of the outside world that will create new productions of society (interpretive reproduction).

Agency is recognized as one of the key non-cognitive skills essential for academic success (Boylan, Bartlett & Knaus, 2018). The development of agency is essential for the development of resilience and independent thought (Mentha, Church & Page, 2015). Agency in the context of this thesis paper must be given the opportunity to be exercised. This opportunity is typically labelled participation. Participation in the early childhood context will be defined as: contributing and having control over one's own circumstance. Simply listening to what children have to say is not a full participatory process. Actively finding ways to practice children's participation by listening and following through with their agency is considered true participation.

Choi describes that agency in the early years is not only the performance of capacity (following through), but the ability to do so in context (2018). They argue that agency in the early years is directly related to navigating social relationships and interactions; this phenomenon is termed "relational agency" (2018, p. 1526). This view of agency directly links back to Vygotsky's sociocultural theories surrounding children's development: as he viewed the context as critical to how one views the child (1978). Choi describes agency as important in the preschool years because it is essential for "identity construction" (2018, p. 1526). They argue that children's identity is formed through participating in the choices that affect their lives, decision making and developing and maintaining relationships. These are all tasks that would typically constitute political participation in an adult circumstance. This contrast of ability

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between child and adult has been historically documented in literature; with children's activities typically characterized as socialization and adult activities constituting actual practice (Moran-Ellis, 2013). Exercising agency and participation is a way to strengthen children's identity and the more concrete their identity, children will typically practice agency and participation (Choi, 2018). Choi makes an interesting observation of how a sense of security can create more agency: describing how in a bilingual preschool a child showed more likelihood to be assertive and show assertiveness with the peers with whom she shared a second language. While in contrast, they remained more compliant and less assertive with the majority language speaking peers whom they were trying to develop a new relationship. Choi argues this is an example of power: that preschoolers are more likely to express agency freely with those they have already developed a secure relationship with. If children feel they do not have power, or that the caliber of their relationship is in contention they are more likely to comply with social norms. Further, they may be less likely to express agency, or they may express agency in a way they feel will gain acceptance (Choi, 2018).

Agency for the purpose of this research project is typically correlated with acts of pre-mediation and planning. Which we can contrast with ideas of autonomy which may be more aligned with the idea of volition or control. Just as agency can mean different things in different concepts, it's just as important to think about the contexts of participation. As aforementioned, agency is a mechanism of participation but for the purpose of the project it's important to look at the potential layers of participation. The Norway Children's Act is an example of how children can exercise political participation (Covell, Howe & Blohkuis, 2018). Children having control and contributing to their political and geo-social circles could be described as political participation. Social participation can be described as children participating and having affect

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over the transactions in their social environments. For example: engaging in social interactions, engaging with the environment itself, and having affect over how these come to fruition. Piskur (2013) describes that social participation is the same as “participation” but must involve “communities” (p.213).

The definitions of agency and participation are critical for this thesis project as they are the foundation to my findings. ECEs are in a critical position to facilitate political participation and agency with young children. Some children attend their early learning environments 40 hours a week. This is a window of opportunity for concepts like strengthening identity and facilitating agency. It will be key to confront findings about what ECEs in Nova Scotia know about agency and participation with existing research, as they are in an ideal position to be championing these skills and rights.

1.4 Alienable vs. Inalienable Rights

There is significant literature on how rights in themselves are also a social construct. Literature typically refers to two schools of thought: the Will Theory of Rights and the Interest Theory of Rights (Steiner, 2013; Biasetti, 2015). According to the Will Theory of rights: rights are inherently alienable because they deem what is socially acceptable and socially unacceptable. To take away or act differently than political rights would be to breach a social code. Meanwhile, the Interest Theory of Rights says that rights “protect” what is most important (Steiner, 2013, p. 140) and that is a moral code. Inferring that when something becomes associated with morals it becomes inalienable (unbreakable or unchangeable). However, morals and values are typically determined by the hegemony. For theoretical consistency in this project rights will be viewed as a social construct rather than a moral construct (similarly to the social construction of childhood).

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1.5 Article 12 of the UNCRC related to Participation and Agency

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law. (Art. 12 UNCRC)

An important part of this thesis will be how agency and participation relate to article 12 of the UNCRC. Although the words participation and agency are not explicitly labelled under article 12, the United Nations has categorized article 12 as a “participatory right” (Department of Justice, 2019). Although the literal text of the article describes how children have the “right to express their views” (UNCRC, 1989, p.4). The Committee on the Rights of the Child described in 2009, that consultation with children is not adequate in order to fulfill the requirements for article 12 (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; Department of Justice, 2019). In order for a participatory right to be fully realized, the contributions of a child must be truly taken into account and integrated into the actions going forward (within due weight) (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). Definitions of the word participation describe it as the act of participating; therefore, a mechanism of participation needs to be identified. As agency is the ability to “choose, act, and influence” (Mentha, Church & Page, 2015, 626), this is the mechanism of participation. Agency is both a skill and the right to have choice in one’s own life (Mentha, Church & Page, 2015; Shaik & Ebrahim, 2015). Agency and participation are both needed to fully realize the criteria for participatory rights.

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These nuanced definitions are essential for the analysis of the findings of this thesis project. The purpose of this thesis project is to unpack the perspectives of ECE in regard to their current practices under the current “universal mandate” (UNCRC).

1.6 Standpoint Theory

Children's agency is a layered concept as it is both a skill that children inherently learn and conversely, an adult permitted opportunity. Frequently surrounding agency is the phrase “giving children opportunities for agency” (Mentha, Church & Page, 2015; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). While this phrase is not contextually problematic it insinuates an adult-centric view of how and when children should be using agency. To unpack whether there is a power-dynamic or imbalance in childhood we can use child-standpoint theory. Mendina-Minton poses that Standpoint theory is based on a communication-based power-differential; typically, between a majority population and a minority population (2019). In the case of a child-based standpoint theory, despite children's active contributions to the construction of childhood and subsequent contributions to society, their voice is not typically documented (Mendina-Minton, 2019). Academic fields like statistics, economics and political sciences have a history of simply not documenting children, or not documenting the impact of their field onto children (or the contributions of children unto their field) (Qvortrup, 1997). The UNCRC itself was created without the consultation of children (Harcourt & Haggland, 2013). Mendina-Minton propose that it is through children's (as a social group) marginalization and powerlessness that they are considered eligible for standpoint theory (2019). Children are not a majority population (statistically) and their rights are not legally binding (Kenneally, 2017). It is the duty of each ratifying party of a UN treaty to interpret and implement its articles (UNICEF, 2008). The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines marginalization in the following way: “to relegate to an

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unimportant or powerless position in a society or group” (2020). Children are powerless in that their decision making is left up to the interpretation and consideration of adults (Callaghan, Long-Wincza & Velenosi, 2017). Despite this being a developmentally appropriate practice it thus, makes them eligible for standpoint theory. Standpoint Theory is an enquiry-based theory that explores the power dynamics between populations. When studying participation and agency in young children, this is especially pertinent. When and how children are given choice over their own lives and in what situations they are deemed competent to have volition in their own lives are important questions. Article 12 of the UNCRC is bound by the modification: “due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (UNCRC, 1989). This distinction is a direct example of how the population of adults is exercising power over how and when children can participate in their own lives. Deeper still, the idea of when and where children are deemed capable of their own participation is nuanced as it can be assumed that as the age of majority differs internationally so would these measurements of due weight. If the measurement of due weight is left to the determination of the hegemony that has cultural implications for many populations as the UNCRC is considered a universal document. To date there has not been a universal or non-universal basis for how due weight should be calculated. (Covell, Howe & Blokhuis, 2018).

1.7 Conclusion

By creating a framework out of the theories of socio-cultural cognitive development, social acting and the sociology of childhood\ and standpoint theory, criteria for analysis emerge: that children are capable of agency, and that opportunity is a key factor in children's access to agency and participation. Agency is the mechanism of participation, and it is children's agency that inherently affects both adult and child society (Corsaro, 2015). Children inherently will

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need to participate in the construction of their own childhood in order to fully manifest

interpretive reproduction. The reason standpoint theory is important to the framework of this thesis is it maintains the importance of the relevance of power. In order to research and analyse a project that is centered on a document that was written on behalf of a population rather than with a population, it is important to have a framework prepared to navigate power dynamics. Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis project: standpoint theory will be used as it is inquiry based (Medina-Minton, 2019), and does not insinuate a conclusive and rigid structure to assess findings.

Agency and participation are the defined research terms (of this thesis) and they are included in one the articles of what is currently the only legally enforceable document of human rights for children. It could be considered an academic oversight to dismiss the relationship of these two concepts. Therefore, the direct relation between the UNCRC's mandate of agency and participation and the implementation of Early Childhood Educators implementation will be the considered within the lens and framework of this thesis project. The Sociology of Childhood remains important to the assessment of the UNCRC and children's rights in general because it asserts that not only do children inherently possess agency but that their capacities and dynamic reproductions of society affect both child and adult society. Ultimately, if we are to holistically understand how children are perceived and why they are allocated the rights and resources they are currently afforded; we need to understand how children affect society. In order to understand why ECEs have established their current practices, we need to understand their current perspective on children and their capacities - a view, which has inherently been formed, in part, by their experiences interacting with children as they interpret and reproduce society.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In 2006, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child had dedicated an entire day to discussing the implications of article 12 (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). The Committee reminded ratified parties that participation is one of four principle rights; frequently referred to as the “3Ps” (Kenneally, 2017; Schneider, 2017). This title refers how the 3Ps represent: participation, provision and protection (Keanally, 2017; Schneider, 2017. Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). The other three principle rights being: the right to non-discrimination (article 2), the right to life and development (article 6) and the consideration of a child's best interest at all times (article 3). Principle rights are articles that should be incorporated into the implementation of all other articles in the UNCRC (2009). Campbell and Rose-Krasnor explain that more articles from the UNCRC are needed to actualize political participation fully (2007).

Table 1**Articles Required for True Participation**

| | |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Article 13 | Freedom of expression and the right to seek and receive information |
| Article 14 | Freedom of thought, conscience and religion |
| Article 15 | Freedom of association and the freedom to peaceful assembly |
| Article 16 | Right to Privacy |
| Article 17 | Freedom to access the media |

(UNCRC, 1989)

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Only when articles 12-17 are being actualized that children's participation is truly occurring

(Campbell & Rose-Krasnor, 2007).

In the process of performing a literature review on participation and agency in the early years certain themes began to emerge. Below will detail the results of a literature search for the explicit terms of "participation" and "agency". However, further than those terms, there is a body of research centred around political participation, guidance, and the UNCRC. In order to find these articles, it took a multitude of search terms and a collaboration with a member of my thesis committee who provided pertinent, relevant research. Articles were found by combining "participation" or "agency" or "UNCRC" with "early childhood educators or preschool teachers or kindergarten teachers" in the data bases of Academic Search Premier, Child Development & Adolescent Studies and SocIndex. The themes revealed by the search findings guided the research further. There was a clear prevalence of literature surrounding decision making, a connection between agency and child centered education and a clear need to construct a precedent for children's participation in Canada. Using these themes as my guide, my intention was to research as thoroughly as possible in directions suggested by pre-existing literature.

2.1 Decision Making and the UNCRC

Hudson (2012) gives an example from Australia where Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) who viewed children as individuals were more likely to encourage independence. The ECEs who viewed children as individuals were more likely to have the perspective that children should have autonomy and volition. These ECEs did not view these traits negatively (Hudson, 2012). Other ECEs viewed treating young children as though they had autonomy would expedite their childhood - that their childhood was an innocence that needed to be protected and

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they felt as though decision-making would violate that (Hudson, 2012). This mindset can be described as the protectionist approach.

The protectionist approach views the child as innocent and dependent and is often at the core of some [Australian] educational policies (Hudson, 2012). However, in 2013, Haggland and Harcourt describe that the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) directly stated: "The Convention also recognises children's right to play and be active participants in all matters affecting their lives" (p.288) in their document (2013). According to Quennerstedt, in order for there to be change in the degree of children's participation at the early years level, Educators need to be educated (2016). To facilitate a change in mindset, educators must be provided with knowledge so that they can practice and implement participation in their programming (Quennerstedt 2016). Theobalt, Danby & Ailwood describe the perspective that educators should be shifting from experts in child development to experts in adult-child collaboration (2011).

Decision making is considered a subset of participation. In Australia, some Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) view decision making as unnecessary while others viewed it as a building block to human rights realization and autonomy, seeing choice as the beginning of learning how to manifest identity and agency (Hudson, 2012). These ECEs focused more on what they were doing to provide opportunity to facilitate decision making, instead of the children's implicit ability to make the decisions already. These ECEs typically facilitated children's decision making in a pre-determined environment where the choices and subsequent consequences were already determined, and the idea of choice was more of an illusion (Hudson, 2012, p. 7). This is not an example of participation or agency. The ECEs who did not feel the need to facilitate decision making, or practiced very limited decision-making opportunities with

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the children described an almost innate desire to direct children towards the (what they viewed as the) “right choice” (Hudson, 2012). For the purpose of this literature review, the term ‘right choice’ will be considered as the ‘socially acceptable’ choice. Succinctly, Hudson found that ECEs who did not facilitate decision making had a higher likelihood of making choices based on their own personal morals (2012). This practice was typical amongst practitioners who worked with children under 5 as opposed to practitioners who worked with older children (Hudson, 2012, p. 6). This could be a reflection of how they view children, as beings to be moulded, rather than autonomous citizens to be provided with choice. Prout (2003) explains that, in the twentieth century, childhood is typically viewed from one of two perspectives: that children are in danger or that children are dangerous. It is from these perspectives that adults typically feel the need to intervene and “guide” children to socially accepted norms and behaviours. When children are viewed as in danger, it can refer to a hyper-idealized view of childhood innocence. Despite statistically low rates of tragic events (ie. abduction), adults may feel like they need to provide essential protection to ensure safety. When children are viewed as dangerous, it is in reference to how children can be viewed as a danger unto themselves. Without guidance, they would drift to performing undesired “immoral” behaviours and contribute to the decay of society (Prout, 2003). Neither of these perspectives leave room for the independent choice and volition of the child. Both perspectives disregard a child’s ability to interpret society and make personal choices based on their own intrinsic value hierarchy. Covell and Howe detail that in order for children to learn how to make good choices they need to be given the opportunity to make choices (2018).

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2.2 Children's Right to Participation in Canada

In order to appreciate the context of how the UNCRC is implemented in Nova Scotia it is important to have an understanding of the context of the enactment of the UNCRC within Canada. Canada ratified the UNCRC on December 13, 1991. Canada continued to ratify two out of its three optional protocols: The Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (OPSC) and The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC). Most importantly, the final protocol is: The Optional Protocol on a Communication Procedure (OPS 3 CRC) (Keanally, 2017). It is pertinent that Canada hasn't yet ratified this protocol as this third protocol establishes systems and protocols for children to challenge rights violations committed by State Parties. This is relevant because at times Canada's implementation of the UNCRC can appear symbolic (Howe & Covell, 2007). Canada tied with Ireland for last place amongst 25 developed countries in a comparison of Early Childhood services in 2008 (UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 8). In regard to child poverty, Canada ranked 24th out of 35 industrialized countries on UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 10 (2010). Followed by 17th out of 35 on children's wellbeing in rich countries on UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 11 (2011). Despite numerous critiques from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Canada has not yet implemented a monitoring system to keep track of children's rights application across the nation. A system which has been utilized in other regions (specifically Europe) (Covell & Howe, 2007). Another example of a critiqued practice is that the Canadian Criminal code continues to include section 43 which allows for "spanking". This segregates children as the only social group who are legally unprotected from physical assault in Canada (Callaghan, Wincza & Velenosi 2017). The Canadian government has not legalized or

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implemented any initiatives similar to the Norway Childrecon's Act encouraging participation by children in Canadian Society (Covell, Howe & Blokhuis, 2018). Further, Canada's Charter of Rights does not extend to private systems (ie. the family) (Covell, Howe & Blokhuis, 2018). Canada does not currently demonstrate a deep commitment to children's rights (Covell & Howe, 2007 p. 396).

The Innocenti Report Cards demonstrates how criteria like hunger and access to resources are a relatively measurable outcome. Agency and participation cannot be measured in such a cut and dry way. Specifically, in that access to agency and participation although a participatory right is measured from the perspective of the child through the adult. If this is how Canada has been assessed in relation to rights that can be provided in a manner that can be measured with little interpretation for the purpose of this literature review it will be inferred that it is the same for rights and articles that cannot be directly (or has been documented as under reported or undocumented (Herczog, 2013) assessed without adult allocation or interpretation.

In a 2005 Ipsos poll of the Canadian public, 61% of respondents felt that children's rights had been fully realized in Canada, while only 46% of those respondents were even aware of the UNCRC itself (Covell & Howe, 2007). Later in 2018, an Ipsos poll of the Canadian general public reported that 50% of participants answered that they felt children were the marginalized population most in need of the protection of human rights (Ipsos-Reid, 2018). This research can be interpreted in different ways. It can demonstrate the power imbalance between adults and children (Mendina-Minton, 2019). Or it can show that because of the lack of education surrounding children's rights in Canadian public school curricula; skewed realities of true rights actualization may be perpetuated (Covell, Howe & Blokhuis, 2018; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). In Manitoba, children are recognized with the right to be heard at age 12

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(Covell, Howe & Blokhuis, 2018). Despite the UN general comment mandating that there is no age limit in article 12 (The Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). All children have the right to provide their views and opinions and be heard at any age. In fact, to place and age limit would be discouraged (Committee of the Rights of the Child, 2009). These examples of discrepancy between the actualities of right realization and implementation begin to paint a picture of how Canada chooses to implement the UNCRC. Article 42 of the UNCRC mandates that the education surrounding its conventions is legally binding (UNCRC, 1989, p.11). Canada should be considering the education of children around their respective rights as they would be considering the implementation of any other article.

Campbell and Rose-Krasnor elaborate on two criticisms that Canada has been given in regards specifically to participation: that the UN committee of the Rights of the Child has specifically addressed Canada's lack of children's participation in legislation. Secondly, Canadian Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have suggested that Canada provide more non-tokenistic opportunities for child participation (2007). Canadian governmental officials at both a federal and provincial level continue to state that Canada shares a philosophy with the UNCRC. For example: Senator Landon Pearson stated in 2003 that "a recent trend in Canada [is] to assume that children have the right to participate (Campbell & Rose-Krasnor, 2007 p. 213). However, Canada does not reflect this with legislative action.

2.3 Canadian Schools

Research regarding participation of children in Early Childhood Education in Canadian settings is sparse. Still, it remains important to analyse how Canada implements agency and participation in school settings. Therefore, this section is a brief overview of Canada's agency and participation strategies in school settings. Acknowledging the lack of literature both

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nationally and internationally (Herczog, 2013, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009).

There are not many schools in Canada that would qualify as fulfilling children's right to participation (Covell, Howe & Blokhuis, 2018). Yet, the classroom is an excellent place to practice decision making (Campbell & Rose-Krasnor, p. 218) It is reminiscent of the critique by the Committee of the Rights of the Child that without the right to participation, the right to education cannot be met to it's fullest (2009). Covell, Howe & Blokhuis describe that the role of the teacher is changing (2018). It is changing from one of a singular educator to a multi-faceted workload of interventionist, educator, care-giver etc. Importantly, this change in perspective has not led to a change in training. Teachers are not being educated on how to educate in a modern climate, or how to implement the UNCRC into their programming but also educate children on the UNCRC and human rights (Covell, Howe & Blokhuis, 2018). Meaningful education about children's rights as well as an environment that facilitates agency and decision making is associated with positive self esteem, critical thinking and social responsibility (Covell, Howe and Blokhuis, 2018). The authors corroborate the theme that typically, it is teachers' perspectives on children's decision-making capacities, their own personal education and rights-based training that may limit them in their implementation capacities (2018). Student participation has been increasing since the ratification of the UNCRC (Campbell & Rose-Krasnor, 2007). Yet, in Canadian public schools, children are typically taught a curriculum that has had little to no input or consultation from the children whom it teaches (Macdonald, 2017). Adult populations are choosing and teaching from typically majority perspectives which can further marginalize children. Both, from the perspective that they are only being taught what adults deem important, and from more complex racialized perspectives that other minority historical viewpoints or other cultural value hierarchies may not be reflected in these curricula (Macdonald, 2017).

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Furthermore, Canadian children are typically not educated about their own rights in the classroom setting. There is typically not a significant amount of curriculum allotted to educating children of any age about what their rights are (Covell & Howe, 2007). To help rectify this rift, the province of New Brunswick has allowed students on the Curriculum Advisory Board, to contribute to the recommendations made to the provincial government. However, in Ontario, students who are on advisory boards must take a non-voting role (Campbell & Rose-Krasnor, 2007). Facilitating decision making in the classroom can be considered paradoxical. As teachers in Canada are mandated to teach from a curriculum and meet outcomes, yet are required by universal law to facilitate agency and include participation. In Nova Scotia, examples include: regulated child care centres are mandated to follow the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework, and for high schools: the Atlantic Canada Framework for Essential Graduation Competencies (Education and Early Childhood Development, 2015; 2019).

Canada is accused of being tokenistic in its implementation of children's rights. However, slowly, practices are being introduced across the provinces to amend the rift between the idea or aspiration to have children's rights and the implementation of children's rights. In the next sections, I will unpack the ideas surrounding the paradox that was the creation of rights for a population, rather than with a population. More specifically, if one of the principal rights assigned to that population is participation in their own life.

2.4 Who is consulted in Participation?

Despite the UNCRC's commitment to participation by naming it a principle right, the UNCRC itself was drafted without the consultation of children (Harcourt & Haggland, 2013; Freeman, 2000). The UNCRC being drafted in 1989, but it wasn't until 2002 that a minor would address the General Assembly of the UN. The minor was 17 years old (one year before the

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typical age of majority) (Stasiulis, 2002). This was the catalyst for reflection on the UN's own perspective and accreditation to the views and opinions of children. Opinions including ideas like: providing children with participation and consultation in their own lives would doesn't necessarily give them the final say. Nor is it developmentally appropriate for children to be expected to make and control all decisions in their life (Campbell & Rose-Krasner, 2007; Covell, Howe & Blokhuis, 2018). However, implementation of participation does require putting value and consideration on their input. In Norway, it is illegal to make choices that affect the lives of children without their consultation under the Norway Children's Act (Covell, Howe & Blokhuis, 2018). Children who are given the opportunity to be heard and contribute input into their own custody agreements post-divorce, are more likely to have successful family relationships (Roberts, 2003). Theobald, Danby & Ailwood detail that simple consultation with children is not enough to ensure full participation (2011). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child views such consultation: "tokenistic" and not a true implementation of participation (2009). To acquire the views and experiences of a child is not adequate. To implement and integrate these ideas is what constitutes participation. A study conducted in Norway, described attempts at facilitating children's participation in policy too short term, and with no lasting changes (Prout, 2003). "Participation is a fundamental right of citizenship" (Lansdown, 1995, p.4). Providing children with participation opportunities doesn't guarantee that society will change in a positive way. Or that programs will start producing better outcomes. Regardless, denying children the right to participation is a violation of rights (Roberts, 2003).

In Europe, children younger than school age were frequently left out of reports pertaining to progress on UNCRC implementation (Herczog, 2013). In Sweden, teachers rarely referred to children under the age of three in discussions pertaining to children's participation

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(Quennerstedt, 2016). Despite the fact that there is no lower age limit on the UNCRC (Campbell & Rose-Krasnor, 2007). Children who are under three or neurodivergent typically do not use spoken words to assert their rights (Quennerstedt, 2016; Mentha, Church & Page, 2015). Further, children who are being educated in languages different than the language used at home may not be able to fully express their participation (Shaik & Ebrahim, 2015). All methods of expression that children use must be taken into account when engaging in children's participation. The Committee of the Rights of the Child dictates that "non-verbal forms of communication including play, body language, facial expressions, and drawing and painting" (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, p.7) must be recognized as valid.

2.5 Participation and Decision-Making in Schools

The information regarding participation in Early Childhood Education in Canadian settings is sparse. Still, it remains important to analyse how Canada implements agency and participation in school settings. This section is a brief overview of Canada's agency and participation strategies in school settings. Acknowledging the lack of literature both nationally and internationally (Herczog, 2013, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009), there are not many schools in Canada that would qualify as fulfilling children's right to participation (Covell, Howe & Blokhuis, 2018). Yet, the classroom is an excellent place to practice decision making (Campbell & Rose-Krasnor, p. 218). It is reminiscent of the critique by the Committee of the Rights of the Child that without the right to participation, the right to education cannot be met to its fullest (2009). Covell, Howe & Blokhuis describe that the role of the teacher is changing (2018). It is changing from one of a singular educator to a multi-faceted workload of interventionist, educator, care-giver etc. Importantly, this change in perspective has not led to a change in training. Teachers are not being educated on how to educate in a modern climate, or

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how to implement the UNCRC into their programming, educate children on the UNCRC and human rights (Covell, Howe & Blokhuis, 2018). Meaningful education about children's rights, an environment that facilitates agency and decision making is associated with positive self esteem, critical thinking and social responsibility (Covell, Howe and Blokhuis, 2018). They corroborate the theme that typically, it is teachers' perspectives on children's decision-making capacities, their own personal education and rights based training that may limit them in their implementation capacities (2018). Student participation has been increasing since the ratification of the UNCRC (Campbell & Rose-Krasnor, 2007). Yet, in Canadian public schools, children are typically taught a curriculum that has had little to no input or consultation from the children whom it teaches (Macdonald, 2017). Adult populations are choosing and teaching from typically majority perspectives which can further marginalize children. Both, from the perspective that they are only being taught what adults deem important, and from more complex racialized perspectives that other minority historical viewpoints or other cultures may not be reflected in these curricula (Macdonald, 2017). Furthermore, Canadian children are typically not educated about their own rights in the classroom setting. There is typically not a significant amount of curriculum allotted to educating children of any age about what their rights are (Covell & Howe, 2007). To help rectify this rift, the province of New Brunswick has allowed students on the Curriculum Advisory Board, to contribute to the recommendations made to the provincial government. However, in Ontario, students who are on advisory boards must take a non-voting role (Campbell & Rose-Krasnor, 2007). Facilitating decision making in the classroom can be considered paradoxical. As teachers in Canada are mandated to teach from a curriculum and meet outcomes, yet are required by universal law to facilitate agency and include participation. In Nova Scotia, examples include regulated child care centres are mandated to follow the Nova

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Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework, and, for high schools, the Atlantic Canada

Framework for Essential Graduation Competencies (Education and Early Childhood

Development, 2015; 2019).

Due to the little literature on this topic connections had to be made from the early years sector to school age. The requirement for government to disseminate children's rights information to teacher's remains the same. As well as structure wise, early learning setting are often organizations with staff hierarchies with the ratio of a single caregiver to multiple children. Children are often in the presence of multi-age groups with their peers (Gordon et al., 2014). This is typically mirrored in the school age setting in Canada. Since its origins, early learning setting typically involve an element an aspect of school "readiness" or "preparation" (Gordon et al., 2014; McCormick, 1969). Therefore, the environment's facilitated in preschool can at times mirror school settings at least with enough intention to transition children with success.

2.6 Child-Centered Education in the Preschool Setting

How do we attempt to bridge this gap between children's agency, personal choice and merge it with society's current early educational care settings: licensed preschool child care facilities? Currently, a child-centered education model is being implemented across North America, Europe, Australia and parts of South America (Haggland & Harcourt, 2013; Konstantoni, 2013; Koran & Avci, 2017; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). Child-centered education is pertinent to the topic of the implementation of children's agency and participation. As previously stated by the Committee on the Rights of the Child: if children are not participating in their education, and being given opportunities to manifest their own agency; than they are not fully actualizing their right to participation (2009).

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Koran & Avci describe child-centered education as a process that ensures child participation at every level. It is typically a fluid process that is changing, and being modified so that all individuals are included (2017). Pedagogies like the Reggio-Emilia Approach are based around teachers centering their programming around children's interests (Moss, 2016). Basing the curriculum of the school around the interests of children can and has been considered immensely radical (Moss, 2016; Konstantoni, 2013). Shaik & Ebrahim describe giving young children agency over their own education as "feeling risky" (2015). Strong-Wilson & Ellis describe how in Reggio-Emilia classrooms, children are considered not only to participating in creation of the curriculum but as one of the three educators. The first being the teacher, the second: the child, and the third: the environment (2007). When participation is viewed through this lens, it challenges the previously established power hegemony (Moss, 2016). In a 2017 study in Turkey, teachers viewed children's expressions of opinion as disrespect or opposition (Koran & Avci, 2017). Child centered pedagogies strive to break this narrative. The Reggio Emilia Approach was founded after World War II in Italy under the premise that children would need to learn to think critically to break from previous political cycles and strife (Hoekstra, 2015; Moss, 2016). Becoming agents of their own learning promotes children's critical thinking, executive functioning and social-emotional regulation (Koran & Avci, 2017; Hoekstra, 2015; Macdonald, 2017).

There is a caveat to child centered education. If educators are providing children with what they determine or interpret as their interests, is this really an exercise of choice? Earlier in the thesis project the idea that "influencing, shaping or determining" the wants of someone is an act of power (Lukes, 2005, p. 146). Lukes specifically labelled this the 3rd degree of power (2005). For example: if a teacher determined that the children in their classroom enjoyed art

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activities and directed the entire class to participate in art activities regardless of their current interest level, is this truly an act of choice? It is important that child centered education ideologies be implemented intentionally and with children's participation. A critique of child centered education is Floom & Janzen (2020) where children are described as "empty" (p.61) and "subject" (p.60). This is an important piece to consider when critically analysing child centered education in regard to children's own participation.

2.7 Agency and Participation in Preschoolers

There is a limited amount of literature on agency and participation in preschoolers. These ideas have only been adopted for the preschool and early years perspectives in the past ten to fifteen years. However, the new literature being released uncovers interesting perspectives on how we view participation and agency differently when it comes to preschoolers rather than children over the age of five.

Agency in preschool academic literature is frequently written from the perspective of a child existing/navigating a pre-existing adult routine, as opposed to documenting preschoolers' capacities for agency and what exercising that could look like (as is mirrored in the school-age years) (Dotson et al, 2015).

In regard to participation, in a literature review conducted searching for the terms "preschoolers or preschool children or toddlers or early childhood or kindergarten" and "participation" over three large data bases: Academic Search Premier, Child Development and Adolescent Studies and SocINDEX there were five peer reviewed articles out of Canada (the years searched between were between 2000-2021). Out of those 5 articles, two were written

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about community participation, two were assessments of models we could use to measure participation and one was an article about children aged six and twelve years old.

International documentation on preschool participation details that participation is two pronged: that it requires attendance and involvement to be meaningful (Cameron et al, 2021, p. 675). This mirrors the comments from the Committee on the Rights of the Child: that in order for participation to be realized, all components of a child's voice needs to be considered (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). An example from Bay (2018) describes how a teacher felt like they needed to support children to participate in writing activities by providing a certain set of materials. This poses the idea that children won't participate in certain activities without guidance. This is an example of how the idea of guidance permeates not only literature of agency and decision making but also into participation.

Participation in the early years is often described in the literature as being enrolled in programming: Ren et al (2021), Taylor, Gibbs & State (2000) and Nimbalkar, Patel and Phatak (2016). These three articles are all examples of children being enrolled in a variety of programming: extra curricular activities, kindergarten and nutritional studies respectively and how that will affect them in the future (these articles all referenced the future using the same term: school readiness). Literature conducted around preschool participation is infrequently conducted around how children exercise their own participation, rather it is documented on how children behave and react once placed in a situation that adults have pre-chosen. This is important for my thesis project as I intend to ask ECEs how they provide opportunities for children to exercise their own agency and participation. I wish to document how ECEs feel about children's agency and participation and subsequently how it occurs within their classroom.

2.8 Components of Agency

The Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework (NSELCF) encourages licensed child care centres to choose traits that they would like to promote within children. This is called creating the “image of the child” (Education & Early Childhood Development, 2021). It could be argued that once children exhibit certain traits, they are more likely to practice agency. However, in literature surrounding agency, it is described as both a skill or a right not necessarily a trait (Mentha, Church & Page, 2015; Corsaro, 2015). There is a growing body of literature on a variety of children’s-based approaches: Reggio Emilia, Project Based Approach, Child Centered Curriculum (Hoekstra, 2015; Moss, 2016; Community Child Care, 2011; Konstantoni, 2013, Floom & Janzen, 2020). Within these approaches, educators are use a variety of teaching styles and curricula that promote traits including independent thinking and confidence “Community Child Care, 2011; Lundy & McEvoy 2011, Petterson, 2013). Traits like confidence and independent thinking are components of agency as especially demonstrated in the aforementioned example by Choi (2018). The intention of this research project is to investigate current perspectives on agency and participation in preschoolers. The research question could be further refined as the perspective on the combination of both the ability to make decisions and the act of making those decisions. I validate that currently in many educational environments ECEs are taking steps to facilitate components of agency and should that surface in the data and subsequent analysis it will be documented thoroughly and valued.

2.9 Conclusion

The UNCRC is a contradictory document. While one of the pillars of the document is participation it was written without the consultation of the population it was compiling rights for. However, it remains the only legally binding human rights treaty to date. While the UNCRC has

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celebrated its 40th anniversary, there is still very little consistency on how or what the actualization of participation and agency should look like, especially for children aged 6 and under. At times the facilitation of children's rights in early childhood curricula is viewed as "risky" (Shaik & Ebrahim, 2015). It raises the question whether or not the facilitation of child centred education is a true exercise in children's participation at all. The literature review shows us that adults created a document entailing the necessary rights for children without their consultation. Until present day adults have not come to consistent agreement on how to implement the document they created, and still there is no clear answer in sight. Both adults and children in Canada are under-educated about the UNCRC and its implementation (Covell, Howe & Blokhuis, 2018; Campbell & Rose-Krasnor, 2007; Macdonald, 2007).

The intention of my thesis project is to explore how Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) are currently implementing and their knowledge base around participation and agency.

Participation and agency are concepts being newly documented in the field. In this literature review I have provided a brief yet current overview of current perspectives surrounding preschoolers' agency and participation, even though there is a significant lack of literature in this area (0-5 years), when contrasted with school age literature. I believe that this sets a precedent for me to analyse the perspectives of Nova Scotian ECEs on participation and agency. Both, on how (or if) they provide opportunities for these concepts in the classroom, and how they find these concepts fall in line with UNCRC guidelines.

Chapter Three: Research Question

Participation and agency have been championed as principal rights under the UNCRC (UNCRC, 1989). However, according to reports: implementing these rights, especially, for

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children under five has been a complicated task. Childhood itself can be dismantled into a variety of social institutions. Deeper still, the experiences of the children within those institutions are so diverse that creating a universal standard to measure has proven impossible. Regionally, countries like Australia, Norway, and Canada have begun to incorporate rights-based approaches into their early learning frameworks (Harcourt & Hagglund, 2013, Covell, Howe & Blohuis, 2018). Regardless, of the consultation of children in the creation of the curricula themselves, paradigms are turning to include the UNCRC and the consideration of children under five (McAnelly & Gaffney, 2019). Article 42 mandates that state parties make efforts to make sure that children and adults alike are educated about the UNCRC. Yet, very little Canadian public school curricula provide coverage of children's rights (Covell, Howe & Blokhuis, 2018). All regulated child care and pre-primary programs in Nova Scotia are guided by the "Capable, Confident and Curious: Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework (NSELCF)" (Education & Early Childhood Development, 2021). There is currently no explicit rights education in the NSELCF, the word participation is used 11 times and the word agency is mentioned once. The word participation is mentioned in a variety of contexts from children participating in the literal program, to children participating in how they are being documented, to children participating in creating the programming. Agency is used when describing a concept labeled "the image of the child" (Capable, Confident, Curious: Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework, 2018). This thesis will explore how Early Childhood Educators in Nova Scotia perceive participation, agency and children's rights building from this framework. In Vygotsky's book: *Mind in Society*, he describes that from the psychological perspective you can approach a problem from two stances. The first being how it looks, the second being to approach it from its inside (1978, p.62). In my literature review I was able to

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piece together a small part of how children's rights look in Canada. Now the intention of my study is to unpack the "inside" of why children's rights are being implemented in their current practices in Nova Scotia.

My questions are: what are the perspectives of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) in Nova Scotia on participation and agency within their daily routine? Were they aware of children's rights or educated about them in their studies? I will interpret these questions in the framework of the children's rights perspectives afforded by article 12 of the UNCRC. As I unpack these questions, I value the reflexiveness of phenomenology and the integral relationship between myself and the participant. Further, phenomenology is about capturing the essence of someone's perspective and experience (Donalek, 2004). My intent is to portray the perspectives of the ECEs as accurately as I can, while hopefully contributing to the greater conversation surrounding children's rights and implementing true participation in practice. I believe that in order to implement or suggest resolutions or strategies you need to fully understand the story from all perspectives. I do not believe that the story of the implementation of children's rights in Canada or globally has been fully told from any perspective. Most notably absent is the perspective of children. Of similar but different importance is the perspective of the educators who are at the forefront of running programming with children under six under the guide of the UNCRC.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Semi-structured Interview Guide

Semi-structured interviews have been identified as "great way to build an understanding of [...] perspectives, expectations, and assumptions while building a rapport (Rubin & Rubin,

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1995 via Vaughn & Turner 2016). All participants were asked the same questions (both qualitative and demographic), and the interviews had a fluid and conversational feel, allowing for clarification and each participant to go in depth where they needed. The interviews had varying lengths as each participant took the time that they needed to build rapport with the myself to have an effective conversation. Building rapport was critical in order to draw out the ECEs perspectives and mirroring the findings of Vaughn and Turner 2016, the semi-structured interview was a conducive format for this process. Allowing for extra questions, when needed, expansion on concepts and pauses in the conversation. The interviews mirrored everyday conversations about topics that are pertinent to ECEs and it can be inferred that this was advantageous to myself.

In order to really draw out the information needed, the questions needed to be purposeful but open and not intrusive. A major consideration when drafting the interview questions was to write the questions in a way that didn't lead to an assumed right answer. It was important that ECEs share naturally what was going on in their practice and not write questions that would give the impression of a value-based answer. There was a focus on making the questions as open ended as possible so that ECEs would ideally share their genuine perspectives without an assumed right answer. An example is: 2. Describe a way in which you facilitate children's participation in the classroom? This could (and did) look like something different to every ECE. I went great lengths not to create a hierarchy of activities or contributions; every answer was documented diligently without prioritizing one activity the ECE shared over another. The 7 golden rules document (Children & Young Peoples Commissioner, 2016) that was distributed to every participant before the interview was purposefully easy to read. The purpose of the readability to

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negate any accessibility barriers to understanding the concepts of participation, agency and children's rights.

Interview Questions

1. What are your beliefs around children's participation and agency in the classroom?
2. Describe a way in which you facilitate children's participation in the classroom?
3. How do you use your classroom environment to facilitate participation?
4. Describe a situation where you felt it was difficult for children to participate?
5. What is children's agency from your perspective?
- 6a. What do you know about children's rights?
- 6b. What do you know about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)?

Demographic Questions

1. How old are you?
2. What are your pronouns?
3. Where are you located?
- 4a. What is your level of Early Childhood Education Certification?
- 4b. How many years of experience do you have?

4.2 Recruitment Procedure and data collection method

In order to recruit participants, I advertised both online and within child care settings themselves. I posted flyers on popular Early Childhood Educator Social Media Pages. As the

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flyer became more visible, directors and social media editors for other Early Childhood

Education resources offered to list it in their publications as well. Flyers were also emailed directly to the directors of Early Childhood Learning Settings to be circulated to staff. When interested participants reached out to myself, they were sent a consent form to sign and received a preliminary with introductory information about participation, agency, and children's rights (see appendix). The participant and I scheduled a semi-structured interview together.

Recruiting participants took longer than anticipated and the interviews were spaced about at least 1 week to 3 weeks apart. Participants all hold there ECE classification but often had different roles in their Early Childhood settings. Some ECEs had a significant amount of ongoing and past experience teaching and caring for children with disability, while other participants were performing administrative tasks as well as working with children. Recruiting a sufficient number of participants and finding time for the interviews turned out to be more challenging than expected.

The interviews took place online, using the meeting platform "Microsoft Teams". The participants were reminded once more that they were being recorded and were given a verbal option to withdraw at any time. After the interview, participants were reminded of what was going to be done with the materials and how their confidentiality would be protected. After the interview the link to the video recording was deleted out of the Microsoft Teams Summary. After the interview was transcribed into Microsoft word, the lone copy of the video recording was destroyed.

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Table 2

Participant Demographics

| Alias*** | Pronouns | Location | Qualification | Years of Experience | Received Training in NS | Heard about the UNCRC during Educational Training |
|----------------|----------|------------|---------------|---------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Bethany (4) | She/Her | Halifax | 3 | 5+ | Yes | Yes |
| Frank (8) | He/Him | Halifax | 3 | 5-6 | Yes | No |
| Alyssa (16) | She/Her | Hubbards | 3 | 30 | Yes | Yes |
| Rose (27) | She/Her | Halifax | 2 | 20 | Yes | No |
| Moe (50) | He/Him | Beaverbank | 3 | 3 | Yes | Yes |

. ***all names are pseudonyms

Chapter 5: Results & Discussion

5.1 Data Analysis

As the interviews progressed and upon discussion with their advisor, I followed a thematic coding process similar to that posed by Vaughn and Turner (2016). The grounds for

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that being Vaughn and Turner also chose to code manually noting that “But when such software is available, there may still be limitations that create challenges for a research team” (p. 43, Vaughn & Turner, 2016). Therefore, I manually created the themes, and coded by creating a “code dictionary”. True to my original intentions they still followed a “precoding process” taking cues from Saldana’s (2012) approach to qualitative data analysis. The true categorizing of information followed a path much closer to Vaughn and Turner (2016). Collecting the data in one place (it was at this point I took time to precode), creating themes (I used the information from the precode to develop their codes) and more specifically their code dictionary and sorted the data. Coding the information didn’t happen in one single sitting and coding was not a permanent process. The information moved frequently during the coding process. Phrases were constantly being reconsidered and recoded. Codes were not considered coded until all data had been thoroughly sorted and final counts were being made for data analysis purposes. Codes were moving all the time. The information felt very fluid and was very carefully segmented and occasionally double coded as well. Any double coded passage has been counted separately in the table. Sometimes a group of words (less than a sentence) could be coded, sometimes an entire story could fall under one code. The precoding process could be considered fairly inductive while arguably after the first initial draft of the code dictionary the remainder of the coding and data analysis process was deductive (Roberts, Dowell & Nie, 2019).

5.2 Themes

This research question was attempting to analyse ECEs’ perspectives on three different topics. This made separating out the initial themes fairly intuitive. The three final themes were: Participation, Agency & Children’s Rights. While Participation and Agency had similar coding dictionaries, they also had codes exclusive to each of their themes. As I was trying to separate

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the themes it could become nuanced at times. Not just because ECEs define things differently than the pre-determined research definition; but because some ECEs would define certain concepts as other things. For example, Bethany gave an in-depth perspective and insight on agency when asked about human rights. Therefore, in cases like these all information was coded per content not per question asked. This is one of the ways that I made coding decision divergent from the path suggested by Vaughn and Turner (2016) (who suggest all information should be coded by question).

5.3 Participation

5.3.1 *Child and Teacher Led Participation*

It is s important to note that the definitions of participation noted by the participants did not match the definitions found in the literature. Participation as in taking an active role in the classroom was not explicitly mentioned. I did take opportunities to ask participants their opinions on having children contribute to classroom programming. Two participants felt that this was important however cited lack of time as a barrier.

Moe: "You really have to attune yourself to the child and understand them as a unique individual to understand how they communicate their choice. And when a ratio is one educator for four infants or one educator for eight preschoolers you aren't going to have time to provide every child that choice that would provide autonomy [...] If we took five minutes to do every child you would run out of time, and it would create insane wait times for the other children."

Terms like "child centered" and child led" were used by most participants to describe their programming style.

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Rose - "come in, in the morning, in the classroom and I am getting things ready, it's thinking about what I've observed them, in their play, following their interests and continually expanding on that and I like to set up different invitations and provocations that suits their interests"

Observation and scaffolding children's interests are critical and highly attuned processes. However, it is nuanced to note that all participants noted that they would follow children's interests. No one explicitly noted asking children what their interests are. Rose and Bethany explicitly described how they would locate materials if they were asked for them by a child. However, none described a pro-active or collaborative process. Therefore, for the coding process participation was coded into two separate categories. "Child Led Participation" was anytime children were described as children participating in programming per their own volition. Later in this results section we will contrast this to agency. Any time an educator was describing a child participating in programming independently with little to no direction or incitement that was considered child led participation. Examples of child led participation included:

Rose: "I like a lot of times for children to pick their own materials and play"

Moe: "For some children engaging and participating might look like onlooking and becoming familiar with the situation. But for some it's doing something first because that's the way their world works."

5.3.2 Participation via the Environment

The environment was viewed as an accessory to participation differently to each participant. The coding criteria for this portion was participants describing ways they used the physical environment in their classroom to facilitate participation with children. Usually this was in response to the interview question: How do you use your classroom environment to facilitate participation?

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Alyssa described how the environment was a way for educators to create a sense of belonging for the child. We can connect this back to the relational aspect of participation. Alyssa further described that it was important for a child to feel like “we were expecting them”. If a child has developed a sense of belonging, they feel more comfortable participating (Choi, 2021).

Alyssa explains how typical educator tasks like creating art portfolios are critical because they can make a child feel important. That adults have taken time to display their work, therefore their work must be important. This is an example of relationship building and through this relational construction, there will be opportunities for agency and the act of participation.

Frank held the perspective that the materials in the room are key to facilitating participation because they may determine children's engagement.

Frank: “But also, if the materials don't interest them than I guess depending on the activity like if it was a group activity and you want the whole class to participate and they're not interested than I guess it depends on the material”.

Frank's outlook on participation in the classroom mirrored what literature defines as engagement. This is an important perspective because through this lens we can note the importance of children's active participation in the classroom and its materials. If a child is actively participating in the programming and the creation of the content and materials in the room; it can be hypothesized that the materials would be more likely to be engaging to those children.

Moe and Rose emphasized how we can use the environment to support participation in an inclusive way. Children will be more apt to participate in an environment if they can participate

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in that environment. Rose portrayed how it's important that the room itself is laid out in a way that works for all children and how they prefer to learn and move their bodies while they engage.

Moe explained participation itself as:

“So based on my perspective I think a child is participating when they have the tools and the support necessary to engage how they choose to”.

In summary, participants viewed materials as a way to encourage participation.

Typically, participants felt that this could be a way to facilitate engagement. As these interviews have shown us engagement is often a way that participants measured children's participation in the classroom. In further research it would be interesting to document how materials and the environment of the classroom could be used to facilitate children's participation in the programming and creation of the classroom and learning content itself.

5.3.3 Barriers to Participation

A barrier could be the fact that participation was truly interpreted as engagement most of the time. Despite prompting from the myself, it is unclear at times whether this was a misunderstanding between participant and myself or if this was their true definition of participation. For further research endeavours I recommend that “political participation” be explicitly labelled to avoid confusion and to add more concrete findings.

The most commonly cited barrier to participation was a “diagnosis”. This was mentioned by three participants, but how it was interpreted as a barrier was different every time.

Bethany describes how if a child has a diagnosis that could lead them to fixate on certain skills or interests, they may be less interested in “participating”. This leads us back to our research question, the purpose of this project was to document the perspective of Early

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Childhood Educators in Nova Scotia on Participation, Agency and Children's Rights. However, it is important to note that if a child is choosing to direct their attention onto one or few ideas for prolonged periods of time that they are participating in their own life. They may not be meeting the requirements for engagement in the curriculum. However, it is important to validate all lived experiences both the perspectives of the educators and the experiences of the children themselves. Stafford (2017) mirrors this by reminding us of the historical context of the image of the child. Children with disability have been historically not considered in regard to participation (Stafford, 2017; Freeman, 2000; Lansdown, 1998). In this modern-day example: children with disability are not considered politically participating when not acting in line with social norms. In the past, children with disability have been absent from all manners of political participation including census documentation, rights protection and allocation of due weight (Stafford, 2017; Freeman, 2000; Lansdown, 1998).

We can contrast this with Rose and Frank's outlook of how a diagnosis could be a barrier to participation. They shared how if a child is physically incompatible with participating in that environment that is a barrier. That is an example of a true lack of participation and engagement. Rose & Moe shared how not just physical expectations can create barriers, but social expectations can create our largest barriers as well. Rose shares how aware she is that children express and engage in different ways and that she feels a responsibility to manipulate the environment to create an opportunity for engagement:

Rose: "You've got a child whose non-verbal they can't sing, they want to I'm sure they do, but they can't. Is that fair to them? So now you need to manipulate some type of play for them so I find that part challenging.."

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Moe builds on these ideas further by describing how the expectations that the educators themselves have on children can be a barrier on participation. This can be presented in two ways. Either the expectations of the children in general or expectations of the children created based on previous experiences.

Moe: "If a child threw paint one time. The educators are likely to go "Oh that child can't have paint because they threw it last time". They're not approaching it like it's a new situation and a new opportunity to be successful. They themselves are stuck in what happened before and it informs our behaviour in the future and we are taking away opportunities to participate"

Davis and Watson (2001) described data very similar to this twenty years ago. They described that children who have been identified with disability or disabled typically have educational experiences based on other's expectation of their identity. If someone does have a diagnosis or disability they may be consistently contrasted against a norm of typically developing children. Despite the fact that they still are demonstrating abilities (ie. participation and agency) in their own right. Similarly, Davis & Watson mirror Moe's perspective that educators' perspectives on capacity can often be the biggest barrier capacity: "many teachers fail to reflexively question their own assumptions" (Davis & Watson, 2001).

5.3.4 Engagement and Resistance

ECE perspectives of agency typically meet what we define here with the term of engagement. They view non-engagement in activities as an example of non-participation. However, per research criteria, non-engagement is by definition an act of participation: deciding and making choices for oneself. Merriam-Webster provides multiple definitions in regard to the term engage, they include: to provide occupation, to gain attention, however, most notably is to *induce* participation (2022). It seems fair to deduce that engagement is the predecessor to

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participation, as participation is the mechanism to agency. Interestingly, in a political sense, the choice to not engage can be considered as an act of agency. Participants above described how they would observe and use their observations to provide activities that are engaging to children. By definition activities that “should” draw their attention. However, should a child choose not to use these materials, they are in fact exercising a form of agency by denying engagement with a particular activity or item. These actions meet the definitions for participation and agency in this research project. This is a nuanced finding that in the case of this project ECEs did not personally consider preschoolers participating if they weren't engaging in activities, however by the definitions in research and literature they were exercising agency. It would be notable for future research endeavours to research ECE perspectives on resistance. Results from that research could become the building blocks for Early Learning frameworks surrounding facilitating agency in practice.

5.4Agency

5.4.1Fostering Agency

I included interview passages into “Fostering Agency” that I considered to meet definitions of agency closer to the definitions found in the literature. Contrasting examples can be seen in the “teacher led agency” portion below. When coding for “fostering agency”, I was listening for to the perspectives and pulling out opportunities when educators were assisting children to follow through on their choices and volition. Either helping them make their own [true not pseudo] choices, or giving opportunities to perform tasks in ways that work for them. Consistently across participants, this was described as educators following the children's lead. This is an opportunity to identify with children that they are making their own choices. If educators are “building on children's interests”, children would need to make choices and

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identify interests in the first place. This is an opportunity for reciprocity and an example of real-time interpretive reproduction (Corsaro, 2015). If children are seeing that educators can follow their lead and are willing to consult with them this is an opportunity to change the world around them. Corsaro described how interpretive reproduction occurs at “intersections in society”. Educators could use these windows of collaboration as an opportunity to facilitate agency with preschoolers. Examples pulled from this research project include: if a child asked for a material, it was provided to the child. If a child shared that the routine was not working for them, the educators would take time to find a way to find a compromise or solution, allowing children to explore and learn about their own interests.

Rose: “If children don’t want to go to the gym than a teacher will stay behind with the children who don’t want to go. That’s a choice.”

Bethanny: You have to start somewhere. Oh we should add this! Oh well here’s the materials to help you add that. Or maybe we could try this? And than using your materials to go farther.

Moe described how you first need to teach children different means of communication: verbal/non-verbal so that they can communicate their ideas with you.

Moe: “For example younger toddlers or infants, you really have to start from the ground up and teach sign language or pointing. You really have to attune yourself to the child and understand them as a unique individual to understand how they communicate choice.

This is completely congruent with Corsaro’s paradigm of agency which tells us that children must have relationships with those around them in order to express agency. It is the role of the adults around them to provide contexts, opportunities (2015) and the materials potentially requested to facilitate exploration.

5.4.2 Teacher Led Agency and Guidance

Defining agency was not consistent across participants. Most participants asked for the myself to provide a definition of agency first before they responded with their own perspective of agency. Agency was described as a “buzzword” by Rose. Rose and Bethany participants remark that they had to “look it up” before the interview so that they could articulate themselves more clearly. With that in mind, definitions of agency weren’t always in line with definitions of agency developed in this thesis. “Teacher Led Agency” emerged when participants were discussing ideas of agency but were referencing how teachers were setting up or explicitly leading these scenarios. Although this would not meet the research criteria for the definition of agency it showcases the experiences and perspectives of ECEs. This was their perspective on what agency could look like. This is defined as teacher-led as participants were consistently identifying that they felt that it was their sole responsibility to identify and completely direct children’s agentic opportunities. It contrasts the idea of children and adults working together to actively contribute and following through on ideas; which would typically be a more natural process of agency facilitation.

Alyssa: “we try and give them as much autonomy as they want”.

Bethany: “And providing opportunities through provocations, through projects, through different activities and what not”.

A concept that tied in with teacher led agency was the idea of guidance. Participants shared throughout their experiences of both participation and agency that they feel they need to balance these ideas with “guidance”. One participant shared that they used materials in the room to model expectations through participation in programming. Another shared that they balance agency with making great choices and if children are participating in the program, they feel that

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they will know more thoroughly what is expected of them. This matches pre-existing literature that our perspectives on children and their capacities will affect our perspectives on participation and agency. Hudson (2012) describes that ECEs who view choice as a stepping stone for autonomy and identity are more likely to provide opportunity. However, some ECEs may feel more like they need to guide children to the “correct” (or what the ECE feels is the correct or socially acceptable) choice. These ECEs may feel like learning how to make great choices is more important than the opportunity to make choices themselves. Covell & Howe (2017) remind us that the best way to learn to make positive choices is to have practice making choices. I recognize that agency was not consistently defined by any participant.

5.4.3 Agency as Following Through on Decisions

These perspectives were the definitions that were the closest to the research definitions of agency. It should be of note to the research project that typically these definitions were provided to the participants after a discussion about what I felt that agency was. The three participants who met the criteria for this code defined this almost identically. Two used the word autonomy. The other defined essentially defined the word autonomy without using the word:

Moe: you have an inner voice that can guide your decision-making process and making a choice based on that

Participants discussed children making decisions in many areas in their lives: including materials, how they move their body in the classroom and whether or not they accept physical touch. Although this particular aspect was of interest to the myself, this was the only time participants described agency in this way and to reiterate only three out of the five participants described agency in this way.

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5.4.4 Barriers to Agency

All participants identified as a major barrier to agency the lack of time or staff ratio.

Alyssa and Moe corroborate that in Nova Scotia, the preschool ratio is one educator to eight preschoolers (aged 3 and up). For example, a group would not have enough educators to take the time to foster agency and participation with all the children. Or because of ratio, participants were concerned that going one by one and fostering agency and participation child by child would create unsuitable wait times for children and between scheduled events.

Moe: "And when a ratio is one educator for four infants or one educator to eight preschoolers you aren't going to have time to provide every child that choice that would provide autonomy. It needs to go quick quick quick. Everything needs to go quick. We have twenty minutes for lunch, we have thirty minutes for a nap. If we took five minutes to do every child you would run out of time, and it would create insane wait times for other children."

Another way that ratio affected agency was location. If certain children wanted to be in one area of the center and others didn't, staff ratios required that some children potentially had to be in areas that they didn't care to be.

Alyssa: Like for example right now seven children are up and ready to go and ready to go outside and one is sleeping in the crib room and because we aren't allowed to exit the building with a monitor right outside the window of that room. Because that child is sleeping, three of the babies have to stay inside with that educator so that she can watch if needed in the crib room. So that's an example of legislation getting in the way of agency."

Rose: No they don't. Do they have a choice to go outside whenever they want to? No, there's certain times of the day we do that. It's easier in the summer months, the warmer weather. They don't get a choice. [...] If children don't want to go to the gym a teacher will stay behind with the

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children who don't want to go [...] But I don't think that children have that total free range of doing that. I worry about that to a degree.

5.5 Children's Rights

5.5.1 *Rights and Relationships*

Out of the five interviews, three interviews documented how they viewed the relationship between the ECE and the child as an aspect of participation. Relationships are critical for the children exercising their participation because most times children will need help in some regard to exercise their participation. In order for children to contribute to their own lives their contribution needs to be acknowledged by someone. Three ECEs who cited the importance of relationships detailed how critical it would be to build relationships with children and how a child's sense of belonging and community would be a part of how that child participates in the world. One participant spoke about how relationships are so important that can either act as a positive mechanism of participation or they can stand as a barrier.

Moe: "Because once the child does have a negative experience. It can make it a lot harder to have a positive experience going forward so I don't think it's the activity or the space that causes difficulty with participation I think it's past negative experiences that almost create a trauma response when try and go back into it. Because we learned that we didn't have an adult or a safe person to support us when the bad scary thing happened in that space or in that scenario so going forward we don't participate because it's safe where we are and it's safe not to participate"

Moe cited twice how supporting children through their participation in a safe and positive way is critical in creating a foundation for more opportunities for their definition of participation and subsequently agency.

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Alyssa and Rose explained the importance of relationships in regard to fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom. This corresponds with literature: Corsaro describes that participation and agency are skills that can be developed, however we need to build relationships with others when are children so that we can have opportunities to use them (2015). Choi (2021) tells how children will exercise their agency in scale with how comfortable they feel in their environment.

5.5.2 Relationships and Recognition

Do the ECE's in this research project recognize participation (specifically political participation)? We can use Honneth's "Theory of Recognition" (Thomas, 2012; Honneth, 1995; Anderson, 2015) as a way to compare these results with a theoretical model. Honneth describes three components or forms of recognition: love, rights, and solidarity. In order to recognize rights, there need to be other levels at play that realize those rights. Relationships were a standard component of how ECEs in Nova Scotia interpreted participation. In comparison to the literature, relationships fall into the first form: love. Thomas describes how at its core, the love form is the primary relationships between people who have emotional attachments (Thomas, 2012; Honneth, 1995). In order to recognize children's rights, there needs to be a personal relationship between children and their early childhood educator to implement those rights.

Rose: "We respect each and every child for who they are. What the families believe and what they don't believe. We try and work with the families."

Moe: I am an advocate for the family but first and foremost I am an advocate for their child because I am their voice.

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Lopez, Alvarez and Gomez (2020) describe that children develop attachment to their Early Childhood Educators. Further, the more secure that attachment, the more likely they are to develop coping skills for emotional regulation and other non-academic functions (abilities that contribute positively to success later in life but are not necessarily academic skills). Three participants specifically mentioned the importance of the relationship between the ECE and the child for the facilitation of participation. That shows us that over half of the participants have an intrinsic understanding of the importance of this concept. The reason this is interesting is that all three of the ECE's brought this up without being verbally prompted or specifically asked if relationships specifically relate to participation. Bethany shares that they feel like building relationships is an essential part of participation:

Bethany: "[...] stuff like that, and building relationships with myself".

Alyssa: "I would expect that a typical preschooler be greeted and greet the fellow educators when they come in the room. This all makes him feel like he is part of the community, like he's part of the classroom here at school".

If children and ECEs meet the criteria for the first level of recognition. It is important to analyse how they could meet the second level: rights. Throughout this thesis project we have outlined how children's political participation is a right. The term political participation is in reference to the aforementioned Article 12 of the UNCRC that children have a right to participate and contribute in their own lives. This means that when children's right to participation is actualized, children are meeting the second mode of recognition: legal recognition. The UNCRC (1989) itself is a way that children have been legally recognized and we can extend this to political participation. Participatory rights are specifically emphasized under the 3 P's (participation, provision and protection) (Kenneally, 2017; Schneider, 2017); in

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regards to the educators in this project the findings are inconclusive. Every participant in this project acknowledged children's rights, described them positively and "recognized" them. Yet, only three made comments that could be considered in line with legally recognizing the right to [political] participation. Bethany described this as "the right to opinions", this was also described as the tight "to be heard". This makes for a complicated finding. Despite the universal support for "children's rights", not every ECE would be considered as meeting the second criteria for recognition (see table below). This finding makes an interesting case for alienable rights. According to the Will Theory of rights: rights are inherently alienable because they deem what is socially acceptable and socially unacceptable. To breach rights would be to breach a social code. Meanwhile, the Interest Theory of Rights says that rights "protect" what is most important (Steiner, 2013, p. 140) and that is a moral code. Inferring that when something becomes associated with morals it becomes inalienable. Though more research would need to be done on ECE perspectives on whether this a social or moral issue. It is complex, it would require a structured theoretical framework to discern whether you can morally value rights that you are unaware of their specific existence. It is fair to say that the participants in this study valued the aforementioned 3Ps (protection, provision and participation). However, they were unaware of the fact that they are pillars of the UNCRC itself. When looking at moral stances by definition, they are defined as "conforming to a standard of right behavior" (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Through the interviews all participants took a moral stance on the basics of the 3Ps, despite their misrecognition of the more specific articles of the UNCRC or the UNCRC itself.

Alyssa: "That is ultimately what are our mission and vision should be about I feel. So we want to look into 'everything, in our financial decisions we want to make sure we are putting forward enough money for nutritious food, putting money forth for materials, we want to make sure they are of the highest quality, that they are ample for everyone. That children don't need to fight over equipment

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or that the educators feel the equipment is too flimsy or is going to break or is a safety hazard. So we have to keep all this in mind.”

Solidarity is the final form of recognition (Honneth, 1995). Thomas (2012) describe this very concisely as occurring in groups with shared goals that reciprocate each other's worth (p. 9). Solidarity has strong implications for children's participation with Early Childhood Educators. In a 2005 Ipsos poll of the Canadian public: 61% of respondents felt that children's rights had been fully realized in Canada, while only 46% of those respondents were even aware of the UNCRC itself (Covell & Howe, 2007). In this example from Ipsos: more than 50% of study participants verbally confirmed that they valued children's rights and felt that they were important. Yet, less than 50% of the participants who felt that way were aware of arguably one of the most pertinent documents regarding children's rights since 1989 (the last 15 years to the date of the poll). Solidarity requires a comprehension of issues, according to the Thomas 2012 definition, a reciprocation of worth. This is an uncomfortable discrepancy in regard to the research of children's rights. Do people answer per their genuine opinion and knowledge base, or do they answer based on what they feel is the socially acceptable answer? This is complicated but ties closely to the concept of alienable/inalienable rights. As alienable rights exist because of what is considered socially acceptable and inalienable rights exist due to a “moral code” (Steiner, 2014).

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Table 3

Levels of Recognition

| Participant | Love | Rights | Solidarity |
|-------------|------|--------|------------|
| Bethany | x | X | x |
| Frank | | X | x |
| Alyssa | x | | x |
| Rose | | | x |
| Moe | x | X | x |

The table above marks which participants met the criteria for each level of recognition. Solidarity is complex from the ECE perspective (see table 3). All five participants describe the importance of children's rights and share that they implement them daily in their practice. The discrepancy arises when we compare real life application of solidarity to theoretical criteria. Every ECE shared their belief and value of children's rights however, only three felt they were educated about or knew about the UNCRC during the training to become an educator. The UNCRC is to date the most globally unifying document detailing the treatment and standardization of children's rights. When describing children's rights, only three ECE's described the right to political participation, and they did not do it explicitly. Despite the fact that they had been asked three separate questions about participation itself. Honneth describes solidarity as "fundamentally depend[ing] on the dominant interpretations of societal goals in each historical case" (1995, p. 126). This is what makes this finding inconclusive and maybe

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make us speculate that educators are more insisting on protection and provision rights rather than participation rights. All the participants cited their support of children's rights:

Bethany: "Yeah like I just said [children's rights] is basically the basis of our practice"

Moe: "I think I'm very focused on the rights of the child"

Alyssa: "We have to focus everything around what their rights and freedoms are. [...] Because that is ultimately what our mission and vision should be about."

Rose: "I'm huge on children on children having rights and being respected"

Frank: "If we're not respecting their right to say no and their independence in a sense that's going to carry on and that's going to theoretically become a cycle and that wouldn't be great for future generations".

However, with the exception of Frank no one was touching explicitly on political participation. Further, while Frank externalized support for children's participation they cited they were unaware of the UNCRC. Honneth tells us that it's up to the "dominant interpretation" to determine solidarity. All participants (the majority) felt as if they were in support of children's rights; as they were in solidarity with children and their rights. A thorough analysis of the data shows that they may not be as aware of the nuances of children's rights and what that entails. Which leaves an open-ended question: can you be in recognition of something that you are not fully informed on? When it comes to solidarity the most important component is apparent intent. Honneth cites "the dominant interpretation" (1995, p.126). Freire describes how solidarity is relational, and that without a relationship there could never be a subject in the first place (Freire, Freire & de Oliveira, 2014; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012). It is within reason for the purposes of this research project to determine that ECEs in Nova Scotia do have solidarity

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with children and their rights when compared with theoretical models. But, the rift between solidarity and knowledge base should be distinctly noted.

When discussing children's rights, this was consistently the shortest (time) portion of our interview. Typically, "children's rights" were discussed under a broad umbrella. Children having their physical needs met was mentioned twice. I felt it was poignant to disclose that Bethany noted the difference between children's rights and human rights. However, she did not extrapolate her response further. She just mentioned that there was a difference and went on to discuss the right to be heard: see page 61.

Bethany: I don't know if educators are aware of like the difference between children's rights and human rights.

All the participants took time to note the importance they feel children's rights have, and some note the important role they play in their practice. Frank and Rose noted the children's "right to be respected". Moe identified themselves as an advocate of children's rights who takes time to advocate for children's voice and actively tries to give children to use their own voice.

Participants acknowledged children's rights to their own autonomy and their uniqueness however it's interesting how educators acknowledge that children actually having power or contribution to classroom content wasn't highly themed in previous question answers. I wonder if this is due to a definition discrepancy between myself and participants or this is a genuine finding. Three participants identified that they had learned about the UNCRC during their education around Early Childhood Education.

5.5.3 Article 12

Article 12 of the UNCRC was only identified by Bethany.

Bethany: "We all know that everyone has the right to water, food, health, safety but I don't know if everyone knows that children have the right to their opinions heard and stuff"

It could be noted that this participant didn't explicitly identify article 12 or mention the concept of "due weight" (the idea that children's opinions should be heavily considered not just used for consultative purpose). However, due to the nature of this research project and the fact that it is simply documentation. I feels this highly meets the criteria of discussion of Article 12.

This is an intersection of findings: only one participant alluded to article 12 however, article 12 is a participatory right which falls under the 3Ps (explicitly participation). The underlying motive of the 3Ps is that they should be considered when practicing/implementing all articles of the UNCRC. Three participants felt they learned about the UNCRC during their educational training and all participants felt that children's rights were important to their practice. This brings forward a question: where is the gap? Is the UNCRC not being thoroughly explained during educational trainings? I acknowledges that when collecting information on sensitive subjects there will always be a pressure to provide what is assumed to be the socially acceptable answer. Article 42 of the UNCRC mandates that ratified state parties must perpetually educate both adult and child populations about the UNCRC itself (UNCRC, 1989, p.11). Further research would be needed to know if ECE's truly understood that political participation falls under children's rights.

5.6 Conclusion

The ECEs in my study mirror participation to the concept of engagement. They feel that although agency is something that they hear in social media and professional development spheres, they aren't quite sure what it means to themselves. Finally, they value children's rights but they might not be as clear on what children's rights are as they might think. From my interviews I can conclude that the participants shared forward thinking perspectives. Although there was a theme of guidance, ECEs did not consider these ideas as radical (which literature has shown as a historical mindset). All 5 ECEs are consistently willing to follow a child centered framework working with children's interests. Although the findings from this study demonstrate that at this time the ECEs seem to guiding the narrative based on their personal documentation, rather than actively engaging children in the construction of their curriculums. The participants were willing to learn and eager to hear my definitions of concepts they were unsure of. This is a clear demonstration of a willingness to learn and grow, rather than a stand-still in pre-existing ideologies. This willingness to learn shows promise for the education of educators. If this case study is representative of the greater context of NS, than increasing curriculums for ECEs on concepts surrounding political participation, agency and children's rights would be well received. If educators are willing to share their perspectives, are open about sensitive topics and eager to learn about new concepts. It is feasible that the best step forward is providing accessible education during a certification process that already exists.

There is an actionability to the protection and provision. The literature review in preparation for this paper demonstrated that Canada has a history of non-implementation for political participation (Campbell & Rose-Krasner, 2007). Covell, Howe & Blokhuis mirror the difficulties of implementing participation into the education setting, specifically when educators

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are not receiving adequate education around children's rights (2018). Developmental perspectives are slowly shifting to one where political participation itself could be considered less radical and more developmentally appropriate (Shaik & Ibrahim, 2015; Hudson, 2015). As empirical and practical perspectives change, there is hope for an influx in the practice of children's political participation and agency. A theoretical foundation has been building to support these ideas for almost 50 years, beginning with theorists like Vygotsky proposing children's capacities (1978). The Sociology of Childhood is a critical theoretical perspective that prioritizes the inherent capacities of children and the fact that the labels and assumptions we make about children are social constructions in themselves (Corsaro, 2015; Quennerstedt, 2016; Qvortrup, 2009).

Chapter 6: Implications and Barriers

An implication or action item as a result of this project is the foundational need for a pilot project based on participatory rights at the early years level. A consistent critique across empirical literature is that there is little to no recommendations or structure on how to implement these concepts (Campbell & Rose Krasner, 2017; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; Covell & Howe, 2007; Covell, Howe & Blokhuis, 2018). An actionable program/study with active monitoring with a focus on reaching fidelity could break ground on how to practice these concepts. It can seem that a barrier to action is the consensus that this idea is important but a lack of standardized practice. A study using measurable outcomes of political participation and agency could be foundational in demonstrating the idea that this is a realistic goal. This could include more in-depth measure of current understandings of the UNCRC; for example: standardized units of measure to whether children are given opportunities to practice their agency. In class observations could be important pieces to this research, comparing educators

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reports to their direct practice. Furthermore, examining post-secondary ECE certification programs themselves and documenting their programs in regard to educating educators on what agency is and if they provide opportunities to learn about how to facilitate it. Children's rights is an inherently broad topic that spans many research areas. In relation to this research project: further projects could be done on the implications of being explicitly aware of the UNCRC on ECE practice compared to not (using classroom observation, ECE report, etc.). These potential ideas could help try and separate out what is truly the impact of the UNCRC on practice. If this document is providing a framework for educators (since it has acted as standardized precedent without update since 1991). The findings of this research project could stand as evidence for a practice-applicable socio-participatory or agentic framework for ECEs. As ECEs state they do not feel they can define these terms in practice and the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) state there is need for action. This is reasonable grounds for the creation of a practical framework.

The quintessential barrier to this research project was the case size. Only having five participants is not representative of the Nova Scotian ECE population. Therefore, it must be noted that these are only the perspectives of these participants and may not be generalized. The research feels that there is diversity within the case, a wide range of years of experience and gender. Despite its small size, this study makes an important contribution to the literature in the field, as I interviewed a population that had not yet been studied on this subject.

A second barrier could be the fact that participation was truly interpreted as engagement most of the time. Despite prompting from myself, it is unclear at times whether this was a misunderstanding between participant and myself or if this was their true definition of participation. For further research endeavours or training/education purposes, I recommend that

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“political participation” be explicitly labelled to avoid confusion and to add more concrete findings, and strengthen any educational endeavours related to promoting participation of children. Although for the purpose of this research project I find the results authentic to my participants.

For future endeavours I recommend providing research participants with as much preparatory material as possible and being prepared as a researcher for the potential length of the recruitment process.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

What are the perspectives of ECEs in Nova Scotia on participation, agency and children's rights? The definition of the answers differ from participant to myself as researcher. In this case study, participants' perspectives were that participation means to be engaging in programming, while I felt that participation was closer to political participation and engaging in choices related to one's own life. Agency is a new term for participants. Its use in the media and lack of consistent definition can make implication hollow or non-existent. While the practice of children's rights is championed in theory, it is less understood in practice.

This case study mirrors the greater scope of academic literature. Terms like participation and agency are not consistently defined. While the study of these terms increases, there is yet a need to unify the definitions for practitioners. This lack of defining those terms can be reflected in a lack of practice (of participation, agency and children's rights) at all. To value something is critical, however, to understand what it is so that you can practice the concept is separate. Hopefully, moving forward, ECEs in Nova Scotia and the Early Years Sector in general can take steps to increase an understanding of critical concepts (since they are the basis of children's

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rights conventions). Honneth describes the three levels of recognition that are required for recognition and participation to be truly realized. Equally as important, Honneth describes that a concept is recognized by its “dominant interpretation”. This emphasizes why it is so imperative that dissemination of these concepts in an accessible manner is so critical, so that Early Childhood Educators are given the tools to implement children’s rights to participation in their lives and contexts.

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Appendixes

Appendix A

Letter of Invitation

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Marly Nauss and I am a Masters student at Mount Saint Vincent University in Child and Youth Studies and I am currently a thesis candidate. I am completing a case study on the perspectives of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) on participation and agency in Nova Scotia. The intention of this project is to begin to understand the context of agency and participation in Nova Scotia through the lens of current ECE realities and to give representation and voice to ECEs who are front-line workers in the implementation of children's rights.

Participation in this project will require the completion of one 15-20 minute long interview. Participation is completely voluntary and consent to participate may be withdrawn at any time. All identities and contributions will be kept anonymous unless requested otherwise.

If you would like to move forward with your participation in this thesis project please read and sign the accompanying letter of informed consent.

This study has been approved by the Mount Saint Vincent University Ethics Board. If you have any concerns you can contact my thesis supervisor Dr. Cornelia Schneider at XXX-XXX-XXXX or cornelia.schneider@msvu.ca. You can contact myself (Marly Nauss) at XXX-XXX-XXXX or marly.nauss@msvu.ca. Your participation in this project is a contribution to the field of research in child and youth studies and rights based approaches with children under five.

Thank you for your consideration,

Appendix B

Informed Letter of Consent

Dear Potential Research Participant:

You are being invited to participate in a thesis project on Early Childhood Educator's (ECEs) perspectives on participation and agency in Nova Scotia. I intend to interview ECEs and ask them questions pertaining to their daily routines, their personal perspectives on participation and agency and their perspectives on their educational experiences.

This research will require about 30-45 minutes of your time. The interviews take place virtually, over an online meeting platform (ie. zoom or Microsoft teams). These interviews will be recorded for the purpose of data analysis.

All participants identities will be protected. Despite the transcription of interviews, the typed interviews will not contain participants names, or any other identifying information. Once the recordings have been transcribed and analyzed they will be destroyed. All transcriptions will be kept in a password encrypted coding program (MAXQDA), and one password encrypted Microsoft Word document. The interviewer will be the only person with access to this password. The interviewer has taken precautions to learn how files can be saved in multiple places on one computer, and will actively ensure there is only one copy. Said copy will be terminated at the end of the thesis project.

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There are no anticipated risks or discomforts related to this research. However, by participating in this research, you will be contributing to a new and growing body of research on participation and agency research in Nova Scotia.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. However, you may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. Should you withdraw your contributions up until withdrawal will be destroyed.

This study has been approved by the University Research Ethics Board. The results from this study will be presented in my final thesis project as a case study on the perspectives of ECEs on participation and agency in Nova Scotia.. The results will be presented in my final thesis defense which is a public presentation.

If you wish to receive a copy of the final thesis when it is complete you may contact me at: marly.nauss@msvu.ca

If you require any information about this thesis project, please contact me at: marly.nauss@msvu.ca or XXX-XXX-XXXX. Or my thesis supervisor Dr. Cornelia Schneider at cornelia.schneider@msvu.ca or XXX-XXX-XXXX

If you have any other questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research, you may also contact the Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Coordinator Brenda Gagné at: brenda.gagne@msvu.ca.

Statement of Consent

I have read (or have been read) the above information regarding this thesis project ECE perspectives on participation and agency in Nova Scotia and consent to participate in this study.

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_____ (Printed Name)

_____ (Signature)

_____ (Date)

Appendix C

Flyer



Interview Information:

Eligible candidates would: have an Early Childhood Education Certification
: be practicing at an Early Learning Facility in Nova Scotia

Interviews will be approximately 15-20 minutes long and conducted over an online meeting platform

If interested please contact: Marly Nauss at marly.nauss@msvu.ca