Agency in the Early Years: A Discussion with Nova Scotia Early Childhood Educators

Sarah Brown

Mount Saint Vincent University

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Thesis supervisor: Dr. Sarah Reddington

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Abstract

Children's agency is the ability to move through and influence physical spaces, routines, and social spaces while being mindful of others sharing the space with them. It is important for children in early childcare settings to establish their agency, as it is one of the few places outside of the child's home where they can interact with other people. Critically, developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) has been considered the standard practice of early childcare, where children's bodies are managed in order to comply with adult standards. An over reliance on DAP standards can limit the possibilities for children to express themselves and curtails their ability to be agentic. The aim of this research is to learn from early childhood educators (ECEs) in Halifax, Nova Scotia, if and how they are able to prioritize children's voices within their practice in order to support children's agency. Using a qualitative case-study with a focus group methodology, this researcher found participants who prioritized freedoms within their classroom settings to allow children to express themselves. Four themes emerged from these discussions surrounding agency; practitioner's philosophies inform children's agency, institutional structures can impact children's agency, settings and routine informs children's agency, and supporting young children's voices. Two recommendations arose from this study found that professional development needs to explicitly discuss children's agency and child rights in order to bring these understandings to the foreground of ECEs' practice. The second recommendation is that professional development for ECEs should shift towards a more decolonialized approach, where the emphasis is on facilitating discussions regarding critical issues to challenge the assumptions held by ECEs.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction:

  As an early childhood educator (ECE) I find the capability of children to have agency, that is to interact with each other, whether through play, negotiation, or mimicking the actions of their peers, to be fascinating. Agency is understood as the capacity for young children to move openly, to give voice, to problem-pose and shape the environment around them (Freire, 2000; Mentha et al., 2015; Oswell, 2013). Agency is more than an individualistic skill; it is a skill of community, culture, and citizenship; it is the awareness of others and includes strong consideration of social justice and fairness (Mentha et al., 2015; Oswell, 2013). An ECE's ability to support children's agency is related to their dedication to prioritize the child's voice within their practice (de Leeuw et al., 2020). To prioritize the child's voice ECEs understand children to be active participants and respect children's experiences and expertise by listening reflexively to the children in their care (de Leeuw et al., 2020; Hohti & Karlsson, 2014; Weckström et al., 2021). Opportunities for children under the age of five to share their perspectives, ideas, thoughts and provocations beyond the home are often limited to childcare settings, which emphasizes the importance of understanding ECEs' ability to support agency within their practice (Hall & Rudkin, 2010). Therefore, in this study I aim to explore how agency is understood by ECEs within early years contexts, specifically, in Nova Scotia.

  Within the province of Nova Scotia ECEs working with preschool aged children are required to follow *Capable, Confident, and Curious: Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework* to support their practice (Nova Scotia Department of Early Education Development [DEECD], 2018a). This framework adopts a socio-cultural perspective which locates children's voice and capacities at the forefront for ECEs, to acknowledge young children as active and

engaged citizens (Yelland, 2005). Yet, ECEs may struggle to support children's agency due to obstacles that may impede their practice (Mentha et al., 2015). Previous studies show the barriers ECES can experience when wanting to support children's agency in practice (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014; Mentha et al., 2015; Sampson & McLean, 2021; Weckström et al., 2021; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). The two largest barriers that the above studies address is the use of a developmental model of practice that often limits children's capacities to share their ideas and the other barrier is related to limited training as it relates to agency through a more socio-cultural approach. I will expand on these barriers later in my thesis when reviewing the literature. Though the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework advocates active children having a voice within their classroom, it is unclear if this is happening, how it happens, or the obstacles that Nova Scotian ECEs may face when supporting children's agency.

Aim and Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of this research is to explore Nova Scotia ECEs' views and knowledge about children's agency in the early year's settings. Specifically, the aim is to find out how they support children's capacities to advocate, problem solve, share their ideas openly, and to collaborate with other children and adults. Whether *Capable, Confident, and Curious: The Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework* (DEECD, 2018a) has been successful in influencing ECEs perceptions and practice in supporting children's agency is currently not known. The obstacles Nova Scotian ECEs face in supporting children's agency is also unknown. Therefore, it is important to find out more about ECEs' experiences in relation to children's agency in the early years' context. Specifically, I want to find out what role ECEs play in relation to children's exploration of agency and whether they encourage children to be active agents in their own lives.

Research Question

The research question that guides my study is: "How do Nova Scotia early childhood educators (ECEs) support young children's agency in their everyday practices?"

Sub-research questions:

1. What comes to mind when ECEs hear the word, agency? How is the concept of agency understood in practice?

2. What obstacles limit ECEs capacities to support children agency?

3. What approaches do ECEs use to support agency, if any?

4. What skills do ECEs recognize are required to enhance children's agency?

Theoretical Framework

This study will apply a child rights-based framework as it aligns with prioritizing children's voices in the early years setting. A child rights-based approach is the purposeful integration of social justice and agency in the early years' settings as it builds opportunities for children to problem solve, make decisions and share their ideas (Caplan et al., 2016). For example, through a rights-based pedagogical approach children's agency might emerge when they take turns, vote, and share their ideas in all forms of communication within an early childhood learning space (Boyd, 2018; Hall & Rudkin, 2010; Herczog, 2012). As Caplan et al. (2016) reiterates classrooms that adopt a rights-based approach teach children to learn about their own personal agency in the world and their responsibilities to others. This approach has been adopted by various early years pedagogies, such as: Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Steiner (Boyd, 2018; Ghirotto & Mazzoni, 2013). It is important to note that ECEs may be consciously working to support children's rights in their classroom but using different terms for what they do. In this study, I hope

to learn more about how ECEs understand agency in their practice and what language they employ to facilitate and document young children's agentic movements and actions.

Child rights-based research is a sub-section of sociology of childhood, which considers children as their own sociological group (Ba', 2021; Mayall, 2013; Wall, 2022). In this way children are viewed as their own community that is shaped by the culture that they are embedded in and other social contexts (Caplan et al., 2016; Mayall, 2013). Sociology of childhood grew as a critical juxtaposition to the field of child psychology, which segments childhood into discrete sections, (e.g., social emotional development, cognitive development) (Mayall, 2013). Where psychologists separate children from their cultural context they are situated in, sociologists understand all of these facets to be entwined with each other (Mayall, 2013). Sociology of childhood researchers are critical of psychologists who view children as "human becomings" by placing children in a linear developmental model as opposed to human beings in their own right (Mayall, 2013). Sociology of childhood is a broad theoretical framework with research in various academic fields, such as history, anthropology, healthcare, and education (Mayall, 2013). One focus of study within sociology of childhood is the critical examination of power structures that children are situated in and advocating for child rights and participation in society (Ba', 2021; Mayall, 2013). With the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) the branch of sociology of the child was joined with critical theory to form the basis of a child rights-based approach (Mayall, 2013).

A child rights-based theoretical framework advocates for the voices of the child in all facets of their life. Moreover, a child rights-based approach addresses the relevance and importance of prioritizing research that positions young children as active, engaged citizens in their own lives. The UNCRC provides a basic framework for ECEs to implement a rights-based

approach (Caplan et al., 2016; Herczog, 2012). The four sections include the right to survival and development, views of the child, non-discrimination, and best interest of the child, which provide a guidepost for ECEs to question their practice (Herczog, 2012; UNICEF, 1989). This is an important advancement as before Canada ratified the UNCRC in 1991 children were considered property; afterwards they were considered active citizens from a legal standpoint (Caplan et al., 2016). Likewise, a child rights-based approach considers the child as an active participant in the classroom helping to shape the curriculum around them when possible (Caplan et al., 2016; Herczog, 2012). Though navigating the line between protecting a child from harm while also enabling their ability to participate and take risks can be difficult (Hart & Brando, 2018).

In the next chapter, I outline current literature on children's agency within the early years and gaps in the research that I hope to address within this thesis. I then describe in Chapter three, the methodology that guides this study. Specifically, I explain the use of a qualitative case study and focus groups to explore how ECEs support young children's agency in Nova Scotia early years settings. Chapter four shares the main themes that emerged from my study after conducting a full analysis. Finally, chapter five that presents recommendations for future professional development opportunities for ECEs regarding agency.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction:

I have divided this literature review into six sections. In the first section, I look at the historical implication of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) to contextualize current socio-cultural practices. I then examine the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's (2018) *Capable, Confident, and Curious: Early Learning Curriculum Framework* to problematize the potential gaps in relation to how agency is supported in the early years in Nova Scotia. I then take a critical look at free play-based learning to find potential weaknesses in supporting children's agency. The latter three sections of the literature review examine research into current practices and issues in supporting the children's agency in early education settings.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Agency

In the field of early childhood education Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) was considered the standard of care (Walsh, 2005). This form of practice relies heavily on the findings of developmental psychologists, specifically Piaget's theory of development and Vygotsky social development theory (Babakr et al., 2019; Obee et al., 2021a; Walsh, 2005). Those in the field of developmental psychology, including Piaget, aim to establish universal truths regarding child development by testing their ability to establish milestones in developing cognitive, social emotional and other skills (Peleg, 2013; Walsh, 2005). To establish these truths, psychologists compare children's development to the finality of adulthood, implicitly stating that children are often deficient in mind and body (Antonsen, 2019; Hall & Rudkin, 2010; Peleg, 2013). Piaget has since been criticized for testing children separated from their everyday context which can

consistently underestimate children's abilities (Babakr et al., 2019). Another developmental

theorist practitioners refer to is Vygotsky (Obee, 2021a). Vygotsky believed children learn

socially from peers and adults who have more skills than they do, requiring adults to facilitate their

learning; his critics refute this and stating children can learn from each other regardless of skill

level (Hall & Rudkin, 2010; Obee, 2021a). Critical investigations into developmental psychology

highlight the absence of how culture affects development, and how dominant colonial systems can

adversely affect a person's development (Babakr et al., 2019; Walsh, 2005; Zuckerman et al.,

2022). In summary, DAP is informed by theories that often ignore social and cultural contexts,

and view children as lacking independence and the capacity to engage in critical thought compared

to adults (Antonsen, 2019; Babakr et al., 2019; Hall & Rudkin, 2010; Peleg, 2013; Walsh, 2005;

Zuckerman et al., 2022).

Using a DAP lens can lead to regulations with a focus to protect children from harm;

ignoring the importance to facilitate children's participation in society (Antonsen, 2019; Hall &

Rudkin, 2010). ECEs who adopt DAP in their practice often aim to have children compliant and

to perform rudimentary tasks to meet universal milestones (Antonsen, 2019). Children who do not

meet these standards are understood as requiring intervention with rules and structure established

to regulate more closely their performance and outcomes (Antonsen, 2019). DAP based practices

that prioritize skill acquisition based on normative standards are not overly supportive of

children's agency as it does not allow for a young person to problem pose, generate ideas, and give

voice (Mentha et al., 2015; Weckström et al., 2021). Alternatively, socio-cultural practices value

children as human beings and are viewed as always shifting. Wood (2014) suggests that ECEs

engage with free play pedagogy, to move beyond developmental approaches that merely assess

children's abilities to make choices. It is important to examine the Nova Scotia Early Learning

Curriculum Framework as it is informed by socio-cultural practice, offers a play-based curriculum,

and is critically examined in the following section (DEECD, 2018a). It will be interesting to see if

ECEs follow a socio-cultural model in their practice in relation to children's agency.

Nova Scotia's Early Learning Curriculum Framework

Capable, Confident, and Curious: Nova Scotia's Early Learning Curriculum Framework

provides a guide of pedagogical approaches for Nova Scotia ECEs to implement in their daily

practice (DEECD, 2018a). This framework places the child at the centre of early childcare

practice and emphasizes a play-based learning approach (DEECD, 2018a). It is a proponent for

children's agency and states; "(c)hildren have a right to participate in making decisions that affect

them and to have their ideas and opinions welcomed, respected, and valued" (DEECD, 2018a, p.

9).

The Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework states that play is a scaffold for

children's development of cognitive and social skills (DEECD, 2018a). For example, it mentions

different kinds of play ECEs should be supporting, such as: "socio-dramatic play, active play,

pretend or fantasy play, rough and tumble play" (DEECD, 2018a, p. 27). "By their early school

years, children are better able to control their own behaviour and emotions, and play may become

complex and sophisticated" (DEECD, 2018a, p. 27) which suggests that ECEs working with

preschoolers should strive for complex and sophisticated play in their classroom. I am curious to

learn how ECEs view different kinds of play as this may affect children's ability to express

themselves to their peers in early years settings.

The Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework defines the Image of the Child as

"(w)hat people believe, understand, and assume about the role of children in education and

society" (DEECDS, 2018, p. 78) with an emphasis on the image of children being capable,

confident, and curious. The Educator's Guide to the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum

Framework encourages educators to reflect on this concept of capable, curious, and confident in

their practice (DEECD, 2018b). I am interested in ECE's stated Image as it can be predictive of

the way they support certain kinds of play, specifically risky play which is typically supported by

practitioners who view children as capable (Obee et al., 2021a). This image of capable, confident,

and curious is in stark contrast to previous images of the child that circulate within the field of

early childhood education. Konstantoni's (2013) and Sims-Schouten (2015) have critiqued images

that project children as innocent and silent subjects in the learning space. For example,

Konstantoni (2013) describes an account where three children, all ethnic minorities, were being

excluded. One child demonstrated racist behaviours such as name calling and socially excluding a

peer based on their perceived ethnicity. Konstantoni (2013) approached the ECEs of that childcare

about this racist action and the ECEs dismissed her concerns stating that the children were

"innocent" and were unaware of their actions. I would like to explore what Images of the Child

ECEs practicing in Nova Scotia have and whether it supports a practice that prioritizes children's

agency. Given the long history of developmental practices which projects a static Image of the

Child, it will be interesting to see if they adopt the framework's image of capable, confident, and

curious.

In summary, the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework is the guide all ECEs

in Nova Scotia are required to follow. It is socio-culturally informed which places the child at the

center of ECE's practice, and advocates for children's agency to be supported in early education

settings. The next section discusses potential issues in supporting children's agency in a play-

based learning environment.

Learning Through Play

Play-based practice has been the standard in many early childcare settings with a focus on children learning and developing skills through play. Though children explore their ideas through play researchers have been critical of how agency is mobilized and prioritized within early years programs (Konstantoni, 2013; Rainio & Hilppö, 2017; Stirrup et al., 2017). Rainio and Hilppö (2017) explored the complexity of agency when using ethnography as the methodology of study and suggest the use of dialectics to capture the complex nature of agency. That is, exploring unified oppositions, or tensions, which are dynamic and constantly changing (Rainio & Hilppö, 2017). The program they observed used a dramatic "playworld" agenda and was attended by 7-year-olds (Rainio & Hilppö, 2017. The tensions they looked at were: 1. enacted agency and imagined agency, 2. situative emergence and the progressive development of agency, 3. dependency and separation, 4. mastery and submission, 5. control and freedom (Ranio & Hilppö, 2017). In their example they illustrated how a group of girls experienced various levels of agency and freedom over the course of a few days by virtue of the way they responded to how dramatic parts were allocated. Rainio and Hilppö (2017) illustrate how complex agency can manifest, which lends to how complex it can be to support in the early years. I aim to understand how ECEs can respond to the complex nature of agency.

Adding to the natural complexity of agency in a play-based setting, ECEs should also be engaging with they dynamic of intentional teaching (DEECD, 2018a; Sims, 2015). While learning through play is fostered in early years settings in play-based curriculums, tensions can emerge when educational goals are imposed by educators (Sims, 2015). It is essential to explore in this study how ECEs approach their facilitation of play and how they engage with children in relation to exploring new skills and fostering agency (Sims, 2015). I hope this study will allow the ECEs

to reflect on their practice and explore if their approaches to play are hindered by traditional

pedagogies and training.

Though children have access to all the various kinds of play in a play-based setting; they

may be missing different kinds of risky play. Risky play is defined as ;"... a thrilling play that

provides challenge and opportunity for children to test their capabilities, where there is a risk of

physical injury" (Obee et al., 2021b, p. 2608). Sandseter (2007) has classified risky play into six

distinct categories: play with great heights, danger of falling, play with high speed, play with

dangerous tools, play near dangerous elements, rough and tumble play, and play where children

can disappear or get lost. Sandseter et al. (2021) notes that playing with dangerous tools were

least supported in Norwegian settings because it requires close supervision and facilitation by an

ECE. Other barriers to risky play include avoidance of cold or unpleasant weather, and attitudes

held by ECEs, and a lack of opportunities (or affordances) to support risky play in the physical

environment (Obee et al., 2021a; Obee et al., 2021b). All of these studies occurred in Norway,

where attitudes towards risky play is more favorable than in North America (Obee et al., 2021a;

Obee et al., 2021b; Sandseter et al., 2021). I wonder if and how ECEs can support risky play in

their environment.

As mentioned in my introduction, this thesis will use a rights-based theoretical approach to

explore ECEs understanding of agency when working with young children in Nova Scotia early

years contexts. It is important to note that the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework

does not identify that it uses a rights-based approach. However, it does stress the importance of

children gaining a sense of responsibility and awareness to those around them (DEECD, 2018a). I

am interested to see if ECEs are familiar with a rights-based approach in relation to agency.

Moreover, I want to explore with the ECEs their own ideas, philosophies, and understandings on

what it means for children to advocate and give voice in the learning space. In the next section, I highlight research on children's agency and the challenges ECEs face in supporting it.

Agency in the Early Years

Research from a socio-cultural perspective regarding agency through ethnographic studies describe specific actions children take to gain independence, make decisions, and have a voice within early childhood education settings (Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Karlsson et al., 2017; Vuorisalo et al., 2018; Wood, 2014). Agentic children can test boundaries and rules, persist in conflict, negotiate conflicts, be creative, have knowledge of different play skills and schemas, regulate their bodies and emotions, and communicate with their peers (Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Karlsson et al., 2017; Vuorisalo et al., 2015; Vuorisalo et al., 2018; Wood, 2014). Vuorisalo et al. (2015) explains that a consciously arranged environment can create opportunities for children to be autonomous. Vuorisalo et al. (2015) also observe how children understand the different degrees of freedom offered in each activity that make up the daily routine. Vuorisalo et al., (2018) explains that children who can do the intended challenge, for example completing a high jump, are able to convey this knowledge to their peers. They also find that children who can re-think and re-shape the activity, for example, changing the high jump into a game of limbo, are able to be leaders in the play schema (Vuorisalo et al., 2018). In each study, children had space and time to re-think, alter, participate and influence the physical environment and the people around them (Vuorisalo et al., 2015; Vuorisalo et al., 2018; Wood, 2014). In this study, I aim to find out if the ECEs practices support the development of children's capacities to enable their agency in early years settings.

Johansson and Emilson (2016) examine the way children can use conflict in early education settings to engage with democratic learning. They explain that conflicts provide a

tension between suppression and expression, for example; some children can express themselves when they challenge the status quo (Johansson & Emilson, 2016). To do this, children need to be brave and persistent in asserting their rights (Johansson & Emilson, 2016). As previous literature shows, ECEs who apply a developmental model often do not account for children's capacities to make decisions and voice their ideas (Antonsen, 2019; Hall & Rudkin, 2010; Peleg, 2013). The Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework emphasizes the importance of social inclusion for all children, with two learning objectives stating that children have a sense of belonging and can include others (DEECDS, 2018a).

Though previous studies explore agency by observing children in early childcare settings, a few studies approach the topic from the perspective of ECEs (Mackey & de Vocht-van Alphen, 2016; Mentha et al., 2015; Weckström et al., 2021). Mentha et al. (2015) explore the perspectives ECEs have on agency, with the purpose of understanding what informs their perceptions. ECEs in this study reflect on the meaning of agency and child participation highlighting the importance of children's ability to make choices and not to be dismissed within an early educational setting (Mentha et al., 2015). Mentha et al. (2015) also discuss the variety of influences ECEs have on young people's agency, such as theorists like Vygotsky and pedagogies that accommodate a rights-based approach (Mentha et al., 2015). Though Mackey's and de Vocht-Alphen (2016) interviews with ECEs show how ECEs struggle to identify, observe, and communicate instances of social justice happening in their classrooms between children (Mackey & de Vocht-van Alphen, 2016). Weckström et al.'s (2021) participatory action research took place in Finland and had 3 leaders with 19 ECEs involved in creating a participatory culture for children in early childcare settings. They discuss four themes that support this culture; ECEs share an active Image of the Child, they value communal professional development, they have reciprocal and relational

leadership guiding their practice, and they share a we-narrative with the children that promotes a maintenance of a culture of participation (Weckström et al., 2021). This speaks to the importance of putting systems in place to create and maintain participatory culture for children in early childcare settings (Weckström et al., 2021). These studies comment on different foundational aspects of ECEs, such as their perceptions on practice, their growth through educational opportunities, and the positive influences of support systems (Mackey & de Vocht-van Alphen, 2016; Mentha et al., 2015; Weckström et al., 2021). By discussing agency, I hope to learn more about the influences and supports that improve ECEs' ability to support children's agency through their daily practices.

Though there is an understanding of the skills and abilities children need to assert their agency (Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Karlsson et al., 2017; Vuorisalo et al., 2018; Wood, 2014), and research into perspectives on agency and social justice (Mentha et al., 2015, Mackey & de Vocht-Alphen, 2016), there is a paucity of knowledge concerning the actions ECEs take in their daily practice to support young children's agency. In the next section, I delve into the research concerning the child's voice, and how it is supported or silenced in early years' settings.

Child's Voice

Children's agency includes the ability to have a voice and for another person to hear and respond (Mentha et al., 2015). Communication using language between adults and children has potential obstacles as children have a different understanding of language than adults, but this does not prevent children from commenting on complex issues (Bentley, 2012; Callaghan et al., 2017; Hall & Rudkin, 2010). Children tend to use language more concretely, so the use of metaphors and abstract concepts may confuse them (Bentley, 2012; Hall & Rudkin, 2010). Children may also engage in behaviours to communicate their wants which deepens the challenge for ECEs to

hear and respond to these requests (Åmot & Ytterhus, 2014; Hall & Rudkin, 2010; Rosen, 2015; Wood, 2014). Therefore, ECEs need to rely on their own capacities to listen and respond to children's different forms of communication (Åmot & Ytterhus, 2014; Hall & Rudkin, 2010; Rosen, 2015; Wood, 2014). I aim to learn how ECEs perceive children's perspective through their various forms of communication.

Sometimes physical communication is more effective and accessible to children than language, creating a challenge for ECEs to interpret children's actions as a form of expression (Åmot & Ytterhus, 2014; Hall & Rudkin, 2010; Rosen, 2015; Wood, 2014). Åmot and Ytterhus (2014) observe children copying another child's action of urinating his pants to protest the daily routine of having to go outside. The children copying the action were not often observed interacting with this child socially, yet they identified his actions, understood and agreed with his stance, and copied it as an act of solidarity (Åmot & Ytterhus, 2014). Similarly, Rosen (2015) describes the act of screaming in toddler classrooms. Through observations, the screams serve three purposes; to gain attention from friends, to assert control over their peers, and one incident where it was theorized to build community within their class (Rosen, 2015). Wood (2014) similarly outlines how children will use a whispering tone of voice to control and exclude certain peers from their play. Though adults rely mostly on language to speak, children speak using a mixture of words, vocal quality, behaviour, and play (Åmot & Ytterhus, 2014; Hall & Rudkin, 2010; Rosen, 2015; Wood, 2014). Adults may find children's modes of communication irritating or immature, responding to such modes with forms of discipline instead of listening to the child's intended message (Antonsen, 2019; Hall & Rudkin, 2010).

Researchers of early education settings identify instances of adult agendas interfering with what children are trying to express; resulting in the unconscious silencing of children (Alasuutari,

2014; Åmot & Ytterhus 2014; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). Yoon and Templeton (2019) document

an incident of a child's interest being ignored by an educator in photo-documentation activity with

an early year's classroom. Each child had a turn taking a camera home with them to take pictures,

with the child and educator selecting five pictures to share with their friends (Yoon & Templeton,

2019). The educator was interested in the pictures a particular child took of pop-culture items the

researcher also played with as a child, like Ariel from Disney's "The Little Mermaid" and "My

Little Pony" toys, and advocated for their inclusion in the final five pictures. In doing so the

researcher realized that she had dismissed pictures the child valued depicting her family, culture,

and the routines of care they engaged with (Yoon & Templeton, 2019). Alasuutari (2014)

observed parent/ECE meetings planning out the goals the child should be working on over the

course of a year that were supposed to include the child's voice. Prior to these meetings parents

had been directed to ask their child what they like and did not like about attending childcare

(Alasuutari, 2014). When children mentioned bullying, ECEs would interpret this as an attack on

their practice and dismiss the issues of bullying to something inconsequential (Alasuutari, 2014).

When parents forgot to ask their child what they liked or did not like about childcare the ECEs

would attempt to save parents from embarrassment by diminishing the need to have that question

answered, effectively dismissing the child's voice. Unchallenged bias can potentially silence

children and other marginalized adults, resulting in unfair practices if the decisions remain

unchecked or unchallenged (Srinivasan 2019). These issues of silencing children may not be

apparent to the practicing ECEs, especially if they do not have time to reflect upon their practice

(Alasuutari, 2014; Åmot & Ytterhus 2014; Jickling et al., 2018; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). In the

next section, I will explore the relevance of daily practice and how it can inform children's

capacities to act and move in more agentic ways when attending early childcare settings by looking at documented examples of ECES and children co-learning.

Agency Through Conversations

The actions that ECEs take in their practice can further support the expression of children's agency. Several researchers document examples of co-learning between ECEs and children through projects and strategies ECEs use to facilitate choice making and exploration in, and out of, the classroom. I will outline some of the documented ways ECEs enhance children's agency in current research. I aim to further this research by exploring everyday practices within the context of the child's daily routine while attending early childcare settings in Nova Scotia. Hall and Rudkin (2010) and Callaghan et al., (2017) documents how they created a charter of rights for children using the voices of children within Bolder Colorado and the township of Hamilton Ontario, respectively. They document the various modes of expression offered to children and youth to help them state their rights and the strategies used to decide on the rights constituting their charter (Callaghan et al., 2017; Hall & Rudkin, 2010). Bentley's (2012) early years class, which was embedded in an elementary school, was made to participate in a Martin Luther King Jr. assembly. Wanting to do something more than a cute song she engaged the children in a discussion of what fair and un-fair meant and then created an audio/visual demonstration for the assembly (Bentley, 2012). All three of these projects were provoked by adults wanting to discover what children's thoughts were on topics such as: social justice and equity (Bentley, 2012; Callaghan et al., 2017; Hall & Rudkin, 2010). All three discuss the strategies they used in having conversations with children, namely the terminology used to enhance children engaging in conversation (Bentley, 2012; Callaghan et al., 2017; Hall & Rudkin, 2010). Callaghan et al. (2017) realized that some children were expressing what they wished they had, which the authors

believed this was due to misunderstandings as opposed to children being selfish. Having a specific

question for ECEs to ask: "What do you think are the most important things for all children to

have and to be able to do?" (Callaghan et al., 2017, p. 34) elicited answers that pertained to

children's rights. These considerations indicate a perseverance on the part of researchers working

in the early years field to engage in these conversations, record, and share these conversations with

others (Bentley, 2012; Callaghan et al., 2017; Hall & Rudkin, 2010). There is a paucity of

understanding of what happens in most childcare centres where neither time or leadership are

available to bring large discussions of agency in the classroom.

  Two projects that resulted from adults responding to children's conversations and interests

emphasize the importance of collaboration and co-learning between ECEs and children (Ghirotto

& Mazzoni, 2013; Wien et al., 2014). Ghirotto and Mazzoni (2013) document the process of

building a garden in a city centre square in Italy. They emphasize the importance of building off

of children's ideas by using community experts for advice (Ghirotto & Mazzoni, 2013). The

children wanted to build a circular vegetable garden, the ECEs invited community experts to help

guide them and they explained that the garden needed to be rectangular to be efficient (Ghirotto &

Mazzoni, 2013). The result was a functional rectangular garden that the children were proud of

(Ghirotto & Mazzoni, 2013). Wien et al. (2014) document a project in Nova Scotia where a child

expressed interest in zombies and would engage in conversations with an ECEs daily (Wien et al.,

2014). The ECE was initially reluctant to engage in this discussion as he felt it was an

inappropriate topic for an afterschool program but changed his mind and the two started working

on "Zombie World" (Wien et al., 2014). The rest of the program joined in and they created an art

piece, titled "Zombie World" that showcased young children's voices (Wien et al., 2014). These

two projects demonstrate what can be accomplished when ECEs are able to engage with children

in their ideas. These studies were documented and published because they are significant to the

researchers, I am interested in learning more about projects that are not published and ideas that

did not come to fruition and why.

Houen et al. (2016) document the use of the phrase "I wonder" by ECEs to invite children

to answer to a question without forcing a response. In their ethnographic study observing an early

years' class in Queensland, Australia, they document 42 times an ECE directed the phrase "I

wonder" to a child (Houen et al., 2016). They found two main functions of the phrase; to invite

children to share their ideas or knowledge on a topic, or a way to invite a child to participate in an

activity (Houen et al., 2016). In this paper they focussed on times when ECEs invite children to

do a particular action that the child was not required to do. The researchers were investigating if

children had a genuine choice when ECEs use the phrase "I wonder" to invite, or allow children to

refuse, the suggestions made by ECEs, (Houen et al., 2016). Houen et al., (2016) describes three

responses to this phrase; one child agreed with the request, one child compromised, and one child

refused. Where ECEs have more power than children, using "I wonder" helps signal to children

that they are the ones making the decision (Houen et al., 2016).

In this study, I hope to build on previous research on children's agency within early years

contexts. The next section will outline the methodology to answer my research question; "how do

Nova Scotia ECEs support young children's agency in their everyday practice?"

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction:

This chapter outlines how the information used to explore the research question was gathered and analysed. This researcher used a case study methodology to collect data, with a focus group as the method to discover ECEs' perspectives on the topic. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit a group of 4-5 ECEs to locate information and a thematic analysis was done to answer the research question. The decisions in selecting the research design, participants, ethical considerations, data collection and data analysis are expanded in this chapter.

Research Design

A qualitative case study approach was used to meet the aims of the research. A qualitative research design allowed for an in depth look into how people experience, learn, and perceive the world around them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Savin-Baden & Major, 2012). In addition, a qualitative research design acknowledged multiple constructed realities in order to produce a rich description to the research question (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012). Here, a qualitative case study allowed the researcher to examine a specific event in depth, including the context that surrounded the research question (Lewis, 2012; Yin, 2012). Moreover, a case study methodology can be used to explore a specific issue within a given context (Yin, 2012). That is, this case study explored the research question; "How do Nova Scotia ECEs support young children's agency in their everyday practices?" The constraints, philosophies, experiences ECEs have informed the context surrounding the research question.

The focus group method was selected to gather data which allowed participants to interact with each other and the researcher. Focus groups allowed the exploration of complex topics that were more accessible through discussion as opposed to ethnographic observations (Lewis, 2012).

Supporting children's agency has multiple interpretations and points of view based on a person's prior experience and current circumstance. Questions were asked to provoke conversations regarding the different perspectives ECEs had on supporting agency in the classroom which generated the data necessary to answer the research question. To support the researcher's inquiry, an interview guide was used (see Appendix B). Finch and Lewis' (2012) five step interview process were followed to support meeting the aims of the research. The goal was to move from a discussion led by asking direct questions to observing as the participants interacted and discussed with each other (Finch & Lewis, 2012). These stages were not linear as participants went back and forth between different stages throughout the process (Finch & Lewis, 2012). The researcher became an active listener only asking probing questions if more detail was required, to steer the conversation back on topic, or to be a provocateur when needed.

Participants

ECEs with a level 2 or 3 who worked in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, with children aged 3-5 years old at the time of study were targeted for recruitment. In Nova Scotia ECEs are designated one of three levels; level 1 indicated an online course and guided workplace, level 2 indicated the ECE had a two-year college diploma in Early Childhood Education, a level 3 indicated the ECE had a bachelor degree either in Child and Youth Studies or a bachelor degree in any topic as well as a college diploma in early childhood. This researcher recruited 5 participants to this study, with one participant unable to attend the second focus group. The other members of the focus group met twice; once in May and once in June of 2022. Though ECEs who worked with infants and toddlers would also have information regarding children agency, they were excluded from joining as the researcher decided to focus on ECEs working with children aged 3-5 years old.

Purposeful sampling, with a snowball method, was used to recruit participants to this study. In September of 2021, I sent out letters via email to HRM childcare directors to forward to their staff. Co-workers of the researcher reached out to other ECEs that they knew and the researcher also reached out to local ECE groups through Facebook. The researcher offered a 10$ gift card to improve the recruitment process. By May 2022, 5 participants had been recruited to this study. Each participant was contacted before the first focus group session, either via zoom or phone, to discuss the information sheet and consent form (see Appendices B and C). In mid-May, 2022, the first discussion session was held, with the second session in mid-June 2022. The 5 ECEs were employed at different early childhood centers, or pre-primary programs, within the Halifax Regional Municipality.

The participants worked in one of two childcare situations; either in Pre-Primary or in a regulated childcare setting. Pre-primary is a program offered free of charge to children turning 4 by December 31. It runs for about 6-7 hours a day, with before and after school programs available for a fee if parents require it. It is generally offered within the elementary school the child will be attending when they turn 5, or nearby if the school does not have space available for the program. It is intended to help children transition into their school prior to starting grade primary. In pre-primary, classes can have up to 20 students with two ECEs working, or have three ECEs working with 24 children at a time. Regulated childcare is a fee-for service program, regulated by the provincial Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, opened for roughly 10 hours a day and is intended to provide opportunities for childcare, learning, and socialization for children in the early years. Depending on the facility of the childcare centre, children can start from infancy and stay through to five years of age. The ratio mandated for children aged 4 and up is one ECE to eight children.

Table 3.0: Participants

Name Pseudonyms Used	Level	Role	Current work environment	Experience Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM)
Amy	Level 3	ECE	Pre-Primary	31 years experience; worked in several regulated early childhood centres and currently in a pre-primary setting in HRM.
Beth	Level 2	ECE	Regulated Childhood Centre	22 years in several different regulated early childhood centres in HRM
Cathy	Level 2	ECE	Pre-Primary	20 years; 10 years working in India, 7 years in United Arab Emirates and 3 years in HRM in pre-primary and regulated ECE settings
Dorothy	Level 2	ECE	Pre-Primary	38 years; worked in various regulated early childhood centres, worked as an ECE administrator in HRM and in pre-primary in HRM
Emma	Level 3	Inclusion-Coordinator	Regulated Childhood Centre	17 years as an ECE and inclusion coordinator, and other roles at one regulated early childhood center in HRM

Due to COVID-19 restrictions virtual sessions were planned instead of in-person meetings.

Five participants were recruited and met with the researcher twice, with a month in between each

session. Each session lasted about an hour. The Microsoft Teams was selected as virtual meeting

platform; it is part of the Microsoft office suite of programs that Mount Saint Vincent University

paid to use. It was hosted on a local server and was more secure than other virtual platforms.

Some people who joined the meeting needed to download the Teams prior to the session, but the

app was free to use for participants.

Ethical Considerations

ECEs who expressed interest to the study were sent an information sheet that detailed the

research process and a consent form (see Appendix A and C respectively). Prior to the focus

group each participant was contacted by Teams (except for one participant who requested a phone

call instead) and the information sheet was verbally explained so that participants could ask

questions privately. Anonymity could not be guaranteed because a focus group method was used.

Confidentiality was met by reminding participants not to disclose the identity or personal

information of other participants outside of the sessions. In the transcripts and final report all

names were changed and personal identifying details were removed from the transcript, including

the names of where each ECE worked.

Data Collection

The first focus group started with each member of the group, including the researcher,

introducing themselves briefly and outlining their experience and where they were working at the

time of the session. Opening questions such as "what is your Image of the Child?" and "What

drew you to the field of early childhood education and care?" were then asked (see Appendix B).

The group members discussed their Image of the Child, after which a definition of "agency" was

read and discussed. With little provocation the conversation progressed so that by the end of the

first focus group session half of the interview guide had been discussed. In the second focus group

the discussion opened with some questions to provide more answers from the first focus group

such as filling in one of the participant's back-ground, and finding out why the outdoor routines

had changed from previous years. The group then finished discussing the rest of the interview

guide. The end of both focus groups was signalled five minutes prior to allow participants time to

give last thoughts on the topic.

To illustrate the different stages, a table with the actions used in the pre-focus group, plus the five stages as outlined by Finch and Lewis (2012) is below.

Table 3.1: Stages to Focus Group Sessions

Stages	Descriptions
Pre-focus group	-Researcher met with each individual participant using the Teams app or by phone and reviewed the consent form and information sheet
Stage 1-Scene Setting	-Consent form was reviewed by participants -Guidelines to help support conversations, such as using the raise hand feature were reviewed along with the importance of listening to different views and experiences (Finch & Lewis, 2012; Lobe, 2017) -Participants were reminded that focus group session would be recorded
Stage 2-Individual Introductions	-Researcher and participants introduced themselves (Finch & Lewis, 2012) -Introduction questions were asked (See Appendix B)
Stage 3-Opening Topic	-Topics were explored with participants following the general interview guide (See Appendix B)
Stage 4-Discussion	-Researcher actively listened to participants and asked questions to the group for more information (Finch & Lewis, 2012) -Researcher was critically reflexive to the research space to ensure all participants had adequate opportunities to share their stories, and ideas
Stage 5-Ending Discussion	-Verbal cues were given to participants to indicate the end of the focus group approached. -Participants were invited to contact the researcher by email or phone if they wanted to add any further insights.

Data Analysis

Before the data was analyzed, the nature of what could be learned from this research was reflected upon (May & Perry, 2011). May and Perry (2011) explained that answers that describe how something is accomplished should be limited to claims of basic patterns and tendencies. With this research, the hope was to better understand how ECEs support children's agency in relation to their daily practices. The recorded focus group was transcribed verbatim to focus on what participants were saying, as opposed to how they were saying it (May & Perry, 2011).

There were two phases for analyzing the data. The first phase occurred immediately after the first focus group. The conversation was transcribed using the Teams recording and

transcription feature as the starting point. The transcriptions were then corrected of any errors, quotes were attributed to each participant, and identifiable features of each participant were removed. Afterwards, the discussion was compared to the interview guide to find discrepancies, missing information or information that could be clarified in the second focus group. Time was taken to familiarize the researcher with the data and any emerging themes that could explored in the second discussion group (Oates & Alevizou, 2018).

After the second focus group met the data was transcribed immediately and the analyzing process began. The data was organized structurally by focus group and group members (Finch & Lewis, 2012; Geisler, 2018). A combination of paper and computer technology was used to organize the data, with Microsoft Excel used to organize quotes into the final themes. Paper and pencil were used initially to segment the data structurally and then into different topics through the different levels of coding (Hahn, 2008). Where this researcher was new to analyzing qualitative data, time was taken to familiarize the researcher with the information before segregating sections into codes (Geisler, 2018; Saldana, 2011). The researcher went back to the segments to assign codes until thematic saturation had been reached (Hahn, 2008). These codes were then organized into categories which were examined for relations and interplay (Saldana, 2011).

Limitations

The limitations of this study include a small participant demographic. With a small participant demographic of 5 total participants, these findings are not generalizable. In addition, the data could have been more reliable if the researcher had introduced the concept of agency in advance of the focus group discussions. This might include having an information sheet or literature on the concept of agency for the participants to read and reflect on prior to focus group sessions. The researcher acknowledges that the participants had limited understanding of the

concept at the time of data collection. The other limitation is in relation to the participants'

understanding of the Image of the Child. It would have been purposeful to have gained insight into

the participants' understandings of the Image of the Child prior to data collection.

Ethics:

Before the study began, participants gave informed consent to allow the session to be

recorded. Upon accepting to be part of the study, each participant met with the researcher through

Microsoft Teams to discuss the consent form. After the participant reviewed the consent form with

the researcher, she emailed the form for the participants to sign. This form also outlines the rights

of anonymity and confidentiality, so to keep the research confidential participants were asked to use

pseudonyms and change any notable identifiers when speaking about specific events at their centers.

Pseudonyms were also used when transcribing data. The participants agreed that all information

discussed during this focus group will remain confidential.

Additionally, all data was kept on the researcher's password protected MSVU One Drive to

ensure confidentiality. All hard copy documents such as transcripts, consent forms, and analysis

were stored in the supervisor's office. Moreover, the form described the withdrawal process, which

stated that participants could withdraw up until two weeks after all final data had been collected, by

contacting the researcher. This study posed minimal risk to participants because they were asked

questions that pertain to their educational philosophies and daily practices on agency. All data

collected, and participants' information will be deleted after a successful thesis defense. Finally, this

study was cleared and approved by the Board of Ethics at Mount Saint Vincent University. The next

section will outline the findings from the two focus groups that support the aims of the research

study.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction:

In this chapter I will outline how Nova Scotia ECEs support young children's agency in their everyday practice by discussing the four themes that emerged from the data. I start by looking at the participants' philosophies and how that can impact their support, or lack thereof, of children's agency. I then discuss institutional structures that further impact an ECE's ability to support children's agency. The last two sections look at how the early childhood setting can shape young people's agency, as well as a discussion on how ECEs foster agency by the prioritization of children's voices.

Practitioners' Image of the Child Inform Children's Agency

Practitioners Image of the Child and the ways they personally perceive and view children within their practice sets the foundation for how children experience the learning space. The term "Image of the Child" is used in the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework making it accessible to the participants as a discussion topic. When I asked the participants as a group, they shared their Image of the Child with me often referencing what another participant has said before them:

Dorothy: Their curiosity…

Cathy: I think curiosity is one thing I foster in children. And for me, I look out with nature, I always see that when children play outdoors, they (are) very curious.

Emma: I am big on helping children to take those risks and the confidence in themselves to take risks, and that can be fostering that in all areas their outdoor play, exploration, even in their art…and I just think that there is such a level of confidence that can be built in children when you give them that opportunity to take that risk.

Dorothy: I was going to mention their self-help skills. From the very beginning of the school year when they are struggling with taking off their jackets and hanging up their backpacks … Those little self-help skills that build and boost that confidence for them. I think that's huge as well.

Amy: *The sense of adventure, but then their sense of adventure also brings in their knowledge that they bring with them*

Beth: I just came from an all child centered best practice approach where the teachers kind of made up the schedule…But with the preschoolers I would usually let them decide what they want to play with…but now I've moved into a high scope approach which is more structured then I like.

Amy: And then when you're giving them something that's so simple, and then it just turns into something you weren't even expecting, you know?

Amy: So we have a little bit more flexibility, … But I'm sort of enjoying it more because it's just sort of, it's so free. … And it changes every day. They want to climb the trees or, sit in the mud puddle

Amy: I have a kind of like a community thing and I talk about this all being a community. One person doesn't build a house…

When discussing their Images of the child, often the participants would agree and then add onto another's statement with their own perspective. Images that were identified were "curiosity" by Dorothy and Cathy, "confidence" by Emma and Dorothy, and "knowledge" by Amy. Emma introduced the importance of affording risks in her practice, that is she stated that she believed children should partake in risk taking which the rest of the participants agreed and responded with their own thoughts on risk taking (which is addressed in "supporting young children's voices" section). Amy indicates creativity indirectly by stating that she likes it when children change the intent of an activity, and Beth indicates that she appreciates a program that is child centered. These stated values are the same, or similar to, the five traits that the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework identifies as its Image of the Child: creative, curious, full of potential, capable, confident (DEECD, 2018a). In addition to this, Amy stressed the importance of creating a community within the classroom, she was the only participant to mention the value of having a class community within the group of participants.

These descriptions support aspects of agency, specifically the capacity for young children to move openly, give voice, problem pose, and shape the environment around them (Freire, 2000; Mentha et al., 2015; Oswell, 2013). Here, we see the ways that ECEs own philosophical approach to practice can inform agency. For example, participant Emma expresses how she encourages children to take risks, and participant Dorothy outlines the process she goes through to support children in learning self help skills. As Dorothy claims, "*[t]hose little self-help skills that build and boost that confidence for them".* Cathy and Ann also reiterate the importance of children being curious and seeking adventure. As Cathy states, "*I think curiosity is one thing I foster in children".* This notion of curious aligns with the early learning framework and the concept to support children with exploration and searching for new understandings of self (DEECD, 2018a).

The participants were also able to connect their Image of the Child directly to the decisions they made in their everyday practice.

> *Cathy: We try to extend those activities and bring nature inside the classroom. And I feel the environment becomes their third teacher. When the children were talking about (the) planting we did; we planted the strawberries, we planted tomatoes, and we planted daisies. But the children chose what they wanted to plant.*

> *Dorothy: Involving them in the conversations asking lots of questions and with story time having them look at the pictures and having them tell me what they think the story is about or what they think is going to happen next, before even turning that page.*

> *Emma: You know, giving them the opportunity to take whatever it is they perceive as a risk; we provide those safe risks for them.*

> *Amy: ...And we talked ... what's around your community. And we partnered with the Dartmouth North End Community Food Center up until COVID and did a food program with them.*

Indicative of a link between an ECE's Image of the Child and the decisions and actions they take that constitutes their practice. As such;

> Everyone's Image of the Child shapes their decisions and beliefs about how children learn. The image influences the types of early learning environments that are provided for children,

the role of the educators in preparing early learning environments, and relationships with children and families. (DEECD, 2018a, p.9)

The Image of the Child can often inform an ECE's practice and approaches to children's agency, including their individual approaches and philosophies as evident here. This data shows the relevance and importance of having conversations with ECEs about their philosophies as it relates to children's capacities to share their ideas, to problem pose and give voice. For example, we see in the above data how Cathy fosters nature as a third teacher which builds on her Image of the Child as curious to explore new spaces (DEECD, 2018a). As Emma states, *"giving them the opportunity to take whatever it is they perceive as a risk, we provide those safe risks for them.* Dorothy also signals the relevance of having conversations with children and to create opportunities for the children to examine their own positionality by telling stories. However, other factors can affect an ECE's ability to express their philosophies in practice.

The participants highlight how their colleagues can either support or obstruct an ECE's practice which can then affect their ability to encourage young children's agency. One participant, Beth, explained how her co-workers often placed restrictions on the ways that children can explore materials in the center. Beth states, "*The kids aren't allowed to move from area to area so many rules*". Beth then recounted a particular exchange with a co-worker.

> *Beth: I will have six kids and I let them sit there and yesterday I got told off by one of my coworkers because I had too many children. "How many children allowed to sit here?" I'm like, "they're engaged." "How many children allowed to sit here? Four, four, four and four. They understand better that way". The two teachers are very teacher directed.*

Beth experiences restrictions based on another ECE's approach to the learning space. Here, her desire for children to explore and move around the room freely differs from and can be limited by her co-worker's wish to monitor children's movements more closely. Her co-worker's belief that there must be a maximum number of four children at the table speaks to a desire to potentially

regulate and supervise the children as a microcosm of power (Antonsen, 2019). Beth's capacity to

encourage children's agency is there for restricted. Beth does not share this belief of regulating

children. Instead, she values the engagement of children exploring and learning through play.

However, Beth also mentions the tension she experiences when wanting to pursue approaches that

contrast to her colleagues' philosophies. Beth states, *"I don't want to cause a rift in the classroom,*

right?". While Beth's beliefs are in line with the Nova Scotia early learning framework, her co-

workers' beliefs are not always aligned.

Interestingly, the ECEs in our discussions not only drew on their knowledge of the

framework to encourage curiosity and risky play, but they also at times drew on their histories to

inform their approaches. It is important to understand how ECEs own histories and experiences in

the field as it relates to structure, traditional pedagogies, and Images of the Child can also shape

how children experience the space. The next section, I will explore in more depth the ways

institutional structures inform the ECEs approaches to children's agency.

Institutional Structures that Impact Children's Agency

Another theme that emerged from this study was the inherent structural barriers that often

limit children's capacities to be agentic. These structures during our focus group discussions were

related to policies, curriculum, and current training the ECEs have received. For example,

participant Dorothy, who works in the Pre-Primary program at a local school, discussed several

school policies that hindered the connection between classroom, families, and community.

> *Dorothy: We can't take them on school outings or they can't play in the playgrounds at the schools. We can't (do) those kinds of things, I think it's more like an insurance policy thing and we can't take them on metro Transit. So, we can't take them to Discovery center or museums or anything like that. Our parents have not been allowed into our building. There are some schools that have now opened and are allowing parents in, but our school does not.*

Dorothy's comments indicate how policies and institutional structures emphasize protection which can potentially limit a child's right to participate and play (Caplan et al., 2016; Hall & Rudkin, 2010). Dorothy flags insurance policies as a barrier to participate on outdoor equipment that presumedly in a year, when the child is old enough to attend grade primary, they will be able to access. She later signals that parents are also not allowed into their spaces due to restrictions put in place to mitigate the spread of COVID 19. To clarify, the children in the pre-primary program have access to outdoor play spaces segregated from the rest of school-aged children. Caplan et al., (2016) state that "the capacities of children as a group (relational community) continue to be immensely underestimated. In other words, just as the capacity of an individual child can be underestimated, so can the collective capabilities of children as a whole" (p. 41). Where young children are often relegated to the home, their agency relies on an inclusion in the communities that surround them which includes schools if they are attending an early years' program located in a school setting (Hall & Rudkin, 2010). Here, Dorothy brings attention to the ways that policies can impede children's experiences to explore their immediate community beyond the areas designated as early years space as well as the opportunities for the children to connect with families within the context of the early learning setting.

The logistics of ECE to child ratios and scheduling staff breaks impose even more challenges. Participants Cathy and Dorothy both mention that their routines working in Pre-Primary are set with little flexibility for change to accommodate children's wishes.

Dorothy: Pretty much the same routine daily

Cathy: We have a fixed thing…it's really tough.

Cathy indicates that the rigidity of the schedule is something she dislikes. Part of the reason for rigidity in Pre-Primary programs is due to fewer hours per day than what is offered in regulated

early childhood centres, and Cathy mentions how lunch breaks for staff also affects the schedule. "*We know the lunch monitor comes in at this time and we have a fixed thing. All of us have different lunch breaks (that) the lunch monitor needs to cover*" (Cathy). Emma elaborates on Cathy's sentiments and provides a rationale on why a longer day would support children's exploration and agency. "*I've seen a lot of educators be able to ask, like, "are we going to go outside now or do we want to finish doing this"?* Here, Emma points to a difference in relation to flexibility provided by regulated early learning and child care programs compared to Pre-Primary settings. As an early childhood educator in a regulated setting, I can attest to how we typically do not have lunch monitors, instead a nap time routine is implemented, which usually require children to stay on their beds regulating their bodies into a confining ritual so that ECEs can have a lunch break and maintain ratio. The statements made by the participants regarding the structured Pre-primary routine indicates that they value having a more flexible space and schedule that can support children's exploration and movement (Weckström et al., 2021). Here, we question what role structures can have on young children's capacities to be agentic and explore in more open ways. For example, do scheduled activities impede children's capacities to engage with an activity in-depth? This is a question that often arises within my practice as an early childhood educator. We are often restricted by time constraints and the need to adhere to schedules.

Participants found maintaining child to ECE ratios while outside was another logistical consideration that can encumber children's agency. Participant Beth, acknowledges that they have more transitions going in and out because they need to take groups of children in shifts to provide access to the toilet and to maintain the licensed ratio for the center. Nova Scotia regulations require one ECE for 8 children in a given space. In Beth's early learning space, even though the children are experiencing extended periods outside, they are also experiencing more transitions

than children in pre-primary programs as they rotate children based on toilet use and ratio

requirements. Alternatively, Dorothy, who works in pre-primary, can accommodate an individual

child's need to use the bathroom, "*we have enough educators that one will take in children*"

instead of potentially requiring children to go the bathroom for logistical reasons rather than need.

This is one example of how poor design can place limitations on the ECEs' ability to be flexible

regarding routine in their early years' settings. If more ECEs were available in Beth's class, she

could take children in as needed, as opposed to taking groups to ensure no ECE has more than

eight children in their area. Such limitations stifles children's capacities to explore the spaces

more openly. For instance, if a child's outdoor play is interrupted due to compliance with

arbitrarily being brought inside the building because one child in the group needs to use the

washroom can potentially inhibit their creativity and capacity to dive into more complex problem

posing scenarios within outdoor nature spaces.

Though I did not directly ask about professional development in regards to agency,

participants spontaneously shared how current workshops in professional development inform

their capacity to support children's agency. In Nova Scotia, ECEs are required to attend 30 hours

of professional development over three years. For example, participant Beth connects what she

learned from a series of early years professional development workshops to change her practice

from interrupting children's play by asking questions to what Beth describes as *"standing back"*

and *"making observations"* to let children play un-interrupted. These types of workshops allow

for ECEs to reflect on traditional approaches and shift to practice that intentionally leads children

to enhance their interests through play-based learning. The participants indicated how the

workshops have created opportunities for them to reflect on best practices. As Dorothy stated,

"[o]ne thing that I've learned over all of these years is that we're constantly evolving and we're

understanding more about children's brains". Here, the ECEs acknowledge the requirement to

expand their thinking and explore innovative approaches to supporting children in their center.

Dorothy later mentions two programs; "*The Circle of Security*" which is used for children

who have experienced trauma and "*The Pyramid Model*", a social-emotional tiered support

program offered by the province of Nova Scotia. She expresses how both professional workshops

widened her understanding on the diversity of approaches ECEs can use to support children.

Weckström et al. (2021) explains how ECEs value their professional development to readjust the

attitude and apply new knowledge as they change their practice. I question at this juncture how

much training ECEs receive in relation to rights-based approaches, children's agency to

reconceptualize early childhood education outside traditional models of practice. Professional

development can potentially allow opportunities for ECEs to ruminate and reflect on their current

practice, which may allow them space to reflect on harmful practices and ways to correct them

(Jickling et al., 2018; Mentha et al., 2015; Sampson & McLean, 2021). As Sampson and McLean

(2021) state:

> Educators need time, opportunity, and a safe space to critically reflect, debrief, and
> deconstruct their classroom experiences so that a deeper and more complex understanding of
> their role as educators and the children's role as active and authentic participants in the
> program-planning process can emerge. (p. 47)

The connection of professional development to critical reflection is recursive, with critical

reflection resulting in potential avenues for an ECE to study. Reflective practice also contributes to

professional learning for adults and in this process, educators can identify topics for further

exploration in ongoing professional lines of inquiry. These topics may be pursued through

individual study, professional development for staff at individual early childhood education

programs, or may be brought forward to professional organizations for inclusion in regional or

provincial strategies for ongoing education for the early childhood education sector (DEECD, 2018a).

Furthermore, if the collective team of ECEs from one center participate in the same professional development it has a chance of creating what Weckström et al. (2021) refers to as a "we-narrative", a key development in maintaining a consistent culture within an early childhood center. Professional development opportunities can be an effective way to change ECEs' practice, but the participants in my study did not have specific workshops to draw upon in relation to the concept of agency. The ECEs did acknowledge that their greatest learning tools are often sitting with colleagues like this focus group, and engaging in discussion; "*when I'm watching all of you, I'm getting so much of our knowledge and advice*" Cathy. This speaks to the importance of supporting ECEs entering into dialogue about their daily practice and offering opportunities to share their lived experiences with others in relation to critical topics, like agency and children's rights.

One facet of agency is the ability for children to shape the environment around them and move freely (Mentha et al., 2015). The next core theme that emerged from my study was the influence that the early years settings and structured routines had on young children's agency.

Settings and Routine Inform Child Agency

Another theme that emerged was how the ECE settings and various routines can either limit or support children's agency. When considering the setting in this study, I include aspects of early childhood education that are initially set out by ECEs and larger institutions, which includes the physical setting and the routine. I was curious how ECEs accommodate children's ability to move openly and shape the environment around them. In terms of physical settings, participants spoke

to the importance of allowing freedom within the learning spaces by removing boundaries. By

boundaries, I am referring to both physical spaces and play materials. The participants stated:

> *Dorothy: We encourage them to move things around… if they decide they want to build forts and they have to move two or three tables together, we allow that.*
>
> *Cathy: We even take class material outside; we take story books outside, we take crayons, paper, everything outside.*
>
> *Beth*: *If they did something differently than the intent of it? That's great*
>
> *Amy*: *Sometimes we sort of hold back from taking inside toys outside because we're finding they're more apt to learn to cooperate and play a game … it's not so much about what they have in their hand. It's what they're using that's in nature*

The participants highlight how they encourage children to explore their surroundings, especially

the outdoors. As one participant Dorothy states "*[w]e encourage them to move things around"* and

Cathy reiterates this idea by indicating they encourage children to take materials outside. Beth

shares that at her center they encourage children to do something different than what she had

initially intended. This above data shows how the ECEs invite children to explore the messy

entanglements of outdoor play independently. Mentha et al.'s (2015) study asserts that child

participation involves children contributing to and altering their environment. Here, we see the

ECEs encouraging children to explore more openly. The participants also spoke of how they

support a child-led classroom, as opposed to a teacher directed one. For example, Beth spoke

about loose parts and the importance loose part play in her practice;

> *Beth: I'm starting to put a lot of open-ended loose parts in the classroom. When I put the lids and bottle caps, and little cut up pool noodles I just put them right out on the table and they love it. I noticed they were building cities with them.*

These items, referred to as "loose parts", offer opportunities for children to be creative in finding a

purpose for them, such as building cities. This play was made possible by ECEs extending

opportunities for children to explore different forms of expression with little direction or demands

on how these items can be used. As she allows them to explore, she finds the children building

little cities with the loose art materials. Other ECEs aligned with Beth and expressed how they do

not require children to participate in activities that they do not express interest in. Most of this

discussion centered around asking boys to participate in the arts activity center instead of letting

them play in the block area:

> *Amy: I have two boys in my class right now. I don't think they should have to sit in the …art area if they have no desire. But if they don't want to do it, they don't want to do it, you know.*
>
> *Beth: don't believe in the teacher directed stuff at all. I believe in process and not create this.*

The Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework points to intentional teaching where

the status quo is to be challenged and children are encouraged to learn new skills (DEECD,

2018a). Here, we see the tension a couple of ECEs experience when wanting to support children's

engagement with their interests. Amy, for example, shares how she wants to support the boys in

her early learning space who do not have an interest in playing in the art area of the classroom.

Beth similarly indicates how she did not align herself with teacher led instruction or craft sessions.

However, Amy's statement indicates that perhaps she does not have mark making materials

available outside of their art area, pointing to a contradiction in her stated philosophy of allowing

materials to be moved around the classroom and her practice. The concept of agency in this data

could be analyzed in the context of the ECEs trying to give the children a wide latitude for

movement and interaction, with evidence of further latitudes ECEs could still work to provide.

This led to a discussion on the routine of naps and if nap time is something that the

participants insist on or , do they give children opportunity to explore alternative activities instead

of napping. Participants expressed some level of unease in requiring children to sleep. "*I would do

not like the concept that everyone has to nap*" (Cathy). This unease may be due to the recognition

on the ECEs' part that restricting a child's movement for a rest period is unjust. To clarify, Cathy

works in the Pre-Primary program which does not have nap time, though she was working in a

regulated childcare centre months before the discussion group. Beth and Emma both work in

regulated childcare, with Beth in a classroom during the naptime routine. Beth stated, "*I'll cave*

and give them books" indicating that there is a boundary that has been set which the children are

attempting to subvert. By giving them books Beth is attempting to transform the naptime routine

into a solitary, quiet time that would allow those children that are tired to nap and those that are

not an opportunity to explore quiet activities (Mentha et al., 2015). The participants agreed that

some, if not all, four-year-olds can have a day without a rest period. Thus, these ECEs are

attempting to support some form of freedom and citizenship in this restrictive routine (Mentha et

al., 2015).

Some freedoms that children experience in their early childhood care settings require them to

have more responsibility. For example, the participants talked about not limiting the number of

children in particular areas, as Amy states:

> *Amy: I was traditionally taught when I first started, and I never agreed with limiting*
> *numbers (of children) in areas. Now I can set out the most beautiful sandbox that you ever*
> *saw and put all kinds of things in there, and if they know that it's something new in there all*
> *21 of them go to the sandbox. I don't say a word. I watch what's going to happen, because*
> *by process of elimination if they can all get in there, people who (don't) want to be around a*
> *crowd will leave, the people who are gung-ho they're going to stay. But it works itself out.*
> *How are children going to learn to self-regulate if we don't give them those kinds of issues to*
> *figure out?*

Amy notes the persistence and the skill of self-regulation that enable children to either figure

out how to work with many other children or leave if they are unable to do so (Johansson &

Emilson, 2016). In removing the restriction of the number of children in one area, the focus is

now on the child's ability to self-regulate instead of the ECEs monitoring the situation for the child

(Antonsen, 2019; DEECD, 2018a; Vuorisalo et al., 2015). In allowing children to regulate

themselves opportunities are created for them to learn about citizenship and fairness, a key aspect

to agency (Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Mentha et al., 2015).

     The participants also spoke of their role in setting expectations and guidelines for the

children in their care. September is the start of the school year in Nova Scotia; at that time most

children start their pre-primary program which runs through to the end of June when school is

dismissed for the summer. Amy stated that each child "*comes with something different*" referring

to each child's prior experience to Pre-primary. Children may be coming from different regulated

child care centers, family home child care programs, or a familial care situation. Dorothy states

that "*at the beginning of the year"* she is "*setting the expectations*" so that the children have a

consistent understanding of what to expect. For example, Dorothy provides concrete examples for

the children by stating "*as long as it's safe to do so*". She extends this example to use of materials

and states, "*they can put what they want in the water play, as long as it's not our books*". This

approach of encouraging children to explore the space encourages decision making,

communication, a sense of community and creativity. Amy shares the value of having a classroom

community with the children by emphasizing this when cleaning up the classroom, a task that at

times can be overwhelming for children. Amy states, "*we're all going to work together*" and in this

way the children can see how a community can be supportive of one another.

     Though the rigidity of routines was discussed in a previous theme, participants mentioned

ways they were able to offer choices within certain routines to children. For example, Dorothy

and Cathy use the children's collective voice to offer some latitude with routines. Dorothy does

this by having open snack. With Dorothy's open snack routine children can join snack time when

they are ready. Cathy shared how she polls the children on which play space they want to go to.

"*We have a poll; we see whose hands are up and we generally go with whatever the kids want*"

(Cathy). Letting children vote to choose their outside play space enables Cathy to give

opportunities for children to choose and create a community in this activity (Caplan et al., 2016).

The next section discusses ways focus group participants try to support children's voice in their

daily routines.

Supporting Young Children's Voices

Another theme that emerged from the discussions were ways ECEs work to support the

voices and actions of children. The participants discussed the tension between child rights and

their responsibility to children in relation to safety and regulations. They also discussed how they

moved beyond the considerations of traditional developmentally appropriate models of practice by

being more critically reflective of their need to control children's bodies in various situations.

When exploring the concept of accessing children's voices, the participants stated they try to "*find*

things that piques interest" (Dorothy). Dorothy and Cathy uses friendship pairing to support

children in sharing their ideas with one another. To clarify what friendship pairing is; "*And that's*

what we tried to do with him; … invite children that we think would be able to draw him into

play", Dorothy. In other words, Dorothy tries to pair up children that can potentially forge

friendships though she admits: "*… they end up making friends with other children that we never*

would have paired at them with ever".

There are different considerations for when friendship pairing is used; for example, Dorothy

pairs certain children together during transitions, where Cathy uses lunch time to seat children

together to encourage conversation. As Cathy states, "*they tend to talk at that time".* Amy

encourages some children who might be more reluctant to share their voices to lead a game with

their friends, allowing them to be in control of the game, and become the focus of the group. "*It's*

sort of done on purpose that he's in control of the game" (Amy). These strategies are intentional

choices made to support children's voices by providing opportunities for them to develop

friendships in the group setting. The Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Frameworks states

that "[i]ntentional teaching is deliberate, purposeful, and thoughtful. Intentional educators

recognize that learning occurs in social contexts and that interactions and conversations are vitally

important for learning" (DEECD, 2018a; p. 39). Participants demonstrate this intentionality

through their considerations on how to amplify certain children's voices in early years spaces.

In conversational and play settings participants also discussed how they allow space and

freedom for the children to interact with each other. They do this by refraining from interfering in

children's play unless it's necessary to do so.

> *Beth*: *Sometimes interrupting play can be not a good thing.*

> *Cathy: I would try not to interfere in a child's play.*

In doing so they allow children opportunities to generate their own ideas, to problem pose and

explore the learning spaces independently. By observing what the children are doing, these ECEs

are giving children the space to interact with their physical and social environments. Participants

then noted the difficulties that can arise between children during these times of interactions. Cathy

shared a story of a child being consistently excluded from a group of children:

> *Cathy*: *I have three children in my class who always stick together, and they always like to play together. And I have another kid who always wants to join the play, but these three children always say "no thank you" or they say it in their own ways. The fourth child is always feeling sad. But I try to tell the fourth child that's OK you can find something else to play. And you know when they are ready, maybe they would take you.*

The issue of child exclusion is complex. Cathy's story of a child being excluded by his peers

shows the tension and complexity of play in the early years' context. After Cathy shared this story,

the participants acknowledged the challenges but equally they wanted the children to problem

solve and make independent decisions. Cathy, Amy, and Dorothy all mention that they do not like

interfering with child conflicts unless it is necessary which indicates an understanding that

children have a right to argue and make up with one another (Callaghan et al., 2017). However,

they also wanted the children to understand the importance of inclusivity. They proposed ways to

help children navigate conflicts. Dorothy's solution is to teach phrases "*may I play with you*" and

"*may I have a turn*" and following through even if the reply from their peer is a "no" ("*If they say*

no, then you'll have to go find something else to play with" Dorothy*) (Johansson & Emilson 2016).

Amy also provides phrases: "*can you let me know when you're finished".* Both Amy and

Dorothy mention having discussions at large group times, including role play as an additional

strategy.

> Dorothy: ...*especially if someone's feelings are getting hurt a lot by that we might have a*
> *discussion on how it's, kind to invite our friends to come play with us.*

> Amy: ...*(We) would be bringing in empathy dolls or ...role playing ... so we'll pretend we're*
> *the children and we'll just do something. ... We're trying to come up with a way to sort of get*
> *them to see it from a different view.*

These methods can help children to learn democratic lessons through conflict, and build a

community within the class (Caplan et al., 2016; Johansson & Emilson 2016). However, one

could question as to whether the strategy of teaching certain phrases and having circle discussions

would be enough to counter issues of bullying in the classroom (Konstantoni, 2013; Sims-

Schouten, 2015). Konstantoni (2013) witnessed a racist incident grow and persist over the course

of the year in a classroom where ECEs highly value child participation. Konstantoni (2013)

dismisses the idea that a general discussion with children about inclusion is enough to change anti-

social behaviour as they witnessed this occurring in their study and it did not seem to produce any

meaningful change. When we discussed these situations no one, including myself, used the term

"bullying", perhaps because we are blind to seeing bullying as an issue within young children and

instead view these behaviours as an issue of poor parenting or poor supervision (Sims-Schouten,

2015). Regardless of this oversight, participants expressed different strategies for children to

advocate for their personal rights, and to respect other children's wishes, and develop empathy and

understanding to others. They did this by providing space for the children to play without

unnecessary interruptions, teaching phrases to help children negotiate between themselves and

their peers, and group discussions to deepen the understanding of others people's situations.

I wanted to see how ECEs can support a child's freedom and so we explored the routine

activity of toileting and the capacity for children to express toilet humor. When asked, Dorothy

and Beth shared the following:

> *Dorothy: It's bodily functions like I don't understand why people get so hung up and "ohh
> we can't say that" unless it gets really, (out of hand) bigger stuff then we may have a little
> chat with them. But most times we just say "ohh my goodness, you guys". ... And we laugh
> with them.*

> *Beth: So, in my classroom right now my kids are obsessed with Mr. Poopy head, that's what
> they talked about constantly. I first was giggling along, and then I didn't know how far to let
> it go because now all the children are talking about Mr. Poopy head. I was going to write a
> story and help have them tell me a story about this, but yeah.*

Both mention their desire to bring in books to support and normalize conversations on toileting.

Though it looks like Beth and Dorothy both support potty humor, they both hint at a possible limit

as to how far they would let the dialogue go with children. "*I didn't know how far to let it go*"

(Beth), "*bigger stuff, then we may have a chat with them*" (Dorothy) indicating a tension they

engage with when deciding when to stop discussions. Here, we see the ECEs trying to support

children's voice on a topic that children are curious about, in this case bodily functions (Hall &

Rudkin, 2010). Though the concern that potty humor might "*go too far*" indicates a boundary

between ECEs and children, none the less the ECEs strive to explore these topics more openly

with children.

The ability of children engaging in activities that adults deem "risky" supports their ability to move openly and develop their capacities to improve in these activities. While "risky play" is defined in literature as play that poses a physical risk to the children, and the participants initially discussed within that parameter, they expanded the definition to mean any activity that posed any kind of social, emotional, or physical injury (Sanseter, 2007). The participants shared their various perceptions on risky play outdoors. "*I'm seeing kids now climbing trees*" (Cathy), "*and the children would be climbing on the rocks" (*Amy). Risky play, or risk taking, is a way for children to express their physical ability through action not words. As Dorothy stated, "*risk taking is not just the climbing the tree or walking up the slide. You're rewarding those little risks that they're taking as well*". Emma then followed up with a statement that all children will understand and pursue risk differently, "*whatever it is they perceive as a risk"*. This led to Beth sharing a story from her center on risky play.

> *Beth: I just wanted to share a funny story about the risk taking. Couple weeks ago, when COVID hit half the staff in my classroom, and I had to go in and open and we didn't have enough substitutes and it was crazy. Two little girls in my class decided to take the little tempera paints. Then they decided to take the liquid paint and they started pouring it in each disk and at first, I was like, "Oh my God, I'm by myself and I (have) 16 kids". ...but then I stopped myself and I said "OK, you know what? They were creative. They were trying to do something different. They're not hurting the environment. They're not hurting me.* (A quick note on ratio; Beth was speaking in exaggerated tones and may have been overexaggerating the number of children in her care, as she would have been in breach of child care regulations being alone with 16 children).

One could argue that from the children's perspective there was no risk taking, they were simply mixing paint together. From Beth's point of view the children were using materials in an unexpected way which elicited a panicked reaction from her. The feeling of discomfort in the form of expressed concern, fear, and panic was a consistent reaction to children engaging in what adults perceived to be risky play. Jickling et al. (2018) asserts that ECEs must be risk takers, especially if the perception of risk comes from the ECE alone and not the child. It is the ECE who is taking

risks when they allow children to mix bottles of paint together as they would be the one facing the

consequence of the potential mess and censure from co-workers and supervisors. Several

participants recounted perseverance in allowing children to participate in risk taking activities for

"[a]dults are faulted for a failure to protect but not for a failure to allow" (Hall & Rudkin, 2010, p.

37).

> *Dorothy: It's trying to get my coworkers on board and I'm like they're not going to do anything that they are not comfortable doing. So, they will climb as high as they're comfortable climbing*

> *Amy: "But it's really high" (principal) and I'm like, "yeah, they're OK. If they couldn't have got up there, I certainly wouldn't have put them up there" kind of thing.*

Those resisting the children's participation in these activities indicate that they perhaps view

children to be dependent and incapable of accomplishing these tasks, prioritizing protection over

participation (Caplan et al., 2016; Peleg, 2013). Conversely, the participants in this study express

attitudes that allow risky play to occur, these social affordances include the way the participants

view children as capable, and they link the development of skills through risky play to improving

each child's confidence, and they place value on the experience of risky play (Obee et al., 2021a).

However, the participants mentioned limited notions of risky play as categorized by Sandseter

(2007); notably focusing on playing from a height but missing other aspects such as using

dangerous tools, being near a dangerous element, and rough and tumble play (Sandseter, 2007).

Participants mention ways they evaluate and mitigate the potential harm a child could receive,

engaging in the tension between protection and participation by opting to reflect on the potential

harm (Mentha et al., 2015). These ECEs demonstrate an understanding that children need to

engage in acceptable risk-taking activities to expand their capabilities and learn how to make

sound judgements, which will affect their freedoms and agency overall (Hall & Rudkin, 2010;

Hart & Brando, 2018; Obee et al., 2021a).

This chapter examines how the ECEs aim to support children's agency through creating

more flexible routines, allowing children to explore the spaces more freely and engage in risky

play. The participants also indicate barriers to agency and how rigid routines, policies, and

questionable practices can stifle children's capacities to generate ideas and problem pose. The next

chapter will bring forward recommendations to enhance children's agency in early learning spaces.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The aim of this research was to learn ECEs' perspectives and thoughts on children's agency, specifically how they can support young children's agency in their everyday routines. Participants of this study discussed different ways they prioritize children's actions within their setting and future considerations on how to support children's agency. However, prioritizing children's active citizenship and agency is not a universal practice among all ECEs especially if they still adopt traditional developmental logic. In addition, the ECEs accounted for structures, policies, practices, and routines that can limit children's agency. For example, Beth spoke of co-workers who continue to limit the number of children in a given area, Dorothy spoke of how her children were often excluded from school assemblies and COVID 19 restrictions limiting the access parents had to Pre-Primary spaces. Interestingly, the participants accounted for moments where they disrupted structured practices to support children's exploration and emergent engagement with the learning spaces. Overall, the dissertation suggests that ECEs want to encourage and foster children's sense of agency and could benefit from paying attention to the small agentic moments in children's daily lives. With this, they also recognize the requirement for professional development and training on agency.

Recommendation 1: Enhance Concept of Agency within ECE Curriculum Frameworks

ECEs' practice is continually shaped by what they learn in their professional development opportunities. Within professional development, ECEs should have opportunities to discuss the topic of agency. The word "agency" is not currently included in the main text of either the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Guide or the Educators' guide, nor is it defined in the glossary (DEECD, 2018a; DEECD, 2018b). The UNCRC and the topic of child rights is also excluded from the provincial framework and educators guide (DEECD, 2018a; DEECD, 2018b). The

UNCRC legal and moral framework places children's rights at the top of the political agenda in local, national, and international contexts (UNICEF, 1989). The UNCRC views children as human beings with rights to participation, autonomy, and self-determination (UNICEF, 1989). For example, Article 12 gives children the right to participate in decisions that concern them. Similarly, Articles 13 and 5 focus on the right of children to be heard, and their right to proper guidance in accordance with their capacity (UNICEF, 1989). The recognition of children's capacities to make decisions is critical. For instance, the UNCRC recognizes that children have voices and that all children will act in their best interest to make decisions when given the opportunity (UNICEF, 1989). Therefore, children's agency and child rights need to be explicitly discussed if we are to expect ECEs to prioritize and support children's agency within their practice.

Similarly, traditional developmental models that emphasize universal ages and stages should be discussed as a counterpoint to agency and child-rights. Naming the practice for what it is, where it originates from and how to advocate beyond it is important. Richardson and Langford (2022) suggest that educational systems should critique developmental theories to point out the limitations of its usefulness as part of the initial training for ECEs. For example, Richardson and Langford (2022) explain how developmental logic that classifies, codes and categories children according to normative discourses is static and does not account for the messy entanglements that emerge in early years settings. They also highlight how dominant conceptualizations in early childhood programs are relegated to outcome-based activities and interactions instrumentally addressing children's immediate physical and social needs (Richardson & Langford, 2022). This is evidenced in this study where the ECEs drew attention to issues of poor program design, such as interrupting exploration and fluidity in the learning spaces due to routines being dictated by ratio

requirements and ECE availability. There is a requirement to allow ECEs time to re-frame theories

that were taught to them in their primary educational settings and begin to reconceptualize early

learning education to account for children's agentic actions, curiosity and situated engagement.

Part of this discussion is to support children's autonomy from adults, but also, to acknowledge that

children can exercise agency alongside adults. It is useful to explore what might happen when

adults and children exchange ideas within social contexts. Agency must also be acknowledged

outside developmental discourses that previously situate agency as something that develops with

maturity and growth. Rather, children need to be seen and heard as active agents in their own lives

and capable of critical thinking.

Beyond concepts on agency, there is value to explore within early childhood education the

concept of child citizenship. However, to discuss children as active citizens in early years spaces,

ECEs must challenge the image that children are innocent. They can then explore the ways

children become decision makers and problem solvers, and the importance for children to be able

to give voice and share their ideas in creative and imaginative ways. The tendency for

developmental logic to value protection over participation must be anticipated and questioned by

ECEs. Opportunities must be created within professional development spaces to discuss how

traditional developmental models affect ECE's ability to support children's agency in their

practice. We must draw attention to children's social, cultural, material, and spatial worlds, and

understand these worlds more from the perspective of children and the emergent nature of their

lives. I have developed a list of resources on children's rights and agency. Please refer to the table

below, all resources are freely available from the internet.

Table 5.1: Resources for Children's agency and Children's rights

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority *Supporting Agency: Involving Children in Decision-Making*

https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-04/QA1_SupportingAgencyInvolvingChildreninDecisionMaking.pdf

- PDF resource that describes Agency
- Includes reflective questions
- Was found using "children's agency" in google search term, other resources also popped up.

UNICEF (1989). *The United Nations convention on the rights of the child.*

https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/UNCRC_summary-1_1.pdf

- PDF resource that summarizes the UNCRC

Hall, E., & Rudkin, J. K. (2010). *Seen and heard: Children's rights in early childhood education*. Teachers College Press.

https://books.google.ca/books/about/Seen_and_Heard.html?id=pAORb1uOYfkC&redir_esc=y

- Summarizes the child rights movement and contextualizes it within other rights movements
- Link provides limited e-access to several chapters
- Links to purchasing e-book and paper back included in this link
- Book may also be available at local ECE college library or other resource collections for ECEs

Callaghan, K., Long-Wincza, V., & Velenosi, C. (2017). "Of, not for...": The evolving recognition of children's rights in a community. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 42(4), 17-36. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.18357/jcs.v42i4.18101

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328579262_Of_Not_For_The_Evolving_Recognition_of_Children's_Rights_in_a_Community

- Article outlines a Canadian city's creation of their own charter of rights using children's voices
- Includes further resources on child rights, including children's books
- Link provides access to read and/or down load article

Recommendation 2: Reconceptualize Professional Development

In Nova Scotia, ECEs typically conceptualize professional development in the form of workshops offered by the local university or colleges and facilitated by an "expert" on the subject. ECEs count the hours of each workshop they attend to keep their provincial classification. What was made evident during this study is how ECEs can learn from each other when they have

moments to discuss their practice outside of their hurried classroom routine. A shift in conceptualizing professional development would include opportunities for ECEs to have dialogue and reflect on best practices. Through dialogue, ECEs can begin to collaborate on ways to enhance children's arenas of agency within early years learning spaces.

There is also a requirement to have a support system in place for ECEs to critically reflect on children's rights and agency. Though the participants did not directly express this need, they did express the importance of the focus group itself ("*I'm getting so much of our knowledge and advice. I think this focus group is going to help me at the end of it"* Cathy). A support system for critical reflection help to disrupt assumptions about children's agency. One such assumption is that independent decision making by children takes precedence over collective concerns (Caplan et al., 2016). Agency needs to be understood as valuing voice, interdependency, and the capacity for children to resist inequities and pursue interests that align with their cultural and social expectations. With this, the understanding is that agency is relational and situated based on the climate of the center where everyone works together for the benefit of community. We also cannot assume that the concept and awareness of agency is universal and that everyone will understand it by reviewing the UNCRC or taking a workshop on child's rights and agency. Children do not have the same rights as adults and their status and ability to give voice is often questioned by adults who believe children to be incapable (Callaghan et al., 2017). We must acknowledge that age is used as a proxy for assessing competence. We must look beyond the mere definition of agency and to recognize that agency is complex and highly situated. We need to ask questions in our practice, such as: What kind of voice do children have? How do they exercise it? When are their voices restricted? How can we foster children's decision making here? This goes back to the beginning of this section that invites a reconceptualization of professional development. This

reconceptualization invites ECEs to have dialogue, to reflect and then to act to support and view children's competencies in new ways. Perhaps ECEs should adopt a childism stance, looking for ways to extend children's agency beyond the realm of early years spaces (Wall, 2022).

When reviewing the data for this thesis, I began to realize how difficult it can be to challenge the status quo and recognize this to be one limitation to this study. On several occasions in reviewing the transcript from the focus groups I realized that I could have followed up with questions to learn more, or challenge assumptions ECEs were expressing during the conversation. The skill of a facilitator is a valuable one and this skill should be fostered in positions of leadership such as; directors, assistant directors, inclusion coordinators, and pedagogical leaders. The Nova Scotia Early Years Professional Development Committee had been offering workshops to ECEs in positions of leadership labelled "Module 2: Leadership" to help guide and develop this skill. The Educators guide includes several series of reflective questions that matches sections of the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework. Supports are there for this to occur, yet none of the participants mentioned having consistent opportunities to critically reflect on their programs outside of their classrooms with their co-workers.

Below is a table with a couple of resources to help ECEs assuming the role of pedagogical leader to provoke discussions.

Table 5.2: Resources for Pedagogical Leaders

Nova Scotia Early Years Professional Development Committee- ELCF support materials   https://eypdc.ca/elcf-support-materials/   • Provides list of materials to support each module that illustrates the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework   • Each module includes a Leaders guide, which includes reflective questions
Stephen Brookfield- *The Skillful Teacher Workshop*

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5738a0ccd51cd47f81977fe8/t/5750ee6c044262124f3e31ce/1464921738561/The_Skillful_Teacher_Workshop_Packet.pdf

- PDF is to support a workshop that Stephen Brookfield gives on engaging critical conversations in secondary educational settings
- pp. 15-28 lists a series of activities that fosters equitable, critical reflecting conversations
- Pedagogical leaders may find the following activities useful: Circular response (p. 17), Quotes to affirm and challenge (p. 21), and Snowballing (p. 26) when leading small or large group discussions

Fostering agency has the potential to transform the future lives of children. Children's experiences of agency change depending on who they are with, what they are doing, and where they are. Their plethora of experiences must be recognized. In addition, ECEs perspectives and approaches to agency are an integral part of a child's experience in their early years and therefore, ongoing training in this area is crucial. It goes far beyond the static conception of agency that traditionally has stressed "we allow children to choose things". Agency is complex, messy, situated and informed by the social, environmental, and cultural context of the early learning spaces. We must free narrow understandings of agency through developmental logic and attend to children's active engagement and competencies.

In conclusion, ECEs can support agency in a variety of ways throughout their practice; however, there are limitations in their ability to support young children's agency with historic practices of managing children's bodies and the emphasis of protecting children's bodies still influencing other practitioners and policies. Perhaps future research can address how ECEs feel their agency is limited within their practice and society. We must recognize that agency is something that is continuously negotiated. Children's relationships with independence are always in flux and ever changing. There is a requirement for ECEs to learn more about the relational nature of children's experiences and build on this understanding together through dialogue. Children can experience agency when adults in their lives recognize their respective stance and

position in the world. Maintaining critical reflection periods can help ECEs address issues within their practice in a timely manner, further supporting their ability to support young children's agency in their daily routines.

Final Critical Reflection

As I critically reflect on this research, I realize one of the challenges of this study was the concept of "agency" itself. A striking memory I have conducting the focus group was the silence that followed my reading of the definition of agency. I also recall when reaching out to ECEs to join this study some had asked what "agency" meant. Why is the concept of agency so foreign to ECEs in Nova Scotia, and why was it not included in a framework that states it values equity and social justice in the early years (DEECD 2018a)? Agency includes the skill of citizenship, the awareness of others and the understanding that one has rights, if we are to support children's agency we must understand the concept and its significance. Again, the absence of the UNCRC in the current edition of the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework is puzzling, how are ECEs prioritizing the concept of participation if they are unfamiliar with the charter of rights in the first place? Perhaps if "agency" was a concept that was understood and returned to during moments of critical reflection, the ability to recognize and remedy issues that negate children's agency, and finding ways to support it, would make the task of supporting it in ECEs' everyday practice more successful.

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Appendix A: Information Sheet

Mount Saint Vincent University
Child and Youth Study
Researcher: Sarah Brown, Graduate Student in CYS program
Sarah.brown3@msvu.ca
XXX-XXX-XXXX

Supervisor Contact:
Dr. Sarah Reddington
Assistant Professor
Child and Youth Study
Mount Saint Vincent University
sarah.reddington@msvu.ca
902-457-6215

Title: Children's Agency in the Early Years: A Discussion with Nova Scotian Early Childcare Educators

My name is Sarah Brown, and I am doing a graduate thesis study in Child and Youth Study at Mount Saint Vincent University under the supervision of Dr. Sarah Reddington, Assistant Professor in Child and Youth Study. The goal of this research is to find out how early childhood educators (ECEs) presently working in a licensed early childhood center in Halifax Regional Municipality with a Level 2 or 3 ECE classification support young children's (ages 3-5 years) agency in their daily practices. I hope this research will inform new ways and potential strategies for ECEs working in the Nova Scotia sector to support young children's agency and their capacities to problem solve and share their ideas.

I am writing to invite you to participate in my research by sharing your experiences in relation to supporting children's agency in your everyday practices. Agency is defined in this study as the capacity for young children to socially interact with others. It is also the ability for children to be able to move openly, to give voice, to problem-pose and shape the environment around them. I hope from this research that I will be able to bring forward recommendations for ECEs to better support young children in sharing their ideas, giving voice and actively problem solving in their daily activities.

I am inviting you to take part in two focus group with 5 to 6 other ECEs currently working in the HRM to discuss agency in your practice. We would meet twice about three weeks apart using the Microsoft Teams virtual meeting platform. If you agree to participate, I will send you a link to the meeting room that you can click on and join the focus group session. The focus groups will be in the evenings to accommodate work commitments or alternatively on the weekend depending on participant preferences. Each focus group session will be approximately 45-60 minutes in length, video and audio taped and fully transcribed. I will use a semi-structured interview guide approved by my thesis committee to facilitate the focus group discussion to support meeting the aims of the research.

Here are a couple of examples of the types of questions we will discuss:
- How do you support children in sharing their ideas?
- What are some barriers in your practice that limit children's agency?
- What connections to agency can you make with your image of the child?

Maintaining anonymity and confidentiality of the participant is of utmost importance, however, your anonymity in relation to other participants will be known as you are meeting in a focus group format. All participants will be instructed prior to both focus group sessions to keep the identities of participants and where they work confidential. Pseudonyms will be used in the written notes and all transcribed copies of your conversations. I will take every care to remove responses from any identifying material as early as possible. Any identifiable features will be altered (i.e. name of early childhood center); however, the researcher cannot guarantee the confidentiality or anonymity of material transferred by email or phone. The audio recordings will be securely stored on the Microsoft Office app until the transcription is completed, when it will be deleted from the server in accordance with the MSVU Research Ethics board. The transcripts will be stored securely on Office 365 ONEDRIVE for five years from the time of completion of the project.
Participation in this study is voluntary and you will be free to withdraw at any stage without being questioned. No reason will be required. The research itself contains nothing that is surprising in nature as we are talking about children's agency. You will receive a two page summary of the study's findings.
If you would like to participate, please contact me at sarah.brown3@msvu.ca.
Thank you.
I look forward to chatting with you.

Sarah Brown, Graduate Student
Masters of Child and Youth Study
Mount Saint Vincent University
Sarah.brown3@msvu.ca

The ethical components of this research have been reviewed by the University Research Ethics Board (REB) and found to be in compliance with Mount Saint Vincent University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Research Ethics Coordinator of the
REB at brenda.gagne@msvu.ca or ethics@msvu.ca
902-457-6350

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Opening Questions:

How long have you worked in early childcare?

What attracted you to working in the early years' sector?

What is your image of the child?

Statement of Agency:

Agency is understood as the capacity for young children to socially interact with others. It is also the ability for children to be able to move openly, to give voice, to problem-pose and shape the environment around them. Agency is also understood as a skill of citizenship; it is the awareness of others and includes strong consideration of social justice and fairness (Mentha et al., 2015).

Any questions or thoughts regarding this statement?

What connections can you make with agency to your image of the child?

Questions regarding practicalities:

How are you able to support children's agency in an early learning setting? (Prompts: centre policies, the learning environment/space, the daily schedule…)

What might be some barriers that you face in supporting children's agency? (Prompts: policies, space, daily schedule, parental expectations, administrative expectations)

Questions Regarding agency:

As you think about the components in a typical day, can you describe how children can (or should) be able to demonstrate a sense of agency during the following:

- Social interactions

- Selection of materials/activities/projects

- Transitions

- Snack and meal time

- Nap time

- Toileting and personal hygiene

- Documentation of learning experiences

Questions regarding fairness:

Social justice is the consideration of well-being for the individual and the collective; where the rights of everyone are fulfilled equitably. Community based values support this by serving individual and collective needs; for the people in the early years setting (ECEs and children) and those tangible to it (families, community etc.) (Caplan et al., 2016).

Any questions or comments on this definition?

How would you describe social justice in an early childhood environment? What does it look like?

How do you support it? (Prompts: how do you model social justice? Any barriers to social justice?)

Describe how you help children handle problems, frustration, or conflict situations?

Appendix C: Consent Form

Title: Children's Agency in the Early Years: A Discussion with Nova Scotian Early Childcare Educators

Researcher: Sarah Brown
Graduate Thesis (towards a MA with Child and Youth Study)
Mount Saint Vincent University
XXX-XXX-XXXX
sarah.brown3@msvu.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Sarah Reddington, PhD
Supervisor Contact:
Dr. Sarah Reddington
Assistant Professor
Child and Youth Study
Mount Saint Vincent University
902-457-6215
sarah.reddington@msvu.ca

Research Consent Form

I have read the information sheet, and the nature and the purpose of the research project have been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.

I confirm that I am over 19 years of age.

I confirm I am an employed early childhood educator in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) presently working at an early childhood center in the HRM and have a Level 2 or 3 ECE classification and have experience working with 3-5 year old children.

I understand that I may not directly benefit from taking part in the project.

I understand that participation is voluntary, and I can withdraw from the study at any stage.

I understand that at any time in the focus group I can choose not to answer a question(s). I understand that the researcher cannot guarantee the confidentiality or anonymity of correspondence by email or phone.

I understand that I will be video, and audio recorded during the study via the Microsoft Teams virtual platform.

I understand that my anonymity will be safeguarded will all identifiable information being removed.

I understand that the audio recordings will be deleted once it has been transcribed. The transcripts will be stored on Office 365 ONEDRIVE for five years meeting the MSVU REB requirements. Access to this material will be restricted to the researcher, her supervisor,

I understand that the findings from this study will be published on Mount Saint Vincent's website as a thesis.

I understand that the study may be published in a peer reviewed scholarly article, and the findings may be presented at professional or scholarly events.

Participant's Name _____

Participant's Signature _____

Date _____

I have explained the study to the participant and consider that he/she/Z understands what is involved.

Researcher's Signature _____

Date _____