Understanding Early Years Educators' Perspectives on Imaginative Weapons Play

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Introduction

Play is a child's inherent right as emphasized in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The value of play is reinforced in Articles 28 and 29, stating that play is indispensable in children's development as it fosters agency and learning. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) underscored the importance of children's play as it "promotes the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, as well as physical, social, cognitive, and emotional strength and skills" (p. 17). Play should also be pleasurable and enjoyable for children when interacting with their peers and adults (Lansdown, 2022). Adult's involvement in children's play enables them to obtain a better understanding from a child's point of view (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). Imaginary play is beneficial to children as they create meaning out of their lived experiences by taking on a role, creating their own rules and rehearsing story lines (Burris and Tsao 2002). However, adults' hierarchization of play (Heikkilä, 2021), especially when the play does not conform to curriculum standards and Imaginaries of a child (Rosen, 2015), tend to be curtailed by the teachers (Delaney, 2016). This research will explore the perspectives of educators on imaginative weapons play.

Teachers and parents are often quite restrictive when it comes to role-playing with pretend toy guns, even though children who are in their care are interested in this kind of play. Once a "pew-pew" is heard, accompanied by a stick or Lego built resembling a gun, adults respond in different ways - the play is immediately stopped, the children are encouraged to engage in another activity, the gun is asked to be changed into a more "peaceful" or "fun" gun or to break it apart. Holland (2000; 2003) and Delaney (2016)

argue that by preventing weapons play, when the children initiated it and imaginatively created their own rules and world, adults are restricting the children's agency by prohibiting it as it is considered as violent, problematic, negative, and unacceptable. This instigated the implementation of zero-tolerance approach on weapons play. Heikkilä (2021) cited the hierarchization of play, where adults prioritize one type of play over another as it is considered more meaningful, orderly or conforms to the learning objectives. If the play contradicts the societal norms, and expectations of what an early childhood classroom should look like, the play is immediately de-valued and prohibited, such as running with pretend guns and "bad guy-good guy" role-playing. But even if this type of play is banned and discouraged by teachers and through school regulations, why do children continue to create their own version of guns and use it as a prop for their play? If this is a regular occurrence in an educational setting, why do early years educators continue to restrict imaginative weapons play? Holland (2003) invites adults to look at what lies beneath the surface with children's weapons play and to reflect on why educators continue to be uncomfortable with this play. With this, my study aims to explore the reasons why early years educators allow or restrict weapons play in their classrooms. By listening to the rationale behind the actions of the educators towards imaginative weapons play, my hope is to contribute to the agency of the children as they reflect on their personal biases, opinions and values that permeates in their interactions with the children. Through this, educators are able to gain more understanding on what the children are trying to communicate to us when building their pretend guns and using it in their role-playing.

Literature review

Conceptions of Childhood

Society's imagery and conception of a *child* and or *children* have been deeply influenced by histories and theories which are based on Westernized accounts of writers such as Aries and DeMause, and developmental child theorists such as Locke, Rousseau, Piaget and Vygotsky among many others. In his 1962 work, "Centuries of Childhood", Ariés (1962, as cited in Gulati, 2021) described how Medieval Europe recognized children as "mini adults" and properties who were forced to engage in labor. Subsequently, Puritan Beliefs ushered in the concept of "original sin", whereby, children should be chastised and subdued for the sins that they have committed in the womb (Kerr, 2023). There was a shift during the Enlightenment period, where Locke's "tabula rasa" highlighted how children were seen as passive beings requiring protection. In addition, Rousseau (1762, as cited in James & Prout, 2007) and Freud (1938, as cited in Yaacob, 2006) proposed that adult's responsiveness to the child's needs during their formative years has an impact later in life, placing the importance of adult's role in training and educating a child. Although the "adult-child" binary continued during the 20th century, there was change with the conceptualization of a child. Works of Constructivist theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky suggested the ideology of an "active child" (Meynert, 2015). Piaget (1960) believed that children are "meaning-makers" who make sense of their world through their interactions (p. 106). Meanwhile, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding helps children perceive the world (Bordova & Leong, 2015). While both theories have been highly regarded by professionals working with children, they still focus on the notion of the child as "becoming" rather than "beings" (Meynert, 2015). Such

perception of children as "not yet" an adult continues to be a challenge when it comes to their right to participate and right to play.

Emerging questions and ideas about children and childhood continued to unfold during the latter part of the 1960s, when the feminist movement became prominent (Montgomery, 2016). Like women, the lives of children have been socially marginalized due to patriarchy, although women's and family studies paved the way for re-examining the lives of women and children, making them more visible in the society (Oakley, 1995). The ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 signalled a new direction on the social construction of children and childhood (Tisdall and Punch, 2012). Proclaiming the Rights of the Child solidified their status as human beings, with inalienable rights intended for them to be protected, provided for, and to partake in matters that they consider important (Montgomery, 2016). Participation of children and youth, as highlighted in Article 12, underscores that children are subjects, social actors, and agentic individuals whose experiences and ideas are respected. Both events marked the beginning of the new social studies of childhood.

The new sociology of childhood advances the rights of the child as capable, active, social agents whose contributions are vital in producing and changing culture (Meynert, 2015). Researchers such as James, Prout and Corsaro advocated for decentralization of agency from adults to children (de Almeida Santos & César Barros, 2020). Prout and James (1990, in Tisdall & Punch, 2012) emphasized that as a new sociological construction of a child is formed, their present experiences are seen, heard and valued, veering away from being identified as "passive and dependent". Corsaro's works advocated for children's agency and role in constructing new meanings through their

interactions in their environment which contributes to the wider society (de Almeida Santos & César Barros, 2020; Meynert, 2015). Both the enactment of United Nations Rights of the Child and the new sociology of childhood paved the way for researching with the children and having new perspectives to recognize and honor children's authentic voices (Tisdall and Punch, 2012).

Although the children are viewed as capable individuals with rights, there are still hindrances to their full participation as agentic beings. As Foucault (1979, as cited in Robson et al., 2007) described it, "agency continues to be invisible, declined or claimed as severely suppressed by restrictive circumstances". This was further emphasized by Klocker (2007), by categorizing children's agencies as "thin" and "thick". The former suggests that children can decide freely but with limited options while the latter means being able to exercise their agency, provided with diverse options. Children's agency can either be "thinned" or "thickened" depending on factors such as "structures, contexts and relationships" (p. 85). Institutions such as schools, curriculum, teachers' authority, and enforced policies create barriers and limitations on children's agency (Robson, et al., 2007; Sirkko et al., 2019,). Children's play is one example where their agencies are considered "thickened" or "thinned" due to adult-child dynamics and play spaces. Children's agency is evident during play (Baker & Courtois, 2022; Delaney, 2016) as they initiate the activity, choose their own materials, and create their own narratives and rules. However, their play is still heavily influenced and scrutinized by adults (Holland, 2003; Jerome & Starky, 2022; Tyrie, et al., 2018), whose perspectives determine whether their play is acceptable or not, which therefore contributes to the "thickening" or "thinning" of their agency.

Children's Perspectives on Imaginative Weapons Play

Children's daily experiences are re-enacted through play. The children's imaginative weapons play and violence are influenced by situations that they encounter, interactions with their peers and what they see in media, which can sometimes have violent themes (Katch, 2001, Rich, 2003). Their observations of their realities are simulated through imaginative play, where they gain understanding of cause and effect (Holland, 2000), the difference between fantasy and reality (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2004), acceptable and unacceptable behaviours (ibid), concept of bad and good (Bauer & Dettore, 1997) and rehearse the situation to create an alternative story line and endings. Paterson's et al.'s (2018) study with early years educators in the Ojibway Indigenous community, demonstrated how guns and weapons are viewed by children not as an object that causes harm but as a tool for their sustenance as they use it for hunting. Delaney (2016) highlighted that re-enactment of an American school's "Code Red" or lockdown drill through play captured the pre-Kindergarten's sense of security as they protect their teachers and friends from the "bad guys" by pretending to be police officers. This was supported by Berson and Baggerly (2012) as they reiterated that violent-themed play is children's approach to reflect about their experiences and to interpret it differently. Play helps children perceive their world and is a way for them to seek for answers to "what if questions" related violence and to examine potential situations where they can feel safe (Bauman, 2015; Delaney, 2016, Rich, 2003).

Levin (2003) and Berson and Baggerly (2012) reasoned that children who are fascinated by this type of play may find a certain situation traumatizing, worrying, threatening, frightening and confusing, and these feelings create a feeling of

powerlessness. Role-reversals and re-enacting events through imaginative play reclaim the children's power as they gain control of the narratives which may include storylines about retribution or restoration (Bauman, 2015; Ogawa, 2004).

Children are drawn to weapon play because it elicits positive feelings. A child may find satisfaction in creating guns with open-ended toys because it is attainable (Rich, 2003). It is plausible that children feel fulfilment in creating gun-like structures because of the agency and power that they experience when building it (Holland, 2000). The feeling of enjoyment and excitement during pretend play with guns were experienced by children in Baumnan's (2015) transitional kindergarteners. The political content that the media portrays through the cartoons are imitated by the children. The feeling of being powerful and strong heroes entices and influences children's play as they defeat the "bad guys" (Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 2004) Weapon play also creates an inclusive experience for other children who are often excluded. Monte, a second language learner participant in Bauman's (2015) study, was involved in the boys' play and his opinions were validated by his peers. Darren, a nursery child mentioned in Holland's (2003) book, became part of a group when the zero-tolerance approach to imaginative weapons play was relaxed in his Nursery class. Holland (2000, 2003) also emphasized that gender boundaries was reduced as girls joined in the weapons play.

Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2004) incorporate the developmental view on war play, which explains why there is a need for children to engage in weapons play. This view focuses on needs of the children and the importance of play in addressing those needs. The crux of the developmental view, as discussed by Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2004), is that children make sense of ideas and feelings by bringing in their experiences and

reconstructing it through play, creating new meanings. By recreating meanings, their ideas develop, and the children are then able to gradually master and comprehend their experiences. Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2004) stated that in order for the play to serve its function which is to show children's developmental needs and issues, the conditions must be met: that the play should be child-initiated, the children are taking charge of their play, the play must demonstrate the appropriateness of the "development, experiences, needs and interests" (p.26).

Bauman's (2015) self-study concluded that "gun play is not an act of violence, rather, an outcome of their interactions with the social world" (p. 196). Children engaged in this type of imaginative play are not intentionally causing harm and aggression towards their peers (Hart and Tannock, 2013). In addition to this, Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2004) pointed out that children view imaginative weapons play as "just pretend" as opposed to adult's view of actual violence. If this is the case, why are educators, who are supposed to support the children, refuse to support weapon play?

Educators' Perspectives on Imaginative Weapons Play

Hart and Tannock (2013) emphasized that practitioners are accountable for permitting or restricting weapons play. Delaney (2016) discussed that educators' personal beliefs, values, and fears surrounding violent-themed play inhibits them to allow children to such play. These are results of societal constructions of males being violent during the rise of the feminist movement in the 1970s until 1980s. It prompted the belief that boys should be restricted from violent-themed play as it will turn into aggressive men (Holland, 2000). The notion of "dangerous masculinity" (ibid, p. 94) permeated within the promotion of zero-tolerance approach on war, weapon, and superhero play within educators

(Holland, 2003). Personal philosophies about peace were also mentioned by Holland (2003) as one of the reasons on implementing zero tolerance. Unable to differentiate negative and positive peace, educators rely on banning imaginative weapons play as it is believed to be a sign of violence and aggression in children. Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2004) discussed that the sociopolitical view on war play presupposes that children learn "militaristic lessons about violence and conflict" (p 31) from playing. On the contrary, research found that playing with pretend guns is not a predictor of aggressive behaviour or juvenile delinquency (Smith et al., 2018). Often, aggression in boys are effects of harsh parental discipline (Watson and Peng, 1992 as cited in Holland, 2000, 2003) and parental message about violence (Orpinas et al., 1999). It is also a result of exclusion from peers (Katch, 2001) and presence of or playing with toy guns or what is known as "cueing effect theory" (Holland, 2000). Delaney (2016) also pointed out that adult's discomfort in having conversation about themes such as death and violence because children are continually romanticized and that their innocence should be preserved (Bowie, 2000; Rosen, 2015). Adherents of the sociopolitical view expressed their concerns wherein allowing weapons play would create a belief in children that violence is enjoyable and exciting and that preventing this type of play will protect children from learning about violence (Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 2004). Since they are seen as vulnerable, educators are concerned about the health and safety of weapon play, thus using "surplus safety" to protect the children from potential harm (Rosen, 2015, p. 243). In contrast to romanticization of children, they are also viewed as dangerous and unconscious of others which means that they need to be educated and controlled (Rosen, 2015). Practitioners in Rosen's (2015) study mentioned that violent-themed play makes them "stuck" (ibid, p 242) in the play

narrative and that violent play is disorganized, a contradiction of what an idealized early childhood curriculum is trying to achieve (Heikkilä, 2021). As a counter argument, the children-participants in Heikkilä's (2021) and Bauman's (2015) works displayed skills that are relevant in learning and socialization such as empathy, conflict resolution, risk-taking, cooperation, decision-making and creativity, among many others. Citing how it benefits the children, the school management and policymakers are encouraged to support educators to reflect collectively and creatively to respond effectively to those who are engaged in weapon and violent-themed play. (Heikkilä, 2022; Holland, 2000; Katch, 2001).

Educators who are responding to and joining the children in their role playing are questioned, scrutinized, or labelled as incompetent (Peterson, et al., 2018; Rosen, 2015) since the norm is to enforce zero-tolerance. As Holland (2000) and her colleagues collaboratively decided to "tune into children" (ibid, p 55), they discovered that there was no aggression towards each other and that the children were more engaged in purposeful, imaginative play. Instead of playing away from teachers' gazes, they were part of the game which enabled them to clarify, support and extend their interests (Bauman, 2015; Holland, 2000). It also made the children feel confident, seen, valued and respected, which draws back on UNCRC's Article 31.

Levin & Carlsson-Paige (2004) explored five different options to assist educators in responding to imaginative weapons play - banning the play, having relaxed approach, allowing the play with limits, actively encourage the play and limiting the play and providing alternatives. It was suggested that educators should encourage the play and

limiting the play while providing alternatives to addresses both the developmental and sociopolitical perspectives of imaginative weapons play.

Suspending and reflecting on opinions and beliefs surrounding imaginative weapons play provides a positive environment for children to play at what they know. Adults can openly discuss and scaffold the children's learning once weapons play is encouraged in the setting (Delaney, 2016; Holland, 2000, 2003; Katch, 2001). Through proper dialogue, children can clearly distinguish the difference between real and imaginary violence (Delaney, 2016). But why are policies in the Global North still hindering children from violent-themed play

Schools and Zero-tolerance Approaches of UK, USA and Canada

Unfortunate events, such as school mass shootings and aims to decrease youth violence and crime, prompted the creation of national policies about the presence of weapons in schools. America's federal government's response to this is the 1994 implementation of Gun-Free Schools Act (Office of Safe and Supportive Schools, n.d.) In this law, local education agencies may expel students who are in possession of real guns within the school premises (Irby & Coney, 2021). Similarly, the UK imposed a tighter gun ownership regulation after the 1996 Dunblane School shooting (Wilkinson, 2013; Squires, 2000). In Canada, the strict implementation of gun laws such as selling, owning, and limiting the kind of guns available in the country prevents these types of violence from happening in schools. From 1884 to 2022, there were only 8 reported school shootings in the country, including the 1989 shooting at Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal (Nicholls, 2023). The society's fear from these social realities and events filter through children's imaginative play.

Although the presence of guns is prevalent in the Global North, children who emulate guns through play are penalized. For example, a Pennsylvanian kindergartener faced suspension after telling a friend that she would use her Hello Kitty bubble gun on her (Fitzpatrick, 2015). In 2013, two 6-year-old boys in Maryland were suspended because of using their fingers as guns while playing cops and robbers (CBS News, 2013). An 8-year-old girl from Florida was also suspended after forming her PopTart into a shape of a gun (Greenwood, 2017) This prompted the "Pop Tart Bill" in 2013, a legislation protecting children who simulate guns with constructed toys or fingers from school authorities' harsh disciplinary measures (Bauman, 2015). The zero-tolerance on weapon play in UK school settings has become lenient (Rosen, 2015) after UK's Primary National Strategy stressed that practitioners should facilitate and encourage play that is based on children's interests, including superheroes and weapons play (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007). Holland (2003) investigated the genesis of the ban on weapons play in the UK and discovered that a written rule regarding this type of play was non-existent. Likewise, nothing was mentioned in Nova Scotia's "School Code of Conduct Policy" regarding the prohibition of pretend gun play, except for possession and or use of weapons in school (Nova Scotia Education and Early Childhood Development, 2015). "Capable, Confident and Curious", Nova Scotia's Early Learning Framework, did not mention, encourage nor discouraged imaginative weapons play, but briefly cited that pretend and fantasy play, and rough and tumble play are what children engage in their schools' settings (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2018).

It is easier to support children as they are "playing with pretend violence" (Delaney, 2016, p. 880) and understanding that there is a distinction between "serious aggressive behavior and playful aggressive behavior" (Hart & Tannock, 2013) by examining the deep-rooted causes of society's fears and thoughts on weapons play. By setting clear boundaries with children and consistency with the approaches by the teachers (Holland, 2000; Rich, 2003) it is possible to recognize the importance of weapons play as part of their exploration and learning process. This honors the children's right to play, voices and agency. Hopefully, the growing number of research about weapons play would help in informing school policies and practitioners about the benefits of weapons play in the early years.

Nova Scotia's Early Learning Curriculum Framework

The learning framework implemented in Nova Scotia (2018a) is composed of four learning goals intended for children from 0-8 years old:

- Well-being
- Discovery and intention
- Language and communication
- Personal and social responsibility

These learning goals are intertwined and should not be considered in isolation. The document also discussed that these learning goals are experienced by children and observed by adults through play, which is described in the document as "spontaneous, voluntary, pleasurable and flexible" (Smith and Pelligrini 2013, p.4 as cited in Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2018b, p. 37). The Council of Ministers of Education in Canada in 2012 (Department of Education and Early

Childhood Development, 2018a) stressed the importance of play in children's learning because they actively construct their knowledge and understanding their world by creating connections in their experiences. One of the characteristics of play mentioned in the document is that it is initiated by children, meaning that any theme or activity that is initiated by children is considered as play, even if it is considered by adults as "violent" such as weapons play.

To enact these learning goals, educators should have a shared view of the children. This is elaborated in the complimentary document, "The Educators Guide to Capable, Confident and Curious: Nova Scotia's Early Learning Curriculum Framework" (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2018b) the importance of having a "shared image of the child" (ibid, p. 11) is emphasized. These learning goals coincides with how early years educators in Nova Scotia should view the children in their setting as right-bearing, creative and curious individuals who are full of potential. Loriz Malaguzzi, the founder of Reggio Emilia, believes that there are "hundreds of different images of the child" (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 52) and that the image of the child influences how adults act and interact with the child. Children should also be seen as responsible individuals who are capable of taking on their own learning. For example, Nah and Lee (2016) concluded in their action research that when children are trusted by the teachers to take control of their environment and learning, the experience enhances their confidence, communication and negotiation skills. It was also stressed in the Educators' Guide (2018b) that having the aforementioned ethos of a child is vital as it affect not just their interactions with the children but with how it influences their decisions regarding the learning environment, behavior management and planning for children's

learning. For instance, Hedegaard et al., (2018) stressed that children learn and develop their agency through their socializations and activities in their setting. If an educator views a child as an agentic individual, then the learning environment is designed as an enabling environment, where children are given the authority and freedom to choose which activity they would like to partake in, which space they would use and what materials would they be needing in their play. This means that children should be able to choose the activity and materials that they are interested with even though it can be considered by adults to be irrelevant to the curriculum such as building weapons and using it in imaginative play.

Both the Nova Scotia's early learning framework and teachers' guide document emphasized the significance of respecting the child's cultural background. Acknowledging this creates an environment of inclusivity, which influences a child's identity and self-worth. Hollie (2017) invites educators to have a "culturally responsive pedagogy", focusing on the "hows" and "whys" of teaching in a diverse classroom. For instance, some of the early years educators who are teaching in Northern Canadian Indigenous Communities welcomes the children's weapons play as it is part of their way of living as they hunt for their food with their families (Patterson et al., 2018). One of the educators in Patterson et al.'s (2018) study mentioned that her bias around guns is left "at the door" (p 15).

The learning goals and educator's view of the children can be achieved by continuously and critically reflecting on educational practices, by becoming more aware of personal beliefs and assumptions and adapting to the current educational trends in early childhood (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2018b). Corriea et al. (2020) discussed that perceptions about children and

the decisions that they make in the classroom are formed by the educators' cultural background. There is a need for educators to collectively examine their views of the children as it influences their pedagogical practices to ensure that children's rights are honored and achieved (Nah & Lee, 2015). The aim of this research is to add to the literature surrounding weapons play to help early years educators in Nova Scotia in order for educators to have a collective understanding regarding this kind of play.

Research Aims and Questions

This research aims to understand the how early years practitioners in Nova Scotia view their students' engagement in imaginative weapons play. The purpose of this research is to add on to the existing literature regarding imaginative weapons play in the early years and to inform the practices of educators in order to respond effectively to children's needs and interests. The objective of this study is to provide educators a space to reflect on their beliefs about weapons play and the agency of the children in their settings. The research questions are:

- What are the perspectives of early childhood educators with regards to weapons play and what influences their decisions in allowing or prohibiting imaginative weapons play?
- What are early childhood educators' views of children and how does this affect their pedagogical practices?
- What views do early years educators hold regarding their role when encountering children in who are engaged and disengaged in imaginative weapons play?

Theoretical Framework

The aim of this study is to gain knowledge regarding the perspectives of the early years educators when they encounter children who are constructing weapons and engaging with it through imaginative play. By listening to the adults' perspectives, this research can be instrumental in thickening of children's agency when it comes to weapons play. Given this intention, I will be employing Critical Childhood Studies as the framework that will guide my study. Critical Childhood Studies is focused on three tenets – valuing children's voices, recognition of children's agency, and the social and cultural construction of the child and childhood (Jenks, 1996; Tisdall & Punch 2012). It also focuses our attention on the power imbalances that children are experiencing due to adult-child binaries, where adults exercise their superiority towards children. Such views make children the "objects" rather than "subjects" in different fields particularly in education and research. This research provides information on how the educators' perspectives influence their views of the children as agentic individuals during weapons play and how it affects their interactions and roles as educators.

By using Critical Childhood Studies as the framework, the children's voices are heard and honored (Spyrou, 2011) by adults in their environment, as the purpose is to listen to different early years educators' perspectives in order for them to "contribute to the empowerment of social justice and societal practice" (Alanen, 2010, p. 1). Once different viewpoints are heard, it can open a discussion on how the educators can support groups of children who might or might not be interested in weapons play. Critical childhood studies is also focused on the Rights of the Child, particularly with how they enact their agency by taking part in decision-making processes (Myall, 2002 as cited in Tisdall &

Punch, 2012; Tisdall & Punch, 2012;). By providing a space for educators in this research, customary practices and attitudes towards children and childhood are addressed (Alanen, 2011) such as power imbalance between children and adults when deciding their choice of play and disregarding the value of weapons play in educational settings. Moreover, Critical Childhood Studies is centered on the social construction of the child and childhood. This also means that children's identity and experience rely on social interactions within their communities and "transnational mobilities" (Prout, 2011) which are then reflected through their play. As early years educators engage in this research, they are invited to reflect on how they perceive children (who are coming from diverse backgrounds) and how their perception influences their ideologies and actions towards children who are building pretend weapons and taking part in imaginary weapons play.

Critical Childhood Studies also emphasizes that both adults and children are in a constant state of becoming (Prout, 2011), bearing in mind that both states need to "be respected as beings/persons in their own right" (ibid, p 8). In this framework, both adulthood and childhood are viewed as a result of interconnectedness of social events and phenomenon. The views of educators who will take part in this research are heard since the complexity of childhood is constituted through their social interactions with their teachers.

As Critical Childhood Studies acknowledges that children are in a marginalized position due to power imbalances between adults (Tisdall et al., 2009). This study focuses on children as subjects as its intention is to listen to the educators' perspectives and utilize it in order for adults to continuously promote and recognize the children's agency, their right to play and be supported in their learning.

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature as it "*provides an in-depth, intricate, and entailed understanding of meanings, actions, non-observable as well as observable phenomena, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors… it gives voices to participants"* (Cohen et al., 2011 p. 219). Qualitative research recognizes the participant's social reality, which is constantly developed by the individual (Bryman, 2012). Qualitative research is the appropriate research approach because it is in line with Critical Childhood Studies since the study aims to listen to adult's experiences that influences their pedagogical practices with regards to weapons play and through different appropriate data-collection methods.

In order to effectively and meaningfully collect and interpret the qualitative data (Willig, 2008) regarding the educators' perspectives on weapons play, ontological and epistemological perspectives will influence this research. Relativism was employed in this research, an ontological view that recognizes the multitude of realities which are constructed socially by individuals which are then explored during the data gathering (Willig, 2008). In relation to this, this research used interpretivist as my epistemological lens. This paradigm considers that as multiple realities exist, the goal is to understand the human behavior towards these realities (Pulla & Carter, 2018). These realities are then subjective as it is dependent on an individual's interpretations of his/her experiences within cultural and social groups (Williams, 2024). This led me in utilizing focus groups with four early years educators in order to discover their realities. Within these focus groups, discussions were encouraged regarding imaginative weapons play. Having these paradigms helped me acknowledge that the participants' responses are influenced by their social and cultural backgrounds and experiences. These paradigms are in

accordance with Critical Childhood Studies since it is placing value on early years educators' experiences and how it influences their views towards children and their choice of play.

This study is designed to discover the deeper meaning behind early years educators' perspectives towards imaginative weapons play. I currently work as an early years preschool educator in a child care situated in Halifax. As an early years practitioner for more than 14 years, my opinion was divided as well when it comes to allowing children to engage in this type of play. However, as I was working for two years in the center, I realized that the children in my care are coming from diverse social and cultural backgrounds and that their chosen play such as police officers and robbers with weapons or superheroes with superpowers are results of their experiences outside the confines of our child care. By prohibiting it, I came to a realization that I could be dishonoring their agency and disregarding their experiences and ideas, which are against my value as an early years educator. As an advocate for children's right to play and having this realization, I became curious about the perspectives of other early years educators. Through this research, I want to contribute to children's agency and advocate for their right to participate and play. I believe that this can be done by listening to other early years educators and to use this research as a point to reflect on their personal beliefs and opinions of children and weapons, which affect their decisions in supporting or prohibiting children's imaginative weapons play. In this manner, we can have a shared view of the children and their play, thus, we can collectively and fully honor their agency and rights.

Method of Data Collection

The data collection was done through focus groups. It is in line with the paradigms that I am employing in this research as it is an effective method in obtaining the subjective experiences of the early years educators that influences their perspectives towards children's weapons play (William, 2024). Focus group is a method of interviewing usually a group of individuals (Bryman, 2012), where they are encouraged to create a response or comment on other members' contributions (Wilig, 2008). Through focus groups, their ideas are "challenged, extended, developed, undermined or qualified" (ibid, p. 31) The rationale behind this is that I, as a researcher, intends to fully capture the experiences of the educators which influence their pedagogical practices and beliefs regarding children and weapons play. The educators that were recruited as participants are from the child care setting that I am working in, thus, they are members of the same community where they share similarities (Bryman, 2004), particularly in responding to children who are engaged in creating weapons and imaginative weapons play. The engagement of the participants brings about "ways in which individuals collectively makes sense of the phenomenon and construct meanings around it." (ibid, p. 504). As emphasized in the Nova Scotia's Early Learning Educators' Guide, educators should have a shared view of the child in order to see children as "capable, curious and confident". Through this focus group, educators working in the same setting had the opportunity to identify and share attitudes towards children's agency, weapons play and how they see their role as educators.

Focus group sessions

Data collection took place during two focused group sessions to give participants ample time to fully engage in discussions with their co-participants. It also allowed me to

reflect between sessions in case there is a need to improve and revise questions and structure of focus groups (Breen, 2006) and to reflect on my role and responses through a reflective journal.

During the first focus group (see Appendix B), the participants were welcomed, introductions were done, the consent form was reviewed and community standards were created. Defining our roles and responsibilities during the research was given importance. A short PowerPoint presentation was shown to give a background about the research topic, aims, questions, data gathering (use of a Mp3 recorder to document the sessions) procedures, and data analysis and how they can access the research work. This served as an opportunity for the participants to ask questions. The objective and activity of the first focus group was shared which was to partake in an arts-informed focus group in order to gain a deeper understanding of how they view children. The arts-informed method selected was creation of illustrations. Visual representations such as drawings extend the participants' ideas through "non-verbal meanings and sharing of thoughts, feelings and experiences which are not easily communicated" (Brailas 2020, p. 4447). Participant-produced drawings therefore elicits deeper thoughts and meanings (ibid). Through the use of focus groups as they discuss their drawings, the participants are able to utilize it as a prompt to consciously interpret their thoughts and feelings (Harper, 2002). Moreover, having multiple sources of information such as the educators' drawings, triangulates the data gathered (Bryman, 2012), adding credibility to the research work. This session took an hour, and the general ideas were noted using a mind map visible to all participants and was used as a tool during the discussion part of the session.

The objective of the second focus group (See Appendix C) was to share experiences of weapons play by looking at and discussing vignettes (photos) (see Appendix D). Prior to starting the second focus group, consent and community standards were reviewed. A short summary of the responses from the first focus group session was reported, which provided an opportunity for the participants to confirm their contributions. The participants were invited to look at a series of photos of children who are building pretend guns with Legos or other construction materials, children who are running and pretending to be superheroes or cops with weapons. Vignettes are utilized in focus groups to stimulate the conversation around the topic (Willig, 2008). Moreover, the use of photo elicitation during focus groups is an effective way to evoke emotions, feelings, thoughts and ideas as it serves as a visual reminder of experiences, which therefore provides more meaningful responses (Harper, 2000). While looking at each vignette, they were asked to reflect on their practice and to discuss together. The responses of the participants were noted on a mind-map that was visible to everyone. The group synthesized the ideas together prior to ending the session. This was also an opportunity to confirm and clarify their answers.

Participant and Selection Criteria

Recruitment of Research Participants

To answer the research questions posed, early years educators were invited to take part in the research which aims to explore their views and decisions about weapons play. They are members of the same community where they share similarities (Bryman, 2004), particularly in responding to children who are engaged in creating weapons and imaginative weapons play. The engagement of the participants brought about "ways in which individuals collectively makes sense of the phenomenon and construct meanings

around it." (ibid, p 504). Through this focus group, educators working in the same setting had the opportunity to identify and share attitudes towards children's agency, weapons play and how they see their role as educators.

As my intention was to have an in-depth understanding of the educators' experiences, I used purposive sampling, where the participants were recruited based on the relevance of their experiences to the questions being explored (Bryman, 2012). Educators from different cultural backgrounds were welcomed to take part in the research, The selection criteria were as follows:

- Working in the same child care facility.
- Has been an early years educators for at least five years or has a child care experience adding to five years.
- Should have at least a Level 1 classification from Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

The rationale behind recruiting participants from the same child care setting was to ensure that they are aware of the policies towards imaginative weapons play in the setting. Having a background in education is an important factor to ensure that they are knowledgeable with child development and how children learn. A recruitment poster was displayed in the staff room to inform the ECEs in the child care setting as it serves as a meeting point for all the child care employees, making it visible (see Appendix F). The educators expressed their interest to join via email and their participation was confirmed after filling out a secure Google Form. The electronic form required the potential participants to answer the following questions:

- How many years have you been an Early Years Educator?

- What level have you acquired from Nova Scotia Department of Education?
- What is your name?

To have rich and meaningful data obtained during focus groups, I aimed to recruit no more than six participants, as suggested by Willig (2008). This was to guarantee the accuracy of discussions during the transcribing phase and the participants were given an equal opportunity to be involved in the focus group sessions.

Demographics of Participants

There were four participants in the study. Educator 1 and Educator 2 are born and raised in Canada. Both Educators are experienced educators and are part of the management team. Educator 1 has 20 years of experience and Educator 2 has 10 years of experience – both were classroom teachers prior to their management roles. Educators 3 and 4 were born and raised in India and they received their educational degree in Canada. Both educators are class teachers with 4 years of experience, but they had other caregiving experience while completing their education degree.

Research Setting

All teachers employed in the centre have a degree in childhood education and majority have been in the field for more or less than five years or with a background in child care. The early years educators in setting are from diverse cultures and backgrounds.

Data-gathering with the adult participants took place in Winter 2025 at one of the study rooms at MSVU. Instead of having the focus groups in the child care setting after working hours, it was appropriate to have it in the weekends since the shifts of the staff in the child care varies. Having a neutral setting instead of the child care can also have a

different impact on the responses of the practitioners as it is free of distractions, and it helps in defining my role as a researcher rather than a colleague during the research work. Both the sessions lasted for more than but not exceeding to two hours for two consecutive weekends.

Method of Data Analysis

Guided by interpretivism as my world view and Critical Childhood Studies as my conceptual framework, I used thematic analysis to understand and interpret the subjective experiences of the participants and how it affects their perspectives of children and weapons play.

Naeem et al. (2023) provided a step-by-step process in creating themes - coding of data, searching for themes and refining it to create concepts. I will be applying the following steps as suggested by Naeem et al. (2023) to answer the study's questions:

Step 1: I familiarized myself with the information that was gathered. By looking at the drawings with transcriptions, the mind maps produced during the focus groups and the transcribed responses (both verbal and non-verbal) from the audio recordings, I started creating generalized themes. In this process, I looked for and selected statements that are pertinent to the research questions and aims.

Step 2: I had a thorough and careful examination of the selected statements and quotations gathered from the first step in order to determine repetitive patterns and specific words which was turned into *keywords* that are essential in answering research question. In this stage, the experiences and thoughts of the participants were summarized. To recognize which keywords are important, Naeem et al. (2023) provided

6Rs as the basis of selection – realness, richness, repetition, rationale, repartee and regal.

Step 3: I created codes from short phrases or words that were used to describe the keywords. Inductive coding captures the "message, significance or theme" (ibid, p 4) of the selected responses. This step provided the foundation, organization and interpretation of broader themes from the data. It was also possible in this stage that new themes might arise, which will also be used, given that it will provide an insight to the research questions.

Step 4: I developed the themes by organizing the codes that have similarities in meaning. These codes are then grouped into themes which showed interconnectedness of different codes. The themes from the data analysis of quotations, keywords and other themes were then arranged in and presented in meaningful manner through a mind map.

Step 5: I developed concepts by interpreting the keywords, codes and themes that were presented in the data. The concepts are then supported by the quotations, phrases and illustrations, that were captured during the data collection.

Step 6: I created a conceptual model where I was able to connect Critical Childhood Studies framework with themes and concepts from the participants in order to create new meanings and understandings with regards to weapons play. Through careful analysis and arranging the participants' views, I was able to define the experiences and thoughts of early years educators regarding weapons play.

I have outlined in the following section how my study demonstrates quality research as suggested by Bryman (2012) such as applying reflexivity and confirmability and showing trustworthiness through credibility.

Applying Reflexivity and Confirmability

Applying an interpretivist worldview, I acknowledged that my own values and beliefs were likely to affect the research (Cohen et al., 2011). With this, I applied reflexivity, where my biases, assumptions and opinions surrounding children and imaginative weapons play will continuously be reflected on. In addition to this, Willig (2008) pointed out that it is more than a researcher acknowledging her bias, but rather to have a careful thought on personal reactions and actions may affect the research process. To continue to reflect on my biases and perspectives, I kept a journal, where I wrote down all my thoughts, learnings and reflection throughout the research process. Having a journal was particularly useful as I reflected after each focus group session, considering my role as a moderator to the focus groups. Being a facilitator and an educator who's passionate about the topic proved to be challenging as my personal assumptions and biases might affect the research process. But having a reflective journal helped me as a researcher to be more objective, especially during the focus groups sessions. Being reflexive when designing the research helped me to address issues with ethics, data reliability and validity. This was achieved by carefully taking into consideration the social and cultural background of the participants during the design (e.g. materials, location of research, instruments) and implementation (e.g. method of communication, language used) stages of my research. By being reflexive, I was aware of my role as a colleague to the participants is different from my role as a researcher. I ensured that my positionality as a colleague to the participants did not influence my interaction with them and the data by clearly outlining my role as a researcher and by conducting the focus group in a neutral setting. By being reflexive, I demonstrated that I am acting in "good faith" and that my

personal values and beliefs are not being used to manipulate the research process and data.

Showing Trustworthiness Through Credibility

Trustworthiness is essential in the research process so that the findings are credible. Credibility was shown through respondent validation (Bryman, 2012). Both focus group transcripts were sent separately, via email, to the participants using my MSVU email. The participants were given enough time to confirm the reliability of the transcribed responses before I proceeded in analyzing the data. At the end of each focus group sessions, the educators were provided an opportunity for clarification and asking questions. During the data analysis, I reviewed the coding and themes with the guidance of my thesis supervisor for inter-rater reliability. I also added a section for definitions in my codebook to help me further in understanding and analyzing the data. The participants will also be receiving a final copy of the research to ensure respondent validation. Through these steps, I ensured that the participants' responses were respected, legitimate and accurate.

Ethical Considerations

Consent from Participants

Consent was taken from the participants through a consent form (see Appendix A). Participants were assured that they can withdraw from the research if they wish to but the information that they have shared prior to withdrawing will still be used as a data. Additionally, the consent form noted that theirs and the confidentiality and anonymity of other participants will need to be respected, and that the information that they gathered during the focus groups should not be divulged to other parties. They can ask questions

regarding the study before being requested to sign and return the consent forms. The participants were asked to sign two hard copies of consent forms, one is kept by the participants and the other one was kept for data. Their consent was asked at the beginning of each focus group session after reading a condensed form of the consent letters.

Perceived Harms

As the research topic is somewhat sensitive in nature, there was a possibility that it could cause feelings of discomfort for the participants, especially if they might recall specific events related to the topic. I have previously discussed that in an event that this occurs, the information where they can access professional support was provided through the consent forms (see Appendix A) In any case that I have observed that the participants are experiencing discomfort such as anxiety or distress, it was my obligation to stop the process and ask the participants if they are capable of continuing the research.

Breach of confidentiality and anonymity was also considered as a cause of harm to the participants. The participants were asked to go anonymously or by using a pseudonym when their works and words are discussed in the research. The participants made a decision to use "Educator (number)" for their pseudonyms. The data such as the participants' illustrations, transcripts of interviews and video recordings of the focus groups were saved in MSVU's One Drive, where the data is secured and encrypted. Data retention for this research work is at one year after use or unless specified by my thesis supervisor and or committee member.

Findings

The aim of this study is to discover how Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) who are working with children in a child care setting in Halifax, perceive children and how these images of a child influence their pedagogical practices in relation to imaginative weapons play. Through the use of Critical Childhood Studies as the research's framework, four themes have emerged – the diversity of educators' image of a child, the importance of play, the shift in perspectives towards imaginative weapons play, and the relevance of their roles and responsibilities in assisting groups of children who are involved or disinterested in imaginative weapons play.

Theme 1: The Image of the Child

The four educators brought about four descriptions of a child: children as agentic beings, children as right-bearing individuals, children as capable individuals and children as innocent beings.

Children as Agentic Beings

The participants view children as agentic beings, as individuals who have a choice with their activities. Educator 4 stated: *"Whatever they want to do, they will do."* It was also observed that the children's manner of responding to others and behaving is an extension of their agency. For example, Educator 4 shared: *"Sometimes they don't listen. They say directly 'no'... to your face... if you force them, they will not do that… So, in the classroom, they behave like that, 'No, I want to do it myself."* Educator 2 suggested that *"They don't care because they're busy learning..." And Educator 4 added: "I just think, you know, sometimes I just saw the children, like they said, 'No, I don't want to do it. I don't want to sleep. I don't want to do this… they don't want to… just continue play."*

Aside from having a choice, children are also seen as being in charge of their own learning. As Educator 4 noted, the children are able to manage their learning and thinking while they are "*creating and inventing new things*" with open-ended toys such as *"blocks and Connectors"*. Educator 1 added that when ECEs see the children as agentic beings, then educators "*program that way."* In the context of boundaries, Educator 2 also noted that each child is perceived as a unique individual who has their own physical experience when it comes to understanding their limits.

Children as Right-bearing Individuals

Children are also viewed as individuals who have rights. It was reiterated during the focus group discussions that it is the children's right to engage in and explore different types of play. The different play themes that all the educators have observed over the course of their teaching career are superhero play, role-playing their daily experiences, risky play, rough and tumble play, building with construction toys and even imaginative weapons play. The educators also noted that these types of play are allowed in their classrooms and that they do not interfere when they see the children being actively involved in their play choices but ensuring that they are doing it in a safe space. In the context of imaginative weapons play and children's right to play, Educator 1 stated: *"I just realized that even in the last month, we have to adapt that because that's in their own autonomy... We have to recognize that."*

Educator 1 described children as *"little versions of us (adults)".* She explained that such view came about because of her belief that children, like adults, are "*always living in the moment*" and that they are "*always evolving".* Educator 4 agreed, sharing:

> *If I'm a child, if I'm an individual, I am just expecting to respect my emotions, my things. So as a human, they also have emotions... They have the same feeling... As even they are a child, they also have the same emotions. They need to be respected... So I need to be respected their views.*

Educator 1 also repeatedly stated that children are accepting of adults and that children are expecting the same treatment from adults. For example, Educator 1 shared: "*Kids accept us where we're at and we need to do the same... At the end of the day, children accept people where they're at... they're just accepting you, where you're at and they want the same in turn."*

Educators also discussed how they modify and show flexibility as they interact with the children. Educator 1 stated: *"So you have to modify how you play with them, how you change with them, sometimes every minute, sometimes in that moment. You have to take it all in place so you can plan your day better with them."* Educator 1 added that children are deserving of explanations, just like with adults: *"They (children) deserve the same respect. They need to know that if you're telling them 'no', you better have a good reason why. There's going to be kids who will be like, 'Why can't I? 'Right? "What is your reason behind it?'. And they will need a full explanation."* Educator 4 also said that setting limits to the children should be done with respect, *"So if you say 'no', you need to be respectful."* Educator 2 and 4 elaborated that being respectful to the children is by being truthful to them. For example, Educator 2 shared: *"Part of my role is to provide a safe space… providing some insights of the reality and the dangers of these types of scenarios and you know, and violence…"*

Children as Capable Individuals

Another sub-theme that emerged during the focus groups was that children are viewed by the participants as competent individuals. All educators shared their observations of children as articulate and being able to express themselves such as their daily experiences. Educator 4 stated: *"They share everything... their daily living. They share everything without knowing...."* Children also have the ability to communicate their emotions and feelings as stated by Educator 3:

> *I think children's better way is to talk to them. I know like when they're doing I and when they started crying and when they are really angry and frustrated, they will not talk. But once you calm them down, they will tell you if you ask them. So I think it's a better way to talk to them, 'What's going on, what was happening'.*

Educator 3 also related the image of the child as articulate when talking to them about their involvement in imaginative weapons play: *"Then I go to there (children) and I talk to them and then I listen to them, what they're doing, what they're playing."* Educator 1 pointed out that there are other ways where children communicate themselves: *"A lot of them are non-verbal. The ones we work with but just figuring it out, body language gives a lot away."*

When asked about their personal perceptions of children, Educator 2 responded that children are "*very intelligent".* Educator 1 stated that *"preschoolers are some of the smartest people alive*." The conversation of children being intelligent individuals brought about examples that they have observed. As Educator 4 stated: *"But I can't think, I can't imagine, they make new creations with blocks and Connectors, sometimes it's so... like out of mind.... So, they give us new learnings for new things."* In line with this image of the child, the educators consider ideas, asking them about what they have created or

modifying their works: *"So we can ask them, Can you show me how to make another... what other things can you make with this?" (Educator 4).* The children's capability to reflect and understand boundaries, while being guided by educators, was also mentioned in the discussion when describing children as intelligent individuals. As Educator 2 said: *"... we will start to be asking questions to the child. You know, 'how does this making you feel? How do you think does this other child making their child feel?"*

Children as Innocent Beings

The perception of children being innocent was another subtheme under the image of the child. The children are viewed as innocent without any form of bias: *"Children are most innocent little beings with no bias"* (Educator 1). The children's innocence reminds Educator 1 of simpler times:

> *...they take you back to your most innocent times and they remind me that the day is not all about chaos and the admin... Being with children just brings me back to more innocent, less stressful times and they remind me as adult to take time for those moments... You know, they take you back to where it all started.*

The children are viewed as innocent in a sense that they are unaware of the consequences of their actions. As Educator 4 described it: *"I think children are innocent creatures who thinks that they need to explore anything without knowing their consequences... what is the result of that thing, they just do like that They need to go and do it."* Unawareness of the repercussions of their actions are also reflected through their interactions with their peers:

> *...and even while they are playing, they hit each other, but again, they play with the same person (laughing). They cry, for one time, again, they stop playing with them.*

> *They join them and they laugh. And after that they complaining about them, after five minutes, you will see them, they will laugh with each other.* (Educator 4)

The educators' perceptions of children are reflections of their personal experiences from their formative years. Educator 2 shared her childhood experiences, describing children as *"vulnerable"* and that it influenced her teaching practice which is *"to be empathetic, protective and loving."* Educator 2 elaborated:

> *...I remember feeling very...painfully shy as I was terrified to say anything, And I would just feel like this... massive energy inside my chest, in my head, behind my lips like I wanted to scream, and I couldn't make a sound. So when I think of how I felt, I'm feeling all this energy and fun inside of me, or anger, or frustration, passion, I couldn't let it out... But I do know that I felt locked inside myself.*

Educator 2 further reflected about how her childhood experience affects her current pedagogical practices:

> *So I want to make children, now, feel safe as humanly as possible when they're with me. So that no matter how shy they are, or how upset they might be, they can tell me, We can talk about making them feel comfortable with who they are, who they want to be... So I would do anything to help them come out and show me show their personality is, what they want to say, how they want to feel and express that. I want to try to pull it out of them, just by making a safe space.*

Educator 1 also shared that her pedagogical practices and beliefs are formed from her experiences.

> *I think who you are as an educator shape everything you've been through up on to that point of each day. So I know that today I might be a little bit different as an*

educator and administrator based on all my experiences from yesterday back... I guess everything I've been through up until today shapes who I am as an educator.

Given this, Educator 1 also mentioned her experience of the diversity of cultures in Nova Scotia and suggested that teachers should re-evaluate their image of the children because of the increasing cultural diversity in the province.

As the children are perceived as innocent, Educator 4 mentioned that they place trust on the adults around them: *"They are like trust... believer. Whatever you say, they believe you... They are (children) a big believer. If you say 'You have a superpower', they believe that. 'You have strong muscles', they believe it."*

Theme 2: The Importance of Play

All educators agreed that play is a right of a child, and that play is an essential part of children's lives as they gain self-awareness. Play was primarily defined by educators as "*children's* nature". They regarded play as an intrinsic part of a child, citing it as *"children's activities",* that it is *"something that happens daily"* and that *"children explore so they learn new things daily".* Children's activities include "*exploring and engaging in their surroundings."* Educator 2 stated: *"It is (play) inherent to a child… it's their natural tendency to explore… and to play, to use their surroundings."*

Educator 1 emphasized that it is through play that children learn about themselves as they discover their preferences, interests, and capabilities once they are given the avenue to explore. Educator 1 suggested: *"It helps them know who they are and what their likes and dislikes are because they're given those opportunities.* The educators also discussed how children learn about their capabilities when they engage in risky play. Educator 1 stated: *"If children are allowed to experiment in risky play, such as climbing*

up the kitchen table and jumping off the couch, they learn not to be afraid..." Educator 3 *added: "They want to do something and when they do, even if they fall or don't fall, they know how to balance... how to do their gross motor and fine motor on the spot."*

Aside from self-discovery, it was also pointed out that play serves as an outlet for children who have undergone trauma in their lives, Educator 1 stated: *"They have play-based therapies now and so, what if those who are just experiencing, these children just need to act out as part of whether they know it or not, then, being accepting what they have just seen or come from..."* Educator 2 suggested that by allowing children to use play to act out their experiences, they are able to internalize it and communicate themselves: *"So if they have experienced some form of trauma, uhm we need to allow, encourage them to play that out...They need to express themselves and process things and they do that through play."*

It is with the use of toys that children are able to relieve and revisit situations that they have encountered. Educator 2 shared an observed play with a child who was using small world toys:

> *I had a horrible experience with a child who was... a foster child. They were not playing with guns at the moment, but he was acting out a scenario of a mommy and daddy and you know, 'bad mommy' and daddy was, you know. He was using two figures and daddy was hitting 'bad mommy'... It was very obvious to me what he was doing, and he was playing out a scenario that he had likely seen many times.*

In addition to processing their thoughts and self-expression, educators also talked about other learning that takes place during play. As they explore their surroundings,

interactions between children occurs. Socializing with their peers helps them learn about their own and other's boundaries. Educator 2 stated an example where children are involved in rough housing type of play while discovering about their limits. Educator 2 shared: *"You know, rough housing is actually really important... it's a way for children to practice and learn about boundaries. They can't know what boundaries is until they have one themselves."*

The educators also discussed how play can be an avenue for children to practice their autonomy, even if their chosen activities are unsafe for them. Educators 4 stated: *"And while playing, they climb everywhere, they go in the narrow corner, and they don't know they will get bumped, or they run freely."*

Part of practicing their independence is selecting the materials they will use as props and the kind of play that they want to engage in. Educator 1 shared: *"...if a child's wearing a dress and doing housekeeping and they're a little boy, well no, we're not gonna change that. That's what they want to be."*

Having the environment as the *"third teacher" (*Educator 1) was also discussed by the educators. The learning space and available materials also aid in developing and enhancing children's independence. In this regard, Educator 2 stated: *"We adapt to the environment so they could flow through the room, practicing that autonomy..."* And Educator 1 shared: *"making sure that we have the tools so that we are recognizing the autonomy of all the children"* is an important part of play.

Being able to choose their activities and to freely engage in their chosen play elicits positive feelings for the children. Educator 3 stated that the children feel *"joy and excitement"* when they learn new things. In addition, both Educators 3 and 4 shared that

children feel proud when they are able to achieve a task during their play. *"Yeah, they feel like so good when they say, "I did that! You know teacher, I did that!'"* (Educator 4). *"And they get more excited and they say 'I did it!'"* (Educator 3).

Theme 3: Imaginative Weapons Play

ECE's Experience and Imaginative Weapons Play

Aside from influencing their perceptions of children, the educators' personal experiences also shape their perspective towards imaginative weapons play in their settings. Educator 1 emphasized how media influences her perception of imaginative weapons play and stated that *"the news have sensitized us to that (violence)."* Educator 1 explained that the fear comes from the news that is being shown in media:

> *I watch the news too much. But I will watch the news, and you will see the school shooter and the people who kill themselves... I have this fear because it watch too much and listen too much. I can't shake it, I can't get rid of it cause I watch so much of it and I listen to these studies and I watch too much Dr. Phil.*

Educator 1 also elaborated that that the violence being presented in the news and TV shows elicits strong, negative feelings which in turn affects her roles as a mother and teacher.

> *The news is making me a much more paranoid parent. It also makes me more nervous as an educator... I have real fear because you watch the news like, oh it's those quiet people on the schools or it's those kids who seem to have no friends... because I have been exposed to that stuff which causes very real fears to me. I watch too much CNN and Dr. Phil, so I've internalized that to me.*

The internalization of what was being shown on media directly affects Educator 1's decision in responding to children's imaginative weapons play. Educator 1 explained: "*My fear as a human, a mother, is if I, and as an educator is if I teach children about this, are they gonna do it because I've shown it to them?... So I am scared as an educator that if I expose these children to this, is it then in turn gonna make them become these people?"* Meanwhile, other educators cited that their upbringing formed their perspectives towards imaginative weapons play. Although both Educators 3 and Educators 4 are brought up in a military and police families, their views vary.

When asked by Educator 2 if Educator 4 was never exposed to playing guns in her formative years or was she prevented from role playing with pretend guns, Educator 4 responded that she and her siblings were not exposed to imaginative weapons play for the reason that her father works in the military: *"...as my father is a military man, he is so peaceful. He is so quiet, so he doesn't like these types of things."* In addition to her father's influence, the play preference of Educator 4 affects her perception of imaginative weapons play. As Educator 4 narrated: *"Actually, my preferences from my childhood is I was taught about musical things... my interest was in the music (laughs) and my books and nothing else. Yeah, my interest was music... I just... I don't support violence."* Additionally, Educator 4's unfamiliarity with playing with weapons-like toy such as a water gun contributed to her current perception of children's imaginative weapons play: *"You know, the water guns, these types of things, developed later when I was an adult (laughs). So that was not in my childhood. I didn't see. It wasn't common in our areas."* On the other hand, Educator 3 narrated her upbringing with a father who works as a police officer and her exposure to guns:

> *My dad, he is a police officer. And he always [carried] his two guns. One is bigger one and one is smaller one. And we always had it in our house. And I have two older brothers... uhm... they always like try shooting them in the air... When I was little, I used to play with guns. We had water guns when I was little... uhm... because I have two older brothers and they love playing with guns and everything, weapons. And in my family, I am the only girl and others are boys, my cousins and yes, they do love playing with guns.*

In addition to their family background, the use of guns in Educator 3's and Educator 4's hometown contributed to their insights regarding imaginative weapons play. Both educators said that guns were not used to "*hurt physically but light the air" (*Educator 3) and that guns are "*for playing or enjoying but there's no feeling of hurting" (*Educator 4).

Due to their upbringing, Educator 3 and Educator 4 have a difference in opinions regarding imaginative weapons play in their settings. Educator 3 allows children to engage in imaginative weapons play and as Educator 3 shared: "So here, with the kids, when I see them playing with guns and making guns, it was okay for me." On the contrary, Educator 4 replied that she doesn't see imaginative weapons play as something that is important for children to explore. Educator 4 explained: "*No... you know, this gun play thing, I learn only here in daycare... I never... see the children play like that...In my childhood I was never exposed. My thinking is nobody has the right to hurt anybody. Everybody deserves peace."* Although Educator 4 does not see imaginative weapons play as vital in children's lives, she still allows the children to create guns and engage in good guy and bad guy themed play for the reasons such as "*children enjoy it*, *they learn creativity"* and *"it's their (children) culture."*

Educator 2 offered another viewpoint on the use of guns as she shared that her partner is a gun owner.

> *...Because I live with a gun enthusiast. We have actually many, many guns in the home. They're all locked away; all safety measures are in place. But does it make me feel nervous? Yes. But when I see a gun, I don't immediately think of violence. I think of uhm... my partner's passion and you know, target practice. Because he doesn't even kill anything. So in a different... coming from a different perspective on the use of firearms. But certainly, I am afraid of them.*

With this, Educator 2 said that she supports children who are engaged in imaginative weapons play in the classroom while providing guidance: Educator 2 gave the following example on how she guides the children: *"I would be asking them questions while they're playing and help them to vocalize their thoughts, their feelings and help them express any boundaries they may have."*

The conversation during the focus group also touched on the subject of violence and weapons. Educator 3's perception is "*used to kill bad people to maintain peace*." Additionally, Educator 2 pointed out that weapons are used to prevent violence: *"A threat to enforce law for a peaceful outcome. Not necessarily kill. But in a society, a threat, the threat of violence... to maintain a peaceful, lawful, existence."* Educator 1 also stated weapons are used *"for a peaceful outcome"* while Educator 4 said "*so that they're (people) scared*."

The educators also specified that violence is not just limited to using weapons and cited an example: "In *countries where there are no guns, like the UK, for example, there's a lot of machete violence and stabbing" (Educator 2)*. Educator 1 shared an observation

that there is violence going on in countries that seem to be peaceful, but the reality is that violence is rarely depicted in the media:

> *But I think if you dug deeper, it's not sensationalized and it's not put out there in the media. If you dug deeper, how many people are getting stabbed in the railways and how many... I watch things where there's using their fists more frequently... People are dying in the hand of someone's physical hand.*

Responding to Children's Play

While the educators shared experiences that influenced how they see children's imaginative weapons play, two types of responses emerged – permitting play with boundaries and allowing play but readily providing alternatives. Recreating experiences from war and "good guy-bad guy" role playing are the two play themes that the educators focused on during the discussions.

Due to her immersion with news and media, Educator 1 expressed strong disapproval for imaginative weapons play:

> *I don't love weapons play. It makes me nervous, it's old school, it's who I am. I don't like kids pretending to shoot each other. Even if they say, 'Oh, I'm just hunting or whatever it is. I don't like it. It makes me scared... I don't want kids to role-play shooting other people.*

Educator 1's ECE experience and training was a contributing factor in her disapproval of imaginative weapons play. Educator 1 recalled that *"back in the early years when I was in child-care, it's a hard and fast rule, there's no guns in class and superhero play. We don't allow guns in daycare. You can't use Legos. You can't build a gun."* Nevertheless, the recognition that times have changed incited Educator 1 to reflect on as she discussed:

"*And so while it's not part of my growing up in that sense... I mean guns, when I was growing up, was used for hunting and bad people used guns... But nowadays, it's not the same."* This realization came about when Educator 1 observed the change in population trend in Nova Scotia, particularly the presence of refugee families and children:

> *We have a lot of children coming right now from war-torn countries and they are bringing in this situation in the scheme of what you are saying about gun play. A lot of these children that we've never seen, especially in Nova Scotia. We've never seen children that have witnessed actual real-life gun play or experience maybe bombs going off in their countries... And I never had to deal with that, like this before but it's coming up quite a bit in the sites.*

Educator 1's reflection and observation influenced her decision in letting her staff allow imaginative weapons in the classrooms, an evident shift in Educator 1's perspective.

> *I think that the hard thing before, I was so anti-weapons play I wish I was in the ECE world back in the day, you're taught like, don't let the children play with guns and it was just, you know, a hard and fast rule... there's no guns and superhero play. But now, I think we're not honouring where they're coming from if we don't allow them to explore that.*

However, Educator 1 continually feels divided when it comes to permitting imaginative weapons play and raised the following questions to the other participants:

> *Like how do we teach them when they're seeing maybe in their own countries that there's war is to protect their own country? To get... you know, to get their homes back... how do you teach them it's not okay? But how do guide them through it? How do you find that balance of going... understanding why they are doing it but*

making sure that you teach them but don't do it this way. Cause if you do it this way it's bad, that's bad play. But if you do it this way cause you're pretending to protect your homes or whatever, that's okay. How do you teach them?

Educator 2 responded to Educator 1's query, saying that ECEs just have to teach and allow children to engage in imaginative weapons play. Educator 2 explained: *"So, you let them do it. It's counter intuitive as an adult, as a nurturer to allow* ***violent play in children.*** *Not something you... that you should promote but when you think, logic wins, it has to."*

Educator 1 raised another question to other educators during the discussion, whether there is a need for violence being taught to the children: *"But why do we have to teach them? Murders... is it part of their life?"* The question prompted Educator 2 to discuss her thoughts about human nature and violence*: "I think humanity as a whole and the animal kingdom, we are... We can be violent. It's just part of life and unfortunately... I think we all have fears as human beings..."* Educator 2 further explained that it is human's tendency to become violent as a result of fears that humans feel: *"...And also, the natural instinct to become violent. So, if we have a natural thing to act out in aggression, in order to protect ourselves. I do think that it comes from a very primal place."* Educator 2 also linked the development of guns with human's disposition to be aggressive: *"So you know the invention of the gun, is just an extension of our violence as humans... Think about what the gun is called, it's called a firearm, It's an extension of ourselves. It's a creation from us."* With this, Educator 2 reasoned that imaginative weapons play should be normalized: *"...So for children to be playing with violence, I don't think it's anything that is unusual or new to guns."* This was supported by Educator 3, regarding imaginative

weapons play as the same kind of play that children engage in: *"You know, pretend play they do... like you know, 'I'm selling ice cream.' Same, 'I'm doing pew-pew with the guns.'"*

The contradicting thoughts of Educator 1 whether to allow or prohibit imaginative weapons play was resolved during the discussion as she suggested that by removing personal biases and considering the child's experiences, ECEs are able to honour this kind of play in their learning spaces:

> *You have to take yourself out of the equation. Take everything... not necessarily what you know because it shapes who you are but everything that is creating this bias... when I step back and I think about it and you really go, okay, but wait, take my bias out of this, take all the scary news stories I have watched and figure out why... and then you have a big opportunity to teach in that moment. I think the biggest piece that I am seeing is observing but being into their backgrounds and understanding before they came to us, what did they come from? But recognizing where they're coming from is the key...*

Furthermore, Educator 1 clarified that there needs to be a valid justification coming from the educators before a child is allowed to engage in imaginative weapons play. As Educator 1 explained:

> *I think you have to take it situation by situation. I think as a management, when our staff present it to us, we have to go talk and give them a chance to think, 'Why are they doing it? 'What is the history here?' Give me some context and background... And then once you put all the pieces together at that point, then decide in the context of, 'Now, I've done the research and gotten the background story, am I going to allow to move it forward and if I am, how am I going to allow it to move*

forward based on the information?' I think without the research and observation, I don't think you can. I just don't think you can.

Educator 1's perspective was further elaborated by Educator 2's contribution which particularly focuses on children who are engaged in war-play themes. Educator 2 suggested questions that ECEs can use to reflect on children's play, which includes not only the management and educators in the conversation, but also the children's families.

If it was war... then that's when you ask, 'Who is the child? Where do you they come from? What is their family background that we know of?... are they new to us? Is there a real reason... is there something that they have seen, experienced... that they are aware of this kind of scenario?' And in asking those questions, we can gather information as to why, if they were in a situation, if they are coming from a war-torn country, that's when you have to have a deeper conversation with your teachers, with your parents, with your management... and how to best help that child process what they've seen because that's a much bigger issue.

Educator 4 explained that there is a shift in her perspective although she previously expressed that imaginative weapons play is not important for children to take part in. Educator 4 said: *"But as an adult, my point of view is changed day by day... Nowadays, the children are playing with guns, and their point of view is different."* It was specified by Educator 4 that the culture that she was brought up in is different from the culture of children here in Canada and the generational differences affects her decision in allowing imaginative weapons play. As Educator 2 expounded:

It's their culture. We can't deny. They learn these things because now the development is too high. Like we are limited to watch the shows, before we don't

> *have social media, we don't have much television or like video games that time. So we are not exposed. But they are exposed... We can't deny these things. So, I just accept that thing and try to redirect them.*

Aside from *"games"* and *"social media"* (Educator 3), other educators cited *"news"* (Educator 2) and experiences with "*parents*" (Educator 1) expose children to violence. Acknowledging the fact that children are exposed to violence and aggression in their daily lives, Educator 4 allows children to engage in imaginative weapons play while observing them: *"Because they love to play with it. Some children like it. I just watch them until it's safe or something. I just want to watch them for their safety."* When children are expressing discomfort with peers who are engaged in imaginative weapons play, Educator 4 uses redirection and diversion as strategies:

> *But other children feel afraid, and they come to us, they say, 'Teacher, I am afraid of that. That person is...'. So, we just divert their mind to other activity. We need to like, divert both children. Because if one is saying, we have to divert that one person, but other is listening so that person also getting negative thing.... So, we have to redirect both of them.*

Educator 4 talked about redirecting the children by asking them to create other things with the construction toy that they used through open-ended questioning: *"So we can ask them, 'Can you show me how to make another... What other things can you make with this?' So, I just want to give them the option to explore their imagination. To make another things also."* Meanwhile, Educator 3 shared that imaginative weapons play is allowed in the learning space provided that it is limited to pretending but stopping the play when a child is physically hurt. Educator 3 stated: "*So here I see kids playing with guns. But again,*

not physically hurt. Pretending, it's okay but not physically hurt... Hurting physically, that's when I stop them. Before that, if they are playing, that's okay." Educator 3 reiterated that imaginative weapons play is permitted under her supervision:

> *So I just observe them first, what they're doing and what they're making, I observe them and let them do it, until they start hurting each other with the weapons or throwing the things on them and say, 'pew-pew'... So that is the time when I stop. When they really, really, physically hitting each other.*

For Educator 2, children are allowed to engage in imaginative weapons play as she believes that children learn about interacting with peers and understanding limits while role-playing. As Educator 2 described it: "*I think they are learning about boundaries... they are developing socially... well, exploring adult role, situations and fantasies... I also think that with the social development, there's social nuances that are involved in the types of play and exploring... I guess the exploring the heaviness of those nuances."* Educator 2 emphasized that imaginative weapons play can be used as a teaching moment in classrooms, assisting children in understanding boundaries.

> *I think that the regular discussion that we are having in the classrooms in a daily basis about boundaries, about feelings and how we can cause each other... upset through our actions, you are just circling back as you are building a foundation of boundaries. Or you know that knowledge about boundaries.*

Both Educator 3 and Educator 4 observed that the common play theme is "good guy-bad guy", particularly policemen catching and villains: *"Sometimes they respond, 'He is a bad guy, and I am a policeman and I'm gonna pew-pew him or pew-pew her." (Educator 3).* In this observed play, the educators noticed that being perceived as a "bad

guy" causes the children to be upset. Educator 4 elaborated that: *"Children are saying while playing what happened, so 'I am policeman, and you are bad man... and I will put you in jail." So, some children feel bad and that other friends say they are the bad man."* Educator 2 reasoned that children are offended when being labelled as a "bad guy" as they wanted to portray the "good guy", such as the hero in their play narrative: "*I think when you say, 'Why don't you want to be the bad guy?' Cause they would usually say, 'I don't want to be the bad guy. You say, 'Why don't you want to be the bad guy?' And they would...'I want to be the policeman. I want to be the hero."* Educator 2 further explained that children's familiarity with binaries such as good and evil, right and wrong and the implication behind those labels causes the children to be upset. As Educator 2 explained:

> *It's because of the good and bad thing that they're so familiar with. You know, there's good behaviour and bad behaviour. I think that no matter how we might try to say, 'Oh not good behaviour and not bad behaviour'. But there is a sense of you know, shame, right and wrong... If you're the bad guy, there's sort of a sense of not feeling 'You're good'. Which is all... I think, every child's goal is to please...To do good things. So I think, every child's goal is to please.*

In order to respond effectively to those children who are engaged in policemen-villain themes and if causes children to he hurt or upset, Educator 2 suggested the following questions for ECEs to reflect on, which focuses on boundaries: "*You will determine how far will it go? What do we all agree on? What are the boundaries for us, in our classroom? Because yeah, once the children are getting hurt, you're going to stop the situation and you're gonna redirect the children."*

During the discussion, the educators were asked about their thoughts about imaginative weapons play as being violent. Educator 1 responded that imaginative weapons play is not violent but there is a possibility that it can lead to intentional violence. As Educator 1 explained: "*I think that it just depends on what their intent is when they start. If they're just rough housing just to rough house, it can get violent if they go too far. Or they start the game and say, 'Oh, I am going to beat you up."* Meanwhile, Educator 2 said that children being competitive during the play results to having feelings of frustration: *"And that's when feelings happen... the adrenaline gets you know... going. Feelings get bigger because it escalates... quickly... Even when you're not playing and you're angry, you might hit your friend, you know, that is frustration."*

Theme 4: ECE's Role in Supporting the Children

The conversation among educators focused on their roles when supporting groups of children who are interested and uninterested in imaginative weapons play. Three sub-themes have emerged from the discussion – understanding their role, performing their role, and teaching content.

Understanding Their Role in Imaginative Weapons Play

Forming positive relationships with both children and the families were prioritized by the educators. The educators believe that forming a trusting relationship with the children will help them discover their strengths, weaknesses and interests: *"We take the time to get to know them, so we know their likes, their dislikes, but also by getting to know where they... like what they need help with." (Educator 1).* Educator 3 added that having positive relationships with children enables her to understand their temperament and their communication styles: *"If you work with kids, you know each and every child's behaviour, what they want, how they will tell you, or how they will react to everything.* It was also

raised that children are trusting of the adults in their lives and that breaking children's trust can impact the adult-child relationship. Educator 4 explains: *"because there's only you they can trust. If you break the trust, you can't like make good relationship with them."* Trusting relationships is also defined by educators as children being able to have the freedom to express themselves through their play. Educator 3 specifically cited an example where honesty was encouraged from the children when they were creating weapons. *"Talking everyday about these things, "Okay, we are not lying. If we are playing with something, if we made a gun, that's okay. But we are not lying."*

Building positive relationship with children also means providing support when they are physically or emotionally hurt when playing, regardless of whether they are the one who was hurt or the one who caused harm. As Educator 2 discussed:

> *If one child is hurt, they're crying and they're upset, you'd be with that child... providing, nurturing, comfort and all of that... and if the other one is upset, crying, if they're angry, that's when you're gonna go to that child and find why they're angry, why they're frustrated... and comfort them in that situation as well because they are also acting...*

In addition to building positive and trusting relationships with the children in their care, Educator 1 said that recognizing that the children's families "*are their first teachers"* is the first step in working effectively with families. Educator 1 provided an explanation: "*I think when you get to know their families, and get to know their background, it also better helps you get a better picture of what their life is outside the environment. It also helps you understand their individual autonomy and what's impacting their behaviour through the day."* Educator 1 reiterated the importance of rethinking of personal biases about

different cultures in order for ECEs to form positive relationships with families: "*Not understanding about other culture is a big part of having a bias. So, once you start to get to know another part of the world or another way of living, or another community then you... change and adapt your ways and grow."*

Included in their role as educators is being responsible for providing a safe, physical environment for the children. Educator 4 talked about safety of equipment but still being accessible to children:

> *Like for example, we have a bookshelf. Children tried to climb on it and they fall on them. So we need to place the bookshelf in that place so they won't fall on that. And if they try to climb on it so we can watch it. Watch them easily. And it is still accessible and near to that child.*

In addition, Educator 2 emphasized that providing a physically safe environment is vital because *"it's a group care"* in order to "*help prevent certain scenarios from playing out."* Educator 2 also explained that being in close proximity to the child helps in keeping the children safe: *"Obviously, it's gonna be dangerous, you're gonna intervene and certainly you've already intervened, and you know, because of your presence. Because when something is getting rough, you want to be close-by."* Meanwhile, Educators 1 and 3 suggested that providing emotional safety and security is part of having a safe environment by "*giving him (child), like his proper safe, space, relationship building, trust-building, those things s that he can or she can share anything, what is in their hear and what they want to say"* (Educator 3). Educator 1 talked about providing a safe space and being the safe space for children: *"Or you know, the child with... struggling with emotions,*

makings sure we have a quiet space so they can kind of figure it out... and giving them a safe space that you know, they can come to you for a hug if they need it..."

In the context of imaginative weapons play, Educator 4 specifically cited that she provides a safe environment for children by observing the children who are role-playing "policeman and bad guy" themed play. In addition, Educator 4 also provides support for those children who feels fearful of other children who are role-playing:

> *Just calm down them, talk to them, just make light the conversation between like... just saying them, 'they are not trying to offend you or try to hurt you but try to play with you. If you don't like that, you can use your words and say nicely, 'I don't like it. Can you stop doing this?' 'You can come to the teacher, teacher, I need help.*

Being reflective of their practice is one of the perceived roles mentioned by the educators. For Educator 4, part of being reflective is seeking for advice from colleagues, especially when dealing with challenging behaviours in the classroom. As Educator 4 explained: *"I leave the space and discuss with other educators. So what can we do? How can we interact? So we discuss about that things..."*

In the context of imaginative weapons play, the educators emphasised that being a reflective practitioner is important, whether having moments to pause and think or with colleagues. For example, Educator 3 shared that having a collective reflection and discussion with colleagues when deciding about children's imaginative weapons play was to avoid confusion with the children and dishonesty:

> *I think, obviously, talk as a team, because if... we're going to completely stop and kids doesn't follow the thing, they will do it. But they will lie to you...It's like first, if one teacher is not agreeing to weapons and another one is agreeing is of course,*

kids are going to get confused, 'Should we do it? Should we not do it?' So at the end, teachers first need to talk.

Being reflective of their practice by raising questions to improve their teaching was also pointed out. In particular, Educator 1 reflected on why she is not allowing her staff to let children engage in imaginative weapons play: "*All of my intuitive nature wants to tell them, 'No gun play, no violent play' and I have to stop myself when I'm in the room when I'm talking to the teachers, telling them, 'No, they're not allowed' and trying to figure out myself, 'Well, why am I not allowing it?'"* Educator 2 added that she reflects on three questions such as "*What are they doing?"*, *"Why are they doing it?"* and *"What is the purpose of their play?"* as her initial response when encountering children who are engaged in imaginative weapons play.

Performing Their Role

The educators cited examples on how they fulfil their roles in the classroom and one example is observing the children. Educator 1 reiterated: *"We know them because we observe them. We're meeting where they're at and that's through observation."* In addition, Educator 2 said that her initial response when she sees children role-playing with weapons or building with weapons is to watch them before interacting with them. Similar strategy goes for Educator 2, who will *"observe what they are doing and what they are making."*

Aside from observing, the educators said that one of their roles is to facilitate thinking with the children. This is done by asking reflective questions, especially when observing children who are creating weapons. As an example, Educator 2 cited when she notices that children are creating weapons: *"I would be asking them questions while*

they're playing. I would ask them, 'What did you make? 'What is that?'... I'll ask them questions, 'wouldn't that hurt?" Educator 3 echoed this when she sees children who are using their created weapons to hurt other children: *"If they are not physically hurting a child, I think I would let them use it, and of course, asking, 'What are you doing? 'Why are you hitting?' or 'Why are you pretending to pew-pew?'"*

Communicating other child's limits and needs to their peers by asking questions is one example of how Educator 2 perceive her role when it comes to facilitating reflection with children: "*Helping them vocalize their thoughts and feelings and to express any boundaries that they may have....' how does this make you feel? How do you think does this making this child feel?'... and help them understand their own perspective, you know, when you're hurt, you cry..."*

Another role that the Educators have discussed is planning for activities. Educator 2 mentioned that one of her roles is to *"create activities"* for children and to "*encourage what they are doing.*" Educator 3 said that planning should be based on *"the interest of the children."* Adding materials was suggested by Educator 4 so the children can learn new things to be able to *"teach them and direct them more efficiently."*

The educators were asked how they will respond to children whose play imaginative weapons play narratives are repetitive. Educator 2 replied that through planning, they are able to help children to extend their learning:

> *Do you add that kind of... play into what you are doing as an ECEC in the classroom? In terms of programming? Are you going to extend that play?... If it's the same thing every single day, are you going to try to move it forward? Are you... let it unfold? You know, there's a certain time when they're doing things over and*

> *over again and how we can intervene in a way to... encourage them to move to another direction... there has to be some kind of progression.*

The educators cited some suggestions about extending the children's interest with imaginative weapons play. Educator 3 proposed planning for activities: "*Set some activities or talk to the children, so basis on that, maybe set up and activity, read some books or tell them some stories."* Educator 1 advised on inviting resource persons to talk about their experiences:

> *You could bring people in. So if gun play is something that is a big part of your classroom, maybe ask the police officer dad to come in or ask a hunting dad to come in... And have them come in if they are comfortable to talk about their experiences... And make it a whole group learning activity. It's a great way to help us understand another that way. Like use your parents as a... as a guide.*

Teaching content

The conversation between educators led to a discussion of the knowledge and information that they are aiming for children to learn. Educator 1 emphasized that the planned activities and learning environment should reflect a child-centred approach as the child care setting's "philosophy is child-led." This means that everything that is put into practice is on the basis of *"what they're ready for"* (Educator 1), *"children's interests"* (Educator 3) and *"children's culture*" (Educator 4)**.** Furthermore, all the teaching that is happening in the learning environment celebrates the strengths of the children. Educator 2 pointed out that both failures and success of the children are celebrated in the learning environment: *"Celebrating children's successes by honouring their failures."*

Educator 2 reiterated that children learn through play as it was emphasized that she utilizes play as a teachable moment. Educator 2 cited an example, where children learn about limits and empathy when rough housing:

> *I think we reflect the children's... boundaries to them as well. So one is on top of another, and then they, you know, started to push their head on the pillow, and they're like, 'No, no.' You know, that's when you say, 'They're saying 'no'. Do you hear them saying, 'no'? That must hurt.' You know, boundary, boundary..."But if you do allow it to go and be able to sort of communicate that with them, then sort of reflecting that child's needs to other one. Trying to help them understand this is a boundary.*

Aside from teaching boundaries through play, Educator 3 discussed about teaching morality, particularly the value of honesty, as children engage in building weapons:

> *Of course, talk to them every day and be consistent with that. Talking everyday about these things. 'Okay, we are not lying, If we are playing with something, if we made a gun, that's okay. But we are not lying. Tell teachers what did you make, what did you do, why did you make a gun?'*

In addition to honesty, Educator emphasized about the responsibility of ECEs to teach children about "moral compass": *"I think it's our duty as adults and as educators and as parents... and as people to... educate children... about the moral compass that we all have inside us that we learn from our elders, from our societies."*

Conclusion of Data

The findings from the focus groups underscored the importance of play in children's development and learning. Self-discovery, learning about boundaries and

expressing themselves are some of the learnings that takes place during play. Four different images of the child were presented through the discussions such as children as agentic beings, children as right-bearing individuals, children as capable individuals and children as innocent beings. The discussion also revealed varying viewpoints of ECEs towards imaginative weapons play, which are brought about their experiences from media consumption, ECE training and upbrining and culture. The participants also reflected on their roles as ECEs, fulfilling their roles and the content of their teaching.

Discussion of Findings

This research aims to answer three questions with the use of Critical Childhood studies as the framework: What are the ECE's perceived images of the child and how does this affect their pedagogical practices in relation to imaginative weapons play?; what are the perspectives of early childhood educators with regards to weapons play and the influences of their decisions in allowing or prohibiting imaginative weapons play?; and what views do they hold regarding their role when encountering children who are engaged and disengaged in imaginative weapons play.

The Educator's Shared Images of the Child

Having a shared image of the child is emphasized in The Educators Guide to Capable, Confident and Curious: Nova Scotia's Early Learning Curriculum Framework" (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2018b). The findings of the research suggests that educators share the same perspectives when describing a child – capable, agentic, right-bearing and intelligent.

The new sociological construction of childhood placed emphasis on the image of the child whose experiences are valued, seen and heard (Prout & James, 1990, in Tisdall

& Punch, 2012) and that the children are seen as capable, active and social agents (Meynert, 2015). Such construct of the child is echoed by the educators as they view children as agentic individuals, who has the capacity to choose their own activities and has the ability to create and invent with their chosen materials. Moreover, it was mentioned that their actions and behaviour, including as the ability to set boundaries to adults and their peers during play, reflects their agency.

It was also noted that the educators do not interfere with the children's play choices since they believe that they are exercising their right to play and autonomy when engaging in different role-play themes, including war play and policeman-bad guy themes. The educators are also mindful of the safety and feelings of other children who are not interested in imaginative weapons play, demonstrating how they are respecting the agency and voices of this group of children. Decentralization of agency from adults to children, as advocated by Corsaro (in de Almeida Santos & César Barros, 2020) and Prout and James (1990, in Tisdall & Punch, 2012), is evident when the children are given the freedom to select the play that they want to engage in, but in a safe manner and in a safe environment. The educators' responses towards play supports Klocker's (2007) thickening of children's agency.

The educators also proposed that children share similarities with adults in a sense that both are non-static beings and are always evolving as a result of their experiences. Adult's recognition of the children's daily and constantly changing experiences influences their behaviour and play narratives, including imaginative weapons play. This supports Katch's (2001) and Rich's (2003) assertion that children's experiences are re-enacted through play. Another similarity between children and adults is that both are worthy of

respect. This point of view supports UNRC's Article 12, which states that children are subjects, social actors and agentic beings whose experiences and ideas are respected. Despite the fact that educators' views of the children are aligned with the new sociology of childhood, the beliefs that children are innocent continues to prevail. This is because of children's unawareness of the consequences of their actions and that they are vulnerable. This demonstrates that educators' beliefs are still influenced by theories such as Locke's "tabula rasa" (Kerr, 2023) and romanization of children (Bowie, 2000; Rosen, 2015). In addition to this, children are viewed as "little" meaning that they are innocent. It was also mentioned that the innocence of the children reminds one educator of "simpler times". This creates an impression that children should be protected from the perceived violence that comes with engaging in imaginative weapons play. This leads to the educator having a feeling of uncertainty on how to respond to children's interest in weapons play.

Re-affirmation of the Importance of Play in Children's Lives

The educators' viewpoint regarding play as inherent to a child re-affirms Article 31 of United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The educators cited various learnings taking place during play, particularly, self-awareness and practicing their autonomy. This is in line with Articles 28 and 29, which asserts that play is essential in the developing children's agency and learning. Children's positive feelings such as joy and excitement as they learn new things during play supports Lansdown's (2022) perspective that children's play experience should be enjoyable and pleasant. Moreover, the importance of imaginary play was highlighted during the educators' discussion, citing that playing allows children to recreate their experiences such as traumatic events. This

supports Burris and Tsao's (2002) assertion of the value of imaginary play. Role playing is positioned in the hierarchy of play (Heikkilä, 2021) since the educators affirmed its importance and by allowing imaginative weapons play in their learning environment.

The Relationship Between the Educator's image of the children and Understanding Their Role in Imaginative Weapons Play

The images of the children and the value on play, influence the way that educators plan for activities. The educators highlighted that their activities and the learning spaces are planned and designed in order to extend children's interests and enhance the agency of the children. This practice corresponds with the Nova Scotia Educator's Guide (2018b), where it was discussed that an educators' perception of children shapes how they plan for activities and the learning environment. Educators believe that by extending, encouraging and moving the children's interest in weapons play, they are helping children to enhance their learning and not be "stuck" to repetitive play themes. This response contrasts to Rosen's (2015) study where the educators believe that the children's play narrative is becoming repetitive.

Malaguzzi (1994) stressed that there are a hundred images of the child, and these images influences the educators' interactions with each child. The educators emphasized the importance of forming positive relationships with both children and their families. This allows the educators to get to know the children's behaviour, temperament, abilities, needs and interests, which in turn, guides the educator in responding effectively to the children. Both the Nova Scotia's early learning framework (2018a) and teachers' guide (2018b) documents, emphasized the importance of respecting the child's cultural background. This was discussed by the educators, as they shared that recognizing that

the families as their "first teacher" and the children's cultural background helps educators honour the children's experiences, particularly of children from war-torn countries. This enables them to understand where their play themes are coming from. It is especially important for educators to include families and cultures in children's learning as it was pointed out that Nova Scotia is a "melting pot of cultures" and that there is an increase of refugee families. Considering the children's background supports the decision of educators on to respond to children's imaginative weapons play. The Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, (2018b) invites educators to reflect on their beliefs and assumptions in order to respond to current educational trends. The educator in the study supports this as they believe that putting biases aside helps them relate to the families and children.

Forming trusting relationships with children also fosters an environment of honesty, especially when they are creating models of weapons and engaging in imaginative weapons play. As the educators places value on morals and honesty, they build a foundation of trust with the children, that they will not be penalized for creating guns or role-playing bad-guys and good-guys for as long as they are not hurting their peers.

Allowing Imaginative Weapons Play

One of the significant findings of this research is that ECEs are permitting the children to engage in imaginative weapons play. Children's agency and their right to play are honoured as they are allowed to choose their preferred type of play. This provides credence to the philosophy of the construction of the child, according to the new sociology of childhood. Permitting children to role-play scenarios such as "police and bad guy" and war play, the educators are following the interests of the children, proving a child-centred

approach to teaching, thus, as what Klocker (2007) suggests, "thickening" of the children's agency. Allowing the play reiterates the best practices that Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2004) suggested in responding to children's imaginative weapons play which are allowing the play with limits and providing alternatives.

When allowing children to engage in bad-guy good guy and war play themes, it was noted that different learning takes place on the part of the children such as social nuances such as personal and their peers' boundaries and exploring roles. This supports Heikkilä's (2021) and Bauman's (2015) studies where the results show that children learn socialization skills such as empathy and conflict resolution while children are engaged in weapons play.

Providing guidance is important for educators when allowing the play to take place. When educators see the children creating guns or starting the play, they guide the children by asking reflective, open-ended questions, in order for children to have a careful thought about their play. Finding out about their play supports Holland's (2000) suggestion to educators to "tune into children" (ibid, p 55), to provide support and clarification in order to extend their interests (Bauman, 2015; Holland, 2000). Moreover, creating boundaries with children is seen as a crucial part in permitting weapons play to ensure that all children are safe in the group care environment. The educators are also placing boundaries to the play and stopping it in an event where a child gets physically hurt. In relation to responding to imaginative weapons play, the educators see their role as providing support not just for children who are interested in imaginative weapons play but also assisting children who feel fearful and doesn't want to engage in imaginative weapons play by helping them to vocalize their discomfort to their peers.

Observing children is another role that the educators view as important when encountering children who are engaged in this type of play. Paying attention to children's play helps educators learn more about what they are doing in their play and what they're making.

Another strategy that the educators utilize is redirecting the play of the children when one child or a group of children expresses fear and discomfort. It is noted that the role-playing was not stopped, preventing a child to feel dismissed. Rather, they are given another opportunity to explore the play but given different options by the teacher.

The educators also highlighted the importance of having a conversation with colleagues and coming up with a collective view and response to imaginative weapons play, which avoids confusion and prevents dishonesty from the children. Although one educator "feels torn" about allowing weapons play, banning the play was not an option for her as she sees that this type of play honours the experiences and agency of the children, especially those who are coming from war-torn countries. Instead, the educator reflected and asked thought-provoking questions to other educators that can be used to reflect during staff meetings.

Educator's Background and Experiences Influences Imaginative Weapons Play

Based on the responses of the ECEs, their personal experiences influence their judgement in allowing imaginative weapons play in their settings. This confirms Delaney's (2016) study where it was noted that educators' own views, feelings and values impacts their decision in permitting ore restricting imaginative weapons play. The focus groups served as a reflective space for the educators as they recalled experiences that influenced their perceptions and attitudes towards imaginative weapons play. The

educators' media consumption, personal experiences, differences in upbringing and culture influences their perspectives towards imaginative weapons play. Regardless of differences in perspectives, all the educators had a collective agreement on allowing children to engage in imaginative weapons play, provided that all educators have consulted the management, their co-teachers and that boundaries are set with the children.

Educators' biases and assumptions gathered from their experiences are suspended in order to respond objectively to families and children. This was emphasized in literature as it suggested that being objective about imaginative weapons play provides a supporting and positive environment for the children (Delaney, 2016; Holland, 2000, 2003; Katch, 2001).

Violence is Not Elicited During Imaginative Weapons Play

The findings of this study supported Bauman's (2015) conclusion that children do not engage in imaginative weapons play because a child is violent but rather, a recreation of a child's interaction with his environment. Based on the responses of the educators, aggression during play is a result of feelings of frustration and competitiveness. This was corroborated by Hart and Tannok (2013), where their research stated that children are unintentionally causing harm and aggression to their peers. Furthermore, labelling of peers as the" bad guy" causes feelings of frustration and feeling of anger in children as they want to be portrayed as "heroes" or the "good guy". This was corroborated by Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2004) as children see on media that the good guys are always being praised and celebrated.

Levin & Carlsson-Paige (2004) cited that the sociopolitical view believes that children should be shielded from learning and re-enacting violence. One of the educators opposes the idea that children should be protected from learning about violence but rather, being truthful to the children by providing them with the realities of violence but in a safe space and child-friendly manner.

Personal Philosophies About Peace Does No Influence Imaginative Weapons Play

Holland's (2003) discussion of personal philosophies about peace, where the educators are unable to differentiate negative and positive peace, is confirmed in the results of this research. The educators' beliefs about the use weapons are for keeping a peaceful environment and to maintain peace. It also worth noting that an educator believe that violence and aggression is inherent to humans. thus, normalizing imaginative weapons play in the learning spaces. This demonstrates that educators are more familiar with the definition of negative peace.

On the contrary, personal experiences is not a reason for educators to prohibit imaginative weapons play. Almost all the educators' beliefs are not infiltrated through imaginative weapons play. Rather, they model peaceful conflict resolutions such as teaching empathy and guiding children to communicatee their needs and limits to their peers. Furthermore, the educators' reinforced that imaginative weapons play should be normalized and treated the same as any other form of play. Including imaginative weapons play in the hierarchy provides a more meaningful experience for children as they are guided by the adults during play.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study focuses on the educators' perspectives towards imaginative weapons play. By using Critical Childhood Studies as a framework, the educators were able to reflect on their experiences and relate it to how they perceive imaginative weapons play. The focus group served as a space for reflection between four early years educators on their role and how they navigate a play theme that is recurring in their learning spaces.

Their discussions reasserted the value of play in children's lives as they learn about themselves, others and their surroundings. The educators, knowing the importance of play, honours the children's agency and their right to play by acknowledging that weapons play is part of their experiences, which therefore, deserves an equal amount of attention, just like any other type of play. The educators' background and personal experiences influences their perspectives towards imaginative weapons play and their roles as educators. Their response of allowing children to engage in imaginative weapons play is a testament of their dedication in promoting the rights and agency of the children.

The research brought about two significant findings. Firstly, aggression and violence in children are not necessarily elicited by engaging in imaginative weapons play but rather a result of children's big feelings. Secondly, the idea of peace is still vague to educators as they use negative peace to define peaceful outcomes. Peaceful conflict resolutions are utilized by the educators.

The findings of this research presented vital implications for the teaching community. It is essential for ECEs to have dedicated time and space for discussions and reflections with their co-educators. Such practice encourages a collaborative environment that develops creative and collective solutions to complex issues such as imaginative weapons play and creating their setting's shared image of a child. This research can be

beneficial to the wider educational community as it can be used to inform the practices of other ECEs to support groups of children who are both interested and disinterested in participating in imaginative weapons play. This can be achieved by sharing the findings of the research during staff meetings, workshops or through informative posters. Lastly, this study can support educators and managers in developing policies within child care settings that reflects best practices to honour the children's agency and right to play as decide whether to engage or not in imaginative weapons play.

It is proposed that further research be done with children, to understand their perspective towards imaginative weapons play, in order to thicken their agency and support the practices of educators. Another recommendation is for those in managerial position in child care, to create a space where they encourage their staff to collectively reflect not just about imaginative weapons play but other kinds of topic that might require attention from educators. A final recommendation is for ECEs to engage in seminars and workshops that provide new learnings to update themselves with current educational trends such as emotional regulation in children and effective and peaceful conflict resolution.

My aspiration is for this research serve as guide to support ECEs with their roles that enables them to effectively and consistently uphold the agency and rights of children in their care.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Consent form

Title of study

Understanding Early Years Educators' Perspective on Gun Play

Principal investigator

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Child and Youth Study Graduate student, Mount Saint Vincent University

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Thesis supervisor

Dr. Catherine Baillie Abidi

Associate professor. Child and Youth Study, Mount Saint Vincent University

Invitation to participate in the study

You are being invited to participate in a research study conducted by Tara Camille Liscano, a graduate student at Mount Saint Vincent University for her thesis work. Choosing whether or not to participate is entirely your choice. Choosing not to participate in the study will not cause any negative impact on your relationship between yourself and the principal investigator. The information provided in this letter will outline the details of the research, how you can contribute to the study and what are the potential risks and benefits. Please read all the information carefully, take the time you need and feel free to ask questions or clarifications. You should not take part in the study unless you are sure that you have understood all the details in this form.

Purpose of the research study

This study seeks to understand the perspectives of early years educators in Halifax regarding children's imaginative weapons play. In particular, the purpose of the study is two-fold which is to add to the existing literature that can help other early years practitioners in supporting children who might and might not be engaged in imaginative weapons play and to inform the practices of early years educators to respond effectively to the children's needs and interests. In doing so, early years educators are able to respect children's agency and their right to play by collectively reflecting on their experiences that influences their perceptions of children and to engage in meaningful conversations with their co-educators on how they respond to children's imaginative weapons play.

Who can take part in the research study

To take part in this study, you must have at least five years of experience as an early childhood educator and have at least a Level 1 classification from the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

What you will be asked to do

You will be invited to attend two focus group sessions at Mount Saint Vincent University. The focus groups will last between one and two hours and will involve 4-6 early years educators as participants. Focus group is a method of engaging in conversations with other participants where we aim to answer the following research questions:

- What are your views of the children and how does this affect your pedagogical/teaching practices?
- What are your perspectives with regards to imaginative weapons play and what influences your decision(s) in allowing or prohibiting imaginative weapons play?

What views do you hold regarding your role when encountering children who are engaged in imaginative weapons play?

These focus group sessions will be audio-recorded using an MP3 recorder, and transcripts will be created from the audio-recordings. During the first focus group, you will be invited to illustrate your perceptions of children which will then be used to reflect on how it influences your relationships and interactions with children, the design of you learning spaces and delivery of learning objectives and the curriculum. In the second focus group session, you will be looking at vignettes or photos of children who are engaged in imaginative weapons play while reflecting on personal influences that affects your teaching practices when supporting children's play interests.

Possible risks and benefits

Risk: As the focus groups discussions requires you to reflect on your personal experiences that might influence your views of the children and how you interact with children who are engaged in imaginative weapons play. There is a possibility that these discussions can cause feelings of discomfort, anxiety or distress. In an event that this occurs, you can inform the principal investigator if you are incapable of continuing in the research process. A list of professional services that you might need are listed on the last page of the document.

There is also a possibility of eliciting strong opinions, judgements and emotions during the discussions as everyone's experiences are unique. It is highly encouraged that each participant's perspectives should be respected and listened to. Due to the nature of focus groups, confidentiality is not fully guaranteed. It is highly encouraged and expected that

any information that has been shared by other participants will not be divulged to non-participants and outside the focus group sessions.

Benefits: There is no guarantee that you will directly benefit from participating in this research, but your involvement will help to build an understanding on how early years educators can effectively respond to children's imaginative weapons play. It will also provide an opportunity for you to collectively reflect on the teaching practices that honours children's agency and right to play. As the trends in education continuously change over the years, your contribution will also add value to the topic.

How your information will be protected

All information provided to the principal investigator will be kept confidential. To protect your confidentiality, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym that will be used when quoting your contributions from the focus groups. Your personal information will be digitally stored separately from the audio-recordings, transcripts and illustrations that you have produced. The illustrations that you have produced will be scanned, digitally saved and immediately shredded.

The principal investigator will ensure confidentiality by restricting access to your personal information, signed informed consent and produced data during the focus group sessions. These will only be made available to the thesis supervisor if and when needed. All electronic data will be saved securely at Mount Saint Vincent University's encrypted OneDrive folder. None of your information that discloses your identity will be publicly released or published, unless you wish to have your contributions attributed to your name.

The principal investigator will comply with relevant ethics guidelines that protect your confidentiality and will not be shared with anyone unless required by law. Please note that it is the principal investigator's duty to report to Child Protection Services any incidents of child abuse or in some way causing harm to a child that might have been shared by any participant. Confidentiality and respect for other participants is important during the focus group. However, due to the nature of focus groups, the principal investigator cannot fully guarantee confidentiality. Please bear this in mind when deciding what information that you feel comfortable in sharing with the group.

If you decided to stop participating

It is your right as a participant to refuse to participate, answer any questions or withdraw at any point from the study by informing the principal investigator without giving a reason. There will be no penalties or repercussions if you decide to withdraw. However, due to the small number of participants in the study, your contributions prior to withdrawing will still be included in the final report. If you decide to withdraw after the focus groups, your contributions will be anonymized and will be included in the final report.

How to obtain results

Once the final written thesis report is available, a secure link where you can access it will be sent to you. The final report will also be deposited at Mount Saint Vincent University's E-commons, the university's repository where the thesis will be assigned a trustworthy and permanent link. The research will also be discoverable and accessed by a wider community through Google Scholar once is it deposited in the E-commons. The principal investigator will only use your contribution for the sole purpose if this research.

Conclusion

Please sign this agreement form if you agree to take part in the study. Thank you in advance for considering to take part in this research work. The principal investigator is more than happy to answer any questions regarding the research.

Questions

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact the principal investigator, Tara Camille Liscano (email: Tara.Liscano@msvu.ca).

If you have any ethical concerns or questions regarding your participation, you may also contact Mount Saint Vincent University's Research and Ethics Board at ethics@msvu.ca or 1-902-457-6350.

Contact details for support or information of related professional services:

To speak to a mental health professional in Nova Scotia:

- 211: A confidential helpline that is available for 24 hours and 7 days a week where you can speak with someone who can help in referring proper services offered in Nova Scotia.

  Call toll free: 211
- Access Wellness: personal counselling available 7 days a week from 8:30- to 11 pm. Single session can be online, by phone or in person to help individual who have mental health concerns such as anxiety, grief and loss.

  Call toll free: 1-833-691-2282

  Website: https://accesswellness.lifeworks.com/nova-scotia-en

- Nova Scotia Crisis Intervention: Available to 24 hours, 7 days a week to those who are experiencing overwhelming depression, intense anxiety and other mental health crises.

  Call toll free: 1-888-429-8167 or 902.429.8167.

Signature

By signing this form, I have read and understood the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to ask and discuss questions and it has been answered satisfactorily by the principal investigator. I understand that by participating in this study, I will be contributing by attending two audio recorded focus group discussions that will be transcribed using my chosen pseudonym. I voluntarily agree in taking part in this study and I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

I have been given a copy of this form to keep Yes No

Participants name: _____

(Please print)

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B: Structure of First Focus Group Session

Welcoming participants and introductions (˜20 minutes)

- Review of information letter/consent forms
- Introduction of principal investigator and welcoming participants, defining roles in the research process.
- Creation and agreement of community standards based on respect and confidentiality between participants during focus group sessions.
- Participants to choose a preferred pseudonym.
- General overview of the research question aims and objectives.
- Answer participants' questions regarding the research.
- Sharing the objectives of the first focus group.

Focus group discussion (˜60 minutes)

- Participants will be asked to reflect on their personal ideas about the image of a child through the following questions:
  - As an early years educator, how do you see a child? What is/are your view/s or perception/s of a child?
  - What are the sources of your perceptions?
  - How do these perceptions of a child influence your practice as an early years educator?
- Participants will be given 30-45 minutes to illustrate their responses.
- Participants will then be invited to share their produced illustrations with the group while the principal investigator will be taking note of the general ideas on a mind map.

Ending the focus group (˜20 minutes)

- Summarize the participants' responses by referring to the mind map.
- Ask if there is anything that was missed or needs to be clarified.
- Thanking the participants for their contributions during session.

Appendix C: Structure of Second Focus Group Session

Welcoming participants (˜20 minutes)

- Review of community standards which based on respect and confidentiality between participants during focus group sessions.
- Review of the information letter/consent forms
- Sharing a short summary of the first focus group
- Sharing the objectives of the second session.

Focus group discussion (˜60 minutes)

- Participants will be asked to look at vignettes while reflecting on the following questions that are focused on imaginative weapons play:
    - What would be your initial response when you see children participating in this type of play?
    - What are the reasons for this reaction?
    - What do you think are children learning when engaged in imaginative weapons play?
    - How would you support children who have diverse interest in your classroom setting?
    - What is your role as an early years educator when children are involved in imaginative weapons play while others are not?
- Participants are encouraged to share their ideas through round-robin and responses are noted on a mind map.
- Participants will be invited to engage in a deeper reflection and conversation towards children through the following questions:

    - What influenced your perceptions about imaginative weapons play?
    - In what ways do you believe your personal perceptions of the child influences your teaching practices in the context of imaginative weapons play?

- Participants are encouraged to share their ideas through round-robin and responses are noted on a mind map.

Ending the focus group (˜20 minutes)

- Summarize the participants' responses by referring to the mind map.
- Ask if there is anything that was missed or needs to be clarified.
- Thanking the participants for their contributions and informing participants when they will receive their transcripts.

Appendix D: Vignettes Used for Second Focus Group Session

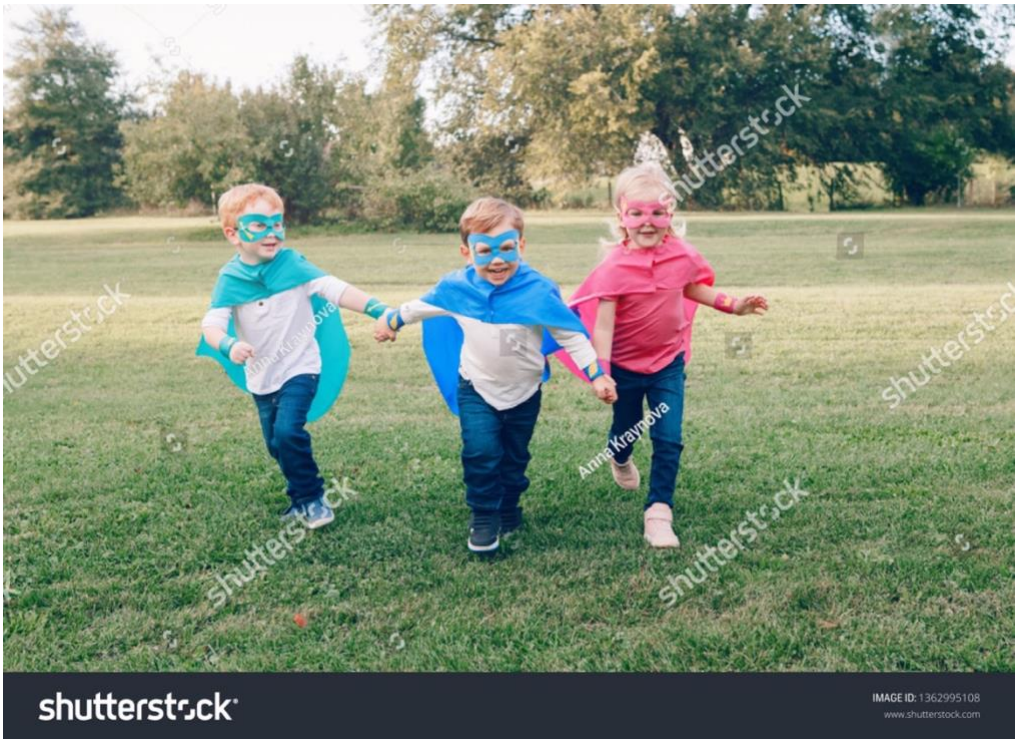


Image 1: Children pretending to be superheroes

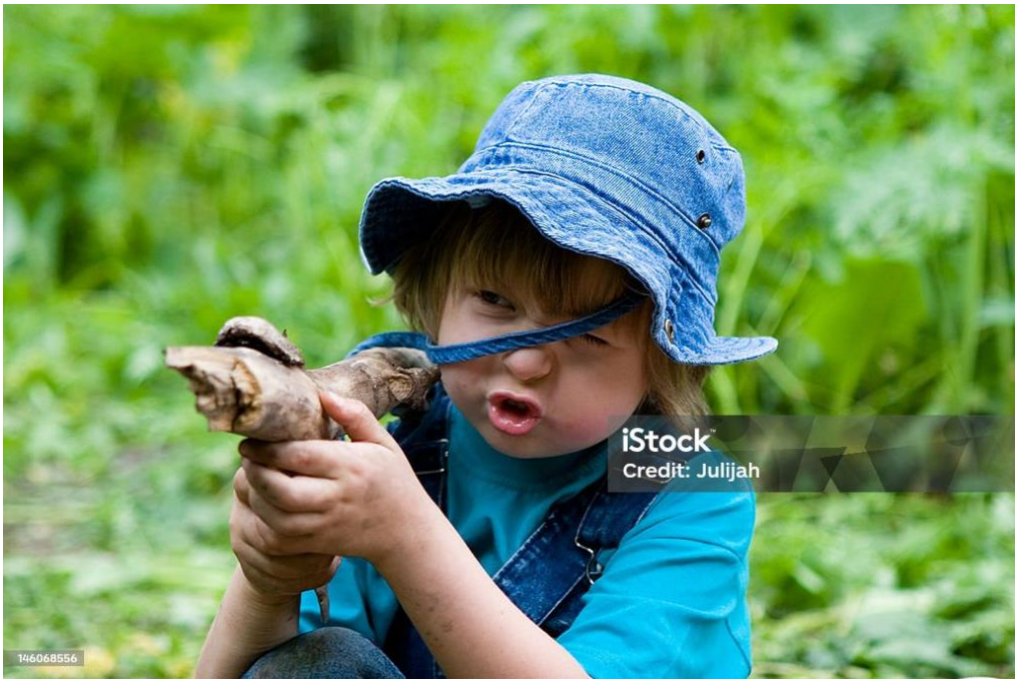


Image 2: Using materials or objects as pretend weapons

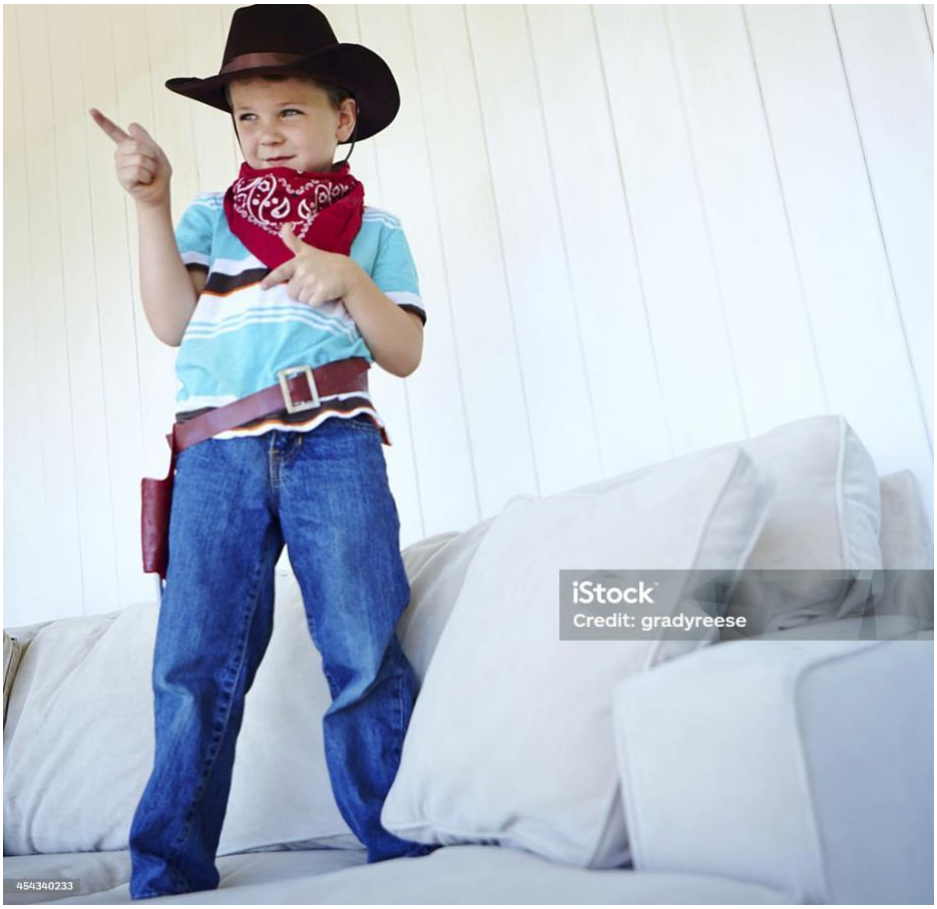


Image 3: Child pretending to be a cowboy, forming his hand as a gun

Appendix E: Recruitment Poster

Looking for participants for a research study

Tara Camille Liscano, a graduate student from Mount Saint Vincent University, is conducting a research study about early years educators' perspectives towards children's imaginative weapons play.

IF YOU HAVE AT LEAST...

- five years of experience as an early years educator.
- a Level 1 classification from Nova Scotia Department of Education and Childhood Development

then you can participate in the study. This is an opportunity for you to come together with other early years educators to discuss and reflect on how you view chidlren and how it influences your teaching practices particularly with imaginative weapons play in your classroom.

WHAT WILL WE BE DOING?

You will be asked to join two in-person focus group sessions at Mount Saint Vincent University, where you will be invited to collectively reflect on the following questions by sharing your experiences:

- What are your views of a child and how does this affect your teaching practices?
- What are your perspectives towards imaginative weapons play?
- What is your role as an early years educator when encountering children who might or might not be engaged in imaginative weapons play?

If you are interested in participating or would like to know more information, please email Tara at Tara.Liscano@msvu.ca

The security of information sent by email cannot be guaranteed. Please do not communicate personal sensitive information via email.

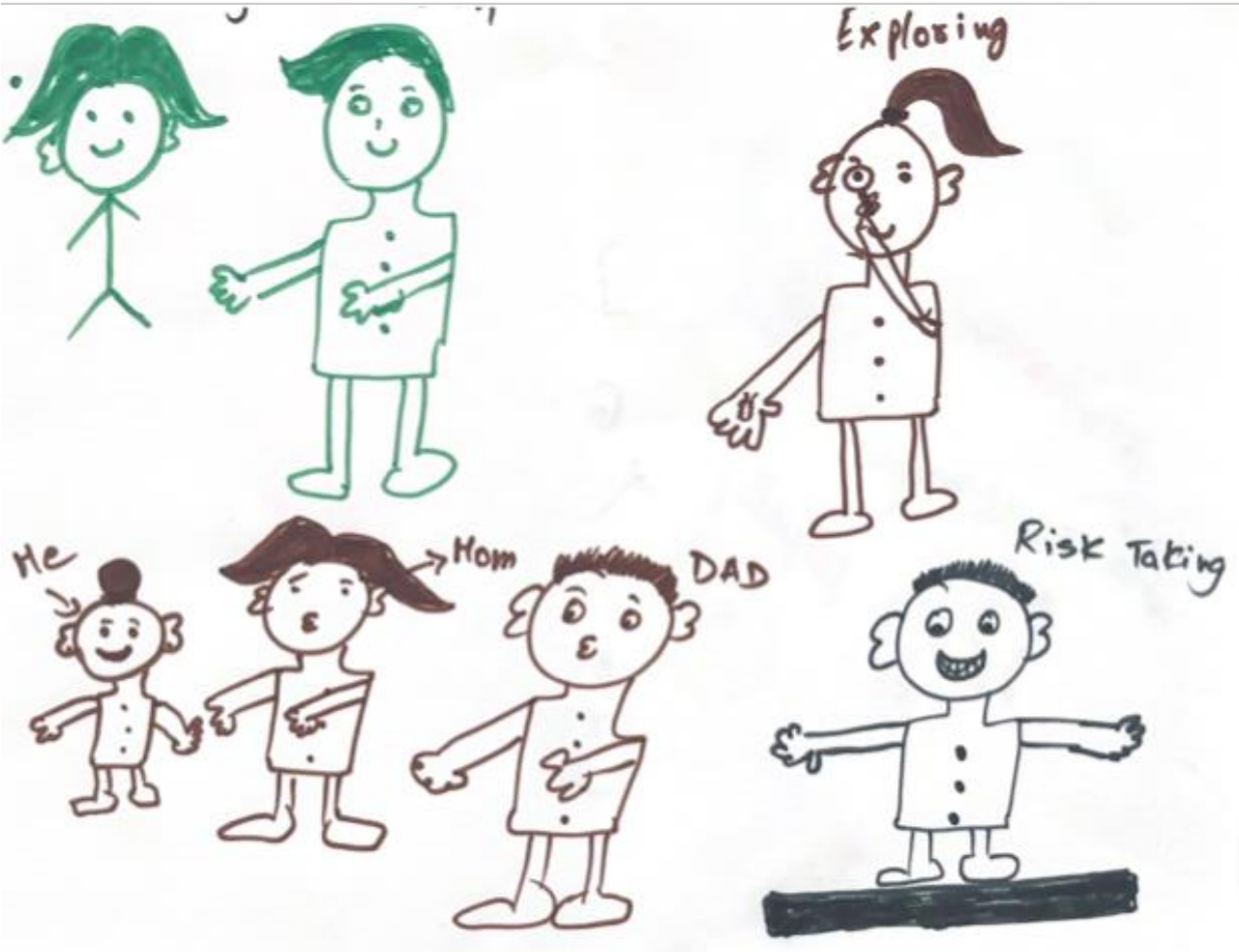
REB #

MOUNT SAINT VINCENT UNIVERSITY

Appendix F: Educators' Illustrations Showing Their Image of the Child.

Educator 1's illustration of her image of the child: Using drawings and descriptive words depicting her perceptions of a child.

Educator 2's illustration of her image of the child: "The child is busy and messy". Educator 2 also talked about the family, school and community as the factors that influenced her perceptions of a child.



Educator 3's illustration of her image of the child: Child as an explorer, risk taker. Her family influences her perceptions of a child. She depicted a picture of an educator talking to a child, as she sees this as one of her roles as an educator.