

**Toys and Outcomes:
Narratives of Care Within Early Learning and Elementary Educator Practices**

by

Denise Burgess

A Thesis
submitted to the
Nova Scotia Inter-University Doctoral Administrative Committee and Acadia University in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies

Wolfville, Nova Scotia
Spring Convocation 2024

This thesis by Denise Burgess was defended successfully in an examination on
October 20th, 2023

The examining committee for the thesis defence was:

Professor A. Doyle, Chair

Dr. S. Stagg Peterson, External Examiner

Dr. M. Lynn Aylward, Supervisor

Dr. Donna Varga, Committee Member

Dr. Anne Murray-Orr, Committee Member

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine how early educators make meaning of and enact an ethic of care in inclusive learning environments. A narrative inquiry methodology was employed to generate data through interviews, focus group discussions, journal entries, and artifact collection with four Pre-Primary educators and three Primary teachers in one rural centre for education in Nova Scotia. Three major themes emerged from the data. These include the impact of relationships with children, responsibilities for promoting learning, and professional connections and boundaries. The findings inform discussions related to power, and how early educators' understandings of child development and learning through inclusive practices emerge. Systemic change in the areas of prioritizing caring, recognizing children's agency, and acknowledging the vast and diverse learning that occurs in early childhood can help to improve early learning experiences in Canadian schools.

Glossary of Key Terms and Abbreviations

CLT—Collaborative Learning Time: Designated time embedded in the school calendar for teachers to collaborate and work on professional development goals.

Early Educators: Individuals employed to educate children 0 to eight years old. For this paper, it specifically refers to the PPECEs and PTs.

ECE—Early Childhood Education: A field of education focusing on the development and learning experiences of children between 0 and eight years old.

ECEs—Early Childhood Educators: Educators that work with children from 0 to five years, in settings outside of traditional school, with a focus on providing educational experiences.

PT—Primary teachers: Certified teachers with a Bachelor of Education, that instruct children during their first year of formal school (often referred to as kindergarten).

PPECE—Pre-Primary early childhood educators: Early childhood educators working in Pre-Primary classrooms in Nova Scotia.

NSDEECD: Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Child Development.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

This study is dedicated to the children I have had the privilege of accompanying on their educational journey. You have taught me more than you will ever know. I am honoured to have spent time with each of you. I hope I have helped you along the way.

I would like to first thank my participants, whose willingness and openness to share formed the core of this research. Thank you for welcoming me into your classrooms and homes, giving me your time, and most of all, for trusting me with your stories. In addition, thank you to my Regional Centre for Education, for your willingness to grant permission for this research to be conducted, and for all the opportunities you have provided me as an employee over the last 15 years. Thank you to Joanne Uhlman and Catherine Rahey for seeing in me, the potential to grow as an educator, and encouraging me to continue to learn, question, and reflect on my own teaching practices.

A simple thank you is not enough for Dr. M. Lynn Aylward, my doctoral supervisor. I have greatly appreciated your reminders that I am working through this process in unprecedented times. The patience, guidance and support you have given me, has made this such a positive experience. Similarly, I would like to thank my other committee members: Dr. Donna Varga and Dr. Anne Murray-Orr. You have both been so responsive to my questions, wonderings, and worries. You have offered encouragement and made me wonder even more. I am so grateful to this entire team. I would like to also acknowledge and thank Ruth Ann Brown for her editing and proofreading of the final drafts.

Finally, to my family, Adam, Caillum, and Ainsley, you have been a source of strength through this entire process. Thank you for always believing in me, having patience with the process (even when I did not) and providing support along the way. To my mother, sisters

Darlene and Dawn, and brothers-in-law James and Mike, thank you for knowing when to ask about the project, and when to not. For excusing my absences, and providing an environment throughout my whole life where education was valued

Chapter 1: Grounding the Research

The aim of this study is to examine how early educators make meaning of and enact an ethic of care in inclusive learning environments. To begin, I share stories as a parent and educator, in my exploration of the influence of inclusive schooling and understanding of child development on educators' approaches to caring for children in early educational settings.

Ready for School

There was an awkward stop in the flow of the conversation. The school psychologist was staring at my husband and me. She leaned back in her chair crossing her arms, her mouth half open she struggled to find her words. "Oh, I see. Well, Caillum will be fine in school come September. The Primary teacher is great, super-structured, and you don't really need to pay for care next year... he is ready for school." It was May 2014, and the school psychologist was our last stop of the day at the Primary screening, in the process of registration for our four-year-old son, Caillum. Although my husband and I had no intention of sending our four-year-old son off to school in September, we did go through the initial rituals associated with entering school in Nova Scotia, at the urging of our parents and the local school.

The Primary screening consisted of a half-hour visit to the school, where parents and preschoolers would circulate through four stations to receive tips for preparing for school entry. Professionals would complete assessment activities or screening protocols to inform classroom placements and potential intervention services needed when the child entered the school system, and in some cases, prior to entry. Stations included public health nurses screening for vision and dental, the school speech language pathologist, and finally, the school psychologist, with each station lasting about eight minutes. The screening had gone well, as we had expected; however,

it had not shifted our choice. Caillum would continue at the local licenced not-for-profit daycare for another year.

After being initially shocked that our decision was to keep Caillum out of the school, the psychologist went on to discuss all the advantages the school could provide, rather than “keeping him back.” I could not think of a single advantage sending him to school would provide, but I did not say that aloud. As his parents, we wanted him to have more time to play and explore in a less rigid more child-centred environment. From the time our son was a toddler, it was clear he loved to play. He was hands-on (as most toddlers and pre-schoolers are) and being active was his primary way of having learning experiences. Although his early childhood educators [ECEs] at the daycare, and the school personnel all assured us, he was “ready” at four years eight months. We decided there was no need to rush him into the structure of school and its demands, and what he needed to learn at this point in his life could be found through his experiences in our home and at his daycare. When we tried to explain this rationale to school personnel, family, and friends, it was often met with objections that we were babying him, and were being too protective. School was where he was supposed to be. Schools have the most qualified staff to teach him. Obviously, as an educator, I questioned this rationale. As a former early elementary teacher and later as a resource/learning centre teacher, I witnessed the unintended consequences of children enrolling in school, where learning experiences were often narrowly defined within an outcome-based curriculum, and assumptions for performance against a standardized norm were high. I could generate a list of students that were perceived early on in their school careers as having deficits from inattention to defiant outbursts, and I could not help but wonder if these challenges were potentially due to the behavioural

expectations being beyond where these children were developmentally, and an environment that could not be responsive to their pathway.

The decision to have Caillum wait to enter school an additional year has not been a determination that my husband and I have ever regretted. When he did enter school, we believe he was developmentally more ready to meet the demands of the Primary curriculum and the expectations of his teacher. As he progressed through early elementary, his report cards and teacher comments continued to reflect that he was a capable learner. His “kept back” year has not been a detriment; he was equally ready to learn at five years of age, and his ‘readiness’ did not expire.

I still discuss our experience from eight years ago with acquaintances and strangers who are often confused about why our 10-year-old is in a grade four class, or why he is the only player on his hockey team in grade three (organized sports are often classified by birth year). These conversations tend to go in one of two ways: either the person is shocked that school is not compulsory until age six in Nova Scotia, or they share their own child’s challenges about those first years in school, and how they wish they would have known that it was a choice. Many parents have stories about the challenges their four or five-year-olds experienced during the first year of school. The other response from people is more challenging. Often, they shrug their shoulders and walk away, or say that I have created an unfair advantage for him. In some way, they may be right.

In sports, there is a phenomenon known as red-shirting, when coaches delay some athletes’ participation on a team until their sophomore year, when they are called “redshirt freshmen” and have better-developed skills. It is true, my husband and I did delay entry to school, so our son was more prepared, but that preparation was not drills, not exercises, it was

offering quality early childhood learning experiences in what we felt were the most positive environments for him. I have had conversations with stressed mothers and fathers that are bracing for the impact of their child entering school. They know in their gut that the school system, as it is currently structured, is not what their four or five-year-old needs for success. Yet, they send their child, feeling that not sending them would be more disadvantageous. After these conversations, I am left questioning how is it that we got to this place, where parents feel the pressure to offer much more than nurturing to four and five-year-olds, in order to set them up for success later in life?

Provincial governments throughout Canada have established laws regarding compulsory schooling, and defined the ages at which children must enter and remain within the system. However, in most jurisdictions, children may enter the public school system up to two years before the required age. Nova Scotia is one of the provinces that have an early-entry practice with public schooling being available to children as young as four years-eight months, although attendance in Grade Primary is not required until their sixth birthday. Furthermore, the province has invested heavily in a universal, free voluntary preschool program entitled Pre-Primary, which is housed within school buildings with the purpose of “providing a child-centered, play-based program for children the year before they start school” (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Child Development [NSDEECD], 2020b). Initiated in 2017, the Pre-Primary program rolled out across the province over a four-year period. Primarily located in elementary schools this program enrolls children as young as three years-eight months of age with the goal that it will “help them transition into the school system and provide experiences that give children the best start to succeed in school and life”. (NSDEECD, 2020b). The messaging of the Pre-Primary program establishes the school environment as the location where the most important learning

will happen for a child, and subtly communicates that delaying that entry is disadvantageous. This lens for viewing early childhood learning as preparation for school and life success, results in a risk of childhood becoming a list of achievements and experiences of the individual, with little consideration for fostering contexts that enables each child's growth and development to occur on its own trajectory. My own experiences with delaying my son's school start evidences the ways in which going against the beliefs of enrolment in a traditional school as soon as possible, is viewed as not in the child's best interest by those within the education system, especially when the child meets or displays the arbitrary signs of being "ready" as established by the school system.

This myth of "readiness" is complex, and requires going beyond simply the characteristics of the child to gain an understanding of the interconnected ways in which this concept infiltrates early elementary learning. Yet, "being ready for school" is often the language that appears in both educational conversation and academic research (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Readiness is often reduced to simple checklists of achievements, standardized skills, or characteristics children exhibit during the transition to school period, that are linked to degrees of success at a later point (LaParo et al., 2000). Typically, studies focused on school readiness rely on teacher reports of their perceptions of readiness, with adjustment expectations and self-regulation being highly valued across countries (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Yet, do these expectancies and understandings of "readiness" really correspond to what is known about child development, or do they further perpetuate deficit understandings? There is a broad, diverse span of development for children during the preschool period. Yet, it would seem there is a clear-cut trajectory created, that places anticipations on academic and social abilities within everyone, required for success. So, with these seemingly clear-cut expectations placed on each individual

child, how do both ECEs and early elementary teachers come to define and establish inclusive learning environments, and care for children within their roles, when against a backdrop of expectations and assumptions of prerequisites established?

Learning and Play

I sat in my Primary/one/two classroom surrounded by several boxes of new materials to unpack. It was the week before school started in 2008, and this was my second year as an early elementary classroom teacher. As I looked around the room, there was an adult-size easel, a puppet theatre, a play kitchen, and a carpet. I expected that other boxes would include accessories to make the new play materials appealing, like dolls, puppets, and play food. Although excited about the infusion of materials to support play-based learning, I was still a bit confused as to when it would fit into the teaching day.

The Primary Teacher in-service that happened the previous May to address the expansion of the Primary program to children as young as four years-eight months, did not include any changes to teaching minutes for subjects or curriculum content, and it definitely did not address how to support play in a multi-grade classroom. Rather, the directive was to integrate play into what was already happening in the classrooms. As one seasoned Primary teacher declared during the in-service, “the only difference is, it seems that there will be younger students in the classrooms and play materials cluttering the room.” Although I did not necessarily see the infusion of play materials as clutter, I did agree that without the time in the school day to make play child-led, there was not much room for a shift in the Grade Primary program to actually unfold. The messaging of the in-service was further met with significant resistance from many of the Primary teachers in attendance, as they feared they would be judged

for the play and unstructured time happening in their room, or they simply believed they were wasting valuable learning time if the play were to be implemented on a regular basis.

Initially, when I had heard there was going to be an in-service for Primary teachers regarding play-based learning in the classroom setting, I had been full of anticipation. Finally, the philosophy that I had secretly adopted and applied (when “no one” was looking) would be considered appropriate for school. I was quickly disappointed as the emphasis at the in-service became about structured play and teacher-directed activities that were labelled play, but were just masking current instructional practices. I also became frustrated with the piecemeal approach that was provided to my colleagues and me, as a Primary teacher.

As I sat there in my empty classroom that August with the brand-new toys, on my desk was a binder of photocopied worksheets provided at the same in-service, to support teachers in planning for the school year. The facilitators of the professional development session had called the binder, containing over 250 worksheets, their “greatest hits” of tasks to support learning in Primary; all premade worksheets for individual seatwork. I could not help but see the irony and contradictions between the two methodologies of teaching presented that day, and the degree to which my teaching peers readily accepted the binder of worksheets, versus the integration of play into the classroom.

In undergraduate courses, as part of earning my Child and Youth Study degree, I examined the positive role of play in learning, theories of child development, and how to nurture inclusivity within the learning environment. These three themes were further solidified for me as best practices, as I completed placements in daycare settings, where I observed and implemented the actualization of the theories and the corresponding success of children provided with an environment that met their needs. As I continued my academic career in a Bachelor of

Elementary Education program, the three keystone themes explored in my undergraduate degree did not receive mention. Instead, the focus was on utilizing curriculum documents, developing methodologies for supporting subject-specific topics, and generating formal lesson plans. My practicum teaching placements reinforced the role of direct instruction, assessment, and how to design and facilitate collaborative work. While I had noticed the contrast in philosophies between my undergraduate and education degree, I negotiated my own strategies to reflect a merging of the two perspectives. However, if questioned, I always spoke from the elementary education standpoint regarding the curriculum and meeting outcomes, and not from the position of child development. After all, I wanted a permanent position in a school, and later, because I did not want to be judged as too “soft” on learning by my peers.

Now faced with the integration of play into Primary, a topic I was passionate about, I was left struggling to negotiate a place for it in my classroom. I was also perplexed, as I could not understand how I was going to allow play to genuinely happen with a rigid curriculum, and the accountability for completing and reporting each child’s mastery and progress. It was not like I had not used play in previous years. I slipped it in when the class seemed tired, disengaged, or unable to monitor and manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviours in ways that would be considered acceptable. It was a reactive response to mitigate disengagement, but I believe play offers the potential to be so much more in early elementary. I have come to understand that learning does not happen in prescriptive ways, nor does it happen only through the delivery of a prescribed curriculum on a demanding schedule. As an educator, I believe play-based learning offers all children opportunities to deeply understand concepts through exploration, creativity, and socialization.

As I sat in the classroom that August surrounded by the boxes, I felt frustrated and disheartened. I began to reflect on my professional experiences, which lead me to question if the philosophies and practices of whole child learning could better serve the diversity of learners that entered Primary classrooms, than the reliance on standardized outcomes and expectations.

Drawing on my experiences teaching in an early elementary setting, as I navigated between meeting outcomes and providing opportunities to play, I identify and agree with Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff (2008) that a false dichotomy in education exists in early elementary, one in which play and learning are separate spheres, and where learning occurs in rigid, teacher-directed ways, while play is deemed the opposite. The acceptance of my peers to the photocopied activities ready to go for their classrooms over the less prescribed toys to facilitate play, underscores ways in which the dichotomy is actualized in the school setting. However, the traditional polarity of learning versus play, is beginning to be contested within educational and child development literature as the concept of “playful learning” has begun to emerge (Zosh, Guadreau, Michnick Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2022). Rooted in the belief that it is possible to combine a rich curriculum and a playful pedagogy, playful learning as a concept places teachers as support, and the children as the active explorers. Yet, for this to happen, a shift in how educators come to understand development, how they are taught to deliver curriculum, along with how learning goals are written and measured is necessary (Hirsch-Pasek et al., 2020). To arrive at the potential of playful learning emerging within early elementary classrooms, whole child learning as a framework for guiding programming and practices is necessary.

Whole child learning, as I have come to define it, means considering the entire possibility of each child by guiding their personal and academic journey. It means fostering a community of learners, affirming the diversity of knowledge each person brings to the classroom, meeting

children where they are, and celebrating their growth as pathways emerge, and an educator provides guidance, rather than direct oversight in the learning process. A holistic approach, to me, is the best fit for early education. By contrast, the standardized, age and grade-based outcomes and expectations established for grade Primary in Nova Scotia come with many assumptions regarding children's previous experiences and knowledge, and have the unintended immediate consequence of leaving some children on the "outside" looking in—far from an inclusive environment. As a result, I wondered how educators' definitions of learning and play impact how they support the diversity of learners in their classrooms?

Incorporate and Transition

A few years ago, the student services department at my regional centre for education received a grant for a new initiative. They created a resource program specifically to support grade Primary and grade one students as they began and progressed through the first two years of formal schooling. The goal of the program was, quite simply, to proactively instruct early elementary children "how to do" school, and therefore, limit the number of additional services required later when the children did not meet specifications for development. My interpretation was that the program aimed to "fix them before they were too broken." The underlying assumption was that children just needed direct instruction to have success, and if they had a deficit in knowing and performing in key school expectations, this could be taught. To put it more simply, there was a right and a wrong way to do school, and school personnel could quickly identify children who were "doing" school wrong and put them 'right.'

Initially, the position that explicitly teaching the expectations of school to children, that were potentially not developmentally ready for these systems and structures, did not appeal to me. If anything, the program highlighted all of the aspects of the school system structure that

were not working. It made me question even further, how our system was fast to label perceived deficits. How could a child that had been in school for only a few weeks already be labelled as “at risk” or worse yet, ‘failing’ at school? After several more discussions with student services personnel and my administrator, I reluctantly accepted the position with the condition that I could create a program responsive to concerns teachers raised, in ways I felt were most appropriate. Which, to me, meant meeting the children referred to me where they were, providing learning opportunities through play, and celebrating them for what they did bring to the classroom.

The first week in September, early elementary teachers started making referrals, quickly identifying children that they assessed were delayed in their academic progress, and by the end of the school year over 33% of students in the Primary classes, and 38% of the grade one students had been referred to the transition program, due to teacher concerns with children’s ability to monitor and control their own behaviours and emotions, time on task skills, and compliance with school expectations.

To support the children referred, I developed lessons that were play-based, supplied frequent opportunities for children to have free choice time with the toys and materials available, and offered support, when necessary, to scaffold learning experiences. In this position, I was free from a prescribed curriculum. Instead, I was able to draw on my informed understanding of child development, to create an environment that could support everyone that entered my classroom. Ironically, this was not why I was approached for the position, or why others are now hired for this role; rather, it was my background as a learning centre teacher that made me a candidate. Perhaps it was my M.Ed. in Inclusive Education, or my ability and experience to assess and prescribe “treatment” through interventions to ‘fix’ the lagging skills

identified by teachers, that made me an ideal transition program leader. Either way, the qualifications valued, further stress the interventionist lens of the program over an inclusive approach to supporting education.

The child-centred learning practices I used in the transition room to support children, enabled me to celebrate each child, and the knowledge they brought with them to the learning experiences. I believe this child-centred approach which focused on the funds of knowledge each child brought, is absent in many classrooms, as early elementary programs are committed to outcome-based learning and individual student performance accountability, which, in turn, now drives instructional practices (Gullo & Hughes, 2011; Hedges et al., 2011; Pyle & DeLuca, 2017). Although the teachers appreciated the program, a common concern they voiced was the children's absence from their academically structured lessons in the classroom, often for 30 to 60 minutes per day, and how this absence was putting the students further behind in demonstrating the prescribed outcomes. Although I integrated the activities in the transition room with the same academic skill concepts that were being taught in their home classroom, these approaches were not accepted by the classroom teachers as "real learning" opportunities. The children from the transition program were not demonstrating their knowledge and learning of the prescribed outcomes in the same way it was expected in the classroom, and so, their progress did not "count" in the opinions of the classroom teachers. In the transition program activities, children often relied on oral presentations and applied contextual situations to demonstrate their learning, over worksheets or formalized teacher-directed learning stations established in their home classroom. Due to the teacher's concerns over missed home classroom learning, many of the referred children were given short timelines of six weeks in daily 30 minute blocks in the transition program, to "catch up" on the pre-requisites of school, so they could get

on with their 'real' learning. In the end, many teachers reported the skills the children demonstrated in the transition room environment did not transfer to their home classrooms. But how could they? The environments were drastically different. These contradictions made me wonder, how do educators create and promote an inclusive learning environment where students can truly show what they know? What do educators really care about in public schooling?

In addition to being an early elementary teacher, I have also been an elementary resource and learning centre teacher. Children were often referred to me, as a learning support teacher, so that I could “catch them up” by providing interventions for improvement. In other words, I was expected to make students match a typically developing student within a few weeks of entering the school system for the first time. I believe there is no clear path for preparation to avoid being behind the normative curve for learning often referenced by schools. The children that have been referred to my resource room from Primary classrooms have a variety of backgrounds, from multilingual learners, and newcomer Canadians, to students living in poverty, and those from affluent families. While some children attended licenced, regulated childcare, others stayed at home with family members prior to school entry. How paradoxical is it that we have so many children who are considered “behind” before they even start their formal learning, as though there exists a universal standard for public school admission? If diversity is defined within the school system as, “the many differences and similarities that exists among people” (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2007, p. 3) from race and gender, to cultural background and education, how can it be the norm that so many children are positioned as in need of interventions as soon as they begin public schooling? Perhaps more problematic in my experience, is that many of the children referred for learning support due to “deficits” are only identified through the filter of the education system, as many come to school with no previous

concerns from their families or in their community, regarding their growth and development. Does the school environment construct these deficits?

At the broadest level, an inclusive school system means having full access and participation in education for all children. To be a truly inclusive environment means realization of equitable human rights that translate into the acceptance and appreciation of all individual and systemic-based differences, including culture, gender, race, socio-economic status, ability, and sexual orientation (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Carrington, 1999). In the Nova Scotia context, the 2019 inclusive education policy echoes the broad definition of inclusion, since it is described by the NSDEECD (2019c) as being “a commitment to ensuring a high quality, culturally, and linguistically responsive and equitable education to support the well-being and achievement of every student [so that all students feel] accepted, safe and valued” (p. 1).

While the foundational cornerstone of inclusion is acceptance and appreciation of diversity, the historical (but still present) discipline of special education impacts how inclusive education is understood in Nova Scotia. Language like “only as special as necessary” (NSDEECD, 2016, p. 1) creates assumptions that there are norms of development, and that accommodations should be provided only when there are deviations from those norms. There are mixed messages within the system for educators, families, and children (Njie et al., 2017, 2018). The continued emphasis on developmental deviations within educational policies may hinder the realization of a practice of inclusive education that is fully responsive, accepting, and respectful in supporting and valuing children’s learning and diverse abilities, as outlined in the latest inclusive education policy (NSDEECD, 2019c). The contrast between the two competing practices of reifying norms and promoting diverse learning pathways was explored in my experiences as a transition teacher.

An Ethic of Care

My understanding of child development and the role of educators in supporting children's learning in an inclusive environment, was explored through considerations of an "ethic of care.". Taking up an ethic of care recognizes the interconnections between care and education, enabling a broader and more holistic conception of learning (Gibbons, 2007). When applied, an educator's ethic of care can be a seamless approach that supports children's development, going beyond the caring traits of the educator as a person, to examining the actions that are foundational to decision-making, and practices related to pedagogy and curriculum (Goldstein, 1998).

My evolving definition of care draws on Noddings' (2011a) argument that teaching through an ethic of care is a process of recognizing each child as an individual, committing to providing individualizing learning experiences first, and then taking action to foster interconnections between all children. As a classroom and specialist teacher, I have prioritized knowing everyone in my classroom, and developing a community of learners. I work to avoid cookie cutter approaches, and I attempt to be responsive to each individual, and meet them where they are. I share with and listen to the children and families, ask questions, and observe their interactions. I believe educators care when they can develop an understanding of each child within their classroom, appreciating their unique perspectives and experiences, and then using this knowledge to inform how they present learning materials. I also support the idea that this type of care directly informs responsive pedagogical decisions that translate into valuing everyone's growth, rather than the achievement of measured outcomes. However, with the backdrop of rigid curriculum requirements, and the tradition of identifying and labelling various types of developmental deviations still very present within the school system in Nova Scotia, how do Primary teachers (PTs) come to define care within their practice, and how does this

compare with Pre-Primary early childhood educators' (PPECEs') definitions and practices? How do potential differences in PPECEs' and PTs' approaches impact their concepts of learning and inclusive practices?

In my experience, the school system appears to anticipate the quick adjustment and demonstration of new skills by children as they enter school, rather than recognizing that transition is a process over time. Transitions are described by the Nova Scotia Department of Education (2005) as the passage from one stage to another, and are considered lifelong processes. Yet, many of my experiences as an educator contrast with this definition of natural progression. The concept of school entry as a transition is not new. It is one of many transitions each individual will experience over the course of their life. Transition is not marked as one singular event, but as an ongoing process. Within the education system, there are key notable landmark (or benchmark) transitions, including home to school, elementary to middle school, middle school to high school, and finally, high school to post-secondary and/or work, and each of these have received focused research (Anderson et al., 2000).

My own experiences in public education as a Primary student were positive. I loved school; I thought of it as a game. A game that was relatively simple; do what they say, complete the mimeograph worksheets, colour in the lines, play nice, and get praised. It never occurred to me in Primary or really at any time through my public school experience, that there would be others that did not understand the game that school was. I believed everyone came to school and loved it just like I did! How could I not believe this? After all, I am a privileged cisgender, white female, and my entire public school experience involved adults with a similar story and culture; pleasing them was easy for me. Now as an educator, I realize school is not a simple game, rather it is a complex system that does not always align with children's identities, and I must be

responsive to each child's lived experiences. Yet, often classroom teachers' assumptions around children's performance, and focus on having them achieve and demonstrate the skills for what school is, are predetermined. When these expectations or skills are not readily displayed, educators are more than willing to make referrals to "fix" or further assess the child, so that an explanation can be made for why specific children are not achieving the expectations of school, rather than shifting the attention to question what the school and classroom are not providing to meet the diverse needs of the children present.

My transition program teaching story is one snapshot of one school in one community, where recently, in one year, over 33% of children from the Primary classes, and 38% of the grade one children were deemed "unready" for school by their educators. What do these percentages really mean? To receive a referral of concern regarding progress in the first year of a child's school experience, underlines that there is an emerging agenda for what the preschool years must teach, to prepare children for school entry. More significantly, how are educators coming to understand child development, and its potential influence on the establishment of inclusive learning environments?

Research Problem and Questions

"Do you realize, I have to do this every day!"—Primary student with a frustrated tone.

"Do what?"—Primary teacher.

Primary student shaking his head back and forth, "Come here to this school!"

Inclusion means having access to education in ways that work for all children, and although policies and best practices have advocated inclusion for over three decades, the reality is that many classroom environments are not accepting of the diversity of lived experiences children inhabit. This study sought to generate first-person story narratives of educators'

experiences, as they navigated the creation of inclusive early learning environments in Pre-Primary and Primary classrooms. Building upon my experiences as a parent, classroom specialist educator, and educational researcher, I have come to believe the level of responsibility and engagement demonstrated by an educator is a critical variable in how an inclusive early learning environment is established. Evidence of the impact of the educator on classroom climate and student well-being can be drawn from Rucinski et al.'s (2018) examination of elementary students and teachers' relationships quality. In their study, a lack of close positive dyadic relationships between children and their teacher was found to impact both emotional and academic outcomes for students.

I planned this research to highlight educator understandings and practices related to child development. Educators' knowledge, experiences, reflections, and how these inform their practice are essential to gaining insights and strategies for supporting all learners. While I understand PPECEs and PTs do not have total control over the learning environment, exploring how educators navigate policies and establish practices, can further inform progressive programs and policy-making for early learners.

My study focuses on gaining insights into relationships between inclusive learning environments, child development, and experiences of PPECEs and PTs in one rural RCE in Nova Scotia. Particularly, I question: What PPECEs' and PTs' knowledges inform the design and planning of learning experiences? How do educators foster relationships with children in an early learning space? How do PPECEs and PTs create and sustain inclusive learning environments? All of these elements combine to create an educator's "ethic of care" in a learning environment (Noddings, 2011a). An ethic of care in this framework is supported by Noddings' (1984) argument that, once a teacher accepts the child in front of them, and attempts to see and hear the

learning experiences through the child's eyes and ears, and works to accept the child's motives, they will exhibit practices that are informed by an understanding of what must be done, as well as what ought to be done.

Research Question

How do participant Pre-Primary ECEs (PPECEs) and grade Primary teachers (PTs) make meaning of, and enact an ethic of care within an inclusive educational setting for children, in one rural educational centre for education in Nova Scotia?

Relevance of the Study to the Field

This research is significant for describing and analyzing the contexts of all children's entry to formal schooling in Nova Scotia, and improving the continuity of programming between Pre-Primary and Primary programs. On a broader level, this research contributes to the discourse of educator education and practice, by challenging dominant child development theories, along with universal assumptions regarding measuring the achievement of early learners.

Chapter Summaries

How early educators make meaning of, and enact an ethic of care in inclusive learning environments is explored and discussed, in the following order:

Chapter 2 examines the experiences and contexts of early education learners and educators in current research literature, along with relevant policies to the Nova Scotia context. In addition, key findings and issues related to inclusive education and practices are explored.

Chapter 3 presents a social constructivist methodology as a framework for the research study undertaken, including its narrative inquiry design, questions, and participant selection. In addition, data analysis procedures are described.

Chapter 4 summarizes and analyzes the data generated through the presentation of emergent themes.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the data analysis in relation to current literature findings, and draws a conclusion to my research question through a reflection of the findings of this research, in conjunction with current literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

[Pre-Primary] is not babysitting and it is not classroom teaching [...] the focuses of [early childhood educators' (ECEs')] training are very different than the teachers at the elementary level. So, I don't see how a teacher who has not taken early childhood training can really function effectively in an early childhood environment—Dr. Fernando Nunes, Chair, Department of Child and Youth Study, Mount Saint Vincent University. (Beswick, 2019)

The Pre-Primary program can be significantly enhanced if integrated into the PSP [Public School Program] by allowing access to specialist teachers (phys-ed and music), library resources, resource and learning centre teachers, and educational specialists, such as school counsellors, speech-language pathologists, and school psychologists. In conjunction with having qualified teachers delivering the program and having access to educational specialists, there is a greater chance of early identification and intervention for children with special needs—Nova Scotia Teachers Union, 2017.

This study explores the complexity that exists for educators as they work with young children in an inclusive learning environment in Nova Scotia. In this critical examination of early childhood learning, a review of the relevant research has been undertaken that considers theoretical and historical understandings of children as learners, the preparation of early learning educators, along with relevant teaching practices, and how inclusion as a practice is actualized in early childhood settings.

As the above quotations demonstrate, the introduction of the Pre-Primary program in Nova Scotia, (The Canadian Press, 2017b) along with the introduction of a new educator role into the institutional school building, brought to the forefront of professional discourse, questions

around what the ideal learning environment is for early learners, and who is best equipped to facilitate these experiences. In addition, as the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (2017) position paper claimed, classroom teachers have always been regarded as best placed to lead a process of interventions (with specialized supports) for students who are identified as requiring it within the first year of schooling. The discursive evidence points out the valuing of “prevention” and ‘preparation’ as main objectives for early childhood education [ECE] (Bradbury, 2019; Burman, 2017; Russell, 2011).

The trend to unite public school grade-based education and ECE, through the locating of early childhood programs within schools, is not unique to Nova Scotia; rather, it is reflective of national and international efforts to increase the quality of early learning experiences available to all children (Akbari & McCuaig, 2017; Huff Sisson et al., 2020). Research findings about the integration of early childhood and school settings in other countries and provinces, detail how tensions can arise when there is potentially little appreciation for or understanding between seemingly complementary professions (Ashton et al., 2008; Langford et al., 2018). Ashton et al.’s (2008) exploration of links between families, early childhood services and formal school in Australia revealed: “no evidence of a continuum of ideas, philosophies and experiences between the early childhood years and school” (p. 11) and no evidence of teachers attempting to develop relationships with ECEs, leaving the researchers to advocate for the creation of collaborative dialogue between educators. Although these conclusions begin to focus on potential areas of professional concern, the study was limited to the participation of kindergarten teachers only, so an important ingredient to the collaborative puzzle was missing as ECEs and parents were not interviewed. Langford et al.’s (2018) research does begin to address the experiences of both ECEs and teachers within a full-day kindergarten program in Ontario. Comparable to Ashton et

al.'s (2008) findings Langford's team (2018) concluded that there emerges a reproduction of a split system of care and education roles, even within a program designed to be collaborative between the professions, as unequal power relations between the groups were uncovered. This finding demonstrates how ECE as a profession with an emphasis on care, can be dismissed for the expertise and knowledge they bring to early learning settings, and further demonstrates the potential for discontinuity between early childhood settings and the formal school classroom. The notion of a split of care and education within an early learning space leads me to question: How do PPECEs and PTs structure "care" and 'learning?' What practices and approaches are valued or counted within frames of student progress and success? How do educators come to address relationships and belonging within the classroom?

Children as Learners

Childhood is a social construct and as such, there are historical and culturally specific constructions of the child (James, 2004). The most influential standpoint within early learning and elementary environments within North American schools is the Western perspective, and its historical roots hold strong in how educators come to practice and experience teaching in North America and other developed countries (Bartlett & Freeze, 2019; Fung, 2019; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2018; Vergari, 2013). The Western perspective of childhood and child development is heavily influenced by psychology and its technologies that observe, measure, and compare children, enabling the creation of categories such as normal and abnormal (Cannella, 1997). It is also through these early psychology developments that a two-fold intervention strategy has emerged. The "early intervention" agenda for the formal public school system acts as surveillance of the 'normal' child for prevention, and to identify abnormal children in order to rectify the pathology as early as possible (May, 2019).

The research literature regarding child development and learning theories is diverse, but often compartmentalized and treated as distinct from one another. Although presented as isolated categories, theories do not simply arise and replace one another. They overlap and merge in places, and are complex and intricate. Five theoretical categories which have shaped early learning environments include maturational, behavioural, developmental, socio-cultural, and post-structural.

Maturational Theories

Maturational theories derive from the work of G. Stanley Hall and A. Gesell, and are rooted in the belief that a child's genetics has the greatest effect on development, and that as a person matures, their inherited potential unfolds. A key underpinning of these theories is the view that potential cannot be created or enhanced through the environment, although it can be limited (Spodek & Saracho, 2006). Proclaimed by Weizmann (1988) during a lecture examining Gesell's role in child development as "one of the most important figures in [...its] history" (p. 1), Gesell's research concentrated on showing that all children go through at their own rate or pace, similar and predictable sequences of development (Ames, 1989).

With an exclusive focus on maturation and limited recognition of any of the environmental factors, like learning, development maturational theories have endured significant criticism (Rathus, 2017). Gesell's developmental stages assume too much uniformity, with little discussion of how much variation can be expected at each age. Much of the early research conducted by maturational theorists was limited to middle class children in a university setting, so critics have appropriately been hesitant to apply their findings to other cultural settings. However, despite substantive critique, aspects of maturational theories continue to be evident in present day educational discourse, including an emphasis on the "readiness" of a child for

learning and completing tasks. Readiness within developmental research is generally defined as being the point at which a child can benefit from a particular type of instruction (American Psychological Association, 2020). Although age is not a key factor in determining readiness based on theory, chronological age has become intertwined with readiness concepts, dismissing another important aspect of maturational theory, which is a child-centred curriculum. A child-centred curriculum emerges within this theory through the belief that children innately know what knowledge they can achieve at any particular time (Spodek & Saracho, 2006).

Behaviourist Theories

Ensclosed in the works of Pavlov, Watson, Skinner, and Bandura, behaviourist theories of child development concentrate on the role of the environment, in particular, the individual's experience with it as it shapes behaviours. Underpinning this group of theories is the interpretation that children can be shaped at will, and are a by-product of their environment. Skinner described development through a system of rewards and punishments which form the basis of operant conditioning, through a series of trials where the child experiences both the stimulus and consequence (Schlinger, 2021). Watson, in applying these facets to development, argued operant and classical conditioning could account for all variations in human ability and self-control (Rilling, 2000).

While initially, behaviourist theories of development focused solely on the environment independent of the learner, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory provided some role for the individual through imitation within social contexts. Bandura proposed that trials are not always required for conditioning, rather, observing others within the environment can be enough to spark the development of responses within the child.

Critics of behaviourist theories note that solely attending to the environmental elements of development cannot account for the role of biology or mental processes like thinking (Chomsky, 1959; Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). Facets of behaviourist theories are reflected in teacher-directed approaches, where teachers select tasks and instruct children to perform the tasks, providing responses to the performance of the child. Special education practices and common classroom management strategies have a foundation in behaviourist orientations to learning (Odom, 2016). Reward charts and other incentive systems to support compliance and performance, task analysis, identifying prior knowledge, and breaking material into smaller learning chunks are all reflective of behaviourist theories of knowledge acquisition and development (Spodek & Saracho, 1999).

Although behaviourist theories have influenced practices within classrooms, critics of these theories have helped to advance further theoretical frameworks concentrated on coming to understand the active construction features of development and learning.

Developmental Theories

At their core, all developmental theorists are deeply engrained in constructivism, understanding that “reality is a product of human intelligence interacting with experience in the real world” (Elkind, 2005, p. 334). At the center of these theories is the belief that gaining knowledge occurs through a process of active construction. Active construction is neither an innate aspect of the mind, nor is it passively transmitted simply by experience, rather, erudition occurs through adaptation to the world through individual meta-construction, which places the learner at the forefront of the process (Ultanir, 2012). Also, fundamental to these theories is the idea that there exists a universal pattern of development, and a predictable pathway for accumulating knowledge that occurs across all children. Simply put, development drives

learning. Key historical theorists include Piaget (1952) and Montessori (Guttek & Guttek, 2016). Montessori's theory emphasizes independent work as a critical element for achieving children's natural curiosity in structured environments, along with the premise that there is sequential, progressive skill development that has critical sensitive periods for gaining knowledge termed "planes" (Ultanir, 2012).

Both Montessori and Piaget, with their focus on progressive sequencing and hands on learning experiences, have greatly shaped understandings of child development, especially in the ECE field. Critiques of developmental theories are quick to note that the Western orientation to how the child is constructed within these theories downplays social and cultural influences (Gray, 2007). Additionally, the clear stages and sequencing of development within these theories validate deficit views, as there are stringent demands for learning making any differences considered abnormal (Arthur et al., 2008; Silin, 1998). Dahlberg et al. (2007) further argue that developmental theories are too prescriptive and constraining, and childhood is not universal, as there are multiple equally valid meanings of it. Again, despite the strong critiques of historically dominant ECE theories, formal schooling continues to apply these tenets in establishing settings that reify developmental stages through school age entry requirements and grade level outcomes that are deemed "developmentally appropriate."

The use of language such as "developmentally appropriate" leads to questions of interpretation. Multiple interpretations and responses have led to the creation and refinement of socio-cultural theories of child development and knowledge acquisition.

Socio-cultural Theories

Drawing from a constructivist orientation, socio-cultural development and learning theories take up the interdependence between social and individual processes in the co-

construction of knowledge (Wells, 1999). These theories of child development and learning were initially documented by Vygotsky (1971) and are embedded in the acceptance that gaining knowledge drives development. Vygotsky's (1978) well-known concept of the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) can be described as the difference between what the child can do independently, and what they can do with the guidance of a skilled partner supporting them. Therefore, the key to Vygotsky's approach was the assumption that every phase of learning for a child is related to socially determined activities and traditions. Therefore, there can be no universal expectations on phases or progression of development. Vygotsky did acknowledge that each child would experience periods of profound change in development, which he termed critical periods described as "abrupt and major shifts and displacements, changes, and discontinuities in the child's personality [...] concentrated in a relatively short time [in which...] the child changes completely in the basic traits of his personality" (Vygotsky & Rieber, 1998, p. 191). However, Vygotsky did not establish chronological timelines for the occurrence of these critical periods, rather, he argued that children vary regarding the onset, duration and impact, placing emphasis instead on the outcome of new psychological structures that form to direct development for every child (Mahn, 2003). These initial theorizations have given way to further articulations of socio-cultural theory, with aspects of relationships and culture taking the front stage, like Rogoff (2003) and Bronfenbrenner (1979).

Rogoff (1995) articulated socio-cultural theory by situating developmental characteristics across three planes: personal, interpersonal, and cultural-institutional. On the personal plane, the learner is at the center. The interpersonal plane is where relationships and interactions are the lenses for understanding development. The third plane is cultural, which frames the learner in as being embedded within a dynamic cultural context. When combined, Rogoff argues that children

take part in the activities of their community, engaging with other children and with adults in routine and tacit, as well as, explicit collaboration. Guided participation is key, and emphasis is placed on collaboration, providing opportunities for children to participate while embedded in cultural activities with adults as guides (Rogoff, 1990).

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original ecological theory, child development and knowledge acquisition are determined through a combination of connections between immediate and distant systems. He proposed five systems as having influence over a child's development: microsystem (immediate environments), mesosystem (relationships between immediate environments), exosystem (environments the child does not actively participate in, but experiences the influences of), macrosystem (institutional systems of the culture) and chronosystem (timing). These systems later transformed to become the bioecological theory of human development through examinations of process, person, context, and time (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Fundamental to this theory is the concept of proximal processes "engines of development" and the contextual role each person plays within development (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 118).

As socio-cultural theories attend to how development emerges through connections between the child and their environment, criticism has surfaced regarding their exclusive attention on how learning originates from social environments, since there appears to be capacity for some children to attain and demonstrate understanding independent of the environment where development occurs (Gredler, 2011). Similarly, gaining knowledge is attributed to occurring through interaction, negotiation, and collaboration. However, understanding development through accounting for all these factors is impractical. Such critique has fostered the development of post-structural theories related to development and learning.

Post-Structural Theories

Unlike these previously mentioned theories, post-structuralists have concentrated less on creating a comprehensive child development or acquisition theory, or even a uniform understanding of “childhood” and have instead argued, that the everyday lives of children are highly complex and deeply contextualized (Nolan & Raban, 2015). Objectification of the child through descriptors placed on the child by educators, along with the role of power in the creation of a hierarchy through normalizing and dividing practices, are areas of attention for theorists including Bourdieu and Cannella.

Although Bourdieu (1984; as cited in Wacquant, 1989) focused mostly on older students, the key themes embedded within his work of power, class and status have been taken up and applied to child development as well (O’Connor, 2011). The unequal structure of society which is replicated by the “who you know” (social capital) and the ‘what of what you know’ (cultural capital) significantly impacts a child’s development (Bourdieu et al., 1994). From a post-structural viewpoint, learning is mediated by the degree a child has the “right” kind of knowledge as a starting point, with intuitions like school “validating certain forms of ‘cultural capital’ while rejecting others” (Gregory et al., 2004, p. 88). These accumulations of knowledge, behaviours, and skills the child possesses, either lead to the child experiencing success in school and being a “fish in water” (Bourdieu, as cited in Wacquant, 1989) or a disconnect occurs which may impact erudition and development long term. As Brooker (2002) argues, “cultural capital requires above all a lengthy period of acquisition, and it is too late to catch up when the child begins statutory schooling” (p. 25).

O’Connor (2011) argues the application of Bourdieu’s theories within early learning, places educators in a state of needing to be “ready” to learn, meaning they must become aware of

and question what they take for granted as normal, instead of being explicit in introducing and exploring forms of social and cultural capital, to ensure all children will have the resources and understandings to be successful in the school setting.

Cannella (1997) argues that current child development models are imperialist, enabling hierarchy-based categorizing of children based on their degree of being “fully developed.” Cannella proposes that a child’s way of knowing is not inadequate or weak, but is an alternative way of understanding, making it important to hear and value the child (Cannella, 2000). Although Cannella’s work does not provide a clear theory regarding child development or knowledge acquisition, it does seek to disrupt the adult/child dualism by examining historical and political ideas about childhood, exploring contemporary concepts of childhood and the role of societal institutions and corresponding public policy on the creation of principles about the formative years (Cannella, 2000). Translating Cannella’s thinking into practice means educators would take time to share observations with families and listen closely to the child, family, and community, in order to make all equal partners in decision-making.

Although the theoretical arguments taken up by post-structural theorists are diverse, there is the potential for these ideas to transform how childhood and learners are perceived. Post-structural approaches acknowledge the complexity of the formative years, challenge universal “truths” regarding child development, and advocate for shifts in the systems that service and support children.

Putting the Pieces Together

There is not one single integrated set of theories to explain all child development and learning, even within the Western educational framework where certain “truths” about childhood have been accepted (Osgood, 2015). The competing theories of child development and acquiring

knowledge have resulted in an increasingly complicated discourse regarding curriculum development, educational settings, and practices. Acknowledging the complications of how child development has come to be understood and how it informs educators' practices, especially between early childhood education and formal school settings is critical. Inconsistencies in knowledge acquisition and development theories lead me to question how both PPECEs and PTs come to understand child development and learning theories. Furthermore, how do educators use this knowledge in their practices of creating inclusive early learning environments?

Early Learners and Early Childhood Education

Early childhood and elementary education emerged in Canada from projects of intervention targeted at "saving" the lower classes with care, moral intervention services and instruction being their priorities (Prochner, 2000). Although, at a national level there has never been a consistent structure to providing early learning, Prochner (2014) stresses two foundational beliefs that have guided all educational opportunities for children over the last two centuries: (1) a genuine acceptance that young children are capable of learning and; (2) that early experiences have significant impacts on later development.

ECE as a label, emerged in the 1920s to discriminate educational programming for young children from the practice found in daycare programs, of solely acting as a care provider (Prochner & Robinson, 2012). Educational programming for young children has been heavily informed by two orientations that continue to have an impact on the location and delivery of programming. The first, Friedrich Frobel's kindergarten program, can be traced to urban centres across Canada during the latter half of the 19th century through the early 20th century. Initially, kindergarten programs were developed with the conviction that children learn best by doing and manipulating concrete objects (Prochner, 2000). Essential to the programming was the

fundamental belief that “children’s self-activity and use of materials under the direction of specially trained teachers facilitated their natural development” (Prochner, 2014, p. 44). The target range for children to enter kindergarten, as it emerged in Canada, was five to seven years old, and these programs evolved into being an extension of the public school system in all jurisdictions. As an extension of the public school system kindergarten, programs “became more like the school systems into which they had been incorporated” (Beatty, 1995, p. 101), resulting in aspects of hands-on learning and natural development shifting to preparation and measures of academic progression. Similarly, normal schools, institutions charged with the education of teachers through the study of curriculum and pedagogy, took over the training of kindergarten teachers, and a loss of the kindergarten pedagogical approach was experienced as the teachers became more familiar with traditional education methods for all grade levels, rather than educational methods promoted by Frobel (Prochner, 2000).

The second competing approach to education for young children was that of nursery/preschools. These programs typically emerged with the dual focus of providing childcare and education outside of the public school system and were shaped by the infant school model (Varga, 2000a). Programs were guided by Robert Owen’s early 1800s principles of grouping young children for teaching times, using play and kindness to infuse learning through the senses, while equally nurturing social relationships (Prochner, 2000; Prochner, 2014). The 1960s saw a revitalization in the use of the preschools for early learning, with an emphasis on programming as an intervention to address social inequalities attributed to lower socioeconomic status (Prochner, 2014; Prochner & Robinson, 2012). Some preschool programming that emerged throughout Canada was targeted at subsets of the population through private for-profit and government-subsidized programs, with explicit goals for establishing children’s preparedness for

school, and imparting middle-class values on individual children, rather than addressing the underlying social inequities (Prochner & Robinson, 2014; Prochner, 2000).

Entering Formal School

Like the majority of countries around the world, provincial and territorial governments throughout Canada have established laws regarding ages for compulsory schooling, yet these laws fail to fully consider the child and the environment in which the child will be immersed (Barakat & Bengtsson, 2018; Herbst, 2017). Each province and territory in Canada is responsible for establishing all educational policies, including school entry age, as there is no federal body overseeing education (Ingvarson, et al., 2013). Based on the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (2008) report, all jurisdictions offer some form of free, non-compulsory pre-elementary (kindergarten/primary) education for four or five year olds, with all provinces and territories having established mandatory school entry between ages of five and six years (Ingvarson et al., 2013; Province of Nova Scotia, Department of Education, 2008).

Nova Scotia. The unique term Primary is used to label the traditional kindergarten year in Nova Scotia. The Primary program is for children who turn five by December 31 of their school entry year, and although not mandatory to enter until their sixth year of life, most students enter at four years-nine months to five years-eight months (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2008). The program is described within Nova Scotia's Public School Programs document as focusing on the transition from home to school, with attention given to nurturing children's positive attitude for acquiring knowledge through fostering development across social, emotional, physical, and intellectual realms (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [NSDEECD], 2013). Furthermore, the NSDEECD (2013) describes the

Primary program as being developmentally appropriate for each child, with the integration of both unstructured and structured play, along with a recognition of each child's individuality.

The foundational principles of the Primary program in Nova Scotia, however, are narrowed through prescriptive Primary learning outcomes, with specific indicators of skills that must be demonstrated and reported once teachers have explicitly provided instruction (NSDEECD, 2015a). The prescriptive outcomes include instruction and assessment in language arts and mathematics, with the integration of thematic topics in social studies, science, and health, along with specialized music and physical education classes. The subjects students in Primary are taught, are the same as the rest of the early elementary grades (one to three), further contradicting the uniqueness of the Primary program. Like all other grades as well, time allotments for each subject area are determined through the NSDEECD (2015b) and become the responsibility of the school administrator to ensure compliance, potentially adding additional pressure on teachers' implementation of the stated Primary philosophy and framework. The Primary philosophy and curriculum outcomes also reflect constructivist and maturational theories of child development, with a reliance on predictable sequences of development and learning (Weizmann, 1988; Ultanir, 2012).

Pre-Primary. Within Canada wide variation exists in how early learners, prior to entering formal school settings, are exposed to or receive early education (Friendly et al., 2021). In 2017, the Nova Scotia government through the NSDEECD, announced the creation of the Pre-Primary program and a four-year introduction across the province (The Canadian Press, 2017a). Pre-Primary is described by the NSDEECD (2023) as “a child-centered, play-based program for children the year before they start school [providing] opportunit[ies that] will help them transition into the school system, and provide experiences that give children the best start to

succeed in school and life.” Documentation of the program states that the focus of activity is established in ECE principles, regarding children as competent and confident learners with a holistic approach to development (NSDEECD, 2023). The program is a fully funded childcare alternative for children aged three years-nine months to four years-eight months, with the promise of providing children with experiences in an organized learning and care setting. The program is staffed by ECEs and is typically located within traditional elementary school settings. To further enhance access to the program, the NSDEECD has committed to providing limited seating within their public-school transportation systems (Gorman, 2019b).

Although within the walls of the traditional formal school buildings, Pre-Primary programming is directed through Nova Scotia’s Early Learning Curriculum Framework (NSDEECD, 2018a). The framework promotes learning as integrated, episodic, experiential, and facilitated through social relationships, rather than prescriptive outcomes found in formal schooling (NSDEECD, 2018a). Goals and objectives across four broad categories of growth including well-being, discovery and invention, language and communication, and personal and social responsibility, are articulated within the framework to guide the pedagogical practices of PPECEs. While learning strategies and measures are discussed within the framework, the document cautions against the use of the framework as a checklist for assessment purposes and lessons, with emphasis instead placed on the learning strategies being starting points for conversations with other professionals and families.

The framework and philosophies of the Pre-Primary program appear to be informed by socio-cultural theories of child development and knowledge acquisition. Sensitivity to each child’s educational journey, relationships, and history are core elements. The possible contradictions between the developmental theories taken up and adopted by the Primary and Pre-

Primary frameworks are important to consider as this new early learning program comes into its own within the school setting. With such contrasting theoretical underpinnings, in what ways do the two early educational programs align to support all children's growth and development?

Where do Pre-Primary and Primary Meet? Transitions

At the most basic level, a transition is a shift or change in some part of life for an individual. Dockett and Perry (2016) argue, "human development can be characterized as a series of transitions: infancy to childhood, childhood to adolescence, adolescence to adulthood, and so on" (p. 5). Transitions occur across the lifespan, and are not merely a single event, but are ongoing processes of adjustment to a new circumstance.

School entry as a transitional period is interesting to examine, as it marks significant changes in the socio-cultural environment of the child (Erkan et al., 2018). Key research findings regarding the transition from preschool settings to formal schooling, stress that school is a quantitatively different environment, with changes in goals and demands focused on formal instruction to raise a student's academic progress in contrast to early learning experiences (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The school entrance process is marked by constraints, both socially and emotionally, with demands including "independence from adults, getting along with other children, recognition and adherence to routine, and being alert and active for longer periods of time" (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). How educators perceive transition through their understanding of child development and pedagogy can heavily impact the experience, yet these foundational considerations are often absent from the discourse.

Why Do Transitions Matter?

The transition guidelines for all Primary students in Nova Scotia are quite vague. The Public School Programs document (NSDEECD, 2013) recommends that schools host an

orientation day, with a few suggestions around what components could be included, along with the encouragement to open parent communication channels. The lack of clear requirements from the NSDEECD regarding transitional practices demonstrates how varied the school entry experience in Nova Scotia might be. Similarly, there are no current directives for PPECEs to actively engage or participate in dialogue with PTs, regarding children's transitions to formal schooling. It is unclear how those delivering the programs may work together to ensure continuity and consistency in delivering a cohesive program of early learning within the province. It was also unclear within policies if the PPECEs and PTs cross paths to support the transition process.

Research indicates 20-30% of children will experience challenges with social skills, academics, disruptive behaviours, and anxiety during their first year of schooling, and that these struggles may have significant long-term impacts on both cognitive and socio-emotional development (Carter et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2015). Approximating generalized research findings, the recent provincial Early Developmental Index results indicated that nearly 30% of grade Primary in Nova Scotia are not meeting age-appropriate developmental expectations, as reported by their classroom teachers using the Early Development Instrument (Gorman, 2019a). Simple time frames, and natural physical and social-emotional maturation alone, cannot substantively explain or describe the multiple challenges faced by some children as they transition to school. In exploring the discontinuities of early education pathways for children, important features to consider are the knowledges, identities, and practices of the Primary and Pre-Primary professions.

The Preparation of Early Learning Educators

Essentially, early learning educators have had two distinct forms of preparation in Canada, either through teacher certification to work in the school system, or through programs oriented toward caregivers for those seeking employment in childcare programs (Varga, 2000b). The two-tiered system has led, in some ways, to a professional collision course in Nova Scotia with the establishment of Pre-Primary; a caregiving program within an early childhood educational environment, nested within the school setting. To gain an appreciation of how educators come to develop their professional practices, it is important to gain an understanding of both their pre-service and in-service training and development.

Early Childhood Educators

Pre-Service Training. Although ECE often emerges as a federal issue in Canada as part of discussions regarding universal childcare, the reality is that each province and territory have control of the design and delivery of early learning programming. Furthermore, each province/territory establishes required education and certification requirements for individuals working within various facilities providing childcare and early education programming. Certification was an aspect often overlooked until the latter half of the 20th century, as ECEs were not required to have any formal training in most parts of Canada (Varga, 2000b). Jacobs and Adrien's (2012) examination of Canadian regulations regarding training, highlights the diverse paths across the country that are used for pre-service preparation of ECEs, from prior field experience assessments, to college and university-level programs. Although there is significant variety across the country in preparation programs, each province/territory has established minimum qualifications desired for working with children in regulated settings.

Nova Scotia. There are five classifications for Early Childcare Educators in Nova Scotia. The various categories are reflective of the diversity of entry points available; however, my focus is centred around PPECEs, which are ideally hired with, or are in the process of obtaining level 2 or 3 classifications within Nova Scotia (NSDEECD, 2018b).

For individuals seeking a Level 3 classification as an early childhood educator in Nova Scotia, they must meet all criteria for a Level 2 outlined (see below) in the diploma route, either through a bachelor's degree from a university around ECE, or by completing both the qualifications for a Level 2 (diploma route) and hold a separate bachelor's degree in any field. Similarly, the first pathway to obtain a Level 2 classification occurs when an individual earns a diploma from an approved post-secondary early childhood program, with a minimum of 900 hours of coursework and 520 hours of supervised practicum experience (NSDEECD, 2018b). To further refine the educational experiences of pre-service ECEs, learning outcomes are established from which all coursework content is derived. Areas of focus include courses on child development, fostering positive relationships, diversity and inclusion, pedagogy, observation and documentation, program evaluation and professionalism (NSDEECD, 2018b). Similarly, elaboration on practicum within the Standards for Early Childhood Education Post-Secondary Programs (NSDEECD, 2018b) underscores the importance of supervising ECEs possessing level 2 or 3 certifications themselves, and having one year of experience working within a regulated childcare setting. Additionally, emphasis is placed on the need for students to have experiences over the course of their practicum with diverse age ranges and abilities. Although in Nova Scotia there are two educational routes to achieve certification, Nocita et al. (2020) and Coplan, et al. (1999) have noted there is little difference in how these certifications impact children's increased knowledge, resulting in calls for the need to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of pre-service

training made available, and increase research into more nuanced ways that ECE certification may directly shape children's learning through educators' knowledge base, and translation of theory into practices.

The second pathway is through the successful completion of the Recognition of Prior Learning Program offered in partnership between NSDEECD and the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Nova Scotia (AECENS, 2021). Through this program, individuals that have been working in the field as a lower classification (entry, Level 1, or school-age) can complete an evaluation that is considered along with references from the field, of their capacity to upgrade to the Level 2 classification (AECENS, 2021). The Level 2 classification through a Prior Learning Assessment pathway is relatively new, with the first classifications offered as a pilot in the summer of 2020. This certification route has not appeared in the literature reviewed, and therefore, leaves many questions regarding how ECEs without formal education come to develop and implement educational experiences within inclusive settings.

Primary Teacher Pre-Service Training

A survey of initial teacher certification requirements for elementary teachers across Canada indicates that most provinces and territories do not have specific certification standards for early elementary, but rather, elementary certification reflects kindergarten to six or beyond, with courses in educational psychology, philosophy of education, and methods of core subjects being emphasized (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2022; Ontario College of Teachers, 2017). Nova Scotia aligns with most provinces and territories since a permit to teach enables the holder to teach at any level between Primary and grade 12 (Province of Nova Scotia, 2018). Also, like many provinces and territories, Nova Scotia has adopted an endorsement system on the regular initial certificate to indicate competency in a specific grade level range, Primary to

six (elementary) or seven to 12 (secondary) (Province of Nova Scotia, 2018). Although the unique needs of the kindergarten program are not acknowledged in the pre-service certification process in many provinces and territories, including Nova Scotia, most provinces/territories offer certification upgrading, which can include specializations in early elementary education. Upgrading programs are exclusive to in-service teacher development past initial certification, and are dependent upon teacher interest in initiating further training (Ontario College of Teachers, 2018; Saskatchewan Professional Teachers Regulatory Board, 2018).

With Nova Scotia (and other provinces/territories) providing initial certification at the broad designations of early through senior elementary, there appears to be a disconnect between the NSDEECD's (2018a) recognition of the importance of early years (0-eight years) in preparing for lifelong success, and their current practices in preparing teachers for entering early elementary classrooms. With this disconnect, the importance of in-service teacher training that focuses on fostering an understanding of child development, and translations of this to appropriate practices for early learners, becomes that much more important.

Professional Learning

There is a limited body of research that examines the professional growth activities of early elementary teachers, in direct relation to teacher practices and understanding of child development in the early elementary years. Rather, professional development research in early elementary tends to focus on specific methodologies for delivering curriculum outcomes, or meeting individual deficits identified through student assessments (Sandholtz, & Ringstaff, 2013; Simpson Steele, 2016). In contrast to this type of professional learning, Dockett and Perry (2009) advocate that to have ready teachers to support the children, teachers need access to opportunities that address flexible approaches to teaching and learning that promote success for

all students. One study that has begun to address the gap is the Starting Strong Program (Eisenhower, et al., 2016).

The Starting Strong Program consists of both parent and teacher training, in a prevention program aimed at enhancing students' protective factors, and improving identified risk factors in students' behaviours. Delivered as a whole class intervention, the teacher portion of the training concentrates on providing teachers with strategies for fostering partnerships with parents, creating opportunities for relationship building within the classroom, and promoting positive behaviours. Eisenhower et al.'s (2016) initial results and examination of feasibility noted the potential of the program in helping to provide the necessary knowledge to support teacher readiness, and enhance best practices during children's first year of formal schooling. Important to note, is the professional development within the research was designed to be collaborative in nature with small groups, facilitators, and interactive activities occurring in short sessions over several weeks—qualities of professional development that are consistently noted in the literature as important to the translation of professional learning into teaching practices (Fraser et al., 2007). While this program is an indication that researchers are aware that teachers require professional development opportunities related to students entering an inclusive school environment, it does not necessarily address all of the areas teachers believe should be supported.

Gallant's (2009) examination of the state of kindergarten in Michigan provides evidence to suggest that kindergarten teachers want professional learning opportunities that concentrate on understanding child development, and developmentally appropriate instruction including structured play. Although not explored in Gallant's research, the lack of professional development opportunities in these areas denotes the increased focus by departments of education on increasing standards-based learning outcomes during the first year of schooling. To

return to the Nova Scotia context, a survey of recent professional development offerings over the last eight years by the NSDEECD through their EduFest summer learning program, provides further evidence a gap may exist in opportunities to extend teacher knowledge of child development and developmentally appropriate practices, as no sessions offered directly explored child development or developmentally appropriate practices. Rather, outcome-based goals were the direct purposes of sessions targeting Primary to grade three teachers as one cohort (J. Dexter, personal correspondence, May 28, 2020; J. Dexter, personal correspondence June 2, 2022).

With both certification requirements and ongoing professional development opportunities offered to Primary teachers in Nova Scotia being generalized to focus on achieving curriculum goals through instructional strategies over focusing on the actualization of inclusive practices, it is unclear how PTs come to support diverse learners in their classrooms. It is through a pedagogical lens that teachers' assumptions and instructional practices in a classroom environment are shaped, yet little is known about how this lens is formed in Nova Scotia (DaRos-Voseles et al., 2003). For this research, in particular, the question of how teachers come to understand and apply developmentally appropriate practices that are emphasized within the Nova Scotia Primary curriculum documents, is foundational.

The two streams of education and certification offered to those involved in the education of children (PPECEs and PTs) draws attention to the potential for contradictions and conflicts within early learning. Blank's (2010) examination of the two stream approach to being a qualified early learning educator, further provides evidence of the debate that is present within the field regarding what is a legitimate practice, since the multiple entry points for classification within ECE designations contradict the rigid qualifications necessary to become certified as an elementary teacher. The stricter qualifications required to be a teacher creates a sense of

legitimization to their profession through the confirmation of a degree (a requirement to teach in public school) and in turn, creates the potential for a hierarchy in what is considered legitimate and appropriate practices within the walls of a school building. The debate also extends further than the legitimization of the practices to get at the core of what and who are ECEs/teachers, and the ambiguity within professional practice research around what are best practices and high-quality teaching (Blank, 2010).

Coming to understand educators' pre-service education and professional development is necessary information to begin to appreciate how educators adopt and explain child development, and learning theories. Requirements for certification, and how these are approached within post-secondary institutions (or alternative routes) will have a direct effect on educators' knowledge and translation of theory to practice, and how they articulate this. The role of certification extends further than preparation as Langford et al.'s (2018) findings suggest, it also reproduces a hierarchy of status and authority, even when ECEs and PTs share the same space and work with the same children. The unequal power distribution, and how that comes to manifest itself in practices, could be a major barrier to collaboration and continuity of programming. Finally, the articulation of translating theory to practice enables the examination of ways in which educators speak of their own practices, and identify these within the context of settings they create for children.

Considerations of Care and Education

“In experience, we know what it means to care, and that caring is an integral part of teaching, yet this aspect of our work is elusive and easy to dismiss” (Wilde, 2013, p. 23).

Care and education have been on separate paths historically, with care being relegated to a private matter, with a focus on taking care of the “body,” while education centred in the public

domain is concerned with the development of the “mind” (Langford et al., 2017). Connell (2013) posits that all education requires care, and Noddings (2012) expands on this, since a child’s emotional needs cannot be separated from their academic needs. Further support for this perspective is provided by Langford et al., (2017) as they have developed four key ideas that reconceptualize how care should be defined within educational settings. First, they argue care is universal and fundamental; it is not a dichotomy between independence and dependence. Dependence is not a limitation, deficit, or burden, rather, interdependence will happen throughout our lives and needs to be valued. Second, care is more than basic custodial activities; it is a way of being and acting. As a result, educator responses and acts of care come from dynamic understandings of a child’s unique needs in each setting at a given moment. Third, care as a practice can be evaluated and as such, it is possible to examine the why and how of interactions. Qualities for evaluation may include attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, solidarity, and trust (Tronto, 2010). Finally, care must be central to policy development. Langford et al., (2017) argue when justice, equality, and freedom are part of the care dialogue, a caring democracy can be realized.

Like Florence Nightingale in nursing, there exists a stereotype in early childcare and elementary education, of the ideal educator who possesses the desire and natural aptitude to help children. Harper and Cavanaugh (1994) describe Lady Bountiful as white and female from the middle class or higher, with an orientation of helping the young. To further reflect this image, Harper and Cavanaugh (1994) depict her as “must know and feel what is wrong and be able to fix it. She needs to be at the centre, but at the same time her needs—her own ‘self’—remain absent” (p. 42). Meiners (2002) proposes this ghost of the past infiltrates the early learning discipline, and often emerges in statements around why someone has entered the field including,

“I have always loved children” or oriented around a desire to make a difference in the lives of children. It is potentially through the Lady Bountiful stereotype, people are drawn to the profession with a predetermined model of what makes a good teacher, cemented in assurances about being naturally able to care for children, but does this also impact ways in which educators share stories of their practices?

In attempting to deepen an understanding of care, I have come to realize that there is relatively little consensus within academic discourse regarding what constitutes care, and how it can be best defined and understood within the context of education (Barclay et al, 2016; Eichler et al., 2010). In 1984, Nel Noddings began exploring care as a relational ethic, and has since become a leading theorist in exploring an ethic of care in education and advocating for school reform (Stone, 2018). In the beginning, Noddings (1984) provided a definition of care as describing something one does in a relationship, rather than a prescribed set of behaviours undertaken. Building on this early definition, I view care as relational, conveying compassion, respect, interest, and understanding (Noddings, 2013). Fisher and Tronto (1990) further elaborate:

On the most general level, [...] caring [can] be viewed as a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world included our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web. (p. 40)

Although care has been presented as the ideal within early learning environments, there is a conflict related to care, as Langford et al., (2017) contend.

Young children are expected to outgrow the need for care as they transition from ECEC [early childhood education and care] settings into primary education. Older children are

expected to engage in self-care and to self-regulate so that educators can focus on their minds. (p. 314)

Yet, is care really subordinate to early formal school experiences? Fisher and Tronto's (1990) definition of care does not constrain notions of caring work, rather, it promotes a range of practices, and enables the examination of educators' everyday experiences of care.

Care is intertwined with the work of educators. Langford et al., (2017) position care as both a personal and professional practice for educators operating across many levels and settings. Noddings (2016) proposes that there are ways in which institutions like schools and early childcare programs can "provide and support the conditions under which caring relations can prosper" (p. 83). As the initial definition of care stressed, caring by educators is relational as they must know students well enough to hear, understand, and respond to their needs, desires, and struggles (DeGuzman et al., 2008). Noddings proposes that educators may achieve the actualization of care as interdependence through modelling care, dialoguing about caring with children, practicing care, and engaging in confirmation care. Yet, Langford et al., (2017) have argued, "care on which children depend is rendered largely invisible, [and] undervalued" (p. 314) within early childhood settings.

How care is interpreted and enacted by educators within school settings has been an area of general investigation over the last 20 years, resulting in checklists and how-tos in research conclusions. For example, Deiro (2003) has identified six teacher behaviour strategies that enhance the nurturing caring learning environment, including (1) creating one-on-one time with students, (2) interspersing personal and academic talk, (3) providing genuine feedback and comments on students' work, (4) building trust and rapport through nonverbal communication, (5) sharing personal information about yourself, and (6) creating and communicating high

expectations for all students, along with a belief in students as capable of obtaining these demands. Similarly, Garza et al.'s (2014) research study of upper elementary and middle school teachers' behaviours also suggests teachers identify caring through the following behaviours: (1) fostering a sense of belonging through proximity, eye contact, and conveying positive dispositions, (2) getting to know students through talking to them about interests and listening to them, and (3) supporting academic success by communicating high expectations, making encouraging statements, and helping as needed. These superficial lists of care do not reveal the entire picture, making it important to explore how care informs both pedagogical choices and practices in early elementary classrooms.

Care, within ECE settings has not been developed or explored in great depth (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Ailwood (2017) argues, care underpins all relationships in education, and that “significant levels of professional knowledge, decision-making, and ongoing reflection [is] required for building and sustenance of caring relationships” (p. 307). Yet, an examination of these features and their actualization has not been examined in detail within ECE as narratives regarding educators as professionals have dominated discourses, which contradict and undermine the potential emotional role of caring. Davis and Degotardi's (2015) examination of documents related to early years frameworks in Australia highlighted that ECEs identified care as being absent from their work descriptions, and explored the tension and confusion created by this. Furthermore, the study of Davis and Degotardi (2015) underscored that educational practice was positioned above caring activities within their discussions with ECEs, underscoring a trend that may have significant consequences in how ECEs explain their educational practices and understandings of child development and knowledge acquisition. The juxtaposition of caring and learning is especially important in thinking about inclusive early educational contexts.

What is Inclusive Education?

Initially, the discourse of inclusion in education was viewed through a disability lens, informed by political and economic theories, along with traditional fields like psychology and sociology. However, as the conversation has matured, there has been a shift to consider communities that have been traditionally excluded from full participation in education. In an expanded view, inclusion has become about diversity, the realization of the principles of equity, and the adherence to human rights legislation. Enacting human rights translates into the acceptance and appreciation of all individual differences along culture, gender, race, socio-economic status, disability, and sexual orientation (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Carrington, 1999). This broader understanding of inclusivity was foreshadowed in the United Nations (1948) declaration that, “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” and that, “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, ... birth or other status.” Within Canada, the formal education system is organized at the provincial and territorial levels, yet, it is not without federal impact. As a country, Canada has signed the Salamanca (UNESCO, 1994) statement, along with other United Nations declarations that impact educational practices and has also declared the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), which states:

Every individual is equal before and under the law, and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. (15 [1])

Therefore, there is a clear mandate for equality and respect for diversity within the provincial education systems through these federal actions, however, there is also variation in the

legislation and policies that reflect inclusion within each province/territory of Canada. (Whitley & Hollweck, 2020).

Within the ECE realm, inclusion is presented as a component of quality programming through the principles of individualized instruction for each child, delivery of services in an inclusive setting, and systematic supports in place to actualize inclusive practices through policy and professional relationships (Ainscow et al., 2006; Guralnick et al., 2008; Frankel & Underwood, 2012). Consistently, inclusive practice within the early childhood field also calls attention to the involvement of families and outside supports as contributors to success.

When directed at education, the evolved definition of inclusion focuses on students belonging and learning collaboratively in a classroom environment within their neighbourhood school (Loreman, 2009; Porter, 2008; Salend, 2011). UNESCO (2012), as cited in Loreman et al., 2014, further details a definition of inclusive education that is consistent with how it is conceptualized across the globe as:

Not simply [...] making schools available for those who are already able to access them. It is about being proactive in identifying the barriers and obstacles learners encounter in attempting to access opportunities for quality education, as well as in removing those barriers and obstacles that lead to exclusion. (para 1)

This definition is reflective of the belief that the kind of society we create emerges from the kind of education we provide (Thomas & Loxley, 2007). The translation of the inclusive approach means the need to shift the cultures and practices within the school to a realization of human rights and equity for all (Allan, 2006; Köpfer & Óskarsdóttir, 2019). To realize the potential of inclusive education, there are fundamental changes in policy, curricula, systemic structures, and instructional practices that must take place, and it requires reforming understandings of teaching

and learning in the ordinary school (Grima-Farrell et al., 2011). Berlach and Chambers (2011) advance a philosophical framework of inclusive education with underpinnings of acceptance of all, regardless of disability and/or disadvantage, opportunities readily available for all, superior ability and diversity, and absence of bias, prejudice, and inequality. Through this framework, proponents of inclusive education argue that there are reciprocal benefits that emerge for all, since there are no set boundaries around who receives support, but rather, at the ideal, it provides a framework within which all children “can be valued equally, treated with respect and provided with real opportunities at school” (Thomas & Loxley, 2007, p. 124). Culham and Nind (2003) caution however, that inclusion is a journey rather than a final destination, since the aim of achieving equity will always be ongoing.

Transferring the philosophy of inclusive education into practice has been challenging, as there are so many different categorical definitions of inclusion. In Canada, Loreman (2009, p. 43) attempts to address this by synthesizing key features to advance understanding of inclusive education as it translates into practice:

1. All children attend their neighbourhood school.
2. Schools and districts have a “zero-rejection” policy when it comes to registering and teaching children in their region. All children are welcomed and valued.
3. All children learn in regular, heterogeneous classrooms with same-age peers.
4. All children follow substantively similar programs of study, with curriculum that can be adapted and modified if needed. Modes of instruction are varied and responsive to the needs of all.
5. All children contribute to regular school and classroom learning activities and events.

6. All children are supported to make friends and to be socially successful with their peers.
7. Adequate resources and staff training are provided within the school and district to support inclusion.

The themes, as they translate to practice, are still an echo of special education and disability related language, without intersectional considerations of diverse learners. Loreman's (2009) summary, therefore, reveals the greatest challenge facing inclusion as it attempts to come into its own in formal school settings, which is that the boundaries between special education and inclusive and human rights-based equitable practices or responses are frequently blurred.

Predominately, research into inclusive practices has focused on formal classrooms, ignoring early childhood settings, and has often been criticized for being too idealistic with too much theory and not enough evidence of practice (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016; Thomas & Loxley, 2007). In addition, there is a paucity of research on inclusive settings beyond considerations of disability and placement. Early research findings, including Baker et al.'s (1994) review of three meta-analyses examining inclusive education within the school setting, found small to moderate positive effects related to an inclusive setting over special education placements for students that would traditionally be in segregated programming, in both academic and social measures. Similarly, Ruijs and Peetsma's (2009) review of the literature between 1999 and 2008 further indicated a small positive to neutral impact related to inclusion for academics and social-emotional development for all students, however, the authors were clear in their conclusions that it is difficult to know for sure, as most of the research lacked control groups, and the variations in how inclusive practices were defined were broad. The remaining broad definitions of inclusion, and the blurred terminology between inclusive and special education,

have led to limited changes and advancements in practices, often resulting in special education practices being masked under the umbrella of inclusion.

Inclusion in Canada

Across all provinces and territories, there is evidence that inclusive education is valued and a goal (Loreman, 2014). Yet, approaches to how inclusion is addressed and supported through laws and policies indicate variation in commitment levels across the country.

Nova Scotia. In Nova Scotia, the first special education policy was introduced in 1996 to legislate the full inclusion of all students in the regular classroom, with an emphasis placed on the philosophy of “only as special as necessary.” The “only as special as necessary” philosophy shifted how educators addressed meeting the challenges of all students by having teachers find the most minimal, but effective, support to meet the needs of each student’s potential, but maintained assumptions about performance requirements. This philosophy enabled a continuum of service model, resulting in individualized program plans being promoted as a way to provide learning goals to meet the interpreted needs of children deemed not able to meet the standard curriculum goals (Loreman, 2014).

Revised in 2008, the special education policy reflects a continued refinement of understanding of inclusion as Nova Scotia’s commitment to all-encompassing practices.

Location of service is provided in the goals, which state:

To facilitate the membership, participation, and learning of all students in school programs and activities. The support services designed to meet students’ diverse educational needs should be coordinated within the neighbourhood school, and to the extent possible, within the grade level/subject area classroom. (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2008, p. 5)

The “as special as necessary” language however, continued within the document, and policies such as identification of deficits, assessments, and exploration of strategies through specialized program planning to address the learner’s inadequacies were the main focus of the document. Although the word diversity is used in the special education policy twice, it is not elaborated on in ways that would assist educators in understanding how it is defined, or its role in the development of inclusive practice, therefore making the weight of the policy related to identified exceptionalities and deficits reflective of the traditional medical model of special education, and resistant to the discourse and emerging practices related to inclusive education.

In response to labour unrest between the province and teachers in 2017, which included significant discourse in the public around teachers’ experiences and struggles with implementing the current special education policy within their classrooms, the Province of Nova Scotia commissioned a report regarding the state of inclusive education in the province (Laroche, 2017; Njie et al., 2018). Termed, *Students First: Inclusive Education that Supports Teaching, Learning and the Success of all Nova Scotia Students*, the report from the Commission on Inclusive Education (Njie et al., 2018) completed an extensive literature review and consultation with a variety of stakeholders to gain an understanding of the complexities of the current system. In issuing the report, the Commission described inclusive education as “public education that supports the learning, development, and well-being of all students in an equitable, efficient and effective manner” (p. 26). While this definition is a step in the right direction, it stops short of embracing a full definition of inclusion previously explored in this literature review, since it does not provide details in how equitable, efficient, and effective are defined or measured. The report also established seven aspects of practice that actualize the concept of inclusive education as put forward by the Commission, including the right of all students to a quality education, a student-

centred, needs-based approach, a multi-tiered continuum of programs, services and settings, positive environments, core values and principles, evidence-based policies, practices, and procedures, along with a commitment to excellence. The report however did not explore or discuss strategies to shift teachers' previous understandings of special education. Although the report is endorsing inclusive education throughout, ways in which the Commission proposed the changes may or may not enable a full shift in school culture to actualize a more fully developed inclusive environment, since some recommendations promote the development of specialized services based on categorical labels. This is especially evident around the diagnosis of autism through the creation of autism specialist teachers, and a fully developed strategy of interventional support. Additionally, the report addresses special education practices directly as it advances the argument for new, expanded lists of exceptionalities to reflect students' learning needs. The term exceptionality within the school setting is defined as a student being gifted or having a diagnosed disability, which suggests the continued attention of the educational system on not only identifying, but labeling differences to gain access to supports (Hutchinson & Specht, 2019). The report also recommends expanded individualized programming options for students, and a streamlined process for program planning that remains focused on identifying how students do not meet grade or age-based expectations.

It is through recommendations from the Nova Scotia Provincial Commission's report that the new inclusive education policy was developed in 2019, with an official phased adaptation originally anticipated to begin in September 2020. Most of the initiatives were delayed due to the impact of COVID-19 on the education system in Nova Scotia. Within the brief for the policy issued by the NSDEECD (2019c) inclusive education in Nova Scotia is defined as "a commitment to ensuring a high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive and equitable

education to support the well-being and achievement of every student” (p. 1). Furthermore, the document expands on the definition by noting key practices including providing “teaching and supports, based on evidence, that promote students’ physical, social-emotional, and behavioural well-being and achievement, [along with having] stimulating and accessible learning opportunities to keep every student engaged, challenged, and inspired” (p. 1). It is clear in this definition and list of practices that effective and measurable interventions are still valued, which reflects previous special education approaches where specialized programs are considered more effective, and possibly limit the degree all educators must shift their practices to support inclusive education.

Guiding principles provide a clear overview of how education in Nova Scotia will appear under the policy including, “every student can learn when provided enough time, practice, and equitable and responsive teaching” and ‘every student deserves to belong (affirmed, validated, and nurtured), be safe, and feel welcomed in all aspects of their daily experience’ (p. 2). In contrast to the definition, practices, and guiding principles, the policy directives place emphasis on interventions to support student well-being and achievement through learning support teachers (formally labelled with titles like resource teacher) and teams, along with a priority given to early detection, with strategies to address potential deficits through the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) model.

MTSS is a framework to support interventions at the intensity required by the student’s needs, language that is very similar to the “as special as necessary” term from the original special education policy, and an evolution of the cascade model, which continues to permeate the policies around service delivery in Nova Scotia (Goodman, 2008; NSDEECD, 2023). Under MTSS, three levels of support are established to support student erudition (Sailor et al., 2018). At

Tier 1, classroom teachers provide instruction through a core curriculum, using a variety of strategies to support inclusive education, including features of universal design for learning and differentiation. At this level, the focus on what is taught is through the lens of developmental appropriateness, and cultural responsiveness, along with being student-centred. However, student performance, particularly through data, is central to measuring progress. As a result, predetermined outcomes dominate discourse about the learning process. Under this framework, data signals students at risk, and interventions are put in place at either Tier 2 or Tier 3 levels. These two levels of support within MTSS stress targeted interventions that are result focused, data-informed, and prevention-oriented to “prevent or fix” the learning issues as soon as possible, as to limit the degree target skill outcomes that might be not achieved. Although the NSDEECD (2023) has emphasized the main principles of inclusive practice in policies and philosophy statements to embrace the diversity of all learners, the practices closely associated with special education have not disappeared in entirety, there is still an interest in having children labelled and fixed within the education system. The reliance on evidence-based practices throughout the implementation of MTSS also reflects the special education lens, as a focus is on providing specific (and often specialized) programs to meet student needs, rather than the development of programming that is designed to support student learning, and is responsive to their unique situation. Finally, at Tier 3, individualized programming with specialized outcomes remains as individualized program plans, with measurable and achievable goals emphasized as the pathway to supporting the student.

Although the term inclusion has become commonplace within schools in Nova Scotia, the question remains regarding the experience of teachers attempting to create inclusive learning environments, while navigating the policies and demands of educational administration. How

can early learning educators make meaning of affirmation, validation, nurturing, and safety, while considering interventions and achievement as inclusive practice?

Educators' Role in Inclusive Education

As provinces and territories across Canada continue to implement more inclusive approaches to public education, the diversity of children present in school classrooms is increasing. Today, everyone goes to school. However, information regarding the experiences and attitudes of educators within inclusive education systems is limited in scope, and almost completely absent at the early education level (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002, Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016; Sharma et al., 2008; Singal, 2008).

A clear definition of inclusion is based on principles that “value diversity and recognize the right of every pupil to study and experience a sense of belonging” (Almog, 2008, p. 37). However, for the philosophy of inclusion to actualize and be effective, the role, attitudes, and practices of educators must be closely examined, yet has not been a frequent topic of consideration in research at the ECEs level until recently (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016). Based on interviews with six ECEs, Dalkilic and Vadeboncoeur (2016) argue rethinking inclusion as relational, due to the regulatory nature of the inclusive practice that may further marginalize children as ECEs’ focus on implementing inclusion over interacting with children. This may begin to explain how research regarding inclusion and ECEs has been aimed at gaining knowledge of pre-service ECEs’ beliefs (Frankel et al., 2014) and preparation (Donegan-Ritter & Kohler, 2017); or coming to understand experiences of ECEs, as they include children with specific disabilities within the early education environment, rather than inclusive practices in general (D’Agostino & Douglas, 2020; Mackenzie et al, 2016).

One of the first comprehensive examinations of literature regarding schoolteachers' attitudes toward integration and inclusion was conducted by Avramidis and Norwich (2002). The extensive international review of the research published between 1984 and 2000, proposed there are three categories of factors overall that may influence teachers' attitudes: student-related (ability, categorical disability), teacher-related (years in education, previous experience working within an inclusive environment) and environmental (availability of additional supports and resources). Within their review, they found classroom teachers with more direct contact with diverse student populations held more negative attitudes in comparison to administrators, who had less contact time with students identified as needing learning support. Additionally, a hierarchy for acceptance emerged from the review, with teachers indicating more willingness to accept more traditionally categorized mild disabilities (sensory or physical) over more complex disabilities. Although this research is now dated and includes an exploration of attitudes toward integration and inclusion, it provides an entry point for examining teachers' attitudes, and how we have come to support or shape these as inclusive practices have evolved.

Many parts of Avramidis and Norwich's (2002) findings have been replicated, as research continues to suggest that teachers tend to be more supportive of integrating students with physical and sensory disabilities into regular classrooms over those with learning difficulties (Lindsay, 2007). The preference for the integration of learners with less complex academic challenges is reinforced by classroom teachers' identification of factors, such as a lack of resource support, the prevailing community culture, along with the teacher's own general preparedness and training to educate any student with academic difficulties (Munchan & Agbenyega, 2020; Whitley, 2010). Similarly, conclusions reflected in the research of Jordan, Glenn and McGhie-Richmond's (2010) examination of teachers' beliefs about disability and

ability, argued that those teachers may need a broader understanding of how knowledge is acquired, in order to support a diverse student population.

Although Munchan and Agbenyega's (2020) examination of five Australian kindergarten educators underscores shifts in beliefs and practices regarding inclusion, their findings also advocated the need for ongoing professional development and opportunities. Yet, how to provide support and professional opportunities is still uncertain. Sokal and Sharma's (2017) draw on their research with pre-service and in-service school teachers to conclude, it is not simply enough to provide courses or professional development regarding inclusion, rather these opportunities must be combined with positive encounters in high quality inclusive settings that have adequate support and resources, along with experiences to challenge pre-existing attitudes and convictions. The malleability of teacher attitude however, does not mean shifts are not happening. Specht et al.'s (2016) examination of Canadian pre-service teachers reveals there are inroads happening to support positive attitudes toward inclusion. Specht et al.'s finding suggests women and elementary educators in general, possess more inclusive opinions, along with positive firsthand experiences with marginalized groups.

Multiple research studies have established the impact of formal learning theories on teachers' practices by examining the questioning undertaken by teachers, and how relevant or applied this is to teachers' classroom practices (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Niemi, 2012). The research of Spetcht et al., (2016) regarding pre-service teachers' beliefs and Sokal's (2012) examination of teacher skills needed to be an inclusive educator, highlights the theory-practice gap that may exist for educators as they attempt to negotiate between idealized concepts of inclusive education, belonging and care, and the skills and strategies necessary to achieve expected standardized learning benchmarks.

There are some indications researchers are becoming interested in exploring and comparing conceptualizations of inclusion and its translation to practices between ECEs and elementary teachers. For example, Thornton & Underwood's (2013) examination of how ECEs and elementary teachers in Ontario conceptualize inclusion and disability, concluded positive beliefs toward inclusion exist. Yet, approaches varied as ECEs reported focusing on the inclusion of all, while elementary teachers underscored the importance of minimizing barriers for children with known disabilities. Comparably, Frankle et al.'s (2014) mixed method research of pre-service ECEs and elementary teacher candidates, concluded many similarities exist in perspectives regarding inclusion, but teachers indicated more perceived challenges, as they would be required to deliver an academic curriculum which might result in the need to create modifications or accommodations. Although these research studies provide a starting point for exploring and comparing ECEs and teacher conceptualizations of inclusion, additional investigation is needed to discern how both professional groupings translate inclusion into practice in early learning settings.

The role of educators in creating an environment for all students to learn is extremely complex. Educators create the classroom climate, select the learning materials, and determine how students will be assessed. But how do they access the knowledge of child development and learning, if the focus of their preparation has been curriculum outcomes? It is through this lens of school achievement and success that concepts of school readiness thrive, and challenge the philosophy and practices of inclusion.

Public Schooling is Inclusive but Be Sure You're Ready

School readiness "is a shortcut to—or a snapshot of—the outcome of the transition process" (Janus, 2011, p. 179). School readiness is generally defined by the ability of the child to

enter a “social environment that is primarily focused on education” (Rafoth et al., 2004), with a predetermined set of abilities at an appropriate level (Janus & Gaskin, 2014). This definition places readiness solely as a measure of the multidimensional capabilities of the child in the domains of physical well-being/motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, and language development (Janus & Gaskin, 2014; Mashburn & Pinata, 2006). This simplistic, narrow definition often results in the categorization of abilities into checklists being generated and administered to measure student strengths and deficits, then applied to potential risk factors and student trajectories, to form a significant body of quantitative large-scale research that dominates the transition to school research (Claessens et al., 2009; Davies et al., 2016). Often the objective of research undertaken becomes a labelling of the child as “ready” or ‘unready’ for school and predicting trajectories, even though many researchers such as Dockett and Perry (2009) argue school readiness “is but one element of a successful start to school” (p. 20).

Research related to school readiness frequently focuses on risk factors like socioeconomic status, family composition and ethnicity, along with the correlations between measures of school readiness and student achievement in later grades (Claessens et al. 2009; Janus & Duku, 2007; Li-Grining et al., 2010; Rouse et al., 2005). Developed in Canada, the Early Development Instrument is designed as a community-level tool to measure, to age-appropriate developmental assumptions across five domains, including physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language, and cognitive development, along with communication skills and general knowledge (Janus & Offord, 2007). The tool consists of a questionnaire completed by the child’s first-year school teacher during the latter half of the academic year. Many researchers utilizing data from the Early Development Instrument attempt

to examine trajectories of achievement on particular outcomes, such as numeracy or literacy skills (Davies et al., 2016; Janus & Duku, 2007). Although research concentrating on school readiness has measured both short- and long-term outcomes, Davies et al., (2016) have noted “there is no consensus over which early capacities are most consequential for children’s later achievement” (p. 65), meaning debate regarding cognitive versus social-emotional skills as markers for success is ongoing. What is clear, however, is that each domain and its interconnectedness with the other domains becomes the “hidden curriculum” of early elementary school, as required developments in social skills, behavioural expectations, and self-regulation are not all explicitly taught, yet are essential to school success (Welsh et al., 2016). Addressing the “hidden curriculum” of school readiness is one gap in the literature taken up in this study’s research design.

The definition of school readiness that focuses solely on the traits and abilities of the learner is problematic. Instead, a definition is required that is school centric, with a more global perspective on readiness that does not simply view successes and challenges solely within the child, but examines readiness across dimensions of childhood, the school environment, and family (Britto, 2012). Britto advocates for a definition of school readiness that is dynamic and draws attention to the interconnections between learners, families, and systems.

A shift in the discourse regarding the transition to school is underscored by Kagan and Rigby’s (2003) argument, “that the sources of readiness are not only the child’s emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and social abilities, but also the contexts in which children live and interact with adults, teachers, and other community members” (p. 3). This more holistic definition of school readiness has the potential to change how the school system engages in transitioning students, by changing the focus from exclusively on the learner to involving a variety of

contexts, and holding the school itself in part, accountable for the success of student transition by being ready. The concept of a “ready school” first emerged with the National Education Goals Panel’s (1997) call for schools to be responsive to their student population. Characteristics of a ready school have been further developed by Ackerman and Barnett (2005), as they have provided three general areas that measure schools’ readiness to transition students: provision of necessary supports for children, emphasis on professional development to meet the needs of students, and adaptability of leadership to build collaborative relationships with the community. These three areas have been further supported and elaborated by Curtis and Simons’ (2008) conclusion that ready schools have nine key pathways that enhance the transition to school process. The nine pathways include creating a welcoming atmosphere, having strong leadership across levels, making connections between early care and education, connecting culturally and linguistically with families, encouraging a high level of parental involvement, forming partnerships in the community, having children succeed in school, using assessment results to support each individual student along with the system performance, and finally, having the school consistently seeking to improve quality overall. Based on the pathway research, Curtis and Simons (2008) recommended that within a ready school, school personnel should view taking “some responsibility for children before they enter kindergarten” (p. 182) along with acknowledging that ‘all children need help with transitions’ (p. 182) as foundational elements of the transition to school process, making it important to come to understand how both early childhood and elementary teachers come to understand care, and its impact on creating an inclusive environment in Nova Scotia.

Summary

This chapter highlighted the historical and contextual elements that impact the realization of care in inclusive early learning environments. The impact of understandings of child development theories on learning, early educators' educational background and ongoing professional development, along with the systemic structures in which the early educators operate, all come to impact how ECEs in Pre-Primary and Primary teachers build and sustain an atmosphere that creates opportunities for success academically, socially, and emotionally for all children. With a wide variation in the contexts of learning for children, it becomes important to gain an understanding of the ways in which educators make meaning of, and enact an ethic of care to guide their practices. Drawing on Noddings' (2012) argument that children's emotional needs cannot be separated from their academic experiences, I situate care as foundational to the creation and implementation of inclusive practices by early educators.

The next chapter will provide an epistemological lens for the current research methodology, along with the research plan, question, and participant selection.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This dissertation began with my own story as a parent of two school-aged children, and it is substantially informed by my experiences as a Primary and specialist teacher, previous graduate study and research related to classroom practices of inclusive education, as well as my informal observations and conversations with both Pre-Primary and Primary educators regarding supporting children in an inclusive learning environment. These experiences and conversations have left me to question how inclusive early learning environments can exist, against a backdrop of discourses regarding child development, school readiness, and the institutionalization of early learning.

According to the prominent North American advocacy organization, The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009), early learning is defined as occurring between the ages of 0 to eight years of age. Although this entire period is characterized by rapid growth and development, for the purposes of this research, the focus of early learning explored reflects the age range serviced in Nova Scotia between the two programs offered by the NSDEECD, Pre-Primary and Primary (three years-eight months, and five years-five months). The creation of a “program that lays the foundation for school success and lifelong learning” (NSDEECD, 2023) can be easily interpreted as a preparation program (Pre-Primary), for the grade school preparation program (Primary) (NSDEECD, 2013) which sets up a specific trajectory of development and defined measures of success. The Pre-Primary interpretation as a preparatory program is further reflected in a parent comment distributed as part of a news release celebrating the complete rollout of the Pre-Primary program.

Being in Pre-Primary before starting Primary better prepared our child for school. She is the kind of child who excels in a structured learning environment and by having early

access to that environment it strengthened her positive feelings about school and allowed her to experience lots of successes. (Lauren Randall, parent of a former Pre-Primary student.) (NSDEECD, 2020b)

This comment seems to reflect an acceptance that the early learning period now comes with many prerequisites, only available to be achieved through formalized educational programs. Which have made me wonder, how do early learning educators' knowledge and understandings about child development inform planning and implementation of learning experiences? As well as, how do early educators come to assess learning and development within an inclusive setting?

Although both education-based programs similar to Pre-Primary and Primary (often referred to as kindergarten and preschool) exist in the same school buildings in many countries, there are differences in how ECEs and elementary teachers view children's learning, and what makes an inclusive learning environment, according to research emerging from similar contexts in Australia (Baumgartner et al., 2020; Huff Sisson et al., 2020) and in other areas of Canada (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Langford et al., 2018; Stagg Peterson et al., 2015). This dissertation extends the current research to explore how PPECEs' and PTs' understandings of child development, play, and relationships, inform their practices as they work to create inclusive learning environments within the traditional school setting. I utilized an "ethic of care" (Noddings, 2012; Tronto, 1993) lens as a tool to explore how these educators facilitate early learning in the Pre-Primary and Primary classrooms, as this ethic is foundational to decision making, practices related to pedagogy and curriculum, and is an important first step in coming to understand the differences in educational approaches (Goldstein, 1998). To illuminate PPECEs' and PTs' understandings and practices, I believe an exploration of their lived experiences through stories they share as they relate to enacting an ethic of care within their classroom

setting, was an important first step. The ethic of care framework provided me with the opportunity to explore if and how educators as carers, not only deliver curriculum and learning experiences for children, but also the ways in which they view children and child development, and respond to differences amongst learners (Conn, 2018; Noddings, 2012, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

Emerging from my own experiences as a parent and educator, the goal of this research was to share early educators' stories regarding how they come to make meaning of, and enact an ethic of care in inclusive classrooms. As such, this research is qualitative in nature, and was informed through a critical ethic of care theory.

Critical Ethic of Care Theory

Historically, care and education have been on separate paths in Canada and in many developed nations, as care has been framed as being subordinate to education, and pushed into the private family and home sphere, while education has been solidified as a public good (Langford et al., 2017). There has been an acknowledgement that all education requires care within educational theory, as emotional needs cannot be separated from academic learning (Connell, 2013; Noddings, 2012). Wilde (2013) argues, for teachers to act with care, they must be equipped with tools to show and model care in varying situations. Noddings (2016) proposed there are four major components to caring for children in an educational setting. The components include, educators modelling care, educators and children dialoguing about caring, educators and children practicing care, and educators engaging in confirmation, all of which bring attention to the need for educators and children to be dependent on one another. Yet, little is known about how care is understood as a personal and professional practice by teachers.

In the broadest sense, professional practices in education are formed through professional knowledge, which is a combination of procedural knowledge and declarative knowledge (how and what of teaching) (Lambert & Biddulph, 2015). Yet, this simplistic view does not underscore the complexities of being an educator. Professional practice is deeply personal, and formed through the tensions of everyday experiences of both teaching and the greater societal influences, such as policy and politics, to produce what has been termed personal practical knowledge (Clandinin et al., 2006). Personal practical knowledge is argued to be the driving force behind educators' thinking and actions, as it enables reconsideration of past experiences and future expectations to address the demands of a present situation (Borg, 2001; Connelly et al., 1997). To further explore this, Clandinin and Connelly (1996) proposed the metaphor of professional knowledge landscapes to describe the multiple dimensions of space, time, and places educators navigate as they come to enact their practices.

To address this gap in understanding care as a professional practice by teachers within inclusive education settings, I applied a critical lens of an ethic of care, so that I could acknowledge the role of educators as both givers and receivers of care, and explore the relational elements of teaching and learning. Using a critical lens, I have analyzed how care is conceptualized and applied within both the Pre-Primary and Primary classroom by educators. As a framework, critical ethics of care calls for constant interrogation and deconstructing of the role of power in care (Held, 2006; Tronto, 1993). I applied this framework to disrupt, trouble and challenge familiar articulations of care, and rethink the role of care and its potential importance in the politics and policies of inclusive educational practices at the early learning level (Mahon & Robinson, 2011).

I have come to understand an ethic of care as a cultural construct and a tangible action, rather than as an abstract list of principles (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Tronto, 1993). Yet, there are important aspects that come to characterize a critical ethic of care, including a focus on relational ontology, recognition of context, and reconceptualization of public/private roles (Hankivsky, 2004; Klaver et al., 2014). A relational ontology grounds an ethic of care, as it recognizes the self within complex webs and relations with others (Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Robinson, 2011). From this perspective, it is considered part of the normal human condition to be relational, vulnerable, interdependent, and unequal (Pettersen, 2008; Sevenhuijsen, 1998, Tronto, 1993). Furthermore, within critical and feminist ethics of care, Sevenhuijsen (2003) notes these characteristics are not interpreted as weaknesses or in need of fixing, rather they are accepted as normal.

Care does not happen within a vacuum. As Langford and Richardson (2020) highlighted “care practices [are] nested within other caring practices that create complex care interrelationships” (p. 34). I situated my research to inquire into these interrelationships, as it is not only educators’ interactions with each other, but within a vast network of interrelationships, that make up the context in which each educator and child operates. A critical ethic of care recognizes care as a practice; is complex and messy, as it is situated within social, political, and historical contexts of power (Held, 2006; Tronto, 2015). The recognition and understanding by ethic of care theorists toward differences, permit an examination of context and factors such as gender, class, race, and ability (Hankivsky, 2004). It is through these examinations that the ethic of care also becomes political, as it takes up questions regarding vulnerability, dependence, difference, and social justice (Held, 2006, Sevenhuijsen & Svab, 2004; Tronto, 2013).

All educational settings are not neutral, rather they operate in ways that reproduce inequalities and exclusion (Macartney, 2008; MacNaughton, 2005). Like Dahlberg and Moss (2005), I view the early learning classroom as having power relations, and that these shape children's learning, participation, and inclusion. These contexts and factors unequivocally impact power relations as fostered through society's values, laws, and institutions, which directly impact care relations in early learning settings. It is through these power differences categories of "other" emerge, as educators negotiate between predetermined normative frameworks related to acceptable behaviours, beliefs, appearance, and indicators or markers of what is normal for children through contextualized judgments (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Shields et al., 2005). Furthermore, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) have argued the workings of power influence children's learning, participation, and inclusion, making educational institutions reproducers of inequality and exclusion as the supposition, that those deemed "other" is to conform to the dominant groups' set of expectations regarding rules, norms, values, and understandings. If children are viewed as passive, helpless recipients of care, the impact of their perceived powerlessness can have deep impacts on how caregivers both provide and interpret their care, as their agency is denied (Held, 2006).

Accepting children's agency is imperative, as through a modern feminist ethics of care lens, power relations are acknowledged and explored. In the context of care relations through the works of Noddings (2003) as she posited, a child can engage in active participation in care, and become a social agent within their own care. Educators need to consider the context of the individual child when making determinations about their education and work. When an educator promotes a belief in the neutrality of education, unequal power relationships are left

unchallenged, and exclusion is reproduced. This is further supported by Noddings' (1993) argument:

One of the great strengths of caring as an ethic is that it does not assume that all students should be treated by some impartial standard of fairness.... Caregivers, therefore, respond in different ways to the different needs presented by “caredfors.” (p. 302)

Making the ethic of care an essential framework for educators to critically reflect, navigate, and balance caregiving and external demands. Langford and Richardson (2020) further argued, “there is something profound and political about how children and educators experience care (or not) in ordinary encounters” (p. 35) within the educational realm, and how these experiences with care unfold can impact their well-being.

Aspects such as attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness to others through practices and thought, are needed in early learning environments. However, these are often overshadowed by the powerful institution of school with its expectations of “school readiness” and ‘readiness to learn’ within children (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). PPECEs and PTs also have a responsibility to balance the educational rights of all children within an inclusive classroom. In doing so, educators operate within the constraints of prescribed curriculum and policy documents, grounded in established notions of development informed by messages of best practices for all children, while also using professional judgment. Ingersoll (2003) argued, layers of bureaucracy and the hierarchies of decision-making governing educational administration in the early 21st century take a rationalized form, where the institution of school distributes this power over teachers’ lives in “standardized, routinized, specialized and formulized fashion” (p. 18). Furthermore, since power is synonymous with control, many teachers have lost autonomy with pedagogical choices, resulting in a loss of agency within their professional life in school.

This, in turn, directly impacts all aspects of educators' practice, including how they establish and enact an ethic of care in an inclusive environment.

Researcher Positionality

This research project employed an interpretivist paradigm to gain an understanding of the “world of human experience” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 36) by attending to participants' experiences and perceptions, along with my own background and experiences, to uncover common themes and tensions as they related to the experience of PTs and PPECEs working with children in an inclusive, early learning environment. From this perspective, I have listened to participants' responses and stories, understanding they are intimate descriptions, and it is through these stories of the experiences, that I have come to make sense of, understand, interpret, relive, and retell. I believe the stories conveyed by participants during their discussions, focus group sessions, and journals (these data collection methods will be explained in the pages ahead) have ontological and epistemological relevance, as well as practical application to educational practices.

As a classroom teacher with experience in early elementary, I could be considered an insider by usual definitions, meaning to produce ethical and credible research, I must reflect on, and be transparent about, the methodological issues and challenges I have faced, which includes how my positionality and background has shaped the generation and interpretation of data (explored in Chapter 1). I acknowledge my white, cisgender privilege along with my post-secondary education, volunteer, and work experience in both the early childcare field and the elementary education system. Since 2006, I have been employed as an educator spending time as a Primary classroom teacher, learning centre, and early elementary transition classroom teacher. My experiences in an early elementary setting have enhanced my understanding and awareness

of the many challenges and issues encountered by the participants. I brought to this research, knowledge of curriculum, provincial and regional policies and expectations, along with strategies for supporting children as they enter formal schooling. Since I have experience in the early elementary context, I have certain viewpoints which have shaped data generation and interpretation, including my understanding of policies, and prior experiences within the classroom. For example, my perspective is that developing meaningful relationships and focusing on whole child development is essential to supporting a positive start to formal schooling, and that challenges can often arise in the process. With my post-secondary knowledge of ECE theory and practices, I did not enter the discussions with PPECE participants with impartiality or a neutral perspective. As a volunteer, I have continued to be engaged with the early childhood field by being a member of a local daycare board of directors. I believe my experiences and knowledge related to ECE have further enhanced my understanding and awareness of the many issues encountered by the participants. I brought knowledge of ECE provincial policies and the early learning curriculum framework within the province, along with strategies for implementation. My perspective regarding early learning is rooted in the belief that all children are capable learners, and the role of early childhood educators is to foster and promote positive learning experiences through relationships. Additionally, in this chapter and others, I have shared and reflected upon my own stories, and how they impacted my way of seeing the participants, and how I have identified and selected what is important in connecting their stories. This undoubtedly shaped my interpretation of the data generated.

I contest the established insider-outsider conceptual framework, as I recognize the static limitations of this dichotomy in considering both my own role and that of my participants, since it does not consider the multiple identities individuals have that enables them to move fluidly

between groups (McNess et al., 2015). I view the insider-outsider experience related to identity and belonging emerging from the engagement between the participants and myself, as we co-create stories through my conversations with them, and the telling of their own stories of experiences enacting an ethic of care. In this research, I lived alongside the participants, experiencing with them their own stories of enacting an ethic of care, as will be described in the research design section of this chapter. As a result, I believe I experienced living in the in-between (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). I acknowledge the insider perspective has shaped my understanding and analysis of data, but this has not been an impediment to my research. Through disclosing my insider experience and demonstrating critical reflexivity as a researcher, Cunliffe (2004) argues “we become more aware of, and skilled in, constituting and maintaining our realities and identities” (p. 410). This in-between is what brought me to the research question, as I have navigated between my understandings from both early childhood and early elementary education theories and practices, yet I did not approach the questions with predetermined answers. I pursued shared understandings, and misunderstandings, and potentially identifying conflicts that arose through the participants’ stories. With my goal of hearing stories to make meaning of, and understand the educational practices of educators as it relates to early learning, I utilized a narrative methodology to respond to my research question.

A Narrative Approach to Making Meaning

Since my research question was concerned with the “how” of participants’ experiences within the inclusive Pre-Primary and Primary classroom setting, I selected a narrative approach to the research design. Narrative inquiry as a methodology is used to develop and value the knowledge that has not always been appreciated in education, one rooted in experience rather than research in isolation (Craig, 2011). Narrative inquiry was employed to come to understand

“how people structure the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives” (Schram, 2006, p. 104). Clandinin (2013) further described the narrative inquiry as centering on “experience as storied phenomenon” (p. 34).

The role of stories in narrative inquiry is important to explore, as Kramp (2004) argued, narrative is a way of knowing, resulting in stories being the way of telling. Creswell (2012) further elaborated on this description, explaining the story in narrative research to be “first-person oral telling or retelling of an individual ... [with] a beginning, middle and an end” (p. 518). The focus within a narrative inquiry on stories to make sense of experiences, is consistent with Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou’s (2008) position that the narrative form is the universal way in which people come to understand their experiences. This sense-making is quite evident in my every day, as educator colleagues often explain and analyze their teaching practice through stories as educators who have been working with children for any length of time, have accumulated stories on their journey (Craig, 2011). Recent narrative inquiry research by Davis & Murphy (2016) to examine an early educator’s experiences making curriculum for a chronically ill student, and Lim et al.’s (2019) exploration of how teachers’ professional inquiry, both provide evidence of the power of a narrative inquiry methodology to elicit stories of educator practices and understandings, and to learn from them. Both articles demonstrate how narrative inquiry can be used to explore teacher professional practice knowledge, and the tensions teachers experience as they navigate curriculum and expectations by inquiring into the stories of their practice.

In both Connelly and Clandinin (1990), and Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the use of narrative inquiry in education is promoted, claiming that much of what is known in the field of research into teacher knowledge comes from educators relating their stories of educational

experiences. As a narrative inquirer, I value the stories voiced by participants for their ability to provide me with additional perspectives, rather than thinking about each story as providing a complete, comprehensive understanding of the phenomena (Clandinin, 2007). I believe it is through this narrative approach, I have come to be able to respond to my research question by thinking “with” rather than simply about the stories shared by participants. As Morris (2002) clarified:

The concept of thinking with stories is meant to oppose and modify (not replace) the institutionalized Western practice of thinking about stories. Thinking about stories conceives of narrative as an object. Thinking with stories is a process in which we as thinkers do not so much work on narrative ... [rather allow] narrative to work on us. (p. 196)

To achieve this, I sought to understand each participant individually and socially, which meant coming to explore their professional and personal knowledge across three commonplaces.

Professional Knowledge Landscapes

I understand that teachers’ knowledge is shaped by their choices, circumstances, and actions, and it is through the metaphor of educator’s professional knowledge landscapes, I began analysis of the ways the work of the educators occurs in various spaces, and in relation to various people (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Philpott & Dangenais, 2011). As framed through this metaphor there are tensions that are illuminated and manifested, as educators travel across professional locations of their work, more specifically, the in-classroom and out-of-classroom aspects (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). The in-classroom and out-of-classroom locations of educators’ work are noted by Clandinin and Connelly (1995) as characterized by tensions as the knowledge, experiences, and skills used in-the-classroom by educators, do not always align with

the out-of-classroom messaging. To unpack the complexities of the professional practice landscape, Clandinin and Connelly (1995) proposed there are three types of stories that are critical to explore and interrogate, to understand the ways theory and practice interact with formalized education and shape educators' practices: the "sacred," the "secret," and the "cover."

Sacred stories explored by educators, focus on knowledge that is imparted through the system in which they work by educational authorities, with the expectation these will be integrated into teachers' knowledge and practices (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). In the context of my research, the sacred story is the institutional narrative, characterized by information communicated by the DEECD about learning through curriculum guides in Primary, the Early Years Framework in Pre-Primary, and other related documents. The sacred stories come to "reveal the broader discursive movements and influences on teachers' work" (Charteris & Smith, 2017, p. 605) leading to a direct impact on what should be said/thought by educators, and who can say it, through how this knowledge is funnelled to the professional knowledge landscape. As a result, Clandinin and Connelly (1995) argued the funnelling of knowledge can lead to dilemmas for frontline educators, as the tension between what they have developed as their own practices, and the theoretical knowledge of the removed authorities may exist. As sacred stories are "littered with imposed prescriptions" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p. 25) and are linked to power, it is accepted there is power associated with these stories, and the potential of a risk if these stories are questioned, making an ability to understand and speak with reference to the sacred stories of education, a protective skill to an educators' status as a professional. In the context of this dissertation the sacred story is composed of information shared by the DEECD about how to facilitate children's learning, along with the academic and behavioural expectations

of children through curriculum documents, and the Early Learning Framework and related documents.

Secondly, Clandinin and Connelly (1995) described the secret story. These stories impart accounts of the work educators do in the classroom. Under this description, the classroom is described as a safe professional location, where they work alone and in privacy (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). McCaughtry (2006) remarked the secret story consists of “lived, relational and context-specific stories of what is best for individual children, what works practically in their classrooms.... They are often secret because they run counter to a school’s sacred story” (p. 163). Aspects of secret stories related to this dissertation, include the practices used by educators to provide quality hands-on learning experiences within their classrooms. Craig (1995) expands further on the secret stories to recognize the challenging waters teachers navigate, when differences between the teaching decisions they make in the privacy of their classroom do not align with the way they feel they are supposed to be teaching, due to the pressures of mandates and standardized assessments, leading to the creation of cover stories by educators.

The cover story acts as a bridge between educators’ secret and sacred stories. Cover stories provided a sense of expertise, as educators use these to define themselves, based on how their actions conform or operate within the range of what is communicated through the sacred story (Charteris & Smith, 2017; McCaughtry, 2006). Essentially, these are the stories told by educators when they feel they need to portray a specific type of image of how they operate, even when it does not align with how they privately practice within their classroom. To an extent, cover stories enable educators to navigate the pressures to align and conform, with the sacred stories of mandates, and identify with colleagues (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). Although Clandinin and Connelly (1996) suggested the ways these stories work to cover, may suggest

educators' assimilation or compliance with the sacred story. I believe it is within these stories that insight can be gained into how educators reconcile between the professional knowledge of the sacred and secret stories. In the face of rising pressures to ensure outcomes are met in Primary classrooms, and with a responsibility to boost literacy and numeracy competencies to "ready" children for further learning, the PTs in this study were quite familiar with establishing cover stories. The PTs told cover stories to try and balance what they believed about early learning and inclusive education, with the expectations of the curriculum and policy documents. Within this dissertation, examples of cover stories include the conversations shared by PTs regarding hands-on learning, and PPECEs descriptions of their responsiveness to children's interests in setting up learning experiences.

When combined, the stories make sense of the multiple spaces of educators' work, and help to expound the complexities of educators' professional knowledge landscapes, and the relationship among educational theory, policy, and teacher practice. Often the stories intersect in messy, complex, and relational ways. The application of the metaphor of professional practice knowledge landscape has helped me as the researcher, to make meaning of PPECE and PT participants' perspectives, by making connections between the kinds of stories participants tell in the context of their practice and professional learning.

The Three Narrative Commonplaces

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued, "it is experience, not narrative, that is the driving impulse ... narrative is the closest we can come to experience... Our guiding principle in an inquiry is to focus on experience and to follow where it leads" (p. 188). However, it is not enough to simply listen to the narrative; rather Connelly and Clandinin (2006) provide three

commonplaces through which a narrative inquiry is framed. The three commonplaces are temporality, sociality, and place.

Temporality is the past, present, and future embedded within stories shared. McAdams (2008) premised people situate experiences in time, and integrate them into ongoing narratives of their lives. This integration means there is a temporal flow to experiences, and how participants attached meanings. Within my research, this means stories will be in flux as participants and myself, as the researcher, continued to have experiences during the data generation period and beyond. People's stories can change and be re-storied over time, as they reconsider them from different perspectives; therefore, meanings ascribed to experiences are dependent on the time they are told.

Sociality is about a continuum across the personal and the broader social contexts of participants: the culture, language, and institutions in which the narrative inquiry is situated, alongside the participants' personal experiences, which include the relationship between the researcher and participant (Clandinin, 2013). It is within these spaces that tensions may arise along the continuum of the social and personal. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) claim it is in the relationships with others that educators tell and retell their stories, perhaps expanding their field of knowledge, and coming to better understand "secret stories" of their own classrooms.

Place is the physical location in which the stories take place. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) have explained it can be "the specific, concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place where the inquiry and events take place" (p. 480). Estefan and Roughley (2013) have stressed experiences always happen somewhere, and these places are deeply impacted by how experiences unfold/enfold, and are then spoken about. As a narrative inquirer understanding this research, I have considered both the qualities and impact of place as a multifaceted context

within the stories especially through the lens of rurality. The conditions of the place in which the experiences have happened, ranging from the immediate location, including the school, community, and province, to the broader contexts such as the COVID pandemic, along with the location of the interview, were considered for their impact on the experience.

Using a narrative inquiry methodology, I became an inquirer seeking to produce rich descriptions of experiences, and explore the meanings that participants derived from their experiences since “both the stories and the humans are continuously visible in the study” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 7). It is through this visibility that I was continually working within a relational space (Clandinin, 2013). I was not simply documenting the stories recounted, rather, I committed to the process of storying and restoring with the participant. I explored with the participants, their stories of being educators in Pre-Primary and Primary classrooms. Their experiences as stories lived and told, are the phenomena that I have investigated, inquired about, and tell (Caine et al., 2013). As Clandinin (2007) proposed, stories make experiences accessible. It is through hearing, telling, and retelling stories, I have connected with participants and understand how they live in their classrooms. I have shared transcripts, interpretations and reflective comments with my participants, and invited their involvement in making sense of what I have written (Clandinin, 2013). I acknowledge that the retelling was not simply telling a story again, but rather it was reconstructing the story, as it was informed by new or different experiences, thoughts, or insights, of both the participant and the researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

As Clandinin and Murphy (2009) described, my priority as a researcher was to fulfil the relational responsibilities between the participants and myself, and to represent our co-constructed experiences. Furthermore, I have been aware throughout the process “the priority in

composing research texts is not, first and foremost, to tell a good story; the priority is to compose research texts in relation with the lives of ... [my] participants” (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009) and myself. To achieve this, I have approached and enacted my commitment from a place of wonder, ensuring I have not positioned myself as already knowing (Caine et al., 2013). It is through this relational aspect between me and the participants, that the complex co-creation of stories situated in time, place, and along the personal-social continuum of sociality, emerged. I believe it was this “being in the midst” of narrative inquiry, meaning the experience of life in progress for both myself as the researcher and the participants, that helped to foster a deeper understanding of PTs’ and PPECEs’ experiences supporting children, and as the participants and I explored together, how an ethic of care informed their practices (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is also this relational aspect that provided an opportunity for the often-unheard voices of PPECEs and PTs, to express their beliefs and practices within early learning inclusive classrooms.

In summary, there are several reasons why I selected narrative inquiry as a methodology for this research study. First, there is a strong and successful history of using narrative research approaches to explore teacher experiences, including recent work by Adams and Rodriguez (2020) that focused on the use of critical incidents to investigate teacher preparation, and Huff Sisson & Kroeger’s (2017) exploration of preschool and primary educators’ professional identities and continuity of practice. Secondly, recent publications emphasize that narrative inquiry is very well-suited to my research question, as the aim was to collect and inquire into stories of PPECEs and PTs regarding their ethic of care within an inclusive educational environment, and “re-story” them into a framework or plot line that deepens our understanding of this phenomenon, while actively involving them in the research (Creswell, 2007). Thirdly, the

experiences of the participants in this study can help inform future practices related to supporting early learners in Pre-Primary and Primary contexts.

The Research Design

Developing a design for responding to the research question required careful examination of selection criteria, for choosing participants and methods for data generation and analysis. The following section provides details of my considerations and actions to generate and analyze the data to inform this research.

Participants and Considerations

Upon obtaining approval to conduct the study from Acadia University's Research Ethics Board (Appendix A), followed by permission from a Regional Centre of Education [RCE] to carry out the study, I began to recruit from one RCE in Nova Scotia, where I am employed, PPECEs and PTs to participate in the study. Regional Centres for Education are established as district zones of schools within a physical region of Nova Scotia, that are overseen by a Regional Executive Director that reports directly to the Minister of Education.

I recruited participants from within my RCE, because I am familiar with current practices regarding Pre-Primary and Primary programming in this RCE. Also, the selected RCE has an early learning resource program to support children during the first two years of formal schooling. This early learning transition to school program accepts referrals of children in grade Primary and one, who are deemed by the teacher as experiencing challenges with routines and demands of school, and is a position I have been employed in previously, as I described in the introduction.

I used nonprobability, purposeful sampling to select seven participants (four PPECE's and three PTs) for this study. Such purposeful sampling enabled me as the researcher, to select

participants who could provide specific information I needed, to describe and understand the experiences of early educators and Primary teachers in Nova Scotia (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Maxwell (2005) provided further justification for the strategy as “particular settings, persons or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 88).

The first phase of participant selection began with the creation of a list of attributes that I used to select and invite PTs and PPECEs to participate in the study. Identifying specific attributes assisted with the selection of participants who met criteria related to the purpose of the study, and who could provide breadth and depth of information about the topic under investigation (Kim, 2016; Patton, 2002).

The attributes for PPECE participants to participate were:

- Level 2 or 3 classification as determined by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
- Employed within a Pre-Primary program for at least two full years.

The attributes for PT participants to fit this study were:

- Participants teaching primarily a grade Primary class (at least 80% of their teaching assignment), although they could also be a combined grades classroom teacher (if 50% or more of their children were in Primary).
- Participants having taught a minimum of two years at the Primary level.

The purpose of inviting a combination of PPECEs and PTs as research participants was to develop, as much as possible, an appreciation for two learning environments currently available and known for providing early education in Nova Scotia. With diverse criteria for how they come to be educators within the two programs, the inclusion of both PPECEs and PTs was

determined to be the best way to gain a diverse appreciation for how they make meaning of, and enact care, along with an approach fostering inclusive education in early childhood education settings. As Conn (2018) argued, inclusion occurs when there is “the capacity of teachers to recognize and respond effectively to the differences between learners, adapting everyday practices in ways that show respect for pupil diversity” (p. 595). This capacity reflects caring as a form of action which directly impacts decision-making around pedagogy and curriculum, and teaching through an ethic of care (Noddings, 2011b).

I began recruitment by posting on social media posters, seeking participants (Appendix B). These posters were posted on my personal accounts. Additionally, PTs and PPECEs within the RCE have informal networks and groups on social media, where I also requested and was approved to post the research recruitment flyer as well, that outlined the criteria for participation in the study.

My initial postings yielded three PTs that met the criteria for the study, however, no PPECEs were initially identified through the process. To further assist with the recruitment of participants, the RCE formally shared the recruitment poster on their Twitter account and through their mailing list server with PPECEs. After two weeks of posting the last email, with still no contact from potential PPECE participants, I approached a PPECE whom I had developed a collaborative working relationship with, and described the study and commitments from the participants needed. That PPECE agreed to participate, and offered to share the study with others within her PPECE network. The participant then provided a list of two other participants that had agreed to share their contact information with me. I contacted potential participants, both agreed to participate, however, one had to rescind their interest before our first meeting, due to a serious illness that put her off work indefinitely. I then personally reached out

to two PPECE teachers via an in-person conversation, that worked at a school in my local community. Both PPECEs agreed to participate in the research as well.

All potential participants recruited were contacted via telephone to verify they met the criteria, and to gather pertinent background information regarding their experiences, education, and demographics. Although all participants who indicated interest were selected, within the pool there was significant variation in age, length of time as an early educator, and the highest level of education, enabling participants that provided “information-rich cases that manifest [their] experience intensely” (Patton, 2002, p. 243). Although gender and self-identification as a racially visible person may have also been important aspects to consider when selecting participants to discuss experiences and practices related to developing an inclusive environment, the RCE is in a rural area of Nova Scotia, and has limited diversity among its employees with 0% of permanent, probationary or term PTs or PPECEs identifying as male in 2020 (Wagner, personal correspondence, March 21, 2021). Similarly, less than 2% of the entire RCE employees self-identify as First Nations, Inuit or Métis or as a racially visible person, based on data collected in the 2019 academic year, making it impossible to utilize criteria regarding ethnicity or gender, without risking potentially identifying the participants (Wagner, personal correspondence, March 21, 2021).

The impact of having a lack of diversity and representation in participants could be significant to the research undertaken. Multiple perspectives on education and care exist and without giving voice to early educators of African descent and Indigenous early educators the results are limited. Recent research examining care in early education has highlighted the degree a communal ethic of care may exist as a common practice for black women educators with a focus on the collective responsibility for the well-being of young children (Green, 2023).

Similarly, Indigenous worldviews centred on interconnectedness and relationships stories shared and the role of care in early education could be very different (James, 2023). Without representation of these understandings there is a limit to how the findings may be applied or generalized.

Once I identified potential PTs and PPECEs that met the selection criteria, I organized an initial session with each individual participant to discuss the research study, review the informed consent, and used this time to start establishing a researcher-participant working relationship. The researcher-participant relationship is essential to data generated within a narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Caine (2008) contend, “in studying and understanding experience narratively, researchers recognize the centrality of relationships, the relationships among participants and researchers, and the relationships of experiences studied through time and over time, and in unique places and multilayered contexts” (p. 542). With this understanding, it is clear narrative inquiry is a relational inquiry in which the role of the researcher includes attending to the tensions in and across the narratives participants share, as well as a possibility within relationships (Clandinin et al., 2009). During the session, I explained all aspects related to the study, including its purpose, the minimal risks of participation, the nature of participation, as well as the participant’s right to withdraw at any time during the study. I also reviewed the steps I was going to take to ensure confidentiality. At the end of the discussion, I requested that each participant sign the informed consent (Appendix C). On the following page is a table listing all participants, their positions, and years of experience, as well as their levels of education. All participants names are pseudonyms.

Name	Position	Years Teaching	Education Level
Heather	Primary Teacher	15 (13 Primary)	Master of Education
Jessica	Primary/One Teacher	13 (11 Primary)	Master of Education
Ashley	Primary/One Teacher	8 (3 Primary)	Master of Education
Lisa	PPECE Lead Teacher	3 (PPECE), 34 (ECE Daycare)	Associate Degree in Early Education
Jennifer	PPECE Lead Teacher	3 (PPECE), 12 (ECE & Daycare Director), 4 (Teacher Assistant)	Diploma
Amy	PPECE Lead Teacher	3 (PPECE), 10 (ECE Daycare)	Bachelor of Applied Arts Child and Youth Study
Hannah	PPECE	3 (PPECE), 8 (ECE Daycare)	Diploma

In addition to the educational background and years of experience, it is important to also highlight the rural context in which the study was conducted. All participants except one were working in the community in which they grew up and all, but one was currently living in the same community in which they worked. Although potentially not unique to a rural context, the degree the rural area potentially impacted the experiences of the early educators is important to note as they described multiple levels of connections with their colleagues along with the families and children.

Data Generation

All data generation occurred over a span of 12 weeks during the fall of 2021. Data generation for this narrative inquiry was composed of four tools:

- Up to three, hour-long individual semi-structured narrative interviews.
- A visit to the classroom space to take pictures.

- Two focus group sessions (one designated for each group and one for all participants) and, three guided journaling activities.
- Offered artifacts from participants.

Narrative Interviews. The first data generation source was multifaceted discussions, guided by open-ended semi-structured prompts (Appendix D). The prompts were designed to enable participants to voice their experiences through questions like, “How might you describe your role as an educator?” “Can you share with me a story of an experience you have had that reflects this role?” To effectively ensure participants’ voice without researcher interference, Kim (2016) proposes two phases of narrative interviews, which is how I approached the data generation. Although titled phases, they are not required to be linear. The first phase of the narrative focused on the encouragement of extensive descriptions by the participants, with me as the researcher, taking on the role of listener and observer. During this phase of the interview session, I attempted to vicariously experience participant stories through the senses and observations of the participant’s body language, pauses, and expressions (Kim, 2016). The second aspect, appropriately labelled the conversation phase, is characterized by clarifications, and invitations to share more stories to further inform the dialogue (Kim, 2016). I remained aware throughout the interviews, that I needed to be flexible and ready to follow unexpected paths that arose through talking with participants, so that the participants were co-constructing the data generation (Creswell, 2012; Narayan & George, 2012). For example, when one participant began to respond to a prompt regarding supporting children’s well-being by sharing experiences related to the absence of material in their Bachelor of Education program regarding play-based learning, I listened to their full story before returning to the interview prompt question.

All discussions were guided by open-ended questions to help facilitate conversations around the purpose of the study, and encourage the sharing of participants' stories (Lodico et al., 2010). I ordered the guiding questions in a manner to help the participant feel comfortable to openly share their experiences, however, I was open to changing the order to align with the stories that emerged, to ensure a natural flow to the discussion. The sequencing of questions further helped me to enhance the participant-researcher relationship by concentrating on developing a positive rapport before asking more specific questions.

In addition, I encouraged participants to share artifacts of their professional practice, such as lesson plans, instructional resources, children's literature, photographs, classroom displays, and any other relevant examples they identified as being related to their stories of practice in their classrooms. Since the purpose of the discussion process was to enable each participant to share their perspectives and experiences of being an early educator, through responses to prompts along with their own reflections and storytelling, the artifacts shared further enhanced and provided greater context for me as the researcher, to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for the stories divulged. The second interview session continued to further investigate the questions posed in the first interview, and was also guided by a discussion of artifacts the participants shared, and the observations I made during my time in their classroom space.

A third meeting took place after the initial data generation period, and focused on the co-creation of participant narratives, with further clarification questions and discussion of emerging narratives. This final interview session reflected Connelly and Clandinin's (2006) recommendation that conversations and relationships with the participants "occur and reoccur as

there is a fluidity and recursiveness as inquirers compose research texts, negotiate them with participants, compose further texts and recompose research texts” (p. 49).

I conducted each interview via a Zoom subscription account, using the transcription feature and recording option. Zoom was selected as it limited travel for participants, and enabled flexible options for completing the interviews in locations where the participants were relaxed, speaking freely, and sharing ideas comfortably. The Zoom invitation consisted of a uniquely computer-generated access room code and password which was provided to participants through a non-employer email. Protocols for the storage of the recordings were followed, and included password protected access to encrypted files, and locked transportation of all data formats.

Classroom Visit. A second aspect of the data generation was a visit to each participant’s classroom environment to document the physical layout of the space, along with the resources readily available to support children’s learning. These visits took place prior to the second interview with each participant, and were during afterschool hours when children were not present. The participants stayed in their classrooms during my visits as I took a variety of digital images of the space. Characteristics of the classroom space I focused on included:

- Items on the walls inside the classroom.
- Arrangement of the learning spaces within the room.
- Information on whiteboards/bulletin boards.
- Materials present for student use.
- Observable routines and procedures.
- Location of students’ personal materials.

I used the images taken as artifacts to support further discussions and conversations during the second individual meeting time with the early educator.

Focus Group Sessions. The third aspect of the data generation was three focus group sessions. There was one session each for PPECEs and PTs separately, and one for all participants together. Focus group sessions were used as opportunities for group sharing of personal stories and experiences of the early educator participants supporting children in an inclusive setting. Each session was guided by a generated list of discussion prompts (Appendix E) and was facilitated by me, as the researcher. In this role, I helped to encourage conversation and sharing of experiences in relation to the topics explored, but also current “burning issues of experiences” within the group. This approach is supported by Polit and Beck’s (2008) position within narrative research, that unstructured interviews permit participants to relate to aspects of phenomena of interest with an emphasis on matters of greatest importance to each individual. The lack of specific questions enabled a free exchange of ideas between participants, as iterative professional conversation promoted a rich description of the experiences in question. Furthermore, the conversations enabled me to examine what questions arose in the process. The information revealed as part of the focus group sessions provided me with a better understanding of each early educators’ individual experiences, and provided insights into the personal professional knowledge early educators employ day-to-day (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). It is this type of personal professional knowledge that can be difficult for educators to share, as many are unaware they are even using it, but is “through experimenting and problem-solving in the course of teaching and through re-presenting their teaching and reflecting on it, teachers develop such craft knowledge” (Ruthven, 2000, p. 124). All focus group sessions were hosted on Zoom and recorded with transcription enabled, to follow all data protocols for the individual interviews.

Journal Activities. A fourth aspect of the data generation was the completion of a minimum of three journal entries completed by participants throughout the data generation period, at approximately the three, six, and nine week points. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) support the use of journals in gaining insights into teaching practices noting, “journals stand as written record of practice; they provide teachers with a way to revisit, analyze, and evaluate their experiences over time and in relation to broader frames of reference (p. 26). I provided journal prompts to all participants (Appendix F) and encouraged them to discuss any aspect of establishing an inclusive environment that was of interest to them, or that arose during their teaching, or conversations during focus group sessions.

I believe reflection is a critical component of reviewing one’s practice, which is why I asked participants to “tak[e] time to step back and to ponder the meaning of what has happened, the impact of it and the direction one is taking” (Higgins, 2011, p. 584) as this helped to further gain insights into the personal practical knowledge of the participants. Day and Pennington (1993) further argue, it is through reflection that teachers’ beliefs, theories, and knowledge about teaching and learning become explicit. The use of reflective practice documentation is noted as one of the major sources of information for narrative inquiry (Willis et al., 2010).

Context of Data Generation

The timing of the study in the fall of 2021 is significant, as it occurred during the worldwide COVID pandemic. Within the Nova Scotia context, the province was entering its third school year with protocols in place to help reduce transmission of the virus. Both 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years were significantly impacted, with the 2019-20 school year resulting in at-home learning beginning in March 2020, and continuing until the academic year ended in early June. In August and September 2020, the Nova Scotia government rolled out the Back to

School Plan, resulting in the 2020-21 school year being marked by significant shifts in practices within schools including cohorts, limited movement, minimizing visitors in buildings, and virtual parent-teacher events. At the classroom level, particular practices, including an emphasis on physical distancing within the classroom, masking always, limiting movement and physical touching/sharing of items, along with minimizing items within the space (removal of learning carpets and toys) were all part of the Back to School Plan (NSDEECD, 2020a). In addition, the school year was interrupted twice with a weeklong extension to the holiday break, to start January 2021, and again in May 2021, as schools were closed and virtual schooling occurred for a month, as the second wave of COVID impacted the province. As the 2021-22 school year began, there was a level of optimism for a return to “normal” as most aspects of the Back to School Plan were lifted, except for masking. However, by the final few weeks of data generation in December 2021, the number of cases were rising significantly in many areas of the province, and it was announced that schools would close early for the holiday break, due to operational pressures. The potential of a return to physical distancing restrictions within schools and further disruptions to the academic year was causing stress for the participants. They shared during the opening of focus group sessions their worries about the impact of this uncertainty on their own well-being and that of the children in their classrooms.

Data Analysis

As part of my narrative inquiry methodology, data analysis concentrated on identifying themes through stories and interview responses, with a clear focus on understanding the meanings attached to the PTs’ and PPECEs’ practices and experiences with children in Pre-Primary and Primary classrooms. My data analysis was guided by a critical ethic of care framework which strived to learn more about how early educators make decisions regarding their

practices to create an inclusive environment. The first step applied to analyzing the data generated was the transcription of all individual interviews and focus group sessions. Each interview session was transcribed using the live transcription feature on Zoom, which also supported time stamping the transcript. After transcription, I reviewed each transcript by simultaneously reading the transcribed data and listening to the recordings. This procedure helped with ensuring that accurate transcripts were available for use. Once completed, I sent the transcripts to the participants to ensure the accuracy of information, as well as the correctness of intent. Data analysis was guided by my research purpose to learn how PT and PPECEs make meaning of, and enact, an ethic of care within an inclusive educational setting to create learning environments. Analysis was supported by my theoretical framework of a critical ethic of care, emphasizing the importance of power and relationships, with an acknowledgement of PTs' and PPECEs' role in the environment, along with their experiences and personal practical knowledge. As a social constructivist and a narrative inquirer, I came to examine the data with the belief that PTs and PPECEs tell and retell stories of their interactions and practices to understand them better, and in the process, shed light on the personal practical knowledge they bring to their teaching. I reflected on these stories to construct narratives that illustrated teachers' personal practical knowledge in the context of their classrooms. As part of the construction of narratives, I applied narrative smoothing to ensure each "participant's story [was] coherent, engaging, and interesting to the reader" (Kim, 2016, p. 192). Through narrative smoothing, I acknowledge I had to make decisions regarding what remained, and what was omitted from the presented narratives. It was part of my responsibility as a researcher to ensure that whatever I omitted or "smoothed" and the narratives remained true to their intent and meaning as told by participants.

Through the lens of Tronto's (2013) formulation of care as practice and orientation, I examined the data with the understanding that experience shapes personal practices, and influences how PTs and PPECEs support children's early learning. Since the data was a combination of responses to open-ended prompts and stories from participants' points of view on their lived experiences, it was important to examine the data in a way that enabled themes to emerge deductively, since a narrative inquiry approach involves attempting to make sense of what has been told, using a highly interpretive lens (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I first became comfortable with the data by reading it thoroughly. Through this process, I created a loop of description, classification, and interpretation in relation to my theoretical perspective and literature review, which had an impact on both my analysis questions and interpretation of the data to achieve narrative meaning (Josselson, 2006; Kim, 2016). I also approached my data with an interpretation of faith, meaning that the stories and responses to questions communicated by the participants I believed to be true and meaningful from their stance. I took their responses at full face value as part of the first step toward narrative meaning-making (Kim, 2016).

With four methods of data generation across seven participants, I needed to create an efficient manner for organizing and analyzing the data. As a qualitative researcher, I drew upon Merriam's (2009) qualitative research recommendation, that all data should be assembled to help the researcher in making the substantial amount of data more manageable. I undertook this approach to help me navigate and reflect on the data analysis process, ensuring that I recorded, not only my actions, but also my thoughts as I worked with the data. As part of this process, I created large poster boards of participants' stories and responses organized in various ways, and coded for easy reference to their original location. For each direct quote, I referenced the transcription by using the first three letters of the pseudonym, followed by a quote for the source.

For example, each quote was coded either Interview (I) 1 or 2, focus group (FG) teacher, ECE, or combined, or journal (J), or artifact (A). Following this organization and initial coding, I undertook a narrative analysis of the data.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is a method used to better understand the lived experiences of the participants. As each participant shared their stories and experiences as a PT or PPECE developing an inclusive classroom environment, they provided insight into a world they have experienced. This perspective is supported by Patton's (2002) argument that "the central idea of a narrative analysis is that stories and narratives offer special translucent windows into cultural and social meanings" (p. 16). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) further argue that "negotiating relationships, negotiating purpose, negotiating ways to be useful, and negotiating transitions" (p. 129) will result in thinking narratively about the data generated. I read and re-read the responses and stories recounted by the participants, to investigate the experiences of how PTs and PPECEs come to develop strategies for supporting children, and create inclusive learning environments. As I approached this study examining experience as a phenomenon, I was open to having my research question shift as I identified "inquiry phenomena as they appear in the data during data analysis" however, the question remained the same as established in my proposal (Kim, 2016, p. 206).

Thematic narrative analysis was employed initially on each individual participant's response, to focus on the content of "what" was said, and then across the participant data (Kim, 2016). The data from each participant consisted of two individual discussions, with prompts and a follow-up interview, their contributions during focus group sessions, and their journal entries, along with any artifacts collected, including photographs of each classroom space. Thematic

narrative analysis is appropriate for my research, as Riessman (2002) supports that this process can generate information for further analysis and interpretation of the data generated by individuals and groups. I was guided by Polkinghorne's (1995) description of the analysis of narratives to emphasize the common elements that appear across narratives. It is through the narrative analysis I attempted to describe the "why and how" of experiences shared, as I sought to bring together relevant data around descriptions of themes. As Kim (2016) argues, narratively coding field texts is essential to uncovering narrative meanings, which I found to be the case. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) extend this idea further by noting that, as the researcher, during coding, I needed to attend to:

Places where actions and events occurred, storylines interweaved and interconnected, gaps or silences that became apparent, tensions that emerge, and continuities and discontinuities that appear ... [along with my] responses to the questions of meaning and social significance ... [to] ultimately shape field texts into research texts. (p. 131)

This analysis led me to develop three themes: relationships with children, promoting learning in an inclusive environment, and professional connections and boundaries.

The intent of the narrative analysis was to investigate and discover how PTs and PPECEs make meaning of, and enact an ethic of care during Pre-Primary and Primary. My purpose was also to identify how PTs and PPECEs come to develop their strategies, and what challenges they experience while supporting the children's early learning experiences.

The analysis of the narratives was methodical, focused, and detailed, while still maintaining a sense of the whole story provided by the PTs and PPECEs. A clear goal was to examine the storied data to discover common themes (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative analysis is a highly interpretive process, which some may find lacking in specifics. However, Clandinin

(2013) proposes the framework of the three narrative inquiry commonplaces as a blueprint for analysis and interpretation which includes: the temporal, the personal/social, and place. The temporal aspect requires the researcher to inquire into the past, present, and future of not only the participants, but also themselves (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Sociality enables the examination of both personal and social conditions in which the experiences occur, as well as examining the impact of the social context on personal actions and beliefs (Clandinin & Huber, 2010), while the place is where the inquiry and event occur, and must be acknowledged, as it is inextricably linked to the stories we tell of experiences (Clandinin & Huber, 2010).

To begin, I read each of the transcripts, along with the journal entries, then I analyzed and reanalyzed to ensure my understanding, and to enable me to be immersed in the details and specifics of the data. Immersion in the data was a necessary aspect of this narrative inquiry, as the data required more than a simple consideration of the stories voiced, but the construction of rich narratives arising from both conscious and unconscious understandings (Kim, 2016). I used the three dimensions of narrative analysis to re-story and categorize the information, allowing the identification of themes. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note that at this stage, it was important for me as the researcher to shift from creating interim field texts to research texts. To achieve this, I followed Clandinin and Connelly's analytical tools; broadening, burrowing, storying, and re-storying. Initially, I applied broadening to gain an understanding of the context of the participant, attending to aspects including participants' values and character traits, as well as contexts of their past and present experiences. For this study, we enter through the lenses of participating PPECEs and PTs working within elementary public education schools. I began each of the first semi-structured interviews by learning about each participant's own journey to becoming an educator, listening to their own memories and experiences in elementary, and the

relationships they remembered having with their own Primary or Preschool teachers. Next, I utilized the tool of burrowing, to shift my attention to attend to details within the data. Kim (2016) notes the importance of considering the “why and how the happenings have influenced the lived experiences” (p. 207) of the educator participants. Additionally, at this phase, I attended to the emotional qualities of the narratives. In this study, I dug deeply into the journals and interviews of the PPECE and PT participants, as they described building relationships and fostering learning. I looked for key language or words used, and attended closely to when they said these keywords. To further illustrate this, when seeking to understand how they came to build relationships with children, I searched transcripts and journals for words like “connect,” ‘listen,’ ‘support,’ and examined the stories these were found in. Finally, I used the analytical tool of storying and re-storying to enable the significance of the lived experiences to emerge. For example, in capturing a story about a participant’s experiences of connecting with a child they identified as challenging, I revisited the participant’s shared experiences with how she remembers interacting with her own Primary teacher.

Through this process, I sought to establish themes and patterns to compare across participants, along with deeper levels of understanding of the central research question: how do participant Pre-Primary ECEs and grade Primary teachers make meaning of, and enact an ethic of care within an inclusive educational setting for children in one rural educational centre for education in Nova Scotia?

By sharing stories, reflecting, writing (and re-writing many times) and then reflecting on the re-writing, I began to bring together across participant responses, reflective of the themes which emerged. I returned to the data again, to undertake a more comprehensive thematic analysis, which included grouping each coded item into similar groups, and then classifying by

themes. In developing my findings arising from the data analysis, the focus was on creating narratives that communicated using the rich, complex, and nuanced data; stories that reflected my understanding of the themes. While the details of each participant's story are unique, upon reflection, three consistent themes surfaced: (1) The role of relationships as a critical force in creating and shaping interactions, its impact on teaching practices, and its presence and absence in our efforts to teach through an ethic of care; (2) The role of promoting learning, and what that looks like for early educators that are committed to teaching children; and (3) Finally, an examination of opportunities for collaboration and boundaries of practices, as identified and explored by the participants. I was then able to begin to create cross participant narratives, reconsidering each participant's story in the light of the themes that emerged, and for the purpose of responding to the research question posed (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

As I completed my work in an interpretivist paradigm, I sought to understand the participants' worlds, and recognize and interpret insights especially salient through my own understandings, background, and reflections, in ways that did not simply align with my own preconceptions. I consistently monitored to ensure the data informed the resulting themes, that participant quotes and stories informed and provided evidence of these emerging themes through storied accounts. Saturation is measured as a "gold" standard for ensuring credibility, yet Saunders et al. (2018) note, it is challenging with a narrative approach to reach this point as there is a more focused account of each individual participant. I believe, however, that by engaging with data generation through interviews, artifacts, and journal entries, along with the applied data analysis techniques, I achieved two levels of saturation where no new information surfaced. The first aspect of saturation occurred with each participant as there was a point during data generation, where new data repeated what the participant had previously expressed. Secondly,

with the use of a cross narrative analysis, I believe inductive thematic saturation occurred because no new codes or themes emerge after a point of working with the data (Saunders et al., 2018).

The themes which emerged from the data are presented in the next chapter as findings, and are based on the responses and experiences voiced by the participants, along with observations made by the researcher while visiting the classroom, and examining the artifacts shared. I present the findings as narrative threads that resonated across groupings (PT or PPECE). Direct quotes are from the interviews, although all names used are pseudonyms. The quotations selected were based on being representative of the narratives expressed. Each direct quotation from a participant that appears in the following chapters has been coded for reference to the original transcripts. For example, each quote was coded by the first three letters of the pseudonym, followed by either Interview (IN) 1 or 2, focus group (FG) teacher (T), PPECE (PP) or combined (A), or journal (J), and entry number or artifact (A). For example, an excerpt of Ashley's second journal entry has been coded for reference as ASH-J-2.

Codes for Participants

Participants Pseudonym	Code Used to Reference Quote
Ashley	ASH
Heather	HEA
Jessica	JES
Jennifer	JEN
Lisa	LIS
Hannah	HAN
Amy	AMY

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research needs to be rigorous in how it is supported and in the meanings that are ascribed (Hammersley, 2008). Trustworthiness is defined as the “quality of an investigation (and its findings) that ... [make] it noteworthy to audiences” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 299). In this research, trustworthiness was established through credibility, transferability, and consistency.

Credibility. The concept of creditability is proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as being achieved when the findings match the data used to develop the findings. Three strategies were employed in this research to support creditability: crystallization, member checking engagement with data collection, and reflexivity.

The first strategy used was crystallization through different data sources, in order to build patterns or themes (Richardson, 2000). Through participant interviews, participation in focus groups, and compiling of journal entries, I have been able to immerse myself in the data that emerge to make patterns and claims that are meaningful, and well-articulated and sustained.

The second strategy employed was member checking. Member checking occurred at various points throughout the data collection and analysis process. Initially, after the initial transcription of the data, participants reviewed it for comments and edits. Then after the preliminary findings, I took the pieces of the participants’ retold stories along with parts of the analyzed data that presented themes to the participants, to allow them the opportunity to determine if my work was accurate, and gather participant feedback and comments (Creswell, 2009). Maxwell (2005) furthermore stresses the importance of member checks as a strategy for strengthening the credibility of a study, as he argues they are the single most effective way of limiting the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants have said, along with their perspectives on what is going on. It is also through the member check process I attempted

to limit my own biases, since through this process, my participants were able to clarify their statements, provide additional information, and offer new perspectives related to their experiences.

Finally, I have been clear in my position as the researcher, also known as my reflexivity. Patton (2002) establishes the role of reflexivity as:

Remind[ing] the qualitative inquirer to observe herself or himself, so as to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of her or his own perspective, and voices of those she or he observes and talks to during fieldwork.... The observer, therefore, during fieldwork, must observe self as well as others, and interactions of self with others. (p. 299)

By acknowledging and reflecting on my existing beliefs and experiences, I have adopted a level of reflexivity which has mitigated the impact of my own professional autobiography, along with how my interpretations and beliefs may have impacted the stories being presented (McCabe & Holmes, 2009). Reflexivity has helped me to foster confidence and credibility within my role as a researcher (Patton, 2002). Documenting the thoughts and changes I have had during the research process has been an important aspect of reflexivity, and has impacted my analysis (Freeman, 2007).

As an employee of the same regional centre for education in which I conducted the research, I understood my role and title as a specialist could impact how the participants viewed me, and could result in me having a position of influence; making the importance of establishing positive relationships, as early as possible, important. Similarly, as I am a teacher, I remained aware of any personal bias that might have impacted the investigation. My career in education has included time as an early elementary and resource teacher, along with several years in

various roles in more complex inclusive educational roles. Addressing the needs of learners and learning styles has been a major focus of both my professional practice and my professional development for many years, and these experiences affected my view and opinions of practices for transitioning students to school. Throughout the research process, I thought deeply about the potential impact of my beliefs and values, and was aware of how my experiences were to be incorporated to understand the experiences of the participants, the themes that emerged, and the conclusions drawn.

Transferability. Transferability in qualitative research, is understood as the degree other researchers and readers of the study can apply the results in meaningful ways (Merriam, 2009). As part of my role and responsibilities as the researcher, I provided a detailed description of the study, so that potential readers can determine if the study has applications within their situation (Merriam, 2009). A thick description of the settings and the findings within the study has helped to ensure transferability. Merriam (2009) has argued that using thick descriptions enables readers to make the best interpretations and applications of the study's findings to their situation.

Consistency. I sought to ensure that with the data collected, the results make sense and are consistent and dependable (Merriam, 2009). To help in establishing consistency in the research, I used crystallization, researcher reflexivity and the establishment of an audit trail. The audit trail was established through the use of a project history journal that I compiled as I proceeded through data collection methods and analysis sections. The journal was composed of personal reflections throughout the process, along with questions and decisions that arose when collecting and analyzing the data (Merriam, 2009). The use of an audit trail further supports Clandinin and Huber's (2010) positing, that researcher must identify the process through which stories are selected for presentation in a narrative inquiry.

Ethical Considerations

During initial meetings with participants, I provided them with a written and oral explanation of the study, and the confidential measures I would use to protect their identity. I provided PPECEs and PTs, that agreed to voluntarily participate, with two copies of the consent forms (Appendix C), one of which was returned to me as the researcher, and one for their own reference.

Measures to ensure confidentiality consisted of all participants being assigned a two-digit code to identify their contributions throughout the process. As the researcher, I was the only person to have access to the coding system, and it was stored on an encrypted file on my personal computer, along with a paper copy kept locked in a drawer in my residence. Other identifying information was not used to ensure confidentiality, and so others could not match data to participants.

Recordings of interviews and focus group sessions were saved on my personal computer and password protected. A second copy of the recordings was encrypted and stored on an external hard drive that was password protected. Artifacts and journal submissions were similarly transported in a locked briefcase, and stored in a locked filing cabinet in my residence. Analysis, validity, and credibility checks were all conducted outside of the participants' schools.

With a narrative inquiry approach, it was also important for me to consider the relational aspects of how I engaged in the research process. Clandinin and Caine (2013) explain, relational engagement between researchers and participants, along with relational ethics, are at the heart of a narrative inquiry. I attended to the needs of participants and cared for the research-participant relationship. I must acknowledge that as a narrative inquiry researcher, I engaged with participants in personal ways that were sustained over time (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). I

developed a friendly relationship with the participants. Throughout the research, I was sensitive of participants' diverse, and demanding professional and private roles. Within the context of these relationships, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) note the importance of negotiation expectations of time constraints, next steps, texts, and outcomes. I responded in a timely manner to participants' correspondence or phone calls, and worked around their work, life schedules, and commitments.

I was intentional in my interactions to cultivate a relationship that facilitated the exploration of experiences. I was aware of both the participants' and my own wonders and curiosities that emerged, as we shared and thought about our stories alongside each other. It was important that I acknowledged the emotional needs of the participants, by demonstrating both care and respect, by checking in about their well-being and thoughts about the research on a regular basis, while maintaining professional boundaries as set out by Acadia University's Research Ethics Board.

As I drafted this report, I ensured I used pseudonyms for all participants, and that all identifying information regarding locations and schools were described generally and separately from the descriptions of the participants. I have also removed any additional information, which I believe may identify the participants, to ensure confidentiality.

Summary

This chapter has described the methodological considerations undertaken to develop a plan of action, to respond to the research question, "How do participant PPECEs and PTs make meaning of, and enact an ethic of care within an inclusive educational setting for children, in one rural regional centre for education in Nova Scotia?" Seven participants were recruited in this narrative inquiry. Through interviews, focus group sessions, journal responses to prompts, and

gathered artifacts, data was generated, and then narrative analysis was completed to enable themes to emerge. The following chapter presents findings organized across three themes, in response to the data analysis undertaken.

Chapter 4: Caring as an Early Educator: Navigating the Early Learning Environment

The intention of this narrative inquiry research is to honour lived experiences, as a source of important knowledge and understanding (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016). In particular, the purpose of this chapter is to present the findings related to the main research question: How do PPECEs and PTs make meaning of, and enact an ethic of care in inclusive classrooms in one rural regional centre for education? In this chapter, I applied Clandinin and Connelly's (1996) classifications of stories to review the sacred (institutional) stories of both the Primary and Pre-Primary programs. I then considered participants' stories of experience in depth, within the construct of the shared narrative themes I uncovered. To further unpack these sacred policy stories, I relate the secret (lived) stories that demonstrate how educators' ethic of care is realized, as educators navigate between the sacred, secret, and cover (mediated) stories of early years education in two distinct, yet similar programs within the Nova Scotia education system. The narrative accounts I co-composed with three Primary and four Pre-Primary educators in rural Nova Scotia, reflect their experiences working to create and support an inclusive learning environment. It is through these accounts, it has been made visible how they come to make meaning of, and enact an ethic of care, while navigating structural constraints imposed by the educational system. The stories, put side by side, helped me awaken and attend to certain threads.

My position as the researcher enabled me the unique opportunity to hear participants' stories; stories they might not have communicated with others. From these stories, I have created three major themes: developing relationships, promoting learning, and professional connections and boundaries. The themes, "storied levels" are investigated to illustrate the complexities of navigating professional practices against the backdrop of multiple expectations outside of the

classroom setting (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). This organizing method is a systematic way to help reveal the personal insights of each educator’s meaning-making experiences. The following table outlines the key themes, which will be discussed in this chapter.

The themes were developed from interviews and focus group transcriptions based on the research question, along with participants’ journal entries and artifact offerings. Themes emerged from the data through inductive analysis using the process of broadening, burrowing, storying and re-storying the stories told of developing relationships, promoting learning experiences for children, and professional connections and boundaries. As well, throughout the process, I attended to the types of stories provided, as the educators navigated between the sacred, secret and cover stories of their practices.

Theme	Category/Subcategory	Example Codes
Relationship	Creating a “safe” Place (Role of Power in Care)	Comfort, love, safety, care, predictability, routine, security, vulnerable
Relationship	Building Connections (Role of Power in Care, Politics of Care)	Connection, listen, respond, responsibility to connect, responsive, attentiveness, belonging, relational, interdependent
Relationships	Inclusive Practice (Politics of Care)	Include, together, belong, participate, social justice
Relationships	Social Emotional (Discourse of Early Learning)	Co-regulator, respect their response, responsive,
Promoting Learning	Outcomes (Discourse of Early Learning, Initialization of Early Learning)	Planning, predetermined goal, responsibility to teach, negotiating, direct teaching, expectations, performing, assessing, developmentally appropriate teaching practices, trust in me
Promoting Learning	Labels (Politics of Care)	Assumption of need, deficit thinking, preparing for later, understanding difference, distraction, independent
Promoting Learning	Where Play Fits (Discourse of Early Learning)	Play, role of play
Professional Connections & Boundaries	Reasons Why (Politics of Care, Role of Power)	Confusion, inappropriate expectations, blaming, time
Professional Connections & Boundaries	Being Ready (Discourse of Early Learning)	Preparation for school, school readiness,
Professional Connections & Boundaries	Building Bridges (Role of Power, Discourse of Early Learning, Agency)	Collaborate, share, trust

The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to a review of each theme, accompanied by supporting excerpts from the participant narratives, along with policy documents to bring attention to how early educators come to make meaning, and enact an ethic of care.

Primary Teachers

Relationships with Children

All participants, across the various data generated, spontaneously made known their approaches to, and the quality of relationships with children, and made specific references to how connections with the children informed their practices.

Kind and Safe. The value of relationships with children emerged first in discussions I had with each individual PT participant, as they expressed their own positive memories of their early elementary teachers. Often, it was these memories of their own Primary teachers that were credited for PTs' decisions to become a teacher. This was exemplified in Jessica's description of her Primary teacher.

I had the most amazing grade Primary teacher. I just remember the way she made me feel, which was so warm and welcoming. She made such a difference in me, in the way I felt about me and my outlook on school, and how much I loved school. (JES-IN-1)

The recognition by the PTs of their first educators' impact on their formal learning journey, informed how the PTs described their own role in building relationships. They centred their discussions on both the responsibility and desire they felt to connect with children, and to create a safe environment. For the PT participants, these memories significantly shaped what they believed defined being an educator in general, and more specifically, a Primary teacher and informed their cover stories of their practices.

The desire of the PTs to create a sense of safety was further echoed by Jessica.

I want them [my students] to know I am safe and consistent. That I can be their safe place.... I just think it is so important to wrap your arms around them, love them, and help them with whatever it is that we can. (JES-IN 2)

Here, care is reflected through an unrecognized sense of power, with the educator ensuring the well-being of the vulnerable child by making them feel safe. This need to protect and set the stage for feeling safe as part of building a relationship with children was also evident in a situation described by Heather.

I have a student that has a traumatic background. Last year, the Pre-Primary teacher made a comment to me like, "Good luck keeping her in the classroom." My goal is to 100% to have her with everybody else. That's how I'm starting the school year, and if it doesn't work, then we can readjust. She has not trashed the classroom once; she's been with her peers the whole time. And so, I take that as a victory, like we got all the way to December with her in the room with everyone else. Do I have to speak to her sometimes? Yes. Does she ever have hands on people? Sometimes. But overall, I feel like it is a victory because she clearly feels safe. The way I have set up the classroom, and the relationship that I've built with her. So, I find that that is definitely a win! She is coming to school and she's happy, and we've laid a lot of groundwork for her to be successful. And so, she is becoming successful academically. She's still, you know, learning how to react to other people when she's upset, but there's times that she doesn't hit people. It's not like she's going around hitting them all the time. I always talk to her and say, "Okay, you know, this is your goal," and she's you know, working really hard. So, I feel like she's a huge success, compared to, you know, last year. But I also find students like her don't do well

in Pre-Primary, because it's not structured enough for her, It was too chaotic for her.

(HEA-IN 2)

Connection Focused. Within the teaching standards, there is an emphasis on “teachers get[ting] to know their students and hav[ing] a broad understanding of how students develop and learn” (NSDEECD, 2018c, p. 6) and how these elements are fundamental to the role and actions of educators. The way the standards potentially impact PTs understandings of their role as educators is further evident in how Heather described her explanation of a teacher:

I define a teacher as more than just an educator. They are someone who makes connections with the child, as a student first, but then gets to know them. A teacher is someone who is there and cares for the whole child, and because of that, is able to teach them. (HEA-J-2)

This link between caring and relationships is one that reverberated throughout discussions, as nurturing individual relationships with each child in their classroom was a clear focus for the PTs. The definition of teacher provided by Heather, also reveals the effect of the sacred story of the role of the educator within the PTs' context, as it contains similar language to the current provincial teaching standards introduced in 2018 (NSDEECD, 2018c). At the classroom level, all three PTs described situations that centred on their actions and roles in supporting each child, on how they assume responsibility for initiating and developing relationships based on their best judgments, and anticipation of what the child may need. For example, Heather stated:

I work really hard to get a relationship with the students. I tell them and show them pictures of my cat, or tell them funny stories. You have to give a little of yourself, to get a bit of them. (HEA-IN 1)

Heather's intentionality in seeking opportunities for bonding with individual children underscores an acknowledgement within their secret stories of practice, that building a relationship was an active process, and a commitment to value each child as an individual. This self-imposed responsibility for fostering relationships described by the PTs, mirrors the sacred story that they have come to accept, which further shapes their cover stories. Embedded within their secret stories, there is an awareness that it may not always be possible, as Jessica disclosed. "There's always like a level of anxiety and just ... you know questioning, will I be able to connect with the student, will I be able to make a relationship with them?" (JES-IN-1). An aspect I noticed in the stories imparted by the PTs' participation of the children in the connection process, was not explored. This absence may be attributed to attempts by the PTs to align their cover story with the sacred narrative of them being in charge, over the reality of practice. PTs instead focused on describing ways in which the teachers led building the connections, which limited the ways PTs discussed or acknowledged both the child's agency, and the interdependent nature of a positive connection, an aspect that further reflects the sacred story of the school system. The focus on their role in making and maintaining positive associations with children, draws attention to the potential of tension between the teachers' perceived power relation and caring within their role as an educator. This was evident in Ashley's description of her morning greeting routine, which focused on her being present, and leading the process.

I greet them every single morning. I am sure you have seen the videos on Facebook or TikTok, of teachers you know standing at the door with greeting options. I do that. I say, "I am so glad you are here today." I love making that connection. It's really at that personal level that I try to meet them where they are at. (ASH-IN 1)

Effective in providing individual one-on-one attention, the routine described by Ashley provides evidence of the initial interactions she has daily with each child in her classroom. Ashley's description highlights a structured approach to framing the initial greetings, and appears to attempt to ensure she is able to carve time out with each child to begin the day. This cover story of Ashley's practices, the need to have such a structured routine, may be affected by the number of children she must greet each morning, plus the other administrative tasks required to start the day, including checking communication books, and taking lunch orders. Additionally, Ashley's practice also calls attention to a sacred narrative within the educational system, that predictable routines help to foster a sense of safety, which in turn, increases the positive rapport between the child and educator. This structured approach described however, may risk connections to start the day being defined and driven by her as the educator, rather than being completely open and responsive to the child being greeted. How Ashley may balance the needs of an individual child within this routine was unclear. The commitment by PTs to building individual relationships aligns with many aspects of an ethic of care, but the positioning of power as reflected in the sacred story, may also be limiting ways PTs are able to view the collective group of children as having agency to support each other. This limited viewpoint may constrain ways in which interdependence can exist, or how each child's agency is acknowledged, possibly impacting how the inclusive practices of the classroom emerge. Teachers have experienced, along with pre-service education, professional development sessions that frequently focus on how they need to "know their students." In addition, as PTs worked through the strains of the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional and social media, along with regional senior administrators' messaging, promoted the teacher-student link as essential to children's well-being, so much so, that the "Back to School" website created in late August 2020, as a resource for Nova Scotia

teachers, advised teachers to be sure to “include well-being in your classroom, by making space to get to know your students, and by accepting your students for who they are, and where they are at in their learning journey.” (NSDEECD, 2020c). There is a risk of trivializing connections, when the push for a bond is interpreted as the need for the teacher to independently build positive relationships with each child or fostering relationships becomes a “must do” on a checklist of teacher ‘best practices’ for inclusion. In either case, it may end up as a teacher gathering information, so they can name or describe the interests or characteristics of a child, resulting in a further imbalance of power, instead of a responsive practice.

The danger of translating isolated facts about individual children into evidence of authentic bonds, is something I observed several years ago. During a professional development day focused on student well-being, my former principal posted around the lobby and cafeteria, nameless photos on sheets of paper, of all 450 students that attended the school. All school staff were instructed to record any relevant, brief bits of information about the student to illuminate evidence the child had a relationship with an adult in the school. I remember circulating the room looking at many faces that I knew on the playground from duty times, and writing comments like loves four-square, has two brothers, lost a tooth last week. I knew facts about some individual students, and extrapolating from the goal of the activity, this meant I had a relationship with them, and they had one with me. However, I question if these superficial facts were enough to say any genuine connection, or a supportive relationship existed, especially since in some cases, I was not even sure I knew their name. Later that day, each classroom teacher was provided with their class list, and beside each student’s name, a number was written which corresponded to how many facts were recorded by the staff about them. The goal of the quantified data was to help the school staff focus on gaining more “bonds” with children, and to target the development

of relationships with those children that had limited facts written about them. Although the goal of the activity appears to be to develop children's sense of belonging, the need to seek strategies to quantify relationships foregrounds at a systemic level, an acknowledgement there is value in associations, but falls short of nesting bonds within complex interrelationships. The limited acknowledgement related to the attributes of attentiveness, responsiveness and trust at a systemic level as part of quantifying and qualifying relationships between children and educators, contrasted with the features found in the stories of practice shared by the PT participants (Langford & Richardson, 2020; Tronto, 2010).

In translating a responsibility for relationships, PTs conveyed the weight they felt to make a connection, along with fostering a sense of belonging and security. As Heather commented:

I feel like I am the first one to really to try and teach them to be little humans, and how to figure out how to be around more than adults or one other kid. And so, they have to function every single day with 21 other students and me. So, we have to not only learn to write our names and the alphabet and all that stuff, I have to teach them how to be nice little humans. And I take that job very serious; we need to work on those things. (HEA-IN-1)

Heather's description of directly teaching skills to support interactions, illuminated the potential limited autonomy of the children, within cover stories, for how rapport is fostered. This example also showcases the degree a PT may unknowingly limit the way children are offered opportunities to interact with each other within the school environment, as Heather described assuming most of the responsibility, while also dismissing or diminishing the role of other adults in the children's lives. The degree to which group associations are recognized as reciprocal,

however, may be directly related to directives enveloped in the sacred stories the PTs receive within the system, regarding their roles primarily as deliverers of the curriculum. This messaging was stressed by Ashley, when she expressed frustration over directives from senior regional administration to eliminate her morning meeting and centre work times, as they were deemed to be inefficient.

I did a morning share every single day, and I found that was a great way to make connections, make a safe space for them. I felt when I did that practice, I had a better connection with the students. And they became comfortable with each other too. I was asked to stop doing it though because of readers' workshop. It had to be at the exact same time across the school. I might bring it back in January at the end of the day, when I can squeeze it in. (ASH-IN 2)

This acknowledgment that the absence of time together in less formal academic-oriented ways is impacting the connections between the children and the teacher-child, emphasized the systemic power and control exerted by the sacred story. Ashley felt she was being successful in cultivating community and belonging in her practices, yet acted to align with regional expectations.

Beyond extreme cases where children were removed more permanently from the regular classroom grade placement due to behavioural concerns, Heather, Jessica, and Ashley all recounted times when relationships with particular children were limited. The PTs attributed the reasons for their reduced bonds to external factors, often relying on formal or informal diagnostic labels to explain the lack of a positive rapport. Jessica explained:

There was nothing; there was not a way to find that. There was no connection. Without the connection there, I was not able to de-escalate situations. There was so much trauma,

and so the relationship was a difficult to impossible one to form. She was very closed off, and it was a tricky situation. (JES-FG-T)

The PTs described feeling a responsibility to build rapport with each child, noting they were often the sole adult in the learning space. Heather offered this story.

I'm working to find a connection with Sammy. I am trying my damndest, but it's not going well. His mother says though, that Sammy doesn't really connect with anybody, so I know it's not me. Usually though, when you are five, and you are having trouble connecting, there might be a reason, like a background of trauma or you don't know how to interact with people. There's none of that, at least not documented, but I can't get through to this kid at all! He likes hockey, I love hockey; so I go to his practice. I try to carve out some positive one-on-one time during the day with him—nothing. He is struggling staying on tasks, but he doesn't seem to care, so I am trying to make him care, but it's a lot. (HEA-FG-PT)

As demonstrated by Heather and Jessica, PTs seem to have externalized the relationship challenge, and have provided the labels for children, to keep intact their own cover story as an educator that fosters rapport with children. In taking up a categorical approach to framing a child's participation in the class, the inherent power relations limit ways an inclusive environment is fostered, as the labels teachers accept may justify their lack of progress in establishing a sense of belonging and safety. The cover story can potentially become a protective mechanism for PTs' professional status, and may further hinder possible positive changes in practice.

Image 1: Jessica's Small Group Instruction Space



Cultivating Belonging. For PTs, one of the main purposes of the individual relationships they made with children, was to support the development of a sense of belonging, Heather explained:

You have to make sure you really get to know the student, and you get the relationship.

You have to work for it. There's so many things going on; you have to work on that in

order get engagement. It's just like a circus, and there's a lot of juggling. (HEA-FG-PT)

Heather's juggling comment points to the priority PTs may place on singular relationships within the classroom as the collective interactive ways the group could support each other, both socially and academically, were not explored. This view connects to Western society's role of education

in creating autonomy and independence as success. The juggling reference shared by Heather, echoes the same term used by Ball et al., (2011) to describe how teachers sought to balance children's emotional well-being as part of their professional context, while also operating within the policies and expectations of their school district. In addition, Heather's comments diminished the role of parents and other adults in children's lives, reflecting a narrative that only the formal learning of the public education system is valued. A narrative that seems to be embedded in how the school curriculum is designed and presented to the teachers. Heather's circus description further made me wonder how the emphasis on outcome learning is impacting the development of relationality between members of a classroom. Feelings of not having adequate time during the day to meet instructional demands and have genuine relations with children in the classroom, is something that was reiterated in the secret and cover stories of practice, revealed by Ashley, when she discussed time constraints, outcome targets, and senior regional staff limiting both her morning sharing circles and her use of literacy centres as the academic focus. The system communicated by supervisors within it, prioritized numeracy and literacy scores.

I have also set up literacy centres as part of my practice for years. She [regional staff member] came in a few weeks ago, and told me that I wasn't supposed to do literacy centres, that they were an extra. Literacy instruction should be a 10-minute mini-lesson on a strategy they need to know and integrate, followed by time for read to self-time, and then a share. So, centres needed to be dropped, but my literacy centres are all around, supporting letter and sound identification, and increasing their opportunities to collaborate and share with their peers. That is when the students have time to connect with each other in small groups, to discuss their learning. But it is off the table now. I am

pretty sure if they came in my room and saw the toys in the corner, I would be questioned on when and how these are used too! (ASH-IN 2)

Ashley's comment regarding the presence of toys underscores the secret story of her practice and awareness on her part, of the risk of playthings being present, as they represent the potential for child-led interactions which did not fully align with the sacred story of a focus on each individual and their academics. For Ashley, juggling was evident, as she struggled to provide children opportunities for interacting within the classroom, while maintaining systemic expectations of teacher-centred academic routines.

The ways PTs took on responsibility for supporting children's belonging, was evident in a story Jessica shared about her approach to supporting a child that was experiencing peer rejection.

Students did not want to play with him anymore. And no matter what he did, it was going to be bad, whether it was or whether it wasn't. It was going to be his fault, and he probably would have ruined the game for everybody, and that was it. And so, we had done a little sticker program for outside. I brought in the duty supervisor, because I couldn't always be there, but those unstructured times were problematic, so we used a sticker chart. He would bring it in proudly, and we kind of built in, like a bit of a little program with that. And I kind of tried to work on, you know, some kindness things with him, because it can definitely be challenging. (JES-IN-2)

The acknowledgement that belonging for the child was a challenge, is an important aspect to Jessica's ethic of care. Jessica's support for the child through an intervention focusing solely on behaviour modification techniques for the individual, rather than focusing time and additional work on the collective to accept and respect everyone, indicates the potential use of a deficit lens

in examining the child's social contributions and growth. Behaviour modification techniques reflect behaviourist theories of development, and are rooted in teacher-directed methods of instruction, where a child performs a task and is either rewarded or punished for the performance, with the belief that the response of the teacher will shape the future behaviours of the child (Spodck & Saracho, 1999). Features of behaviour modification, like reinforcement and examining antecedent events, are individualistic in nature, are prominent within the program planning processes of student support, and are enshrined in policy documents as a sacred story that greatly influenced the espoused approaches and practices of the PTs.

For Jessica and the other PTs, our discussions made evident, social inclusion for any child more readily happened when the child conformed to a set of normative assumptions for social behaviours embedded in the sacred story of what constitutes a "ready" child for school, including the ability to convey their desires and thoughts, share, control their emotions, take turns, and follow directions (Koçak & İncekara, 2020). This reactive approach to creating inclusion and fostering community is reinforced by the current provincial program planning process, which notes the importance of providing early, effective interventions for all children in identified challenge areas, as soon as possible. PT participants in this study, focused on sharing their practices for individual remediation of perceived social challenges, which aligns with the sacred story of the program planning process, and may also reflect the limited preparation PTs received during their pre-service and in-service training related to early childhood social development, or how to foster social inclusion as a professional practice. The degree social inclusion was understood or considered in instructional decisions, was absent from the conversations and reflections of the PTs. All three PTs' stories indicated that social inclusion, and therefore, peer acceptance happened naturally. As they discussed social experiences, it

became evident that within their cover stories, presence in the classroom was synonymous with being included. Ashley gave an example of this “natural” process.

Last year I had one student with ASD, that was significantly impacted. He spent most of his time in the learning centre, but he would come in for morning routine, and then again for a story, and then recess snack. Things that were more social. The kids would sit with him; his group was so accepting of him. He pulled hair, he pinched, he dumped out lunchboxes and juice boxes, and they were fighting over who he would get to sit next to him. I find that kids are often inclusive without the teacher having to actually interfere especially, in grade Primary. Grade primary kids are just so awesome, they don't see that difference as much. So, inclusion just naturally happens within my classroom. (ASH-IN-2)

All three PTs identified time building rapport was made more challenging, when a child is removed from the classroom location and placed for part or most of the day, in an alternative learning environment, a practice that directly contradicts the narrative of inclusion naturally happening. The alternative placements limited the opportunities for the children involved, to build and sustain relationships with peers and their teachers. Ashley, Jessica, and Heather reported times when interactions did happen with isolated children, however, these interactions were described as being contrived, and directed through adult mediation, or often only involved the classroom teacher in an alternative environment. Jessica explained a situation that stood out to her.

I would go down to the learning centre to be with him, and just kind of tried to build a relationship. We would do little activities like Lego, Angry Birds, or play little games together. By the end of the year, we were able to have him, I, and another child in the

room to do an activity without ending up in lockdown. Several students were able to sort of work with him by the end of the year, and we were able to feel safe. That was a big deal. (JES-IN 2)

Experiences shared by Jessica demonstrate the impact of the programming planning process, as a sacred story that guides both teachers' practices and children's experiences. Using program planning as a justification for the removal of children deemed by the school as having limited social skills, along with the exertion of power in determining with whom, when, and how connections were made, reflects the degree to which all social opportunities are heavily mediated by educators, when development is flagged as a concern, through cover stories of ensuring safety for all. Jessica's reflection on the perceived measures of growth of the child, as their risk to others diminished, helps to reveal a cover story to justify the exile of a child from her classroom. All three PTs had similar experiences with children being excluded from their classroom, due to behaviour concerns that were a potential risk to others.

I reflected on my experiences as a learning centre teacher, and I was reminded of how often I would receive a Primary student on a full-time basis, as they had been labelled too "dysregulated" to remain safely in the classroom for any period of time. The label of dysregulated was assigned by authorities in the school, usually the PT or administration team, when there was a discrepancy between the sacred story of what a student is to be and how they were to act, and the current behaviour of a child. Dysregulated was frequently provided as a label to any child that was not able to control their emotions in socially accepted ways. For the children removed from this classroom, their behaviours often included yelling, throwing items, or being deemed a threat to harm others. The remote learning experiences I provided in the learning centre through explicit direct teaching of required skills, and then their performance of

these, became their way to be considered for a return to the classroom. However, often the only times the return successfully happened, was when the PTs were willing to change their classroom routines to provide opportunities for interaction between the child and their class peers while they were exclusively in the learning centre.

The emphasis on specialized and explicit social skills teaching, in isolation, within the student programming planning process, underscores the deficit and intervention focus of the sacred story. In this case, the sacred story limited ways that educators could instruct and support a child, as they were removed from the environment where the skills were needed, expected to learn them in isolation, and then generalize them back in with the larger group; practices that reflect aspects of both the maturational theories and behaviour theories of child development. In contrast, the potential to foster further social skills within the classroom could be possible, yet was silent from discussions or experiences of the PTs. Drawing on the work of socio-cultural theorists like Vygotsky (1978) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) a case could be made that a shift in the sacred story is needed to acknowledge, that development can emerge through connections between the child and all aspects of their environment, and that this progress can be supported with interactions with others.

While less structured, experienced-based opportunities to build belonging seem to be dismissed at the systemic level through the sacred stories disseminated in the formal Primary documents, there is still an acknowledgement within the secret stories of practice voiced by the participants, that children need to experience belonging, and learn skills associated with developing relationships. Although not fully explored by the PTs, collaborative interactions appear to also be valued and facilitated as PTs set their rooms up, to ensure opportunities for exchanges. Photographs of the PTs classrooms revealed that the physical setup of all the

classrooms provided opportunities for student dialogue and interactions, yet the physical environment was absent from our discussions. All three classrooms featured groupings of desks or tables with multiple chairs, which enabled children to be together while working, as in the captured images of Jessica's small group instruction space (Image 1). Furthermore, all PTs strategically selected seating arrangements within their classrooms to ensure optimal learning opportunities and social experiences for everyone. The secret stories of PTs' practices included Jessica explaining how she shuffles seating arrangements often, to make sure different children were seated together on a regular basis. Heather provided a mix of ways for groups to be determined from children picking partners, to her using name sticks to randomly create the groups. Additionally, in the secret stories shared, Heather described taking the children in her class for a walk early in the school year, which further indicated ways she worked on developing peer relationships through a cover story of practicing routines and school readiness skills.

Today we went for a walk. It was beautiful and sunny, and they needed time outside. And the walk wasn't just a walk; we were following directions, practicing how to stand in line. I also told them all to pick a friend to walk beside, so they were fostering those connections too. I tell them, it is just like at home, that just like your mom and dad or your brothers and sisters, people are going to get on your nerves, and together we are going to learn how to deal with that. My job is to teach them all about the world. As a Primary teacher, and there's so much to do with them. (HEA-IN 1)

The ways that the teachers situated their options for taking on relationship building responsibilities, were often noted as limited by curriculum demands on their time. The teachers continuously navigated between the cover stories of their profession, and the secret stories of their actual practice. To help balance this duty to teach curriculum while

still supporting and fostering relationships, a sacred story of practice emerged around social-emotional learning.

Regulate to Educate. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is broadly explained by the multidisciplinary nonprofit focused on SEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

The process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (Niemi, 2020)

All three PTs spoke to ways they took on roles to support all children when they experienced upset, were overwhelmed or experienced intense emotions. The PTs described how they developed structures and routines within their spaces to support emotional regulation, and focused instructional time on explicitly teaching children ways to interact with peers. The participants however identified a conflict between the ways in which they enacted aspects of informal SEL, and how the system promoted and measured SEL development. The tensions created between the systemic demands for SEL as a curriculum, and the contexts of how SEL was actualized in these three classrooms, were evident throughout the discussions. SEL as part of the Primary health curriculum focuses on “investigating a range of emotions that humans share” (NSDEECD, 2019b, p. 8) but falls silent on the types of activities the PTs communicated were instrumental to supporting children within their classrooms. For example, Jessica explored a situation she had with a child the year before.

Kyle was one student that relied on me so much for that regulation support. If there was a substitute, you were guaranteed that he was going to fall to pieces. He relied on me to be

his co-regulator, to help him get through his day. He would look at me, and I would know, or try to guess what he needed. Sometimes it was rubbing his arm, or you know, bringing awareness to his emotions he was having, and those choices he was making. It just makes a difference for them to have that person, that teacher. I could notice and learn those triggers for him, those things that could be upsetting for him. So, I would know these, and I would try to teach him his signals. I would say “I know your body is starting to show some signs you are upset, why don’t you take a break now?” But it’s the moments you miss the triggers as a teacher, when you can’t talk through those moments with them and they go off the rails, that you feel you have compromised their relationship with you. (JES-FG-T)

In contrast, the PTs articulated how at a system level, social-emotional learning was focused through the integration of curriculum outcomes, and a strong focus on prepackaged social-emotional learning programs within their elementary classrooms. In social-emotional learning programs like Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (used in the regional centre where the participants work), an emphasis is placed on the role of the individual in naming emotions and managing their behaviour (Humphrey et al., 2016). Although the PTs spoke about how they supported individual children’s emotional growth, the authority promoted within the system to utilize prepackaged programs was also evident in posters observed during classroom visits. These posters of breathing strategies, and the design of classrooms to incorporate calming spaces with fidgets, further indicated the individualistic nature of the promoted SEL program may still be present, even as the PTs shared, they often supported children through stressful situations.

The responsibility the PTs felt to act in the moment when a child was experiencing stress or feeling overwhelmed, reflects an ethic of care as the PT recognizes the vulnerability of the

child and the interdependent web of relations. The high emphasis on the individual rapport between the teacher and individual children over the collective class connections through the stories shared, indicates a commitment by PTs to ensure all children's needs are met. The description of the teacher-focused work to support children, however, may also indicate unacknowledged power relations within the teacher-child relationship (promoted within the sacred stories of what it means to be an educator) as PTs described modelling and setting expectations, over accepting the child as they were with their emotions.

PTs placing themselves as the sole leader in the classroom, is also reflected as they imparted stories highlighting their role in meeting children's needs with limited acknowledgement of how the child or others may have also supported. As the stories shared implied, PTs are embracing the sacred story of themselves as the leader of the classroom, which may jeopardize the realization of inclusivity, as equality between all members might be sacrificed as power dynamics are inherently present. The ways PTs explained supporting regulation may also lead to potential dependency on the teacher to co-regulate, which intimately bounds up the power dynamics of the relationships. The impact of these power dynamics is further evident in the work of Booth and Ainscow (2002) as their findings point to the positive impact of children feeling welcome and respected in the classroom. However, with PTs potentially focusing on individual bonds, there may be limited time spent by PTs on generating and cultivating multiple associations within the group. This lack of focus may impact how all-encompassing a classroom turns out to be, even when the teachers share that they want a classroom community to develop.

Silent Partners. For PTs, the connections with children were also identified as being more difficult, due to parental involvement with the school. A common sacred story in education

assumes that parents will naturally want to be, and can be, participating fully in their child's education, and that true partnerships with families will emerge. Yet, as PTs described using both electronic methods of communication, like the Remind app and emails, along with more time-tested methods such as newsletters and communication folders to invite families' input, the lack of parental uptake was consistently noted. Although PTs initially described the purpose of these strategies as sharing news from the class, most of the time they indicated that the communication was also for reporting on specific child behaviours and academic progress, while making suggestions for how families could reinforce classroom learning experiences at home. PTs' descriptions of the communication often focused on the PT as the knowledge source, or the PTs' evaluation of the child's performance, which may limit possible responses from families. In this scenario, the parents/caregivers are positioned as a passive receiver of communications from perceived experts. Ashley's attempt to engage with families through her newsletter reflects the difficulties PTs experienced.

I do newsletters, and in each newsletter, I give a whole description of activities that they can do to help their kids along with reading. Easy things like flashcards, but also more creative ideas like bingo and interactive games. I literally said in it [the letter], and this is the hard part, I said, if you need help accessing any of this stuff, let me know, and no one reached out. But that's what they requested during parent-teacher. And so, I would say I am doing as much as I can, like touching base with the parents, providing activities that they can do at home. I have a monthly homework activity, a bingo board with different types of activities, so it could literally be like practicing your no excuse words, or in the winter writing, your no excuse words in the snow. I understand that home life is not easy,

but by providing parents with ideas of what to do with their kids and then not hearing anything back, that is a big piece to my frustration. (ASH-FG-PT)

PTs' focus on academics, and viewing newsletters and messages as steps to forming home and school relationships in the practices they chose to share, may be potentially related to their own commitments to sacred stories of "covering curriculum" and a view that all parents/caregivers need directive support to participate in their child's educational journey. The assumed shared vision between home and school for the development and well-being of the child, combined with time constraints, as most in-person interactions as parent/caregivers and teachers are limited to 10-minute meetings twice a year, further restricts opportunities for families and teachers to build trusting relationships. In the participants' stories, it was unclear as well, if the parents/caregivers wanted relationships with the educators or school community, viewpoints possibly overlooked by participants, or if parents even saw a role for themselves in their child's schooling experience.

Promoting Learning in an Inclusive Environment

A fundamental goal of the school system is to establish an inclusive learning environment, defined within the Nova Scotia inclusive education policy (NSDEECD, 2019c) as having all children present and learning in a shared space. Through the sacred story of the education system, teachers are expected to instruct all children, and provide necessary support as needed. As PTs began to discuss the role of supporting children's learning, how PTs came to define their practices as Primary educators within an ethic of care emerged as significant. The cover and secret stories voiced by PTs, regarding their teaching practice and its impact on how an inclusive classroom environment unfolds, are more complex than the sacred story promoted, of what being a teacher in an inclusive environment is about.

Role of Outcome-Based Curriculum. In my earliest conversations with all three PTs, we spoke about promoting learning experiences within the classroom setting, and how the outcome rich curriculum directly impacted their practices and decisions. All three PTs expressed how they were compelled to have children demonstrate achievement of the outcomes or approximations towards these measures, as the sacred story of education was centrally focused on mandated curriculum instruction and achievement through curriculum guides, report cards, and various assessments promoted regionally. During the focus group session, the PTs agreed that overall Primary outcomes were reasonable for most students but the steep increase in expectations in grade one led PTs to express that they felt they needed to prepare students beyond the levels indicated in the curriculum documents, to ensure the children's long-term well-being academically. This need to go beyond the learning expectations provided in curriculum mandates, was also further reinforced by senior regional staff during professional development sessions, and coaching situations the PTs experienced. The degree of the learning curve of performance was described by Jessica.

Grade one is really big in the academic expectations. Really, what they are to achieve in that grade one year is arguably the biggest of their entire academic career. I feel a lot of pressure to have the Primaries beyond ready for those massive jumps. (JES-FG-T)

This direct concern for the children's future, and plans to support their development and progress long term, demonstrates an ethic of care in action, as their perturbation for meeting targets and achievement was linked directly to children's well-being. In addition, the concern for the future also foregrounds a cover story which situates the PTs "beyond the outcomes" approach, as a method of protecting the children in their class from too steep of a learning challenge in the

coming year. It may also serve a self-affirming function, if the teacher in grade one notes the advanced academics of the children, and attributes it to the previous Primary teacher.

The tools and strategies detailed in the stories conveyed by the PTs to advance the learning agenda, reflected multiple layers of sacred, cover, and secret stories. As a result of concerns about having children ready for future academic learning, PTs spoke about resorting to presenting material in didactic formats and through teacher-led lessons, even when they secretly knew this would not be the most beneficial experience for the children. The degree the PTs indicated they felt empowered to make decisions regarding activities and learning experiences to support children in their classrooms, was informed by curriculum documents, which acted as the sacred story of what and how to educate. Although the PTs said they supported the outcomes provided by the NSDEECD, as Heather explained “you have to have a starting point somewhere, and many can hit these targets” (HEA-FG-A). They also spoke about their own difficulties managing the curriculum requirements of the Primary context. PTs discussed ways in which their practices were centred around work and children producing evidence of learning, as part of their cover story. Jessica further elaborated on how she comes to reconcile her cover story, as she struggles to navigate the learning landscape, especially as it relates to play-based instruction.

I think back again, to doing this wonderful play in-service. You know, we were immersed in our board office for the day with clay, movement scarves, and all these fun things. You know how much joy we had or exploring these aspects? Or when I’ve done outdoor learning in-servicing and things like that on that, and how fun it is? I see how effective that might be; it is not like I don’t want to use those practices. I want to use those practices in my classroom. I see the joy and the learning that can happen, but if I’m going to truly meet those benchmarks, those huge jumps in all of those areas, I don’t always

have the time to make learning as engaging and as fun as I want to. Sometimes I have to skip all that fun stuff and cut to the chase, so that I can get the things done that need to be done, because I know that next year, the teacher is going to be expecting that x, y, and z are done, so that they can move onto those next things. And I guess that is my most challenging part, is knowing what they need to do, and what's best, and knowing it's just, it's a constant battle that I have to have going on in my head, and I find that that causes me personally, a lot of anxiety and stress. (JES-FG-A)

The mixed messaging and expectations around the “fun stuff” and the ‘benchmarks’ for learning that PTs shared they experienced as part of the conflicting sacred stories of curriculum, impacts how inclusive practices unfold in the learning environment. Drawing on discussions around student engagement, PTs identified how they attempted to funnel student interests through curriculum expectations in authentic ways, only to instead, use the anticipated interests of the children to enhance their attainment of curriculum goals. For example, Ashley explored how she was looking at her non-fiction book collection for topics she believed would be of interest to the children in her class as they began a unit, to ensure they would be featured and available to the children. These books Ashley then shared, would be used to provide instruction on the elements of non-fiction texts, rather than simply being for the enjoyment of the child to engage in a book related to the topic of their interest. This process enabled Ashley to provide materials anticipated to be of high interest to the children, but may limit the use of the children’s interests in authentic ways, as the final goal was to examine non-fiction features of books, rather than the content of the book. The need to remain true to the official curricular learning goals stresses the importance and value PTs placed on academic success and learning outcomes, so as not to jeopardize either in the children’s current academic year or the future. The PTs’ approach

to inclusive education was to work to ensure children's interests were reflected in the resources available. The degree inclusive practices like being adaptable and responsive to the children in the classroom could be present in learning experiences, is further evident in Jessica's description of a class project, and evident in Images 2 and 3.

One of the things that I do, that I love doing, that reaches a lot of outcomes, but I would argue that it's not the type of thing I can do all the time, because it would take too much time is to incorporate science, writing, and reading outcomes, is by making bear dens. We talk about seasonal change in science, and how animals and people prepare for it, and then we read and talk about how animals prepare, and things like that. One of the things that we do is go into the outdoor classroom, and we design bear dens in groups. Students have a toy bear, and they have to build their bear a shelter for winter. So, as they are going around searching, you know, it is taking time. But in my mind, I am thinking okay, there's lots of valuable experiences happening. First of all, students who I never really heard talk in the classroom are becoming leaders; they're telling students, "Oh, go get this because we will need to cover this, and oh, I think this area here would make it better." But these things take time. And yes, you can see the valuable learning that is going on; you know it's there. And they are coming in, and they are sharing pictures of it, and they're presenting on it; there's more of the oral language piece. So, we've read books, we talked about it, we've built it; so, you know, there are so many outcomes I am targeting, and they are reaching, but that kind of thing takes time, and the curriculum does not always allow for that. Because if I am doing that, then maybe I'm not sitting down doing a formal writer's workshop with particular genres of writing, with anchor charts, you know, regimented. Yes, I am following the interests of the students and

engaging them, which is very effective, but it doesn't allow me to reach all the things I need to have the children reach. (JES-FG-PT)

Image 2: Another Group of Children Working on Bear Den Creations in Jessica's Primary Classroom



Image 3: A Group of Primary Students Working on Their Bear Den Creation in Jessica's Primary Classroom



The perceived need to restrict the number and amount of open-ended, explorational learning experiences is a story I am familiar with as an educator, and one that I struggled to resolve within my own practice. One of the reasons I left teaching grade-based classrooms, was due to the weight I felt of meeting outcomes, and implementing formal teaching strategies. I “escaped” to resource and learning centre positions, where I was permitted to be completely responsive to the children’s development and interests, as standardized learning outcomes were removed and individualized learning goals were developed. Beyond the removal of standardized expectations, I also felt freedom, because no one seemed to be concerned or paying attention to what was happening, so long as the children were in the room. I was most comfortable and at ease in settings focused on student support, where I felt I was making the most valuable contributions, and I was able to be a true educator. Yet, in some way, this means I also found a way to avoid compromise, as I could not reconcile my own ethic of care framework with the heaviness of the outcomes, and the internal systemic expectations to create an inclusive environment for all, something all three PTs expressed an awareness of doing. My own professional challenges made me want to further explore how PTs found their way.

The contradiction Jessica revealed, and I also experienced, mirrors the theory proposed by Wiebe and MacDonald (2014) that teachers have too much to do, and that there is not adequate space provided in the bureaucracy of education for teachers within the school system to teach in the ways they find most valuable. Knowing the possibilities for a different type of pedagogical freedom in her classroom through projects like the bear den, Jessica believes she is doing less than her best to meet the curriculum mandates dictated. The narrative also demonstrates a level of dismay within the cover stories, expressed by all three PTs and myself, as

we grappled with necessary choices made throughout the day, to meet standardized learning outcomes over the exploration of children's wonders and curiosities.

Image 4: Ashley's I Care Statements

The whiteboard is decorated with alphabet cards at the top: Aa (apple), Bb (bear), Cc (cat), Dd (dog), and Ee (elephant). Below these is a row of colorful cartoon characters. The main content is as follows:

Learning Goals:
 I can read for 19 minutes.

Reading:
 I can make my reading sound good.

Writing:
 I can tell a story with a picture
 I can write the whole time.

Math:

Reading Stamina

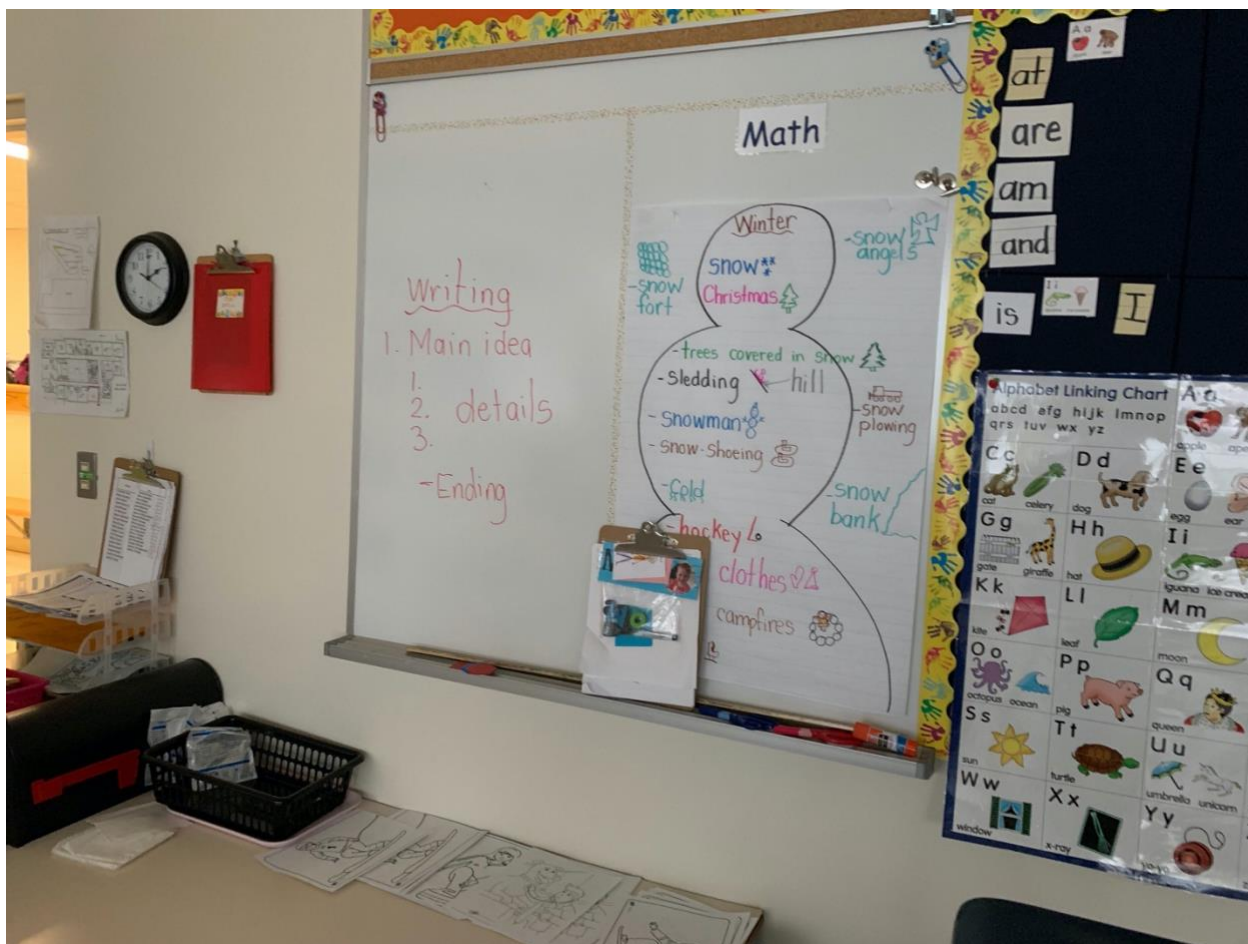
19
18
17
16
14
13
12
11
10
7
5 minutes read

JUST RIGHT

too easy	just right	too
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At the bottom right, there is a small book titled "Thanks for Thanksgiving".

Image 5: Jessica's I Care Statements for Writing



The focus on learning targets over wonders and curiosities was further evident in two of the three Primary classrooms as “I can” statements, commonly appeared in prominent locations within the classroom, or were embedded in the children’s work. “I can” statements are a practice in elementary schools, whereby student-friendly language translations of mandated learning outcomes are used. The use of “I can” statements can be considered part of a sacred story of practice, as it is promoted frequently in pre-service education courses and within teacher practice resources (McWherter, 2021). Ashley described the statements as guides for her entire group, developing them on her own, and writing them on the board (Image 4), while Jessica created

both broad prompts for supporting an outcome (Image 5) and more individualized and focused statements for each child, that was available at their desks and referenced during teacher-led conferences (Image 6). The generation and display of the statements within the classrooms further exemplify the degree to which learning experiences are driven by the provincial curriculum, rather than emerging through student activities. Furthermore, these “I can” statements demonstrate that PTs controlled the focus of instruction and measures of success for each child, which directly impacts how inclusive and responsive learning experiences can be.

Image 6: Jessica’s Record of Individual Goals for Writing

Writing Goals	
Mar. 22H	
Name	
Cameron	- cap/tr case + voice.
Macey	- cont. Spacing - start Punct.
Owen	- ind. writing - He can use two sounds
Emily	(*) buddy Sent.
Jacob	- pronoun (I) - desc wds.
Ava	- cont. Spacing - start Punct.
Spencer	- take ind. risks beyond sight
Neasan	- cont. using Alex Link + Learn Start.
Mason	- Pic. legible - only the plan.
Olivia	- Put sounds in labels in sent to make sense
Autumn	- cont. w/ alpha ch. - start using HF wds.
Lily	- cont. sounds/H.F.
Maeve	- caps @ beg sent - proper punct.
	(AT)
Amelia	- cont. spacing - starting to use ind. w/wrd.
Jaelyn	- desc words - caps @ beg of sent
Maria	spacing.

As discussions regarding implementing the curriculum progressed Heather, Jessica, and Ashley all indicated they understood their key role as deliverers of the curriculum, with direct responsibility to ensure academic achievement. Jessica explained,

I always start with the end in mind; the curriculum guides my instruction. I know that I have a year to get them where they need to be, to be ready for the next grade, and it is “go, go, go” in order to get there. You know, sometimes we need to put our heads down and barrel through. (JES-IN-2)

The need to “barrel through” as Jessica described, accentuates an immense external pressure to meet curriculum goals, and was expressed by all three teachers, regardless of whether or not the children were anticipated to be developmentally ready for the designated content. The pressure to make it through the curriculum, also greatly informed their practices in how they defined and implemented flexibility and adaptations within their teaching.

The power of curriculum as part of the sacred story of schooling, was significant in shaping teaching practices. The PTs revealed how decisions they made through the filter of needing to achieve grade-based outcomes often weighed heavily on their shoulders. This burden was described by Jessica, as she reminisced about her anticipation of entering the profession, and her current reality.

This was my dream job, at least what I thought teaching would be. To be able to let kids be, and to learn and encourage them based on their interests, and things like that, and not have those strict guidelines. The outcomes weigh over my head. If you do this, you know that it is not going to be done. The outcomes are very directed; they need directed activities for children to meet them. (JES-FG-T)

PTs described a tone of heavy responsibility for academically “readying” children to be able to achieve expectations for the Primary year and beyond. PTs identified anticipated skills and knowledge children would need, based on curriculum documents, to be successful and they revealed how these expectations frequently controlled their practices. Pressure identified by the PTs to ensure children were meeting or exceeding outcome standards, in many ways, led to PTs feeling the need to observe, measure, and compare children throughout the year, which directly undermines Nodding’s (2012) argument that all education requires care. Achievement of predetermined levels of competency in academics dominated conversations, and informed the types of interactions between educators and the child.

When PTs attempted to invest in practices at the classroom level to make a difference in children’s lives beyond the curriculum outcomes, they expressed that it came at a personal cost. The data suggested an ongoing struggle for the PTs to do what was required, while not letting go of what was personally and professionally important. One must wonder how long any educator might be willing to compromise their beliefs within their teaching practice. The constant battle between the “must” and the ‘ought’ of practices, as Jessica labelled her experience, was taking a toll on her health. Jessica attributed a recent diagnosis of high blood pressure and migraines, to how she was internalizing the pressures of navigating the system. Similarly, Ashley speculated her overwhelmed feelings as a teacher directly impacted her mental health, and seeped into her home life, making her question, as a new mother, the viability of her teaching position. These findings align with Carroll et al.’s (2022) conclusions that the intensification of the teaching role to meet higher levels of accountability has resulted in Primary teachers experiencing higher levels of stress and potential burnout.

Flexibility to Get Back on Track. All three PTs described their teaching practices within their journal reflections as, being flexible, with an emphasis on adapting their practice to their students. In the secret and cover stories voiced during interviews, focus groups, and journal responses, however, it became evident that flexibility and adaptability was being explored by the PTs as a means for progression toward the target curricular outcomes. An example of this is present in Heather's description of her common teaching practice.

My lesson starts somewhere in the middle of the learning outcome, say, counting orally to 20. I will do the lesson, but then have a small group come over and do it in a more focused way, so not to veer away from the daily outcome. I feel like if they're not there yet, the small group work that I'm doing with them is going to get them there. I really do find that you have a big mix in Primary; that some are above and some below, so you just start in the middle, and then do what you need. For the kids that already know how to count to 20 orally, you give them something more challenging, and the kids that need more work, I just bring them over, and do a little bit more small group work. (HEA-J-2)

The notion of more reinforcement time with the curricular content and small group instruction, replicates elements of the current multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework model embedded within the inclusive education policy for Nova Scotia. Driven by data collection and assessment to inform instructional targets and practices, MTSS tiers instructional practices by intensity beginning at Tier 1, with full class instruction embedding aspects of universal design for learning, evidence-based teaching practices, and culturally responsive practices, and progressing to small group-focused reinforcement of learning targets through direct teaching or interventions, and finally, Tier 3 individualized alternative goals (Sailor et al., 2018).

As part of a sacred story of how to effectively actualize inclusive practice, the challenge of addressing the diversity of learners is not lost on Heather, as she noted, “I think there are a lot of kids that just aren’t ready [to hit the outcome targets], but I don’t think it would matter what the outcome was, I just think if they’re not ready, they aren’t ready.” (HEA-J-2). How the PTs came to acknowledge the diversity of learners within the classroom was unclear, as aspects of flexibility and adaptability explored by the PTs were less responsive to the children, but rather aligned with ways to keep the children on the path toward achieving grade level expectations. This narrow path PTs used within their cover stories to define their inclusive practices, by first ensuring they met their professional responsibility of teaching outcomes over supporting the children in their classroom, echoes Wiebe and MacDonald’s (2014) narrative findings that teachers focus on performativity, may erode their abilities to personally care and support individual children. This challenge to children’s engagement and experience of success is not overlooked by the PTs.

I don’t want my students to be frustrated. I don’t want them to give up. I don’t want them to not like something. I know not everyone is going to like everything, but it kills me when they are shutting out subjects in Primary. For example, my passion is writing. I’ve got one student right now, who does not love writing. Internally, I am thinking, how am I going to win them over? I want them to feel good about it. I want them all to feel they can do it. And that’s not going to look the same for everybody, but I kind of all want them to kind of have, you know, that feeling of success. I think my biggest challenge teaching, is doing what I know or believe students need, and struggling with the benchmarks, where I need to have them at. (J-IN-2)

Jessica's struggle with fostering a love of learning for the children in her classroom, frames the impacts on teacher agency resulting from the weight of contextual factors, like meeting the standardized expectations of individual outcomes for each child. Her passionate statements about the strain she feels, illuminate how the struggle is potentially eroding positive experiences she may have as an educator, challenging her secret and cover stories. Yet, this need by educators to ensure positive outlooks and experiences with writing, may also reflect a power dynamic as a forced judgment by the PT, of what is or should be enjoyable, may result in the child conforming to this belief, regardless of their own feelings.

All three teachers defined their practices in part, by providing explicit teaching. PTs also grappled with tensions between what they felt they ought to be doing, and what was explicitly directed within the curriculum documents. For example, Ashley reported a recent discussion she had with a senior regional staff member, that surfaced the resistance the PTs experienced if they veered away from teacher-directed practices that are more structured and product-oriented.

I do literacy centres, but she [referencing a regional senior staff member] came in and told me that I wasn't supposed to do literacy centres, that they are extra, and should be dropped. But my literacy centre time is about more than getting them to E-F for a reading level by the end of Primary, or K-L in grade 1. It's about being in groups, making friends, socializing, being interactive. It is about them participating. That's how they are going to learn; they will learn way more than just sitting there listening to someone drone on.

(ASH-FG-T)

Ashley's retelling of this visit first in her individual interview, and then during the focus group session, indicates the impact of this encounter. Further, her statement to the PT focus group pinpoints the emotional impact of encounters with senior staff that appear to be hyper-focused on

increasing expectations of children's performance, and in the process, diminishing the practice scope and overall perceived success of the educators. Additionally, through these professional encounters of surveillance, there is the risk of PTs' self-efficacy being eroded. Their judgments are questioned, as they make attempts to be responsive to the children in their classes, potentially further aligning their cover stories with the sacred, and pushing their secret stories, reflective of modelling caring relations and practicing caring dialogue, behind the closed doors of their classroom.

The concern for reading levels Ashley mentions in this excerpt, is referenced in the provincial curriculum document. It states that, within the indicators for grade Primary, that children should, "read simple patterned texts and non-patterned texts within levels C-D," (NSDEECD, 2019a, p. 11) and in regional centre directives to achieve above the benchmarks, that these levels would be submitted for monitoring at the regional office on a regular basis, enhancing the degree of surveillance being felt. The pressure of teacher and student performance is not something that can be easily dismissed, as student assessment data is collected and disclosed about student progress, not only through individual report cards to families and parent/caregiver-teacher interviews, but also the data is used by senior regional staff to target funding for interventions, and to help pinpoint schools and potentially educators, prior to provincial assessments in grade 3, that have students not meeting expectations. Ashley's abandonment of literacy centres shortly after our discussion, demonstrates a hierarchy to her practices, as she felt forced to substitute what she believes are key elements to inclusive Primary education, such as fostering interdependence and agency, for strategies that meet external measures of learning and produce quantifiable data of reading progression. The hierarchy of

practices employed by the PTs was further expanded on by Jessica, as she described her approach to planning.

It's just balancing that off [outcomes and learning experiences], and I guess to kind of live with myself I just say that I pick my times that I'm going to do those hands-on experiences. The more experience I have in the grade, I just kind of know where I'm going to say no, you know what, we're going to do this. And then I get to see the kids have those joyful moments and that fun. And then there's times where I have to push them more, and it's not enjoyable. It's less enjoyable for them, and it's not enjoyable for me; it's a lot more like pulling teeth, I guess. (JES-FG-A)

All three PTs explored their own struggles with the limitations they felt were put on their teaching practices, and the degree to which external pressures were present was indicated through sacred stories around impacts on the timing and variety of learning experiences available to the children in Primary. Through the stories offered, PTs indicated feeling oppressed and trapped in a cycle of delivering curriculum in ways that eroded their opportunities to be responsive to the children. As Jessica explained, her feelings of “forcing learning” on children through explicit teaching, I also remembered times I felt compelled to assign teacher-directed activities, when it was evident the five-year-olds in my classroom were more interested in being outside looking for bugs, and exploring all the curiosities of spring, than producing a piece of procedural writing in the classroom. Yet, reconciling the push to remain “on track to cover the learning targets” was often a significant part of my practice, justified through my own belief at the time, that it was for the children’s long-term benefit—a cover story I could live with. Similarly, in this study, the three PTs identified how they made decisions to focus instruction on what they were told would be the children’s long-term development success through teacher-

controlled instruction, and perhaps also for the teachers' own positive professional reputation. PTs expressed concern for their own professional reputation was perhaps the most predominate, as we explored play-based learning.

Risky Play. Play-based learning is a term all the PT participants referenced, as being integrated into their practices. Yet, how it was defined and applied within the classrooms differed significantly. Play-based learning was characterized by PTs as providing specific toys or time for the children to either explore or achieve a task, with teachers having limited direct student interaction. Examples of play-based learning referenced by the PTs included terms like, loose parts, which is the introduction of movable materials and equipment into children's play spaces to facilitate unstructured, child-led play and engagement with minimal adult direction (Nicholson, 1972). Participants explored many reasons why play-based learning could not be implemented due to the current curriculum demands, even though they espoused its value for child development and learning. Jessica commented:

It is one of the biggest internal struggles that I have as a teacher of young children. We did a PD session where they talked about using loose parts, and all of this. Which is great, but where is the time for it? If I just say, here are these loose parts, and here's this guiding question, or you know, just accept the learning that comes out of it, just for what it is, the teacher that comes after me is not going to be impressed with me. (JES-IN-2)

Jessica's comments imply an underlying acceptance of the sacred story, that meaningful learning is still very much derived through teacher-initiated and directed instruction in the Primary classroom, and that open-ended play-based learning experiences need a separate designated time, rather than being complementary or alternative to teacher-led approaches. An assumed false dichotomy between play and academics is one that was echoed by all three PTs, and aligns with

Pyle & Danniels's (2017) findings, that many kindergarten teachers in Ontario struggle with establishing play-based methodologies to promote learning outcomes, relying on free play, in isolation from instructional times. While both Heather and Ashley acknowledged they did begin the year with play happening in their classrooms, the type of play and how it was used still presented within their cover stories as a mechanism for teaching expectations and structure, with a goal to transition away from it as soon as possible. Heather explained this in her description of centres.

It doesn't even matter what's in the centre for the first few weeks; it's just about them focusing on whatever's in it. I usually just put toys in it, playdough, blocks, that kind of thing. Then over time, I'm able to sort of change the day and add more work without them ever knowing. (HEA-J-2)

The idea of disguising work and assigned tasks as play was consistent with both Heather and Ashley, and documents the restricted ways the PTs came to define play-based learning through their limited professional development and pre-service exposure for exploring the topic. For Ashley, play in general, was used to distract the children or keep them busy, so she could assess and support other children in her class with what she considered academic learning. She also identified it as a time for the children to "recharge and regroup." Although the time given to play was seen as a break from the rigour of academics, the PTs neglected to credit the role of play in supporting the children's socio-emotional development and overall well-being, as well as a mechanism for increasing inclusion within the classroom community, instead viewing it as simply busyness or leisure. For both Heather and Ashley, play and academics were separate constructs. However, it might also be that they spoke only of their cover stories of play, even

within a group of educators, acknowledging their secret stories of how play lived in their classrooms, was too risky.

The PTs admitted that the grade Primary foundational documents encouraged play-based learning experiences, however, the specific curriculum guides do not provide ideas for how to undertake and assess using these methods. Also, all PTs noted that play-based learning was not explored or addressed during their initial teacher education, or made readily available during professional development sessions. The messaging of this sacred story is perhaps further integrated into the system, as Ashley commented on how she believes the education system is not structurally supporting play-based learning.

The materials, the setup of classrooms are not ready for play-based. These rooms come with desks, chairs, and if you are lucky, some math manipulatives and books. Toys are extras; extras that I supply, or they don't exist in the room. Play-based might be mentioned in the Primary document, but nothing about the outcomes or the materials enable that type of methodology for teaching or learning. It's still centred on traditional methodologies. (ASH-FG-T)

So, if the PTs have created cover stories where they believe play-based learning is separate from delivering the outcomes of the curriculum, and the materials to facilitate a different approach to learning are not readily available, it is understandable why through their ethic of care, they are making choices to meet each individual's needs in teacher managed ways. The PTs commitment to the child to experience both long- and short-term school success is through traditional learning experiences, which are promoted as effective education, and supersede their own beliefs regarding appropriate inclusive practices.

Beyond increased accountability, PTs also shared palpable frustration over the limited professional development and resources they received, to support teaching using a play-based methodology.

I think about the amazing things that I have done through my Masters related to play-based learning, and the things that I hear other teachers do, and I want that. But it's always teachers doing it themselves. Like even like loose parts, nothing is provided; you collect your own bottle caps, and whatever else. I know some Pre-Primary teachers do this too, but they were also provided with a lot when they started that program, which was great for them, but where does this leave me as a Primary teacher? I also feel like there is so much that you could do with Primary students, but there just isn't the access to the right materials, and time to make it happen. That PD session with Pre-Primary teachers a few years ago, I don't think a single Primary teacher disagreed with what they were saying around learning through play, but we don't have the tools or the curriculum to take that risk. (ASH-IN-2)

The risk identified by Ashley if she were to implement strategies from the play-based professional development session, is caused by the need to reconcile aspects of early childhood education and formal schooling, while operating in a system that includes colleagues and supervisors not versed in play-based approaches. This reconciliation was further be complicated as PTs identified that the professional development offered, fell short of explaining how to make play-based learning work within the accountabilities of outcome measures, as expressed by Jessica.

Yes, I want to do more play-based things, but I don't have the time or knowledge. One session, three years ago and no follow up, no support, or coaching around it. It just isn't

going to happen. Using play as a tool for learning is risky. I don't think it is really a priority either. Just look at our region. We have coaches for literacy, we have coaches for numeracy, but none for supporting integrating curriculum or incorporating play. That to me, speaks volumes about what I need to focus on (JES-FG-T).

The disconnect the PTs spoke to around promoting learning, and the opportunities to shift their practices to a more play-centred approach, illuminated the boundaries of their practice and knowledge and who was accepted as colleagues to collaborate with and learn from in their environment.

Professional Connections and Boundaries

A final theme to emerge from the PT data generated, was related to the types of professional connections and boundaries they encountered, as they attempted to improve their practices and support children's learning experiences. To begin this exploration, however, it is first important to consider the current and historical sacred stories of what constitutes a teacher, as this greatly impacts the secret and cover stories articulated by the Primary teachers. Kilgore and Reynolds (2011) argue, teachers were assumed in Western society to operate within a silo and in many ways, this model is still widely promoted in North America, as elementary teachers are usually assigned a single cohort they will teach alone, during the day, in their own classrooms, as they are held accountable for the progress of the children within the grouping, and are assessed individually on their teaching effectiveness and skills by a superior. Yet, there are some shifts on the horizons of this sacred story which are reflected in the current Nova Scotia teaching standards, with a recognition of the need for collaboration and active participation in professional conversations (NSDEECD, 2018c). This recognition of collaboration as part of the

sacred story is important, however, the impact of its realization in the workplace is a topic the PTs explored extensively as they shared about collaborative expectations and experiences.

Mandated Collaboration. Formalized cooperation between teachers were noted by PTs as occurring through collaborative learning times (CLT) as designated by the regional centre for education. These CLT blocks occur during school hours for 90 minutes, 14 times over the school year. There is considerable evidence in recent research findings, that providing teachers with opportunities embedded in their day to share and discuss challenges they are experiencing in their classrooms, helps not only improve student performance, but also enhances teachers' feelings of self-worth and efficacy (DeLuca et al., 2017; Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017). When initially introduced a decade ago within the regional centre for education, CLTs reflected the research as their purpose was open in nature, with the topics emerging from the assembled groups of teachers with a goal to balance professional problem-solving with explorations of practices to support the teachers in caring for and educating the children in their classroom. In past practice, the groupings were determined by the teachers, and different groupings across schools were permitted. For example, a CLT Primary group existed with PTs from four different schools. However, at the beginning of this study, the regional purpose for CLT changed, and teachers' autonomy for the CLT was decreased as it became mandated that it be used on evaluating collected student data, and developing evidence-based practices to enhance children's academic performance in a target subject at a school-wide level. The goals for all CLTs are now solely focused on answering the questions, "how are students doing, and how do we know" questions, promoted by senior staff in the regional centre as being linked to the inclusive education policy and more specifically, as the backbone of MTSS. This significant change in

both the establishment and purposes of the CLT time was disappointing for the PTs as Ashley outlined:

I need the old CLTs, where I could meet with teachers that are experiencing teaching similar grades. I don't know what I don't know, and there are definitely holes in my practice. My practices could get so much better, but instead, we are going to take the 14 Wednesdays, and waste our time focusing on something that we [her school] essentially got [reading benchmarks] because someone at the regional office said we should. It becomes an added piece of stress, that we just don't need. CLTs should be a time we can come together, and collaborate, and talk about the students and their well-being, because at the end of the day, it is literally all that matters. If you're not meeting that, who cares what they're reading, and who cares what they are writing? And I can't do the well-being piece by myself. My toolbox only has so many pieces. I need others; I need colleagues, and time for these conversations. (ASH-IN-2)

Ashley exhibits a strong desire for collaboration, as she attempts to actualize an ethic of care through a web of relations and interdependence. Yet, the focus on subject-based student performance and student data for the CLT provided by her regional centre, is impacting her ability to increase her professional connections with peers with similar assignments across the region, which she believed was essential in order to meet the goals she identified as being important for her professional growth. The types of discussions PTs described engaging in during these more formalized collaborative times, further hindered the ways they felt supported and understood, and contributed to a reduction in their own sense of belonging as part of the school team. Heather described a recent experience during a CLT session, that highlighted the ways the children in her classroom, and her teaching needs were being ignored.

Our CLT is focused on the grade ones and twos, especially with the impact of the COVID years, they're not where they should be. And so, we have a whole data wall that we just made indicating everyone's reading level, and where they should be versus where they are. Now, as a school, we are looking at it and saying, "What can we do for these kids? What do we need to do?" And so, at the CLT session yesterday, discussions started happening, but we're only doing letter ID right now in Primary, so my students weren't really discussed. But I know they should be part of it. These are the kids that in grade 1 and grade 2 won't be hitting the benchmarks, so why not start now with support? Help me to help them now. (HEA-IN-1)

The frustration expressed by Heather regarding the limitations of the CLT work may further establish a cover story for the PTs, as both their experiences and the children's performance with the tasks are at risk of being marginalized or dismissed when examining data at a whole school level. This marginalization is also evident within another formal mechanism of the school system that seeks to support all teachers through collaboration, and that is the teaching support team (TST).

TSTs are now a sacred part of the educational fabric and are required under the inclusive education policy in Nova Scotia. TSTs are composed of administration, learning support teachers, school counsellors, and representatives from the teaching staff at the school with the purpose of "strengthen[ing] the school's capacity to support student well-being and achievement by assisting teachers in developing strategies to meet the needs of their students" (NSDEECD, 2019c, p. 3). PTs identified TSTs as missed opportunities for developing collaborative associations within their schools. To connect with the teaching support team, the teacher must first identify a specific student or area of requested support, and complete a formal referral. Upon

completing the referral, the child/or teacher is placed on an agenda for a TST meeting, where the teacher is invited to attend, to share further information, and be part of the discussion. According to the inclusive education policy, after reviewing the referral request, the TST during the meeting will “focus on proactively building capacity among teaching staff, as well as supporting changes in teaching practices to meet students’ needs and on identifying other needed supports as required.” (NSDEECD, 2019c, p. 3). These aspects, as described, resonate to an extent, as a collaborative and supportive approach for the teacher making the referral. However, power dynamics are present, as the team determines when the discussion takes place, and provides suggestions based on their own conclusions of what is happening in the classroom with the child or teacher. In many ways, TST is set up to acknowledge experts gathered at the table, who then bestow strategies or resources on the classroom teacher. The degree the TST has power is further evident, as PTs revealed these teams were often hesitant to offer specific solutions, or were dismissive of concerns raised by PTs. This dismissive nature was noted by Jessica.

The lower level has this label of not needing the same level of supports as everyone else.

I don’t think they [teaching support teams] truly get the importance of intervention and support at those levels. Some schools are just like, it’s primary, whatever. I don’t feel there is a lot of value placed on how important that transitional year to school is. (JES-J-

3)

Beyond the sentiment of not being valued as a roadblock for collaboration during TST meetings, the PTs also expressed how certain attitudes of the team could result in less inclusive approaches, as more complex and challenging learning spaces can be presented, without relevant problem-solving ideas coming from the TST in a timely fashion. Ashley wrote about one incident in her journal.

[My concerns to TST] often have to do with behaviours that come up, like how do I make it that the other 20 students can still learn when there are two disruptive students in the room, because I can't always send them to the office. I have brought it to TST so many times and nothing has come from it, nothing has been offered to support me and my class.

(ASH-J-3)

All three PTs expressed frustration and concerns with the process, as often they felt the matters referred to TST required immediate attention, but were not addressed for weeks, as they waited their turn to make the agenda through a bureaucratic process, or the child was then placed on a lengthy direct service waitlist for other educational professionals. As a result, the PTs noted the same children were often referred multiple times, as they attempted to find ways of accessing support for the child or receiving acknowledgement of their concerns. Jessica described her approach to dealing with her TST, and accessing support for children in her classroom.

I think of myself as the squeaky wheel. I just keep advocating; I just keep going back to the CORE [old label for TST] team. I just keep going back to the SLP, the guidance counselor and my administrator for assessments for the child, for supports. What can I do? That's where the gap is, where I feel like if I just keep being the squeaky wheel that keeps going back and getting more grease, something will come of it. It's a lot of advocating and trying to get the support at this lower level. (JES-FG-T)

All PTs agreed that they seek resources from their TST, but often feel under-supported, and the consequences may be practices in the classroom that are less than ideal for fostering an inclusive atmosphere for all children, and a cover story that places the teacher, as simply trying their best given the circumstances. Jessica expressed concern with how her struggles of accessing strategies through the TST reflected the beginnings of the cover story of doing your best.

I had this one little girl, as she was passing things out, told the speech language pathologist, “Oh that’s Jayden, you’re going to know him really fast because he is a bad boy.” When the speech language pathologist shared that with me, I was devastated. But had you walked by my classroom at any point over that last week and a half, you would have heard his name, I would hazard to guess how many times, and it was always around the negative or trying to redirect. I knew I was trying to get things in place to not have to do that, but for that time period, it did probably sound like that, that he was a bad boy. It was for safety reasons, and leaving the classroom, and hurting others, and all those things. It makes it challenging because students can be really quick to label. It is such a fine balance. (JES-IN-2)

The role of the TST, as a sacred story of the system, may influence the degree to which the PTs are operating from a deficit perspective in viewing the children in their classroom, and how this may impact their secret and cover stories of practice. The formalized process of identifying and submitting a referral to the school team regarding specific children, rather than opening a discussion by asking the teacher to share their experiences about their class in broader terms, could further limit the inclusive approach within the classroom, as it is encouraging teachers to single out and share the perceived weaknesses of the individual child outside of the collective strengths and challenges of the group. When approached this way, there is potential for judgments and bias as the TST are filtering their discussions based on a child they may not have any relationship with, rather than examining the presenting problem situation through an ethic of care lens connected to the teacher in front of them. In using an ethic of care lens, TSTs could engage in understanding the role of the PT in the classroom environment, and acknowledge the ways the team and the teacher are interdependent in supporting all children in the classroom, an

aspect promoted in the inclusive education policy, but not identified or actualized by the participants. The power of the TST is evident as they act as gatekeepers for the possible resources available in the school, and set the required criteria to be met for the PT or child to gain access. As a gatekeeper, the TST establishes a boundary for PTs on what they can do before they seek specialized support, and it is within this boundary that the PTs' cover stories emerge, as they negotiate between their personal teaching philosophy, ethic, and the actualization of practices.

Connections within the School. Beyond formalized collaboration, all three PTs disclosed that they developed relationships with other teachers, and used these relationships to sometimes discuss practices and problem-solve situations. All three participants explained how they had other teachers in their building teaching at least a portion of a similar assignment, and that these were often the first people they would connect and share with during their workday. Jessica and Ashley both chronicled how they often discussed experiences and collaborated with the full-time Primary or grade one teachers, although they both taught Primary/one combined classes, while Heather noted, she worked closely with the other Primary teacher in her school. These informal discussions were spontaneously happening in classrooms, staff rooms or hallways before school, during the noon hour or after school. The PTs described how they often use these interactions to debrief about an event, share about their day, ask questions about ideas, or borrow supplies for upcoming lessons. Yet, even with these connections, Ashley declared,

The world of Primary is unique. I have Crystal in my building, who teaches a straight Primary, so she is a great resource, sometimes the grade one teacher, but really having a split and always being the Primary split teacher is tricky.... They are supportive, but really, I am an island. (ASH-IN-2)

The strategy of seeking opportunities to share and discuss experiences with professional colleagues is a common practice for educators, as it provides specialized situational learning about everyday classroom occurrences (Bhattacharjee, 2015; Many & Sparks-Many, 2015). However, there was no evidence provided by participants of this study of any professional development that promoted the development of effective collaborative relationships, which raises the question as to whether there is an assumption that these relationships will somehow naturally occur, or if they are even valued within the school system at all. The lack of opportunities for learning strategies to develop collaborative networks in many ways contradicts, the revised sacred story of educators as collaborators, that is promoted by both the inclusive education policy and the teaching standards document (NSDEECD, 2018c; NSDEECD, 2019c). Furthermore, without PTs being provided with the knowledge, time, and tools necessary within the formal workday to make collaboration happen, it may further impact the other types of relationships within the school setting beyond educators as well.

Although the three PTs noted that they were the only teacher assigned to their classrooms, they were often not the sole adult in the cohort. Jessica and Heather had teacher assistants assigned to their classrooms during the data generation period, to support a cluster of children identified as requiring additional support, and Ashley voiced that in the past, teaching assistants were also part of her classroom community. In exploring professional connections, however, the additional adult in the classroom was not mentioned as part of the discussions regarding potential collaborative partners. Instead, the PTs theorized how having an additional adult could enable them to work in more focused ways with children, as they could direct teacher assistants to perform custodial or clerical duties within the classroom. This was hypothesized by Jessica.

Imagine if I was given a TA to support the class, without having a high needs student. What I could accomplish as a teacher, and how many fires I could put out at that level, before they ever became a fire. (JES-FG-T)

The lack of acknowledgement by all three PTs of the potential of the teacher assistants (TAs) in their classrooms as collaborative partners, may in part be due to the hierarchy of roles, differing working conditions, the discrepancy in educational requirements, and common background between the classroom teachers and teacher assistants. Additionally, the system structure leaves little time for the PTs and TAs to share, as TAs' work hours are exclusively matched to the school hours, and are dedicated to specific children, leaving no before school, breaks or after school times for cooperation to emerge. The impact of different timetables and agendas was further explored by Heather, as part of her cover story for her use of the TA in her classroom.

I adore my TAs when they are in my classroom, but really there is no time for me to give a lot of direction. They often split their time between my room, and wherever else their assigned student might be in the building. I like to think we should be a team, and I try to do this, but often we just get in a groove, and they are reassigned to another pressing need, or someone else is off long-term, and they would be a good fit with another student. So really, I guess we try to make communication work when they are available. But I respect that they are giving their time; they are not on the clock. Same with team meetings for students. I have had TAs come, but they often have little to say or are not given time to. So, I often share their notes as part of my report, instead of them coming and being ignored. (HEA-IN-2)

With limited times for discussion and apparent restrictions on how collaborative the relationships between the PTs and teacher assistants are, the types and timing of inclusive practices the PTs are using may be impacted, as communication may be limited where roles are rigidly defined.

Another group absent from the discussion as potential collaborative partners for the PTs, were the PPECEs. There appeared to be a disjointed nature to the relationships between the PTs and PPECEs, and it might be related to how different the foundational philosophies and policies are between the Pre-Primary program and the first “grade” of public school. PTs shared that Pre-Primary policy impacted ways they could interact, as PPECEs were not permitted to share information without parental consent, and they were not permitted to spend time with Pre-Primary children unless directly supervised by a PPECE. PTs expressed throughout their focus group session, a respect for the individuals in the program and the work that they do, but also a displeasure in what the program may provide as preparation for learning in “big school.” An example of the PT’s frustration was provided by Jessica.

I find it’s almost harder than if they [new Primary children from Pre-Primary] had nothing. Because if they had nothing, then you can mold them, but now they have expectations for a building and a place. And it’s hard when people are set in their ways. You know, they think, “Why can’t I throw rocks down this slide? I threw rocks down this slide all last year.” You know we have to worry about people’s eyes, and you know, like you talk about safety things, but you just don’t change that overnight because they have been doing it every day for 195 days. So now, you have to reteach everything they have done wrong. (JES-FG-PT)

Furthermore, the PTs expressed resentment for the way the Pre-Primary program was launched without Primary teachers' consultation, creating an "us versus them" mentality, as they felt their knowledge and understanding of early learning was being questioned or compromised.

Clearly, they [the government] didn't ask primary teachers anything about the creation of the program [Pre-Primary]. I now spend the first three months of the year trying to undo the learning they [students] have of what school is, based on Pre-Primary. I would just be happy with a name change if they're leaving it in schools, and communication that it's not getting them ready for Primary. (H-IN-2)

As a result of feeling powerless and potentially threatened as professionals in early learning, it is possible that the PTs are seeking to remain disconnected from the PPECEs to protect their authority in the school building. The potential of PPECEs becoming professional collaborative partners was dismissed by the PTs, as they noted significant discrepancies in how they approached the learning and development of children, along with the stark difference in supports available. Ashley described this gap in how the programs operate.

A few years ago, I was part of transition meetings for a child entering Primary from the Pre-Primary program. He was a massive behaviour challenge. Anyways, Pre-Primary had this program set up for him where, if got through an entire week, on Friday afternoons he had one-on-one time with his teacher; the lead teacher, of the three in the room. They would do something together for like a half hour, while the rest of the Pre-Primaries went with the other two teachers. At the meeting she said, "It is really effective, if you could make that happen." I am one person! I cannot spend 30 minutes with one child, with no one else around. That is an impossible expectation. That is not what a primary classroom is! (ASH-FG-T)

Ashley's frustration with the PPECEs' understanding of her role foregrounds the degree the PTs and PPECEs have not come to understand the complexities of each position within the school system. These discrepancies were cited by the PTs as reasons why discussions of practice and transitioning children were limited, as the PPECEs did not provide what PTs believed to be the necessary or right information to assist them in planning for the children entering their classroom.

The Pre-Primary teachers will say, you can come and watch, when it is getting close to time to start thinking about transitioning the students. But they even say, you know we can't make them come and listen to a story, so we don't know how they respond to that, or we spend so much time outside, and so and so really likes that. Again, it's no disrespect to those teachers, because I love those teachers, but it's just, it's, it's the programming, and so, they really can't say what school will be like or what we need to do to prepare for the children, because they simply don't understand how my Primary program has to differ from their Pre-Primary. (JES-IN-2)

The concept of the 'right information' needed identifies a hierarchy in the knowledge of child development and skills that was present throughout the discussions with the PTs. PTs consistently messaged that the Pre-Primary program did not provide the school preparation they believed was needed and therefore, PPECEs could not offer insights into how the children would respond to the public school structures. There was no recognition that both professionals were supposedly working together within an inclusive early learning environment that prioritized healthy child development. Heather described her frustrations with recent experiences with children entering school.

I'd like them to know that when I'm talking, they're supposed to listen. I'd like them to actually be able to sit. I'd like them to know they have to wait, because in Pre-Primary I find, they don't have to wait. There is always an adult to respond right away.... So, now we have to definitely slow everything down, we have to change the way we approach teaching because of Pre-Primary, because they are less prepared for it. (HEA-FG-T)

The need to shift teaching practices was noted by all three PTs, however, details of what aspects and strategies were used, beyond taking longer to reach the outcomes were unclear. The potential resistance or limited sharing of the secret stories of practice related to how PTs responded to the perceived lack of children's readiness to handle the Primary expectations, could be related to an underlying lack of confidence PTs have in how to respond to diverse early learners, therefore, the deeper secret stories of practice were not revealed.

To gain a greater context for early childhood learning in Nova Scotia, it is equally important to explore themes which emerged from the PPECE participants.

Pre-Primary Early Childhood Educators

Relationships with Children

As the data generated was reviewed, it became evident that for PPECEs, relationality was a foundational aspect of their approach to supporting the growth and development of all children. Relationality, as a concept is linked to an individual's feelings of rapport and support from others. It is promoted as a sacred story within the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework, as it promotes "children's interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities. In early childhood and throughout life, relationships are crucial to a child's developing sense of self—they shape who children are and who they become." (NSDEECD, 2018a, p. 15). For PPECEs, the centrality of relationality is reflected deeply in the children's

sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others, in other words, their sense of belonging (Calp, 2020). The PPECEs described the responsibility they felt to facilitate relationality in the classroom between everyone, and the role every single person had in creating connections. As Hannah explained as part of her cover story for how she approaches all aspects of her work as a PPECE professional, “We focus on building a community, where everyone is accepted as they are.” This guiding principle becomes a starting point for unpacking how PPECEs describe their role and impact in shaping relations within the classroom space, first with each individual child, and later with the entirety of social networks in the classroom space.

Interconnection Facilitators. For Jennifer, her role as a PPECE in developing relationships is embedded within her knowledge of each individual and their unique history.

I feel like at the beginning [of the school year] we try to kind of talk about their families, and kind of build on that. I talk about my family too. We do a lot of play stuff to try to get to know them more, to open up, and get to know about their family. I want to get them to a place where they are comfortable to share. I want to get to know them a bit more, to try to find their interests. The most important though, is just being there, and being sensitive to their needs, and making sure they know that they can come to me, and I’m going to be the kind of person that says, “Let’s try and figure this out.” (JEN-IN-1)

Jennifer’s explanation of her approach to building a relationship with each child, first through sharing details about her personal life, engaging in play with them, and then supporting them, underlines an ethic of care, but also indicates potential power dynamics that impact the associations made. As Jennifer noted, a foundational aspect of her goal in building relationships with individual children, was that each child could see her as someone providing care, so that could help them. These strategies, however, were not always effective, as Jennifer explained.

I had a child that spilled milk on the floor. She was immediately upset, not completely about spilling the milk, but about how she thought I would react, she said “I’m so sorry, oh my gosh, I know I am bad.” And I responded by saying ‘Oh, it’s okay. We all spill sometimes. We’ll just put paper towel on the floor, and then clean it up.’ But you could tell she was really worried that I was going to be upset with her because she spilled milk. So, sometimes your job is really to just reassure them that you will be there, no matter what happens. And that, no matter what happens today, that it is not going to reflect on tomorrow. We will just move on, and have a better day from this point on. (JEN-IN-2)

The challenge of balancing the desires of the adults for how relationships unfold in the classroom, and the realities of how bonds are initially formed, shift, and evolve with time together, was often discussed, as PPECEs described their understanding of their role. Lisa explained:

I want them to know their opinion and experiences matter to me, that I value their lived experiences. I try to support everyone by being part of the group, so that everybody is getting their say, or their feelings acknowledged. (LIS-IN 2)

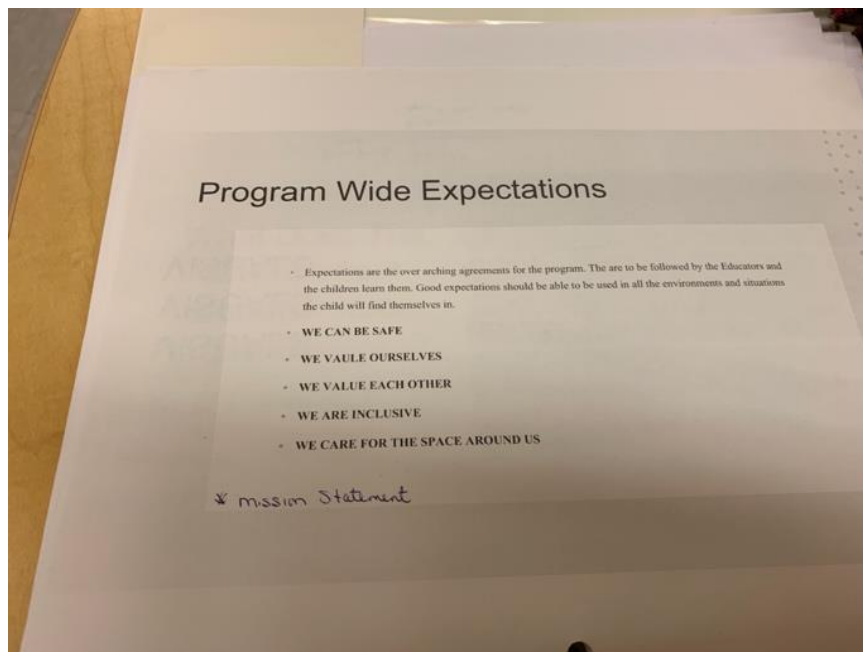
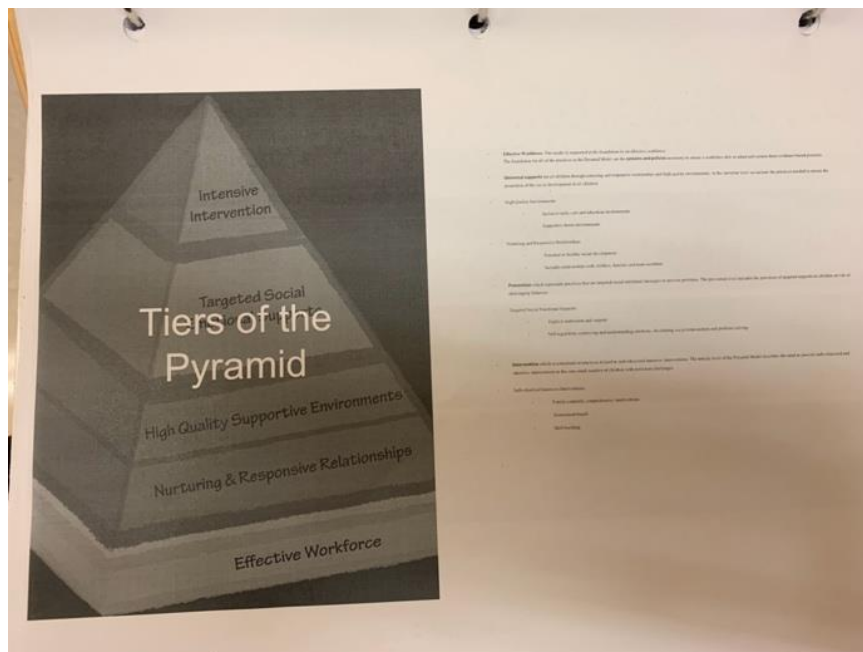
Echoing these sentiments, Jennifer retold the story of recent professional development offered to Pre-Primary educators to support facilitating interdependence.

We are doing PD right now that focuses on problem-solving, friendship skills, and just the basic things they [children] need in life. Like you just can’t go up to a person and whack them because you want that toy. But it is not direct lessons, rather, we are facilitating by just being there, and interacting with them in a positive way, providing them with the steps on how to be a friend, or how to problem solve with me and your

friend, or having support when you and your friend are having some issues. That is how we are coming to facilitate belonging in the classroom. (JEN-IN-1)

Artifacts shared from the professional development sessions denote the types of discussions and practices being promoted as sacred stories within the Pre-Primary program, for example, Image 7, which describes the Tiers of the Pyramid, promotes an effective ECE workforce as foundationally rooted in nurturing and responsive relationships, while the notes added to Image 7, further emphasizes the importance of valuing all as a mission statement.

Image 7: Handouts Provided at the Pyramid Approaches Workshop Lisa Attended



Through both the stories explored by PPECEs and artifact evidence, it is clear the guiding philosophy being promoted within the Pre-Primary program, and how PPECEs come to make decisions on practice, are deeply formed through the lens of fostering interconnections. The

commitment to nurturing a sense of belonging through social connections for everyone within the group context, focuses on the central role of children's agency and distributive power in developing relationships. This approach to belonging places the PPECs as facilitators supporting children, rather than as the sole person responsible for creating and maintaining relationships in the classroom.

Acknowledging the value of diverse personalities amongst the PPECs and the children, mirrors respect for everyone in the space, and a desire for warm responsive relationships. It is through these variables the PPECs noted they were able to model, dialogue, and practice caring relationships, because all interactions were not simply through a single adult or person, but rather, both the one giving care and receiving care equally, actively engaged in it happening. PPECs' interpersonal and collective-focused approach to addressing children's well-being demonstrates an understanding and application of self-determination theory within the early years as the PPECs focused, through their discussions, not only on building the single relationships, but also on how each individual desires to feel connected and supported by others, makes decisions for themselves, and possesses an understanding of their own strengths, abilities, limitations and learning needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wehmeyer, 1997). Self-determination theory is rooted in human motivation, development, and wellness, with the actualization of the basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness being central to how the educators may foster self-determination. Aspects of practices promoted within the theory include providing choice, promoting problem-solving, and opportunities for leadership (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wehmeyer, 1997). Reasons why the self-determination theory held so true to their practice, may be directly related to the overall emphasis within the program at the sacred level, on the PPECs supporting and facilitating child development and learning across the whole schooling experience, rather

than within specific curriculum labels and subjects. The child, as an individual, is central to the philosophy of the Pre-Primary program through learning objectives in the Early Learning Framework (NSDEECD, 2018a) like, “children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect” (p. 54) and “children become strong in their social and emotional well-being” (p. 49).

There was some discrepancy between the promoted practices and the secret and cover stories told regarding fostering interactions. As Jennifer explained, the PPECEs also expressed ways in which they utilized their power within relationships with children to impact connections.

I feel like we start at the beginning of the year ... being there, and being sensitive to their needs, and making sure they know that they can come to me. And I'm going to be the kind of person that says, “Let's try and figure this out,” not just dictating what needs to happen. Then giving them as much positive feedback as possible, as they try to navigate situations. (JEN-IN-1)

The approach described by Jennifer was echoed by the other PPECEs, and illuminated the importance of collaborative problem solving as part of creating social connections and relationships, over explicit teaching of specific social skills in isolation, or the educators assuming responsibility for children's emotional state. This socio-cultural approach of using the naturally occurring social experiences within a classroom and providing support as necessary, aligns with Sevenhuijsen's (1998) and Robinson's (2011) ethic of care, in that a relational ontology places the individual in a complex web of relations, acknowledging vulnerability and interdependency as normal, rather than in need of fixing through explicit teachings. The complexities of inclusive practice were evident in Lisa's description of a conversation about a

child's contradictory understanding of diversity in his classroom, compared to discussions at home.

Like I said, children were asking questions, and we would answer their questions about why Jesse, a child in our classroom with autism, didn't talk, or why he ran all the time. We tried to explain that everybody learns differently. And this little gentleman we had, Jesse, occasionally, he could be a little aggressive. One time, he scratched Callum on his face, and this little child, he was upset because he had been hurt. But we talked to him, we said, "Jesse is learning how to manage his anger, and he was frustrated, and he hurt you. He didn't mean to hurt you. It's just his way of trying to show us that he was upset." And Callum wasn't mad. He was sad because he got hurt, but he was trying to understand where Jesse was coming from. A few weeks later, Callum came to me, and he said, "My daddy doesn't like Jesse." So, I said, "Why is that?" And he said, "Because he hurt me." And I said to him, "Did you explain to daddy, the situation that you know Jesse is learning differently, and he's learning at a different pace?" And he said, "Yes, but he said it doesn't matter. I still like him though." So, even though he got hurt by this child, I think because of us taking the time to explain to him that everybody's different, Callum was almost defending this other child to his dad. I don't know exactly what he said to his dad. But he came in to me, and let me know that even though that might be what dad might think, I think Callum was trying to say, I know Jesse, and I still like him. It was important enough, that the way he's learning does matter, and he was such a brave boy, that he got hurt, but still, that didn't affect the way that he felt about Jesse. (LIS-IN 1)

The PPECEs admitted, as part of their secret stories, how their role in supporting social interactions was often through facilitating and supporting language skills needed to communicate

effectively with peers and adults in the learning space. Lisa described a recent situation in her classroom.

Yesterday, we had one little boy that was being a little rough with a little girl. I went over to the little girl and asked “Are you okay with this play? Is he being too rough with you? Do you want to play like this?” She said, “Yes, I’m fine,” but I gave her words to say, if not. I reminded her “You can say stop.” Because they have to know what feels right for them too. So, it’s about ensuring they have the power and the understanding to know their feelings matter. So, empowering them, giving them the words to use, giving them role models to follow, it all matters. (LIS-IN 2)

Lisa’s story of practice, as she provided possible words needed to navigate a situation, exemplifies how certain practices can empower children to navigate social situations. Through an openness to enable the child to choose when and how to use words, Lisa’s story further provides evidence of how active participation of a child can be fostered, to increase autonomy and enhance relationality with both adults and peers.

Value of Multiple Connections. PPECEs were quick to share that there were some children for whom positive relationships happened more easily, while other children’s situations required more work. PPECEs were grateful to have other adults in the room that were able to potentially create positive relationships with a child and as a result, any child could also attempt to make positive adult associations in the learning environment. PPECEs admitted, within their secret stories, they did not always establish a quick bond with every child. However, the design of the Pre-Primary program to have multiple adults present in the classroom at any given time, resulted in the PPECEs noting how, when their relationship was not as strong as they would like with a child, there were opportunities for others to have that rapport. The PPECEs did not

indicate a struggle with, or feeling weighed down by socio-emotional connection challenges with children. This was further explained by Lisa. “Just like with adults, you don’t always connect with everybody. That’s why it’s good to have different personalities in the classroom as staff.”

(LIS-IN-2)

All four PPECEs noted they worked throughout the year to foster positive relationships. There was respect throughout, for the part the child played in rapport building as well. This respect for the autonomy and participation of the child in the quality of the relationship may have emerged, because the PPECEs were able to rely on other adults to also establish rapport and support, rather than solely taking on the responsibility for providing attention to each child from the start. It may also demonstrate how children’s agency is respected and valued, as the PPECEs enabled the children to make choices about how they sought out support and comfort at any given time.

Families as a Missing Link. As a fundamental aspect of developing relationships with children, the Early Learning Framework also places a strong onus within its sacred story on PPECEs, to “demonstrate deep understanding of each child, their family, and community contexts in planning for children’s learning” (p. 61). Throughout the discussions with the PPECEs regarding the families, it was evident there was frustration with how the recent restriction of visitors in the school due to COVID protocols, along with bussing transportation, have impacted the ways PPECEs could connect with families. PPECEs described how daily communication in the past was easily facilitated before bussing was the norm, as parents or guardians would interact at drop-off and pick-up times. In many ways, the PPECEs were struggling to adjust to the new normal, which eliminated daily parental or caregiver interactions. Hannah’s journal entry noted:

I must say we have a hard time connecting with families. It seems impossible to form the rapport we wish we could have with them since bussing. Learning from the families, getting to know some of the specific cultural and religious customs they celebrate at home has lacked. We don't get the face-to-face connections like we had. I know in some ways bussing is good, attendance has skyrocketed but families seem so disengaged. We reach out electronically directly to parents whether it be email, text, or Fresh Grade (learning communication platform), but it is often crickets back. (HEA-J 3)

The challenge for rural public school bussing was contained within a cover story by Jennifer, as she attempted to explain how these relationships were distinctly different from the daycare context.

The first two years [of Pre-Primary], we had daily contact. We saw parents every day. Anything you wanted to talk to them about, you had this opportunity at drop off and pick up; they were there. Texting and talking on the phone, it is so much different than a face-to-face conversation. My years of experience in daycare where I saw them twice a day, I guess I expect that level of connection, and now it is not happening. (JEN-FG-PP)

Similarly, Lisa also expressed frustration for engaging families in the learning experiences, which she felt began with the restrictions of COVID, but may never return to the pre-pandemic experience.

Before COVID, I found the families were extremely grateful for this early start to the school community. They appreciated the flexibility in the program, and had lots of questions about what was happening in our learning space. Something has shifted now, and they simply don't ask questions; they don't share. We have 13 children; we spend hours doing collages and never hear back. It is frustrating after putting so much effort in,

but we will keep doing it because we want to keep the families up to date on what's going on. Before COVID, we had parents volunteer in the school, so we could also connect that way, but that is pretty much done now with COVID. Parents don't even know what our classroom looks like on a regular basis. (LIS-FG-PP)

The desires expressed by all PPECEs to have frequent conversations, and share information about the child in ways that could enable the PPECEs' practices to be more responsive, and therefore, more inclusive for all involved in the program, are evident within their cover stories. Yet, none of the PPECEs discussed ways in which they attempted to change their practices.

Promoting an Inclusive Learning Environment

All four PPECEs credited the Early Learning Framework as an underlying factor in how they fostered learning experiences within the classroom, however, the way the framework impacted the planning and implementation of the daily activities of children was drastically different from the pressures of the curriculum documents, benchmarks, and grade based learning outcomes referenced by the PTs. As Jennifer explained,

It's about putting invitations out for the kids to play with and explore. They [learning goals and objectives] just kind of are falling into place within the framework. So, we encourage exploration of invitations, and then we document with pictures and responses from the children to probes. For example, my co-worker will set up to make playdough tomorrow in response to children's request today. That activity will be of interest to several children, so it will end up being a group activity. It fits the framework as it will include language, well-being, and social responsibility goals they are working towards in it.... She will write that up as a documentation, and I'll take some pictures of them doing it. (JEN-FG-PP)

Responses to probes and documentation of learning experiences were evident in all three PPECE classrooms visited, as the activities became a tool for teaching. In each classroom, pictures and products of the children's exploration were prominently displayed, with featured quotes from the children about their discoveries and learning. Examples of these are provided in Images 8 and 9, along with artifacts of documentation prepared in Amy and Hannah's classroom (Image 10) and Jennifer's classroom (Image 11). The documentation of the experiential learning process by the PPECEs indicates an ethic of care in practice, as PPECEs provide evidence of their attentiveness and responsiveness to each individual child's words and actions. The degree an ethic of care was present in practice is further communicated by Lisa.

I know everybody is learning from everybody else. We all have something to share; children and adults all have something to give to the program. We [PPECEs] want to ensure that everybody is getting their say, and their feelings are known. I think it really helps to build up a child's self-confidence too. That they are enjoying their play, and they are enjoying that an adult is listening to them, and understanding when they want to do something differently. (LIS-FG-A)

Lisa's comments about how all children contribute and bring value to the classroom community of learners in the creation of inclusive learning, is an important aspect of the stories of practice all participants offered.

Image 8: Lisa's Classroom Art Display



Image 9: Amy and Hannah's Learning Outcomes Sample Display



Image 10: Amy and Hannah's Learning Outcomes Sample Display



For our outing we went to visit a local family in the area.

They have a dog named Luna. She has 3 legs. She is amazing. They brought her with them from up North.

They showed us earrings that they obtained 15 or 20 years ago and we all guessed what they were made from. We DID NOT guess correctly! They were made from Walrus whiskers! We thought this was pretty neat!

They shared their language with us.

They speak Inuktitut which is the Inuit language spoken in the central and eastern Canadian artic.



They told us how to say 'Good Morning' which is 'Ulaakut' (Oo-lah-coot) and 'Good afternoon' which is 'Unusakut' (Oo-nah-sa-coot).

We can not wait to go back again to learn more!

Image 11: Jennifer's Documentation of a Learning Experience

Creepy Crawlers

The Pre Primaries have shown an interest in finding creepy crawlers in the outside classroom. They have spent the last week collecting and releasing slugs, salamanders, centipedes and potato bugs while exploring the outside classroom. To find the creepy crawlers they have been rolling over rocks and old logs.



Learning Goals

Discovery and Invention: The Pre Primary's are developing curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and express wonder and interest in their environments. They are also developing a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesizing, researching and investigating while exploring their environment.

Language and Communication: The Pre Primary's are interacting verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes and contribute their ideas and experiences in play, small and large group discussions.

Personal and Social Responsibilities: The Pre Primary's are becoming environmentally aware and show respect for the environment and develop an awareness of the interdependence of living things. The PrePrimoy's have also demonstrated and showed respect for living things.

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The PPECEs' practices were consistently described as focused on the children's wonders and curiosities. The PPECEs' considerations of academic outcomes were limited, as discovery and problem-solving were the key aspects brought forward by the participants in terms of promoting inclusive learning spaces. Expanding on children's interests to generate opportunities for learning was mentioned by Lisa.

The children were really getting big into lava rock. When we were outside playing, the ice was the lava rock; the little pebbles were the lava rock. So, we built on that. We got plastic dinosaurs; dollar store eggs that grow. We watched videos on dinosaurs, we had stories about dinosaurs. We even built a volcano, because in our discussions, we talked about how volcanos were active the same time dinosaurs were on Earth. So, we made a volcano out of plaster of paris, with vinegar and baking soda to make it erupt. We made it erupt several times, even outside, so it could be a large one over the snow. We talked and explored about dinosaurs for months. They just wanted to continue doing it. (LIS-FG-A)

The PPECEs told of their practices preparing and offering selected invitations, and how they followed children's interests through facilitating individual agency and fostering a codependence, resulting in joint control over the learning agenda. The term "invitations" reflects the sacred story of practice in the early years framework, as it frames the offerings for planned learning made available within the learning environment as a choice for the child to engage with. It is evident through their stories of practice that there is joy experienced by the PPECEs, in their work to establish and facilitate learning experiences for the children through the invitations they prepare. The power appears more distributed in the creation of learning, as all participants have value and are heard, in the design of activities. This codependency further foregrounds

Noddings' (2012) components of care, as educators and children are dependent and engaged with one another throughout the exploration and learning process.

Agency of Play. The responsiveness described by PPECEs within their classrooms to support learning, is further substantiated in how they define and apply flexibility and adaptability as practices within their stories. For PPECEs, flexibility and adaptability in programming opens up possibilities. Hannah's journal revealed one unexpected situation.

We created a space for the children to create with cardboard. They have this keen interest in building and constructing right now. So naturally, we assumed this would be a creative large motor type of activity. We supplied lots of art materials and loose parts to go along with their work. Many children took that route right away. They created car garages, robot suits, cars, trains. They were eager to cut out arm holes, paint their creations and decorate them. However, I was surprised to see some children and small groups working together to fit boxes inside one another. They had turned this into a puzzle activity that required a different skill set and ways of thinking that we hadn't anticipated. It was very exciting. (HAN-J-2)

The excitement and eagerness Hannah displayed in response to the ways the children in her class approached the invitation, corroborated an approach to learning centred on valuing everyone's contributions and ideas, and honours individuality through the PPECEs' flexibility in accepting how the episode evolves.

For PPECEs, children's play was central to all learning within their classrooms. PPECEs detailed within both their secret and cover stories, how they created and structured learning opportunities, and invited the children to explore the opportunities, and how they worked to facilitate these experiences. Children's agency was respected through being provided multiple

chances to engage, without the assumption that the situation must be managed, exemplified in Hannah's boxes and loose parts example. The PPECEs described modes of using play to interact with the children for scaffolding their learning, beginning with the children's starting points, and then moving each child along at their own pace. Amy was able to further articulate this approach in her journal, as she revealed her cover story, as a professional using play as a tool for promoting learning.

Play is where we see their academic type of learning blossom, they experiment and practice academic skills all the time like science, math and literacy and my role is to ask, guide and question their exploration. Play is our context for learning. Children explore and discover, sometimes I support it and other times I let them go discover on their own or in groups without my guidance. (AMY-J-2)

For PPECEs, the sacred story of practice reflected in the Early Learning Framework they operate within, appears to have empowered them to follow children's interests first, and then link the learning back to the areas covered within the framework. The extent to which the PPECEs' stories of practice were receptive and open to the children, is established by Jennifer's description of a learning experience and Images 12 and 13.

We were having sewer issues here [at school]. Our kids were talking about toilets and how things get plugged. So, we made an area where they could dump water, and it would go into a pot, and they could put stuff in to plug it. So that was their toilet area, and they were trying to clog it. They would dump stuff in, and then it would be clogged up, so then they would try to unclog it. We were going off their interest, because every day the parents were saying, "Oh my gosh, my kid comes home saying the toilet broke again

today,” and they worked so hard in their toilet area plugging and unplugging their toilet clogs. (JEN-IN-1)

Image 12: Pre-Primary Child Exploring Jennifer’s Toilet Invitation.



Image 13: Three Children in Jennifer’s Pre-Primary



Although organic in the sense it emerged through the children's interest, there was a clear practical purpose to the station, as the ways children engaged in the activity offered PPECEs ways to advance and measure children's developmental growth. For the PPECEs, their confidence grew from their efforts and ability to prove their practices could meet the framework goals, that learning activities could be carried out in their own classrooms, and under shared and negotiated control with children. PPECEs revealed that they devoted considerable energy in their roles as an instructor and facilitator, to try and shape the learning experiences in their classrooms. The PPECEs' observations and disclosed practices, point to them experiencing power as being held internally, as they decided what the boundaries for learning would be. It was very clear that the influences of the sacred stories of practice were extremely prominent, in both the PPECEs' planning and implementation of learning activities.

Professional Connections and Boundaries

How multiple adults in a classroom related to each other, was a topic of conversation for the PPECEs during the PPECE focus group session and individual interviews. Lisa, Jennifer, Hannah, and Amy all commented on ways their relationships with the other PPECEs in their classrooms were collegial, caring, and collaborative. Yet, how they came to develop these relationships was not completely clear, as they suggested it occurred naturally through the amount of time they spent together, and their mutual, professional responsibility for creating an inclusive welcoming environment for all. Absent from this topic, were any secret stories of the nature of these collaborative relationships. The assumed natural, organic evolution of the collegial relationships in the Pre-Primary classrooms of the participants, may be based on the common beliefs shared around early childhood education, which are further advanced through strong philosophical position statements of the Pre-Primary program reinforced by professional

development opportunities. Professional development sessions attended by participants over the last five years, indicate there is a particular focus on building collaborative relationships, and enhancing communication skills within the profession, as workshop titles attended included: Mentoring Skills Series, Calming Strategies for Children and Staff, Building Collaborative Partnerships in the Early Years, and Creating a Learning Environment, which may also inform their stories of practice for how they come to position their expertise as collaborators in their PPECE role.

Aspects of Noddings' (2002) ethic of care resonate in the descriptions of PPECE collegial relationships, as they indicated opportunities for modelling caring relations, practicing caring, dialogue about thoughts and concerns, and confirming others' intentions within the classroom. Beyond the immediate collegial atmosphere, the collaborative relationships described by the PPECEs, impacted their approaches to supporting relationships with and among children. All PPECEs identified times where they sought opportunities to debrief with their co-workers about activities or interactions they had experienced during the day with the children, creating a reflective practice loop. An example of how the PPECEs' relationships with co-workers informed practice was explored by Lisa.

I can sometimes lose my cool, when children are being disrespectful and rude. One day, I got upset with a little boy. I felt I had not handled the situation as I should have. But that's where it's good; I have a good partner that I'm working with. I went to Lydia [other PPECE in the room] and we discussed what happened. I was disappointed in how I dealt with the situation. We all have different strengths and weaknesses that we bring to the table, when there is a situation or a discussion after. Lydia listened, and shared how

she had approached a similar situation. We talked some more, and then I had a new way of dealing with the little boy next time. (LIS-IN-2)

Although it is true that Lisa could have engaged in self-reflection of her interaction with the child in isolation, the value of having a co-worker that also interacts daily with the child provides opportunities for deeper analysis of practice, and ensures Lisa does not feel isolated in her role as a PPECE. The reflective practice loop described, exemplified an ethic of care in action, as the PPECEs were able to imagine and adjust their practices to ensure they were modelling care, and enacting it through their interactions, both with each other and with the children.

PPECEs identified cooperation as embedded in all their practices. Having multiple PPECEs in each classroom was credited by all participants, as providing opportunities for ongoing dialogues of practice in both formal and informal ways. Lisa further described how this impacted her practice on an ongoing basis.

On a daily basis, I'm communicating with peers. It's all the time. And it's people with like-minded education and practices, that is empowering in itself.... We are four personalities. We are not always on the same page, but we talk things out. It is nice to have someone to talk to, to brainstorm with, to get different opinions. As a group, we will often ask what do you think, how should we deal with this? We all bring something to those conversations. (LIS-IN-1)

A pattern of cooperation emerged as PPECEs recounted in their secret stories of practice, how informal collegial dialogue amongst their classroom team was frequently focused on supporting children's social-emotional development, programming concepts, and generating ideas for engaging with families and the community. As a result of the ongoing discussions and teamwork,

the PPECEs reported during their focus group session, how they feel the classroom environment becomes more inclusive for everyone. Hannah's statement substantiated this.

We're constantly saying "hey, hey, wait, I have an idea! What do you think about this?"

We always debrief after the day is finished too, and have a hangouts group for anything we think of during the night. We always know what we are walking into that day. We are all on the same page, and that's what makes it work so well. (HAN-FG-A)

The professional interdependence Hannah describes as a key element to their collaboration, aligns with an ethic of care in practice as the PPECEs seek to be responsive to the needs of their team, which contributes to a feedback loop where the actions of each person in the association shapes and reshapes others' actions. Furthermore, the supportive nature of the interactions and collaborations described by the PPECEs, helps to increase feelings of self-worth for each of the participants through the reciprocity of care.

PPECEs described a variety of collaborative opportunities beyond the other PPECEs in their classrooms, that furthered their practice as well. The PPECEs described how external support agencies, like Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention (EIBI) focused on providing intervention to targeted children with autism, often entered their classrooms for professional discussions and feedback were always welcomed. Although COVID restrictions had limited some of the inter-agency collaboration, the PPECEs all conveyed how much they enjoyed these interactions, and looked forward to their return once COVID restrictions eased. Jennifer summarized the approach.

I love to have people come in, observe, or interact with the group. I love to have ideas from other people, from other lenses on supporting children, like EIBI. Making those

connections with others that are working with the child are important. It's really nice to have those connections. (JEN-FG-PP)

The collective acknowledgement by the PPECEs of the value of additional professional contributions, and the need to expand collaborations to a diverse array of professionals, demonstrates their ethic of care in practice. They are seeing their relationships and role in a web of other relations and associations, and they are empowered to make collaborations happen while being receptive to suggestions for shifts in their practice, in order to be more responsive to children and enhance inclusive practices. The collective approach described, may be a result of the nature of the implementation of the Pre-Primary program, and how access to specialized professionals like psychologists, speech-language pathologists, or intervention support workers, is from the community, not through the regional education centre staff. As such, PPECEs are not directly competing for resources, attention, or funding with external collaborators. Additionally, external service providers enter the Pre-Primary space as accepted members of a child's team, and access to the services has already been approved, and is not dependent on PPECEs' identification or a referral process. The scope of what constitutes PPECEs role within the Pre-Primary program is more flexible, and as such, they are able to be responsive to the other professionals' ideas, enabling further collaboration. PPECEs described the reciprocal and interdependent ways they worked with various outside agencies, to positively impact development of their practice and the children in their classroom.

Silence and Missed Opportunities. One group however, PPECEs felt were often absent from collaborative discussions, were the PTs in their building. All four PPECEs expressed a desire for conversations and discussions throughout the year with the Primary educators. Lisa stated,

I don't know, maybe because they've [schoolteachers] done it their way so long, and the Pre-Primary program has only been around for what five, or six years, but I would think after a while, the Primary teachers would want to know about us more. They see these children coming from Pre-Primary, coming into their classrooms, and seeing how curious they are, how they relate to nature and things like that. You would think they would ask more questions or want to know what's going on in our classrooms. (LIS-FG-PP)

The identified lack of collaboration with the PTs all PPECEs expressed, potentially indicated the degree to which they have not been accepted into the school community as professionals with expertise. PPECEs described the experiences of co-locating Pre-Primary classrooms in public school buildings as having varied results. Amy and Hannah both noted there was a great deal of mistrust and resentment amongst school staff, directed at the PPECEs, that has not diminished over their time in the school building, while both Jennifer and Lisa acknowledged the start of the program was challenging but now their program is mostly accepted as part of the school community in very general ways. All PPECEs noted they have positive individual social relationships within their buildings with all school staff members, but these have not resulted in being recognized as a peer within structures of the public education system. Amy further explained this situation in her journal.

[...] we are not even on the school website. It has been pointed out to us before. New parents and agencies have had a difficult time getting in contact with us for this reason and have asked us why. We don't know the answer. I can only assume it is because the school thinks of us as separate—which in some ways we are. We are involved in some school activities. Some teachers involve us in their activities, but others don't. For example, we were not included in field day last year and that was a hard one. The notice

had gone out and then we had to explain to our families why we were not invited. We planned our own special event to soften the blow and make ourselves feel better. Overall, we are still being met with resistance by some staff. (AMY-J-3)

The differences in programming approaches were emphasized by the PPECEs, as they expressed frustration with how the Primary program had not changed in recognition of the Pre-Primary learning of the children entering. As Lisa explained:

We give them a different foundation, and once they go into the school system, that foundation changes. I think some of the creativity and some of their experiences are forgotten about by the teachers. They are forced to learn how to learn in a different way, like through paperwork and desk work. I think Primary should be more like our program. It's almost like taking a band-aid off, maybe that's not the greatest analogy because it's not fixing something, but it's like they just do it so fast, and it's just so, boom! There is not a whole transition to work tasks in a structured setting, it's like here's Pre-Primary, where everything is great and directed through your interests. Boom! Sit in this desk, and that's how life is going to be now for the next 13 years. I know Primary sometimes looks a bit different; they have asked for sand tables and sensory things, but I walk by their artwork in the hall, and it's always the same. Everybody is making the same thing, the same way. It must be such a huge change for the children. (LIS-FG-PP)

Lisa's story of the substantial change in demands between Pre-Primary and Primary, further indicates a discontinuity in how PPECEs anticipate future care of the children in their classroom community. For the PPECEs, through an ethic of care, they are concerned with preparing the children for later, and are committed to the children, but know that the cultural constructs of what being "ready" will be, are going to shift. The shift from "ready" for learning being based on

the child's own journey and their interdependence with others, to their individual progress and independence, is a challenge for the PPECEs, and demonstrates their concern for the long-term well-being and lifelong learning of the children.

The discontinuity of practice identified by the PPECEs, may also be impacting the degree conversations between PPECEs and PTs are restricted, as power dynamics of authority for what constitutes learning emerge. These discussions are furthermore challenged as the PPECEs have entered, and are still viewed as outsiders, in buildings inhabited by PTs for a century, as part of the educational system. The complex nature of the education requirements between the two groups, and the role of the types of background knowledge the two groups possess, with the PPECEs having more focused education and background in early learning and development, may further threaten or jeopardized collaboration, as the two groups approach learning and their roles as educators with a different lens. The tensions that emerged because of these differences, further impact the degree the PTs and PPECEs formed informal and formal collaborative relationships.

Summary

The data generated by participant interviews, focus groups, and journal entries, along with offered artifacts, contributed to the emergence of three themes regarding how participants enact an ethic of care in inclusive early learning spaces. PTs and PPECEs shared, they valued relationships with children, promoted learning, and explored professional connections and boundaries. Woven across themes, participants' conversations also highlighted elements of power, and commitment to personal and institutional philosophies, which influenced the practices and understandings that informed early educators' ethic of care in practice.

Establishing a sense of safety and belonging for all children was a focus for all early educators, however, what this meant varied between PTs and PPECEs. The individual

relationships between the PTs and children were central to discussions, with a focus on the ways PTs took charge to foster and maintain these connections. For PPECEs, aspects of unequal power relations were also present as they sought to establish themselves as a trusted adult, yet, there was an acknowledgement of children's self-agency in developing connections, along with a focus on the interrelationships between all, as PPECEs acknowledged children's choice in connecting with each PPECE or the other children in the classroom.

PTs' and PPECEs' orientations for learning, significantly impacted both the development and assessment of learning experiences for children. For PTs, learning outcomes dominated planning decisions, and impacted how PTs approached and evaluated children as learners, with expectations for development echoing a readiness discourse. Expectations of what should be learned and how, impacted the ways PTs explained their practice, and highlighted the power of the system as the Primary year unfolds. PTs all shared ways they both accepted and struggled with making instructional decisions throughout the academic year, as they endeavoured to balance academics with the social-emotional aspects of learning. In contrast, PPECEs viewed all children as ready to learn, and they explored how they provide invitations for the children to explore their environment, and celebrate the discoveries made through play. Although more flexibility was detected in the PPECEs' narratives of learning experiences, there was still evidence of how the Early Learning Framework influenced their decisions for offering certain learning experiences over others. The PPECEs drew on socio-cultural understandings of learning to justify their practices, and appeared confident with their teaching practices (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogoff, 1995). An example of this type of understanding was evident as Lisa explained:

Everything in this room matters. We are all learning, all the time. I need to listen when the children speak. They have so much to offer the group. I am a support for their

learning. I will never be the director of it. The framework really reinforces this; it is all about me, as the ECE, offering options and the children choosing how they respond to it or not. Forcing learning just won't work, and it violates the children. It takes away their autonomy. I know they will learn and grow, and that I will help this happen. (LIS-FG-A)

The final theme which emerged from the data was the notion of professional collaboration and boundaries. PPECEs described ongoing dialogue with the other PPECEs assigned to their classroom throughout the day, and in more formal ways in discussions after school hours, to support reflection as cornerstones of their practice. The PTs, in contrast, described the limited impactful collaboration they experienced as the difference in grade levels of teachers in the building, others' knowledge of the children in their classrooms, and formalities of the processes for TST and CLT, hindered the responsiveness and quality of connections they had available. Although PPECEs noted the potential for PTs to engage in connections and collaborations with them, they felt there was resistance as their belonging and acceptance was still precarious within the system, and they felt they were not acknowledged as a colleague to the teachers. PTs in many ways, confirmed that they felt their Pre-Primary counterparts were not equals in supporting learning as they voiced concern the program was not beneficial in developing the children they received in the right way, and therefore, they did not see the need to involve the PPECEs in professional practice conversations.

Through examining the data generated in this chapter, I have gained a greater understanding of my own experiences as an early educator and as a parent, who braced for impact as my child entered formal schooling. To further develop meaning related to the findings and the interconnection of the themes, the following chapter will consider the discoveries within the context of the literature identified in Chapter 2, and my experiences in Chapter 1.

Chapter 5: Implications and Conclusions

There is relatively limited research exploring early learning educators' ethic of care in inclusive classrooms, compared to the more dominant discourses focused on educator-led interventions or aspects of child-centred readiness. This study focused on addressing the gap that exists, in terms of understanding care as a professional practice when engaging with children in inclusive learning environments. Through a critical ethic of care, the interconnections between care and education are recognized, enabling a broad, holistic conception of learning (Gibbons, 2007). To understand how these participant educators make meaning of, and enact an ethic of care within their professional practices, a narrative inquiry was undertaken. As part of the narrative inquiry, I reviewed the participants' stories and labelled the stories as "sacred," (institutional), 'cover, (mediated) and 'secret,' (lived) to help illustrate the complexities of navigating professional practices within two early learning settings (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). Now, at the conclusion of this study, I recommend several areas for further investigation, and preliminary touchpoints for action, in relation to further enhancing early educators' ethic of care in inclusive learning environments. The findings provide insights into the systemic factors across three critical aspects, including readiness narratives, transition practices, and collaborative connections, which could lead to advancing practices and continuity between the early education system and the formal school system. As I used a qualitative design, I was able to "go deep" with understanding and describing the phenomena of PPECEs' and PTs' ethic of care, but caution that the conclusions and implications that follow are tentative and not generalizable, as that was not the goal of the study.

To begin, social constructivists define inclusion as being ongoing, and occurring in classrooms where all children belong and are valued members. Furthermore, the role of the

educator in an inclusive classroom is defined as, facilitating and providing an environment that is appropriate for each child (Kunc, 1992; Leatherman, 2007). As a social constructivist, I promote the belief that all children can participate in their own learning, given both instructional and social opportunities, and that these experiences can be provided through a classroom community with all peers and educators equally engaged. This position regarding inclusion aligns with the theoretical aspects of Nova Scotia's inclusive education policy, evident in the three key actions of educators emphasized within it: validate, affirm, and nurture (NSDEECD, 2019c). The ways early learning educators make meaning of and enact an ethic of care, informs their teaching practices, and establishes their inclusive lens. I believe inclusion occurs when educators create an environment which enables all children to participate meaningfully, and engage in their own learning through whatever means necessary to achieve personal growth. Within the current formal school system however, the actualization of inclusive practices by educators becomes challenging, as discourses for what is inclusive contradict many practices promoted by the NSDEECD and the regional centre for education. These contradictions lead to confusion and challenges in how care is actualized by PPECEs and PTs, as they attempt to create and maintain an inclusive learning environment.

Readiness and the Caring Educator

Building on the discussion of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 centering on child developmental theories and their influence on teaching practices, the first major factor that impacted how early educators in this study came to make meaning of and enact an ethic of care in practice emerged in how a "school readiness" discourse was taken up, or was absent within each respective system. The concept of "school readiness" emerges from a maturational perspective, with a focus on children's readiness for learning and completing tasks (APA, 2020).

Evidence from the findings suggests, that both PTs and children in Primary classrooms are positioned within a “school readiness” agenda through the sacred stories advanced by the formal educational system. Elements of a school readiness agenda embedded within the Primary program include, the predetermined set of expectations for children’s academic learning entrenched in the Primary curriculum outcomes, along with the “hidden” curriculum of Primary, found within the discussions of the PTs around their expectations for children’s social-emotional skills, especially around children’s ability to self-regulate and express emotions (Jackson, 1968).

School readiness, as explored by the PTs, appeared to be deterministic and instrumental, with a focus on a deficit lens, as the children were often referenced, based on needing prerequisites cognitively, socially, and behaviourally, to be fully accepted within the learning community. This framing of school readiness aligns the sacred story within the education system, on a need for perquisites to ensure early success, often supported through developmental theories of learning that permeate formal school policies, and have been the leading way PTs have received professional development around program planning (Arthur et al., 2008). The need to measure school readiness is evident, as the formal school program has mechanisms in place for PTs to monitor and address children’s potential deviations as early as possible through MTSS, and then act to “fix” development (APA, 2020).

Like the findings of Kay (2022) the “school readiness” discourse present in the formal school setting informed the professional practices of the PTs, as they described their decisions for planning academics to ensure children met predetermined outcomes, and how deficit views were manifested when children could not meet a standardized norm. These findings echo Rouse et al.’s (2023) and Whyte & Coburn’s (2022) conclusions, that early school educators have an individual child-centric focus on what it means to be school ready. The impact of both the school

readiness discourse and the consequential deficit view of children's development upon entering school, shaped how care was expressed within the classroom by PTs. PTs framed their caring practices around providing time for children to progress through the outcomes, along with providing the "right" interventions and supports to advance each child's development, to get them 'back on track' for learning, as expected. These aspects of care were evident in the secret stories shared by PTs of advocating at TST, or providing small group reinforcement after a group lesson.

Secret stories of practice, also revealed PTs sometimes struggled with teaching to the curriculum, as they identified ways their informed connections with the children had the potential to shape the learning opportunities they could offer. Yet, these were deemed risky, and were often limited due to the systemic expectations for teacher-directed and outcome-focused learning. The need to stay on track and teach the curriculum in teacher-centred ways, was central in PTs' discussions to maintain their professional status, and demonstrate their care for the children in their class.

Care for children in Primary classrooms by early learning educators was further explored by participant PTs, as they described their central role in developing relationships with children. For the PTs, relationships with each individual child were significant, and the ways they attempted to foster these were entrenched within a power dynamic fueled by sacred stories of teacher's roles and duties as an authority. PTs described instrumental ways relationships were used, as getting to know the children was considered the best way to advance children's learning. The need for PTs to follow the curriculum as communicated in their stories may raise the likelihood of having the lived experiences of the children marginalized or ignored so that predetermined learning outcomes are the focus of children's time in school. This limited

validation of prior learning was an area that PTs identified in their ‘secret’ stories as struggling with, as through their ethic of care they felt recognizing and celebrating every child was important but the curricular demands forced them to conform and meet systemic expectations. As a result, there was no examination by the PTs of systemic ways a school needed to be more ready for the children entering. The absence of a ‘ready’ school discourse potentially reflects a uni-directional way of thinking about the transition period to school within the ‘*sacred*’ story. ‘*Cover*’ and ‘*secret*’ stories of practices shared during data generation were focused exclusively on individual children’s readiness to enter and progress through the first year of formal school and beyond which contrasts foundationally with the premise of inclusive education.

To actualize inclusive practices, policy shifts should focus on system readiness, rather than on the readiness each individual child brings to school. This was an area that was relatively absent from discussions during the data generation, as PTs focused on sharing their experiences and understandings of readiness as being directly related to the child, and their preparation for the school system (Curtis & Simons, 2008). Primary classrooms, along with the entire school system must begin to adapt to “the diverse learning requirements of children, rather than the demanding pre-specified academic and skills” (Petriwskyj, 2010, p. 3) in order to support all learners in ways that are responsive and supportive right from the start. There is potential for a shift in the ‘sacred’ narrative as the new Inclusive Education policy emphasizes the need for educators to validate, affirm and nurture children, aspects that were reflected in PTs secret stories of practices. The sacred narrative, however, has not reached the classroom level (the PTs and other educators) in ways that are actionable, as the stronger messages of accountability and performance have limited the uptake of discussion and professional development in this area. Additionally, the greater socio-cultural pressure to “fix” children, is a narrative that is hard to

break, and has been deeply entrenched in ways PTs have been initiated into the system, and reinforced in the ways that structures are established, including TST and MTSS.

Findings indicate that the concept of “school readiness” was not addressed by the PPECEs through the traditional maturational lens, instead, they spoke of children being ‘ready to learn’ in ways that embraced the diverse knowledge the children brought to their setting, and the children’s active participation in the process. This approach to readiness reflects a social constructivist lens to learning, rooted in providing explorational opportunities, and promoting deeper understandings at each child’s own pace (Vygotsky, 1978). PPECE participants spoke of a “ready to learn” discourse within the Pre-Primary program that was child centred, and echoed the infant school model explored in Chapter 2 (Varga, 2000a). They also described facilitating opportunities and diversifying experiences in ways that were responsive and open to the children, but still could be used by PPECEs to determine what learning had occurred. For PPECEs enacting care meant getting to know the children and fostering classroom community first, and then providing learning experiences rooted in their understanding of the interests of the individual and group second. Instrumental elements within practice to achieve a particular end still emerged as they described the need to demonstrate the learning through documentation, and linking the experiences back to their guiding framework. The degree they established learning invitations based on the framework was not clear, as within their own stories, they shared that it was easy to link back to the document, and they did not acknowledge the ways the framework may have impacted what activities or materials were available to support learning experiences in their classrooms. It was evident during classroom visits, that the rooms were supplied to reflect the sacred stories being promoted within the framework as play-based, and culturally relevant materials were readily present throughout the classroom spaces to foster inquiry and play.

PPECEs enacting an ethic of care was not separate from teaching, however, there appeared to be more flexibility in how the children's learning outcomes were assessed with less rigid definitions of achievement or focus on measuring and reporting these. Monitoring for deficits did not appear to be a primary focus within the Pre-Primary program, although there were a few examples of how referrals for developmental services were initiated by the PPECE. Rather, socio-cultural understandings of child development and the actualization of inclusive practices, through accepting children for where they are in their learning journey and their own growth and progression, were emphasized as their cover stories of practice. Through the secret stories shared, it was noted that PPECEs did monitor and make referrals when they believed there were developmental concerns, an aspect of their practice which might highlight how they are also feeling the need to identify and provide interventional opportunities to children, prior to their entering formal schooling, as part of their actualization of care.

The lack of consistency in how children are supported with their learning as they transition to formal schooling, is of relevance to how PPECEs and PTs make meaning and enact an ethic of care in their inclusive classrooms. The findings of this research draw attention to the need for clarity between "school readiness" and 'readiness to learn' at a systemic level. Bingham and Whitebread (2012) posit that, "the disagreement about terminology and definition encapsulates a fundamental difference in the conception of the purpose of 'early years education' as there is no clear agreement as to what children are being prepared for" (p. 4). The conflicting models of preparing for the next expectation versus preparing to learn, are supported by findings of this research, as misalignments in understanding child development result in different approaches for planning and designing learning experiences for young children, which further impact the ways the children experience their learning environments.

Going Beyond Entering School, the Potential of Transition Practices

The concept of school readiness extends further as it informs how transitional practices between Pre-Primary and Primary programs emerge. The findings of this research reveal pedagogical discontinuity between the two early learning programs, which makes transition practices a significant point of tension. The tension can be attributed to a range of factors informed by the normative culture of the school system, including policies and the educational background of the early educators within each setting. The disjointedness between the practices employed in each program was recognized by all educators. However, the participants each deemed the other program as needing to shift their approaches to support children during the transition process, rather than considering the ways their program could shift or become more responsive. The identified tension between the two programs has a significant impact on how early learning educators come to make meaning of, and enact an ethic of care, as each group promotes their practices as being impactful, and does not appreciate the potential of a different or collaborative approach to supporting transition experiences for children as they enter formal schooling.

PPECEs focused extensively on how the transition to formal schooling took away elements deemed as essential to early development within their Early Learning Framework for Pre-Primary, including the centrality of play as a mechanism for learning, along with frequent opportunities for children to express creativity, as well as having learning experiences which align with children's interests. Although critical of the children's experiences entering Primary, the PPECEs did not explore how the Pre-Primary program could help to support the children in having a successful transition. This might reflect a sacred story of the Pre-Primary program as defining itself as not being part of the formal school system or it might be the case that as I did

not ask for the information the participants did not think about mentioning it. A potential resistance of participants toward shifting their practices, might be a result of concerns that doing so might result in the “schoolification” of the Pre-Primary program. “Schoolification” occurs within early learning when there is,

[...] an emphasis on the acquisition of specific pre-academic skills and knowledge transfer by the adult, rather than a focus on broad development[al] goals, such as social-emotional well-being, and the gaining of understanding and knowledge by the child through direct experience and experimentation (Doherty, 2007, p. 7).

‘Schoolification’ translates into play-based learning being set aside for more formal schooling techniques so that children enter the school system are ‘ready’ for primary. The concern expressed by the PPECEs for the children’s well-being demonstrates their genuine interest and care for them, but falls short of impacting their practices, as the risk of school mandates and expectations infiltrating their practices was deemed too high.

PTs spoke of the importance of children following basic expectations, such as staying with a group or raising their hands to speak, skills they believed PPECEs did not address, and therefore leaving the children “unready” for their classrooms. There was no mention by the PTs, on the ways the PPECEs fostered the children’s growth with independence and self-agency through Pre-Primary’s approach to respecting children’s choices and I did not ask if they had thoughts on this. Their responses did indicate a resentment of a seeming lack of supporting children’s conforming and performing to school-based expectations within the Pre-Primary space. This might reflect the greater latitude PPECEs were viewed as having in terms of what they could engage in for learning experiences, less accountability to report on learning, lower

teacher-student ratios and an adequate budget to purchase materials to support learning. These were elements PTs believed were needed in Primary, but were not available.

Although all participants identified that the two learning environments were drastically different in pedagogies and experiences, there was hesitancy in sharing from all PPECEs and PTs regarding how they came to support the children as they prepared for and went through, the transition to formal schooling, resulting in the onus being placed on children to adapt to the new context and conditions for learning. Noel (2011) noted that the transition to formal school is often a major adjustment for children as their environment and expectations drastically change. The degree of discontinuity identified between the Pre-Primary and Primary programs appears to be left to the child and their family to navigate on their own as both PPECEs and PTs focused their responses solely on how their program operated and the ways the other program did not meet their expectations for supporting the transition.

To enhance transition practices that meet a critical ethic of care there is a need for early learning educators and the systems they work within to develop a clear appreciation and respect for the distinctive approaches for fostering development in children across Pre-Primary and Primary. As well, valuing and recognizing what children have previously experienced over what will come next, is essential to shifting the tension that emerged in the findings between the two programs (McDowall-Clark, 2017; Nutbrown et al., 2005). Appreciating all early learning as a journey in which the transition is ongoing rather than as definitive and marked by an entry to a new learning space could be important for helping to frame transition practices across the two types of programs. As the two programs operate in relative isolation from each other, the difference in teaching practices and classroom pedagogies makes the transition between them

potentially difficult for children to navigate without ongoing support. Further investigation into strategies to support collaborative connections between early educators should be a priority.

Building Bridges Between Established Islands of Early Learning

The impact of different policies, regulations, and professional requirements between Pre-Primary and Primary translates into boundaries between the two programs and the educators working within each one, which was consistently reflected in the stories shared by the participants and aligns with recent research including Dockett & Perry (2021) and Nolan & al. (2021).

Differences in the programs as explored by the participants included pedagogical approaches and philosophies of pedagogy. Each participant group shared stories that reflected apprehension about how the other group defined and established learning environments. These differences are highlighted in the ways PPECEs were troubled by the lack of child-initiated learning experiences and opportunities for play in Primary, and PTs were concerned about the lack of focus within Pre-Primary on preparing children for the routines or rituals of school. These contrasts in what are prioritized as essential learning for children are not surprising considering the distinct pathways for achieving recognition in each profession and how learning and child development are understood within the two separate programs. This foundational conflict highlights an emerging power struggle as sharing of authority for what is considered appropriate pedagogy was evident as a concern from all participants in the study.

The focus of the PTs' pre-service university education on understanding curriculum subjects and developing instructional strategies further formulates a sacred story of PTs and schoolteachers, in general, as having authority and specialization in facilitating children's learning. The PTs' focus on content learning within the curriculum and explicitly teaching behavioural expectations further reflects the sacred story of the institution of formal school, and

promotes their role as an authority within the system, as they are trained to assess children's learning in subject areas.

In contrast, with the educational pathways of PPECEs focusing on child development over curriculum content, PPECEs' practice counters the sacred story of schools as it promotes fostering responsive learning experiences. PPECEs' diverse entry points to their profession (university, community college, in-service examination) can further perpetuate their having less status as a professional or expert in the school system as these forms of credentialing do not align with the standard Bachelor of Education degree required of public school teachers. This difference in perceived professional status is evident in policy and practices of the formal education system as PPECEs are excluded from the Teaching Support Team (an aspect of program planning for supporting requests related to supporting teachers and children identified by the teacher) and Student Success Planning (school improvement planning focusing on advancing literacy, numeracy and well-being) sessions. PPECEs lower professional status is also reflected in the PT's rejection of the information shared by PPECEs regarding children preparing to enter Primary, and in their dismissal of the children's learning experiences that were offered by PPECEs.

Further research into how perceived professional status might impact collaborative relationships between the PPECEs and PTs should be undertaken to confirm if this occurs more widely. The potential of finding or establishing commonalities between early educator pre-service programs, along with aligning elements of in-service professional development sessions, may help to alleviate some inter-professional tensions. A power dynamic has been perpetuated by a formal school system that prioritizes Bachelor of Education credentials as a requirement for educators to have authority within the system. Shared learning opportunities may help to counter

this uneven distribution of power by increasing familiarity with theories and approaches used between the two programs.

The findings of this research indicate that it is rare for PPECEs and PTs to professionally collaborate. This limited contact can further perpetuate the status quo in practices for both programs, and can create misunderstandings between PTs and PPECEs around expectations for school readiness and play-based learning experiences, something that further impacts how care is realized by early educators (Noel, 2011). Through the stories of experience shared, it was evident that participants in each group see the other as part of the problem when it comes to creating the optimum learning experiences for children.

To reduce the dissonance between programs, it is necessary to begin to create the conditions for building connections between the PPECEs and all school staff, in particular, the PTs. To begin this process, I encourage system leaders to increase efforts to build collaborative relationships between PTs and PPECEs in strategic and intentional ways. Findings from this study indicate there is little systemic push for collegial relationships to be fostered, and opportunities for these to naturally happen are restricted.

Boundaries with PPECEs may have emerged for PTs, because of how Pre-Primary entered the formal school space often causing the relocation of Primary classrooms to less desired locations, and with the Pre-Primary program receiving what was perceived by PTs as unlimited resources and budgets. This supposed 'have/have not' contrast in funding continued in the stories of the PTs throughout data generation. As a result, PTs might view the Pre-Primary program (and therefore PPECEs) as having more power (as a threat to their power as experts of early education in the school building) due to the greater resources to promote learning gained through targeted funding. Access to materials was an area identified as an obstacle to their

practices in the stories shared by PTs as they attempted to navigate providing children with hands-on learning experiences.

To achieve collaborative relationships between PPECEs and PTs, policies and practices at a systemic level must also be examined, as PTs indicated some Pre-Primary policies further hindered collaboration. For example, as earlier mentioned PPECEs cannot discuss children or their current approaches with school personnel without parental consent. This barrier was noted as a source of frustration for all the PT participants. Similarly, the Pre-Primary policy also mentions the requirement for a PPECE to always be present when formal school staff are around a child enrolled in Pre-Primary, creating an interpretation that the formal school educators cannot be trusted to care for and protect young children. These examples highlight how institutional policies and practices can perpetuate boundaries and professional mistrust and provoke a possible division between early educators within a school.

Beyond policies, goodwill, and mutual respect between programs and the individuals working in each need to be established. One way to begin this process could be through offering ongoing joint professional development, and cooperative conversations facilitated by system leaders from both programs. These opportunities furthermore must not be “one offs,” encounters but rather, offered both at the regional and school level on an ongoing basis during regular working hours, to ensure full participation of PPECEs and PTs. To help to facilitate relationships that are collaborative, it may be beneficial to begin by exploring topics that both groups have identified as being important to their practice. An entry point could be exploring ways in which both programs value building relationships with children, and their desire to increase parental engagement. Through these discussions, facilitators can frame conversations to promote and reinforce the stance that all early educators have professional status and knowledge, while also

highlighting where discontinuities may exist, and how they all might address these aspects within their practices, so that all children are supported in the most inclusive ways (Hugo et al, 2018). Extending further in practices to support collaboration, Boyle and Grieshaber (2013) encourage the development of joint initiatives to enable the sharing of pedagogies and classroom practices between early educators. Joint initiatives around play-based learning as a transition practice and curriculum tool in Primary may help to address some of the discontinuities between Pre-Primary and Primary and support more inclusive approaches to learning during the Primary year. Although a starting point for building joint initiatives these aspects will need further refinement to ensure a true sharing agenda is created that leads to changes in understandings and practices for all early educators.

Cultivating relationships and connections between PPECEs and PTs would be an important first step, but for full collaboration to be actualized, further structural and educational changes will also need to be investigated and potentially addressed. Preliminary bureaucratic structural changes have begun between the formal school system and early childhood education. In the fall of 2022, it was quietly announced by NSDEECD senior bureaucrats to senior regional administrators in the school system that the Pre-Primary program was “lifted and shifted” from NSDEECD’s early years branch to its education division (A. Gladwin, personal correspondence, May 25, 2023; D. Dodge-Baker, personal correspondence, May 25, 2023). Although to date, this has not impacted the programming and philosophies of Pre-Primary or Primary, it does set the stage for potential revisions to Pre-Primary, as the program’s funding and oversight will now rest with school system bureaucrats that also oversee Primary. However, this shift might increase the risk of “schoolification” of Pre-Primary, as the formal school system with its powerful discourse and policy, will now be overseeing the implementation and actualization of the early years

framework in Pre-Primary. This could result in PPECEs being further devalued because mandates to increase children's early literacy and numeracy assessment scores, could jeopardize the types of learning experiences and environments PPECEs establish. PPECEs' already limited professional status may be at further risk, if their understandings of how early learning occurs are discredited, as accepted formal schooling practices do not fully align with the current PPECEs' ones. These aspects may negatively impact work to foster and build bridges with PTs, emphasizing the need for both research and practices related to cultivating connections and shared understandings essential going forward.

Although there are potential risks with the recent "lift and shift" of Pre-Primary, this change may also hold potential for further opportunities for collaboration and advocacy of early childhood practices across early elementary grades. If early childhood advocates and professionals are included in discussions at the bureaucratic levels of the NSDEECD, there is an opportunity for changes in policies and practices to reflect and incorporate aspects of the early years framework across early elementary. This shift may bring new expertise to the discussions regarding play-based learning in Primary, and support the rollout of professional development sessions for PTs on how to integrate such practices consistently and meaningfully. Additionally, as the Pre-Primary program integrates further into the NSDEECD's education division, the ways the PPECEs are incorporated into the school staff may also shift to include their presence and voice as professionals in the system at staff meetings, collaborative learning times, and other professional development sessions. Further, as all educators in a school building will be affiliated with the same bureaucratic system, policies which created some of the boundaries to collaboration might be eliminated.

Educational changes that enable the incorporation of early childhood education practices as accepted and promoted instructional strategies to support young learners within the formal school system, should also be investigated to enhance the quality and frequency of collaboration between PPECEs and PTs. All PTs shared ways they experienced challenges connecting with the number of children in the classroom in meaningful ways throughout the day along with creating diverse learning experiences to be responsive to each child. The PTs shared that the current ratio of children to adults in Primary classrooms is upwards of 25:1 after September 30th in any given school year and this directly affects how they can actualize an ethic of care, potentially contributing to resentment toward PPECEs with reduced ratios in comparison. To help address this, further investigation might include a study of the child-educator ratios of the two learning environments and an examination of how ratios might influence the quality and depth of connection between children and their early educators.

The role of rurality throughout the research process cannot be ignored and additional investigations of how inclusive practices are actualized in this context is important to further explore especially with a focus on early learning environments. This research has highlighted the need for further investigations that explore how inclusion in rural areas is understood and actualized in early learning practices and how early educators come to develop networks and connections to support their inclusive practices.

Limitations

Various limitations exist in the context of this study. First, in this narrative inquiry, I aimed to share the stories of participants. However, in sharing these stories, I entered the research knowing I could not fully share all aspects of participants' stories. Rather, I presented in this study, my analysis of participants' stories. My researcher position, with my own experiences

in the formal educational system as an educator, certainly had an impact on my analysis (as described in Chapter 3).

As the participants were limited to one rural regional centre for education in Nova Scotia, and representative sampling was not completed the findings cannot be generalized. The present study was limited to 3 PTs and 4 PPECEs as participants, all were female, cisgendered, White early educators, the findings might have been different with the inclusion of males, nonbinary and other races/ethnicities that included Indigenous and Persons of Colour. The ways an educator's ethic of care is actualized and expressed might be related to cultural and socioeconomic background and this lack of diversity may have limited what we can learn from this study. Additionally, given the voluntary nature of the recruitment process, the participants may have had a higher interest in creating inclusive learning spaces and supporting transitions between the two programs. Because of this, their level of interest in the topic may not reflect more general practices of all early educators.

Having a small number of participants, allowed me to engage in an in-depth exploration of a range of experiences, and gain a solid understanding of the phenomenon. The seven participants supported thematic saturation and identification of consistent patterns. Future studies could possibly benefit from a larger number of participants from more diverse or broader geographic areas, genders, and ethnicities. I considered recruiting more participants to the study, however, given the extensive data that is generated in qualitative research of this type, it was important for me to maintain an elevated level of quality, and manage various logistics for this time-limited, non-funded study. In the future, a larger study with more diverse participants could enable a more complex picture, possibly revealing provincial or national trends around providing inclusive educational experiences through an ethic of care framework.

In addition to studying early educators, additional stakeholders (administrators, parents, children) could be interviewed about their experiences. It may be worthwhile to examine leadership training for administrators of Pre-Primary and Primary programs to determine if their training shapes how their ethic of care is realized as a leader in inclusive programs, and the impact of this on the early educators as they work to realize inclusive practices. Finally, future research could explore changes to early educators' pre-service and in-service professional development, to explore how to better equip early educators in creating an inclusive learning environment through an ethic of care.

The impact of COVID-19 and the disruption to the educational system in Nova Scotia may have directly impacted the stories and practices shared by the early educators. The Nova Scotia Back to School Plan was in full effect the academic year prior to data generation, and aspects of the plan continued throughout the study period. The threats of a return to at-home learning and increased restrictions in how early educators established their physical spaces and learning experiences, were present throughout the study and may have shaped the stories and experiences shared by the participants about their ethic of care. In some cases, educators shared stories of pre-COVID practices to highlight their experiences as they could not draw upon their current situations due to ongoing restrictions limiting their practices.

Conclusion

The analysis of the data generated by this narrative inquiry into how PPECEs and PTs make meaning of, and enact an ethic of care in inclusive learning environments, indicates that early learning educators consistently display a strong ethic of care for children in their classrooms. Care was defined by PPECEs and PTs, as they discussed their need for building relationships with children, and promoting learning within the context of professional boundaries

and connections. Differences in how PTs and PPECEs defined and actualized care through the stories shared, impacted their approaches and understandings of what constitutes learning, and being an inclusive educator. Throughout the themes explored, care was not neutral, as aspects of power surfaced and reverberated throughout the themes, and impacted how participants made decisions regarding learning and inclusive practices within the Pre-Primary and Primary classrooms.

Support for early educators in both the Pre-Primary and Primary programs, to ensure inclusive practices across both areas, should address problematic aspects of school readiness as a discourse and the transition process to formal school from Pre-Primary. The promotion of collaboration between PPECEs and PTs must be central to the changes in policies and practices at both school and system levels. It is my hope that the findings of this study will inform the foundation for change in early learning environments in both the Pre-Primary and Primary contexts, and help to justify a necessary shift in practices to support all early learners.

Last Thoughts

It is hard to believe this doctoral journey is coming to an end. By engaging in this research, I have been able to make sense of my own experiences as an early educator related to inclusive practices, by placing them alongside the experiences of others. This study has provided me with some answers to questions posed prior to entering the doctoral program, while new questions have emerged to fill the void. Ultimately, this work has been a much needed opportunity during particularly challenging times as an educator and parent, as the world (and the school system in Nova Scotia) paused for COVID and reemerged changed in many ways.

With the many uncertainties facing educators as we enter the post-pandemic era, it has been a source of pride to work alongside these participants, as we explored how our own ethic of

care impacts decisions made about inclusive practices, and the learning experience of the children we work with. Similarly, it has been a privilege to have been entrusted with the sharing of these early educators' stories through the completion of this work. I leave this dissertation different than I entered, as my professional identity has shifted to encompass a greater understanding and appreciation for the subtle and complex ways that how, as an educator, I interact with children and colleagues doing this challenging work I return the story of *Learning and Play* that helped to frame my opening chapter and realize the ways in which I judged my colleagues' acceptance of the worksheets over the toys offered and how my conclusion is no longer simply that they made a choice to not accept the toys as through this journey I have come to realize the risk the toys represented to their professional status in comparison to the widely accepted worksheet package. Since entering this research, I have taken on many roles in the education field, including as a university instructor, regional specialist, a return to a classroom position, and finally, as regional consultant. Regardless of my position title, care has been central to my work, and has informed how I have made decisions. This new awareness of how care informs my practice will now be at the forefront of my own reflections, and will also help me in supporting educators as they navigate the educational system. In my new role as a consultant, I am excited by the possibilities of further applying the recommendations of this work to support early educators across the region, yet I know it will not be simple task. To end, I provide a story, to share the possibilities that are emerging as PPECEs and PTs in some buildings have begun to build the bridge between the two programs and the professionals in each.

It was the sixth day of transition meetings, and today, as a consultant for Student Services, I was at a small school in my region. This school had six out of their 18 incoming Primaries identified through early developmental services requiring additional supports, as they

transitioned to school. It was clear there was a nervousness with the school team about how these meetings would go, and what their next steps would be.

The meetings were being hosted in the school administrator's office, and already in attendance around the table was the current Primary teacher, the lead PPECE, the learning centre teacher, the administrator, along with myself. As we were waiting for the family and developmental interventionist to arrive for the first meeting, the group began discussing the "new" Primary children that would be entering in the fall. The group of children was more complex than previous cohorts, and the school identified early in January, there would need to be changes to school practices for the children to have success in September.

The school team had been invited into the Pre-Primary space by the PPECEs all year, and these visits happened often. The team smiled as the Primary teacher shared a story about a recent visit, that included her being recruited to play a bunny by a group that were engaged in pretend play as veterinarians. As I listened to the discussion, it was evident that the school team knew most of the children in Pre-Primary, not just as faces, but as people.

As the discussion shifted to planning for school start up, the Primary teacher turned to the lead PPECE to ask about recent camping activities the group had been doing. The lead PPECE shared that camping was a strong interest of the group, and that they were engaging with all the invitations left by the early educators around the topic. The Primary teacher asked if she could borrow some of these to start the next year in her classroom, noting that this would be a great first theme to support the children's transition, since the activities were familiar and of high interest to the group. The lead PPECE eagerly shared that she could snap some pictures of the activities, and would pack up the materials once the children were finished with them, so they could be in the classroom for next year. It was obvious that this was not the first time the early

educators had engaged in sharing ideas for supporting the transition, and promoting continuity between the two programs. There was an ease in how they spoke with each other, there was comfort and trust, along with genuine interest in what was shared. Throughout the discussion, it was clear the group was a team, and focused on making the school ready for the children who would be entering Primary.

I do not remember much of the actual transition meetings, but what stood out to me across all the meetings I attended that day, was how ideas for supporting the transitions were shifted from being about that child, to being considered as activities we can do as a school for all the children entering Primary. As a result, plans were made for all children to spend time in the Primary room, visit the learning centre, and hear a story on the learning carpet in Primary. Additionally, the Primary teacher committed to inviting all new Primaries to have a special tour of the classroom in the days leading up to school start. The PPECE equally participated and offered ideas to support the transition, and the school team asked questions and listened to the responses of all at the table, including the PPECE and family.

I share this story, as it contrasts with the entirety of other transition meetings I experienced as a consultant. My experiences that day as an outsider, listening to the school and Pre-Primary educators as they collaborated and planned for the transition of the children to Primary, highlights the potential next steps for all programs, and provides a glimpse of the possible benefits of collaboration between PPECEs and PTs. Although policies and bureaucratic limitations may exist, in this school, the individuals working with the children have found ways to navigate the system to place the well-being and inclusion of all the children through the transition first, even when it might contradict policy and common practices of the PTs or PPECEs within the region. Within this experience the three underlying elements of the Nova

Scotia inclusive education policy resonate through the threads of validating, affirming, and nurturing, for not only the children, but the adults within the school community. I still wonder -- how this small school managed to make it happen—what made them different? I believe the small size of both the teaching and school population, along with the fact that it was not as close to the regional office as most buildings (and therefore, less likely to be monitored by senior administrative authorities for Pre-Primary or formal schooling) all played a factor in the success.

It is with this promise of the possibility of collaboration, and doing what is needed to promote nurturing, validating, and affirming of each child as they pass through the Pre-Primary program and enter the formal school system, that I leave this journey into exploring PTs' and PPECEs' meaning and enacting of an ethic of care within inclusive educational settings.

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Appendix A: Research Ethics Board Approval

Research Ethics Board

Acadia University Box 181
Wolfville, Nova Scotia
Canada B4P 2R6
Email: smaitzen@acadiau.ca
Telephone: (902) 585-1407
<http://reb.acadiau.ca>



5 August 2021

Ms. Denise Burgess
School of Education
Acadia University

Re: "Toys and Outcomes: Narratives of Care Within Inclusive Early Learning and Early Elementary Educator Practices" (REB 21-38, as revised 28 July 2021)

Dear Ms. Burgess,

At its meeting today, the Acadia University Research Ethics Board (REB) granted ethics approval to your above-referenced research proposal. In the judgment of Dr. Jim Grant, a Representative of Faculty on the REB, the proposed research poses no more than minimal risk of harm to research subjects. Accordingly, your application received delegated ethics review and approval by Dr. Grant and ratification by the entire REB, as provided for in Articles 2.9 and 6.12 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS2) on human-subjects research.

This approval is for a term of one year. If your project will not conclude before 5 August 2022, you may contact me at that time for an extension of this term of approval. Please inform me of any significant changes to the research before they are implemented, and notify me by email when your project has concluded.

Best wishes for success in your research.

Sincerely,



Stephen Maitzen, Ph.D.
Chair, Research Ethics Board

cc: Division of Research and Graduate Studies

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster Pre-Primary Educators

**ARE YOU CURRENTLY A
PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATOR?**

**TELL ME ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES
AND PRACTICES CREATING AN
INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM FOR
CHILDREN**


Potential Participants
must have

- Two years experience in a
Pre-Primary classroom
- level 2 or 3 classification
from DEECD

I am seeking to understand
how Pre-Primary and Primary
educators build and sustain
opportunities for
all children to be successful.

Participants will be asked to engage in

- up to three, 1-hour long discussions
- participate in two collaborative
learning sessions
- reflect on three journal prompts



Approved by the Acadia
University Research Ethics Board

Email Denise Burgess at
073680@acadiu.ca
for further details or to
express interest

Recruitment Poster Primary Teachers



Are you currently a Primary Teacher?

Tell me about your experiences and practices creating an inclusive environment?

I am seeking to understand how Pre-Primary and Primary educators build and sustain opportunities for all children to be successful academically, socially and emotionally and I would love to hear your stories

Potential Participants must have
 -2 years experience teaching in a Primary classroom
 -currently assigned to a Primary or Primary/One classroom

Participants will be asked to engage in
 -up to three, 1-hour long conversations
 -two collaborative learning sessions and
 -complete three journal reflections

Contact Denise Burgess 073680b@acadiu.ca
 to find out more information or express interest

Research Approved by Acadia University Research Ethics Board

Appendix C: Informed Consent

Denise Burgess

██████████ Lane RR 2

██████████ Nova Scotia

BOJ1T0

Dear Participant,

Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Denise Burgess, and I am currently a Ph.D. candidate at the School of Education, Acadia University. I am undertaking a supervised research study entitled “Toys and Outcomes: Narratives of Care within Early Learning and Elementary Educator Practices”.

The first year of formal schooling for children is essential and it is important to gain an understanding of early educators in Pre-Primary and Primary teachers practices and experiences within an inclusive classroom environment. The proposed research looks to explore how both early educators and Primary teachers build and sustain an atmosphere that creates opportunities for success academically, socially, and emotionally for all children, and as such I am asking you to volunteer to participate in this research study.

The research study will consist of up to three interview sessions with me, participation in two collaborative learning sessions, a visit by the researcher to your classroom space and journal responses to three prompts. Each interview session will last a maximum of one hour and will be digitally voice recorded, with the possibility of a follow up interview. Collaborative learning sessions will take place during the regularly scheduled times for the Regional Centre for Education and will occur for up to ninety minutes in length. During the collaborative learning sessions I will conduct a focus group which will consist of discussion and exploration of topics

selected by the group. I will also make one visit to your classroom after school to take pictures and make notes about its set up and the resources you have available, you may choose to be present or not for the visit which will last approximately fifteen minutes. The last aspect of data generation will be journal prompts provided to you at the beginning of the research collection period. The purpose of the journals will be to enable you an opportunity to share a story or reflection about a particular aspect of your experience or practice, these will be collected based on our negotiated timelines. All data generation will be completed within a twelve-week period. Once transcripts of your interviews and focus group discussions are complete you will be requested to review the transcript for accuracy.

Participation will be voluntary and there are no negative consequences if you chose not to participate, furthermore you can withdraw from the research at any time without consequence. The audio recording and transcriptions will be kept confidential. If you choose to participate in the research, you do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer.

Although I will strive to keep your participation confidential. Your identity will be known to other collaborative learning session (focus group) participants and as the researcher I cannot guarantee that others in this group will respect the confidentiality of the group. I will ask you to sign an agreement to indicate that you will keep all comments made during the collaborative learning sessions (focus group) confidential and not discuss what happened during the focus group outside the meeting.

Should you volunteer, your identity will be protected, and the information you share will only be used for research purposes. Data will be stored at the School of Education, Acadia University for a period of five years after which it will be destroyed.

I realize your time is valuable and would appreciate your contribution to the study.

The research has the approval of Acadia University's Research Ethics Board.

You may contact me at (902) 857-1186 or via email 073680b@acadiau.ca anytime if you have questions or concerns. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Aylward at:

Dr. Lynn Aylward

Department of Graduate Education

Acadia University

Phone: (902) 585-1229

E-mail: lynn.aylward@acadiau.ca

Once again, I will be in contact with you soon regarding the time and place for the initial review of consent and to arrange our first discussion session.

I look forward to learning from you.

Respectfully,

Informed Consent

I, _____, agree to participate in the above research project entitled “Toys and Outcomes: Narratives of Care within Early Learning and Elementary Educator Practices”. The purpose of this research is to help increase the understanding of the inclusive practices and experiences of Primary teachers and Pre-Primary early childhood educators through discussing and exploring my experiences individually and within a group setting along with compiling a reflection journal.

I understand that participation is voluntary, and that I may withdraw from the research up to 30 days after my final journal response submission without negative consequence.

I understand there is no funder or sponsor for this research study.

I understand the data generation period for this study is 12 weeks and have reviewed the expectations for my contributions during that time period.

I understand the researcher may contact me after the 12 weeks to invite me to clarify statements, review draft narratives or findings.

I understand any data sent electronically or stored online may be legally accessed by domestic or foreign authorities.

I understand my employer may have access to electronic data sent from my workplace.

I understand the researcher will take measures to keep my identity anonymous including removing identifying information and utilizing pseudonyms. Any information that is shared with the researcher will be kept confidential and used only for research purposes.

I understand I will my identity will be known to other focus group participants and the researcher cannot guarantee that others in the group will respect the confidentiality of the group.

I understand and agree that digital voice recording of my interviews and contributions to the focus group will happen and that these will be transcribed. I understand I have a right to review and edit my contributions reflected in the transcripts.

I understand the research may be published by the researcher in academic journals and may be presented at research conferences. It will be published in a Ph.D. dissertation at Acadia University.

I understand that the data will be stored in a safe, secure location at the School of Education, Acadia University, for five years after which the digital recordings will be erased, and documents shredded.

I understand that there is no anticipated harm or risk to myself.

I understand that there are no direct benefits to my participation.

I understand that the researcher has a legal duty to report any evidence of abuse or neglect of a child.

I understand that a summary report will be made available for me to view.

I have read and understood the purpose of the research and my involvement including all possible risks and benefits. I understand that I have the right to withdraw my participation at any time and that I may ask any questions at any time. I also acknowledge that by consenting to this I have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

I am giving my free consent to research participation by signing this Research Consent Form.

Date: _____

Signature: _____

You may contact the Chair of Acadia University Research Ethics Board, Stephen Maitzen by email at smaitzen@acadiu.ca or via telephone at (902) 585-1407, if you have any questions about the conduct of the study.

Appendix D: Narrative Interview Prompts

- Tell me about your pathway to becoming an educator?
 - Why did you choose to become a PPECE or PT?
 - Tell me about your education (when/where you studied, what courses you took in your program)?
- How might you describe your role as an educator? Can you share with me a story of an experience you have had that reflects this role?
- How would you describe your approach regarding working with children to support their development/growth/learning? Can you share some experiences you have had that highlight this approach?
- How do you define inclusion within your setting?
 - Can you share a few examples or stories regarding inclusion in your classroom practices?
- When it comes to facilitating children's learning, what are you most concerned about?
- When it comes to supporting children's well-being, what are you most concerned about? Can you share with me an experience that highlights supporting a child's well-being?
- What role do you believe relationships have in providing an inclusive learning environment?
 - Can you share a few stories about building and maintaining relationships with children?
 - Have you experienced challenges with fostering a relationship with a child? Can you share more about it?
- Tell me about your experiences as an educator in Pre-Primary/Primary?

- Can you share some memorable positive and challenging stories that highlight your experiences with supporting children in your classroom? Why do you think you remember them? What did you learn from them?
- In what ways is your teaching guided by current curriculum documents/early childhood learning framework? Can you share a story about your use/ adaptation or dismissal of the documents?
- Explain your level of confidence when working with children. Can you share a few stories of times when your level of confidence has impacted your approach?
- Do you think there are any gaps in your knowledge related to child development and educational practices and/or any particular approaches that you know about but haven't been able to fully access or develop?

Appendix E: Focus Group Guiding Questions for PPECE or PT Participant Groups

- Can you share some stories that describe children's learning during their transition to school period?
- Can you share with me some of the barriers to successful and inclusive transitions to school you have experienced? What would you or could you have done differently to make it more inclusive practices?
- Has COVID changed how you approach creating inclusive learning environments for children as they transition to school?

Focus Group Guiding Questions for Combined Participant Groupings

- How do you collaborate with your peers? How could it be improved or ameliorated? How does this impact your practices?
- What practices do you feel enhance inclusion in your classroom settings? What might hinder?

Appendix F: Journal Prompts

- What are your experiences fostering relationships with children in the inclusive learning environment?
- How do you create relationships with children you work with? Can you share a story of how you do this?
- How do you know you have rapport with children you work with?
- Have you felt like you had children you could not create a positive relationship with? Can you share some details?
- Early learning environments are different than those of upper elementary and secondary. In what ways do you feel included or excluded from your school community? Can you share some examples?
- Make a list of all the professional development workshops and other experiences that you remember over the last 5 years. What do you believe are the cumulative impact of those experiences on your approach as an educator? Specially, how have your professional development experiences supported and informed you of practices for providing children with an inclusive environment?