

How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy of Oppression?: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Ontario's Early Years Pedagogical Framework

Richard A. E. Stronach

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Article abstract

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How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy of Oppression?: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Ontario's Early Years Pedagogical Framework

Richard A. E. Stronach

Richard A. E. Stronach is a registered early childhood educator who, since graduating from Sheridan College in 1993 with a diploma in early childhood education, has filled many roles, including ECE classroom lead, childcare supervisor, childcare cook, and educational consultant. Richard also graduated from St Francis Xavier University with a master of adult education and recently from the University of British Columbia with a master of education, specializing in early childhood education. Currently, he is a full-time professor in the early childhood education program at St. Lawrence College in Kingston, Ontario. Email: richard.stronach70@gmail.com

As Canada begins to establish universal childcare, the market-based neoliberalism of the early learning and care system continues to undervalue, underpay, overwork, and overpolice early childhood educators (ECEs). Ontario's resource How Does Learning Happen? (HDLH) has been celebrated for its sociocultural stance and identified as transformative and central to the modernization of Ontario's childcare system. Critical discourse analysis reveals how HDLH and the Ontario Ministry of Education continue to oppress ECEs. The implementation of universal childcare provides an opportunity for the government to include ECEs to make real changes in working conditions, wages, and the provision of quality childcare.

Key words: *How Does Learning Happen?; critical discourse analysis; neoliberal; early childhood educator; oppression; CWELCC; Canada-wide early learning & child care system*

On March 28, 2022, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced a five-year deal with Ontario to “deliver affordable, inclusive, and high-quality child care for families in Ontario” (Government of Canada, 2022a, para. 1). With this announcement, the Canadian and Ontario governments promised to add 86,000 new high-quality childcare spaces, with each family paying only \$10 a day (Ontario Government [ONGov], 2022). Before this announcement, Ontario had been making changes to childcare policy to increase quality, improve accessibility, and lower the cost of childcare (Ontario Ministry of Education [MoE], 2013). In 2017, the *Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework* (Ontario MoE, 2017) was published to guide the modernization of early learning and care in Ontario.

A key goal for the universal childcare initiative and the policy framework is to determine what “quality” means in childcare (Ontario MoE, 2017). In a report to the premier of Ontario, Pascal (2009) stated that “the program quality that

young children experience depends on educators” (p. 32). Pascal went on to explain that in quality childcare, many “elements, such as group size, adult–child ratio, and supportive working conditions, influence how effective educators can be, but the evidence consistently shows that what matters most is whether a quality educator is with the children” (p. 32). The policy framework promises to “provide enhancements to create an integrated continuum of learning for children while supporting Ontario’s world-class early years professionals” (Ontario MoE, 2017, p. 5). With the exception of increased professional development, however, it does not describe any supports for ECE professionals regarding working conditions, income, or mental health and well-being.

Over the last decade, the role of the ECE in Ontario has changed drastically. In Ontario, the profession is recognized by law and overseen by the self-regulatory College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE). The profession continues

to be introduced to new policy requirements, procedures, and practices at a fast rate, yet the impact of the changes on ECE professionals is an afterthought. Quality childcare needs quality ECEs who have been well educated, are well paid, feel valued, have a sense of purpose, and have support for their well-being and mental health (A. Davies et al., 2022; Pascal, 2009).

For decades, ECE professionals have been an unheard, invisible, female-dominated workforce marginalized socially, economically, and politically (Halfon & Langford, 2015; Langford, 2006; Powell, Fearn, & Burrell, 2021; Powell, Langford, et al., 2020). A prominent reason for the continued oppression of ECEs is the neoliberal governance that is dominant in society today (A. Davies et al., 2022; M. Jones et al., 2019; Richardson & Langford, 2022; Young, 2015).

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism crept into Western governance in the 1970s, gaining more appeal in the 1980s with encouragement from leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (B. Davies & Bansel, 2007; Moss, 2017; Steger & Roy, 2021). Brian Mulroney and his Conservative government brought neoliberalism to Canadian governance in the early 1980s (Steger & Roy, 2021). Neoliberalism focuses on the economy for the survival of the individual and promotes the consumption of goods (B. Davies & Bansel, 2007). Citizens are viewed as independent consumers whose success is tied to economic wealth. They are responsible for their own economic well-being, as well as that of their employer or business, as the government focuses on supporting “the greater good” of the local and global economies (B. Davies & Bansel, 2007).

Neoliberalism is an economic system that promotes a global free trade marketplace, minimizes government interference, and focuses on individualism, competition, and consumerism (B. Davies & Bansel, 2007; Johnston, 2021). Governments take on a marketplace model that reduces taxes, limiting their ability to provide services to citizens, and that filters all policies and programs through a risk and reward business model.

Many countries worldwide have adopted neoliberalism as overarching governing bodies have been created to direct the neoliberal global economy (Arar et al., 2021; B. Davies & Bansel, 2007). Some Western economies have adopted structural adjustment policies to maintain their global competitive advantage (Arar et al., 2021); structural adjustment has also been imposed as an economic experiment by international monetary bodies such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

As B. Davies and Bansel (2007) have stated, “neoliberalism is still accepted as the only possible economic and social order available to us. It is taken without question as true that future security and prosperity are linked to market solutions which solidify cooperation between economically interdependent nations” (p. 253). Wealthy corporations and business owners direct government policy through donations, lobbying, and threats of economic consequences. The marketization and privatization of services put profit ahead of care. In the neoliberal economy, government spending on services such as geriatric care, nursing, and early childhood is focused on return on investment, the creation of a flexible workforce, and human capital.

The oppressed ECE

The Ontario government’s neoliberal stance on education policy and curriculum oppresses ECEs through the marketization of services, which in turn encourages profits over quality, performance evaluation, and surveillance of professional expectations (Cotton, 2001; Courtney, 2016; A. Davies et al., 2022; Johnston, 2021; Perryman et

al., 2017; Richardson & Langford, 2022). This oppression is amplified by poor working conditions, the absence of supports, and burnout. For decades, ECEs have been underpaid, undervalued, overworked, and overpoliced.

Underpaid

In Ontario and across Canada, most childcare programs are not government funded. Rather, they are operated by for-profit and nonprofit businesses, municipalities, or private individuals and corporations. Parent fees are the primary source of funding for wages and daily operations. For over three decades, the Ontario government has provided grants to subsidize ECE salaries (Bird & Halfon, 2015), a practice best described by Freire's (1968/2012) terms *false generosity* and *false charity*.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1968/2012) unveiled the unconscious acceptance and complexities of oppression by the government and the social elite. Freire stated that oppressors use injustice, education, and exploitation to maintain power over the oppressed. The oppression is normalized and maintained through cultural and societal expectations and the "banking" method of education. When the oppressed fight the injustice, the oppressors offer false generosity. On the surface, the false generosity would not seem to help the oppressors, but it serves to reinforce their power and maintain social norms (Freire, 1968/2012).

The government appears to address the issues ECEs face by making announcements that seemingly solve problems, but even with the false charity subsidies, most ECEs do not receive a living wage, and many receive just over minimum wage (Halfon & Langford, 2015; Langford, 2006; Powell, Fearn, & Burrell, 2021; Powell, Langford, et al., 2020). As a result, ECEs who are passionate about teaching young children leave the profession. As one former ECE stated:

I knew my profession was valuable and socially important . . . but I could no longer live with the poverty-level wages I was earning. It was incredibly frustrating that I could earn a better living wage as a bartender than as an early childhood educator. (Powell, as cited in M. Jones et al., 2019, pp. 128–129)

Undervalued

ECEs are undervalued to the point of being an invisible workforce. As a result, many ECEs feel disrespected, unheard, helpless, and unsupported (Powell, Fearn, & Burrell, 2021). Some do not reveal their profession to others (Jones et al., 2019), hesitating to identify themselves because of stigma and negative views of the profession.

Powell, Fearn, and Burrell (2021) surveyed 1,875 ECEs and early years staff about job satisfaction, stress, working hours, planning time, wages, mental health and well-being, professional role and autonomy, working conditions, and the retention crisis. They received responses such as, "It's been made clear by parents and the governments that we are not respected the same way that many other professions are and that we are merely babysitters, so people with 'real jobs' can keep the economy going" (Powell, Fearn, & Burrell, 2021, p. 7). This statement was corroborated by discrepancies in how ECEs were supported during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to other essential workers. The Ontario government provided most essential workers early access to vaccines, improvements to work environments including new ventilation systems, quick access to N-95 masks, and wage increases. ECEs, on the other hand, were not offered early access to vaccines or wage top-ups, nor were they provided with ventilation systems or masks as quickly as schools (A. Davies et al., 2022; Richardson & Langford, 2022).

Overworked

With the introduction of new policies and procedures and a regulatory body with standards of practice, the daily work requirements of ECEs have doubled since 2007 (Johnston, 2019; Powell, Fearn, & Burrell). This increase

in workload and regulations happened before pandemic protocols were added (Johnston, 2019; Powell, Fearn, & Burrell, 2021). In Powell, Fearn, and Burrell's (2021) survey, one ECE stated, "There is so much stress of not knowing current rules and regulations. They are always changing, what seems to be daily. My mental health and anxiety have increased a lot. Crying on the job, overwhelmed with no support" (p. 6).

In addition, ECEs are subjected to marketized practices and are prodded to complete more pedagogical documentation reports to parents than competing programs complete (Johnston, 2019). Most early learning and care programs do not provide ECEs with time to collaborate with peer educators, plan activities or a curriculum focus, create pedagogical documentation, prepare for meetings, or do professional development that is not outside of work hours (Johnston, 2019; Powell, Fearn, & Burrell, 2021). Most interactions with other professionals take place while the ECE is in the classroom with the children or on a break. Work hours and sick time are often contingent on the number of children, as child-staff ratios dictate when a shift ends. In my experience, ECEs who are sick and unable to go to work must often find their own shift coverage; if a substitute is not available, the sick ECE would be expected to come to work.

Overpoliced

Page (2017a, 2017b, 2018) introduced a model to illustrate how ECEs are policed to comply with rules and regulations, consisting of three surveillance levels: (a) vertical, (b) horizontal, and (c) intrapersonal. Vertical surveillance is top-down oversight from management and governments; horizontal surveillance comes from inside and outside the classroom and includes students, parents, professional visitors, and peers. Intrapersonal surveillance is a form of self-surveillance.

Vertical surveillance of ECE practices occurs at multiple levels. Government agencies use program advisers to ensure compliance with rules. ECEs are investigated and cited for any violation of the Early Childhood Educators Act (2007), Education Act (1990), or Child Care and Early Years Act (2014). The CECE investigates complaints about violating standards of practice. Municipal health inspectors check for food handling, diapering, and infectious disease control violations. Child protection services and the local police investigate allegations of abuse or neglect. Other forms of vertical surveillance come from local children's service departments, which inspect and observe for quality and pedagogical guidance. These inspection reports are frequently made public. For example, the City of Toronto (n.d.) posts program offerings and detailed quality ratings for all licensed childcare centres that have service agreements with the city.

Horizontal surveillance comes from community agencies' resource consultants, behaviour guidance counsellors, and support workers (Page, 2017a, 2017b, 2018). Coworkers, peers, and parents are encouraged to report any concerns about the performance of ECEs. Many programs also use live and recorded camera feeds, accessible through the internet, so parents can watch the interactions between the ECE and their children. This surveillance is offered as a selling feature to potential customers. Managers and supervisors review the camera feeds to ensure regulatory compliance and use them as evidence of any perceived misconduct.

Intrapersonal surveillance comes in the form of self-reporting and self-managing behaviours. ECEs are influenced by fear: of being viewed as incompetent, suffering consequences for not complying with policies and regulations, enduring consistent surveillance, or being punished (Courtney, 2016). Together, these levels of surveillance suggest that the profession needs policing, which perpetuates a lack of confidence in ECEs' professional capabilities.

HDLH: The catalyst for change?

The *Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework* (Ontario MoE, 2017) was described as the “plan to transform Ontario’s early years and childcare system” (p. 5) and positions Ontario MoE’s (2014) *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario’s Pedagogy for the Early Years (HDLH)* as central to the changes in practice and increased quality in Ontario’s early learning and care system. *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014) is implemented in all early learning and care programs across Ontario and has been celebrated as a “transformative document” (p. 3) for its sociocultural stance and its potential to change practice (Johnston, 2019; School of Teacher Education at Charles Sturt University, 2014). Given that *HDLH* is characterized as central to the modernization of childcare in Ontario and the government’s promise to increase quality and accessibility while reducing cost (Ontario MoE, 2017), a critical reading is paramount.

When unveiled in 2014, *HDLH* was presented as a shared resource for educators working in childcare (Ontario MoE, 2014). *HDLH* reflects the fundamental principles of the Reggio Emilia approach to early learning and care, which focus on the view of the child, building relationships, and provoking questions that challenge children’s thinking (Ontario Reggio Association, 2021). *HDLH* proposes a sociocultural approach to learning, emphasizing the importance of a play-based curriculum, and positions children as “competent, capable of complex thinking, and rich in potential” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 6). It also promotes relationships with children and families by providing educators with guidance on creating a sense of belonging, nurturing healthy development, fostering an engaging environment, and supporting communication and expression. Yet strikingly, “Ontario’s world-class early years professionals” (Ontario MoE, 2017, p. 5), the majority of whom are ECEs, are not supported in Ontario MoE’s policies, resource documents, or frameworks. As I reread *HDLH* more critically, a question arose: Is *HDLH* a transformational sociocultural document, or does it reinforce current power structures, neoliberalism, and normalization of the oppressed ECE?

Method

A content and critical discourse analysis was used to determine if the language and content in *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014) promote neoliberalism and current power systems, which are used to reinforce the oppression of ECEs. The overarching research question was, “Does *HDLH* reinforce current power dynamics and a neoliberal narrative that underpays, undervalues, overworks, and overpolices ECEs in Ontario?”

Discourse

For Foucault (1972, 1978, 2001), discourse is related to the relationship between power and knowledge and, more specifically, how knowledge is used to create and maintain power. He suggested that discourse is about more than what is spoken: It is about who is permitted to speak about certain topics and who is not, what is permitted to be spoken and what is not, where something can be spoken and where it cannot. Foucault (1978) wanted “to explore not only these discourses but also the will that sustains them and the strategic intention that supports them” (p. 8). He used discourse to identify how knowledge was used and manipulated to reinforce and maintain a specific discourse. He suggested that the power traditionally held by monarchs has shifted to corporations and governments. Power is maintained through the distribution of knowledge in educational institutions, policies, laws, governments, religious institutions, and corporations. Surveillance by police services, regulatory bodies, the military, and self-surveillance maintains order and ensures that the overarching discourse is maintained.

In addition, discourse encompasses how people view themselves, and how they speak and act based on social expectations (Fairclough, 2011; Gee, 2011, 2014). According to Fairclough (1989, 2011), social power structures

are produced and maintained through the ideology created by language. Language and word choice generate what becomes an accepted power structure that evolves into “common sense.” For example, one may label a person as a freedom fighter or as a terrorist, and each presents a different picture. Authors choose words to generate a specific emotion and highlight a particular side of a story. In this perspective, discourse can be defined as how language represents reality (Fairclough, 2011; Gee, 2014; Willey-Sthapit et al., 2022).

Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis is used to analyze the effects power has over groups of people and the outcomes of that power (Rogers, 2011). Rogers (2011) states that “power is a central concept in critical discourse studies. It tends to be defined in terms of negative uses of power, articulated through and within discourses and resulting in domination and oppression” (p. 3). There are many methods of discourse analysis. The one applied in this paper examines text or speech to reveal how the language is used to reinforce and legitimize the current dominant discourse, oppressive power structures, and perceived social reality (Fairclough, 2011; Gee, 2011, 2014; Willey-Sthapit et al., 2022). Fairclough (1989, as cited by Waring, 2017) suggests that those in power make “arbitrary beliefs and practices look as if they were natural and legitimate” (p. 188) and manufacture a common-sense understanding labelled *naturalization*. Through critical discourse analysis, researchers can uncover naturalization and question these created beliefs and practices that continue to oppress and reinforce current power structures.

Gee (2011) states that language is always used for action. He suggests using verbal actions such as encouragement, manipulation, and insults to build or take down particular worlds and realities (Gee, 2011). Gee (2011) also suggests that people continually build on or take down things in their reality in one of seven “building tasks” when using written or spoken language: (a) *significance*, how words are used to make something trivial or important; (b) *activities* (practices), a socially or culturally agreed-upon set of actions that combine to define an activity or practice; (c) *identities*, the language used to support a role or identity; (d) *relationships*, the use of language to create or maintain relationships with others; (e) *politics* (the distribution of social goods), the use of language in creating and maintaining what is considered normal and good in a given circumstance; (f) *connections*, how language connects to other things (which can sometimes be hidden or unclear until a content analysis is conducted); and (g) *sign systems and knowledge*, using language to strengthen or weaken communication systems within specific groups, cultures, and professions.

Gee (2011, 2014) advises that six tools for inquiry be used to unveil how these building tasks reinforce the dominant discourse and current power structures: social languages, capital “D” Discourse, situated meanings, intertextuality, conversations, and figured worlds.

Social languages are the languages of a profession or culture; people use various languages depending on the setting and the identity they wish to portray (Gee, 2011, 2014). *Capital “D” Discourses* examine how people construct and maintain identity through language, actions, and accessories. For example, a person who identifies as a hockey player uses words typical of a hockey player, acts as a hockey player by playing hockey, and wears hockey clothing and equipment. The person must display the “right” characteristics, with particular values, beliefs, acts, and thoughts, to be recognized as a hockey player. *Situated meanings* suggests that how someone is writing or speaking implies a certain level of understanding of the topic to understand the meaning of the word or phrase within that stance. *Intertextuality* introduces the concept that all text borrows and references other texts, suggesting that an author’s words are not entirely their own (Gee, 2014). Gee (2014) refers to intertextuality as a type of cross-referencing to reinforce certain narratives. Fairclough (1992) suggests that authors can use intertextuality to promote or reinforce a discourse or to change the discourse of the referenced text: “Texts can transform prior texts and restructure existing conventions (genres, discourses) to generate new ones” (p. 270). *Conversations*, says Gee (2011, 2014),

can be best described as recognizing the stance or position a person takes in a debate or discussion. Recognizing that stance implies understanding its underlining assumptions. A person's stance influences the interpretation of what is said or written. Finally, *figured worlds* suggests the normal or conventional meaning of a word, phrase, or story (Gee, 2011, 2014). These stories create a simplified worldview that is created and shared socioculturally. For example, if an author writes, "The kindergarten class was hectic today," this statement may paint a picture of a stereotypical kindergarten classroom, with a female teacher, art on the walls, and several young children playing with toys and sitting at tables. When the word "hectic" is added, I envision the children in the same classroom but noisily, busily moving around the room engaged in pretend play. Others with different experiences and sociocultural backgrounds may have a different mental picture of the same statement.

Procedure

Gee (2014) proposes that making a critical discourse analysis valid follows the same principles of any empirical research study in that it "is built around making arguments for a specific claim (or claims) or hypotheses. The claim or hypothesis is the point of the analysis" (p. 142). For my analysis, to answer the research question, I created a list of questions guided by Gee's (2011, 2014) six tools of inquiry to examine whether the building tasks in *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014) are constructing and maintaining current power structures and oppressive practices. The questions focused on how each building task may be used to continue the oppressive narrative of the ECE: How are *social languages*, *capital "D" Discourse*, *situated meanings*, *intertextuality*, *conversations*, and *figured worlds* (the six tools) being used to (a) build relevance or significance for things and people in context; (b) enact activities or practices in context; (c) enact and depict identities (socially significant "kinds of people"); (d) build and sustain (or change or destroy) social relationships; (e) create, distribute, or withhold social goods or construe particular distributions of social goods as "good" or "acceptable" or not; (f) make things and people connected or relevant to each other or irrelevant to or disconnected from each other; and (g) privilege or deprive different sign systems (language, social languages, other sorts of symbol systems) and ways of knowing?

Results

My critical examination of *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014) suggests that it has contributed to and reinforced neoliberalism and a narrative that manufactures a common-sense understanding that it is normal for ECEs in Ontario to be undervalued, underpaid, overworked, and overpoliced. Using Gee's (2014) tools of inquiry, I found that all seven building tasks were used to construct a particular reality, but most often, *significance*, *activities (practice)*, *identities*, and *relationships* were employed. In addition, of the six tools used, *Discourse* and *situated meaning* uncovered the language that most contributed to the promotion of neoliberalism and the naturalization of the oppressed ECE. Although the discourse of developmentalism is also present in *HDLH*, I did not analyze the impact or the effect of this discourse. Instead I focused on analyzing the effect the Ontario MoE's use of neoliberalism has had on ECEs' status and identity, working conditions, levels of surveillance, and naturalization of low wages.

HDLH and the promotion of neoliberalism

Market-driven neoliberalism infiltrates *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014), which uses *intertextuality* through subtle statements and mixed messages of education policy and frameworks packaged in a sociocultural context. My critical discourse analysis unveiled many neoliberal messages and unsubstantiated assumptions about ECEs in the document that conflict with the overall sociocultural discourse, undermine the assertion that all "educators are competent and capable, curious, and rich in experience" (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 7), and promote the narrative that continues to oppress ECEs. For instance, neoliberalism is prominent in the market-based structure of the

early years education system and in the discussion of a return on investment when it comes to high-quality early learning programs. The neoliberal stance is one of human capital, promoting education as a mechanism to produce workers with specific skills and create a strong workforce that will strengthen the global economy (Moss, 2017). Neoliberalism also sees early childhood education and care as a mechanism to allow parents, specifically women, to enter the workforce while others care for their children.

In *HDLH*, the Ontario MoE (2014) uses *intertextuality* of the *Ontario Early Years Policy Framework* (Ontario MoE, 2013) and the *Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework* (Ontario MoE, 2017) to promote a neoliberal stance. For example, the renewed framework discusses “health, learning, and economic outcomes of positive early years experiences” (Ontario MoE, 2017, p. 9). These positive outcomes highlight economic benefits, suggesting that high-quality early childhood education is an investment in the future, in future school success, and in immediate and lifelong financial savings for the government (Ontario MoE, 2013, 2017). Similar statements can be found in *HDLH*: “High-quality early childhood settings are associated with immediate and long-term positive outcomes for children” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 11).

HDLH also cites the OECD, stating that high-quality early childhood frameworks have many benefits to high-quality child care and future outcomes (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 15). Many scholars/researchers have cautioned against the OECD’s influence on government policies and the message regarding high-quality, high-return investment in early years education (Berkovich & Benoliel, 2020; Delaune, 2019). Delaune (2019), for example, states, “The OECD promotes particular and narrowly defined domains of learning as ‘best,’ couching their educational ‘values’ within the neoliberal economic discourse, and setting a narrow scope for children to learn and develop within” (p. 63). Due to the consumer-based nature of childcare in Ontario, these pressures are heightened and may be viewed as oppressive (Johnston, 2021; Powell, Fearn, & Burrell, 2021). The competition to be the highest quality is driven by parents, who are the consumers of childcare services and who choose what program is the best for their child, increasing the pressure for ECEs to perform—and naturalizing the oppression of ECEs.

HDLH and the narrative of the undervalued ECE

Of the building tasks in Gee’s (2014) discourse analysis, *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014) uses *identities, significance, relationships, politics, and sign systems and knowledge* to reinforce the undervalued ECE narrative. First, when examining how language is used to enact the identity of the ECE, other than two specific instances, the professional title of ECE is intentionally omitted. On the two occasions that the professional designation of ECE is cited, it is followed by threatening reminders of expectations and standards enforced by the CECE (Ontario MoE, 2014, pp. 15, 24).

Little argument can be made that the role of the educator and implementation of program expectations presented in *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014) are directed at the over 58,000 professionally registered ECEs (CECE, 2021) who teach and care for children in licensed childcare and early learning programs across Ontario, but the title used is “educator.” Some may suggest that the term educator includes all who work with the children and avoids the suggestion that the ECE is in a more dominant position. And the title educator would be inclusive and appropriate, except the title ECE is not used in *HDLH*’s definition of educator: “We have used the term ‘educator’ throughout this document to refer to all who work with children and families in early years programs (e.g., centre- and home-based childcare, child and family programs, before and after school programs)” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 5). Even when highlighting the significant role of professional ECEs, *HDLH* does not use the professional designation; instead it notes that “the value of early years [emphasis added] educators cannot be overstated” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 19).

In contrast, in the *British Columbia Early Learning Framework*, “early childhood educator” is used more than 25 times (Government of British Columbia, 2019). The term *educator* is defined as

an adult who works in early years settings, school-based settings, community-based settings, and postsecondary settings, including early childhood educators and teachers. While it is acknowledged that many terms are in use and people may have preferences on what they call themselves, this framework recognizes that adults who work in these settings are all educators. (Government of British Columbia, 2019, p. 4)

Other frameworks published by the Ontario government such as *Early Learning for Every Child Today* (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007), *Ontario Early Years Policy Framework* (Ontario MoE, 2013), and *Ontario’s Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework* (Ontario MoE, 2017) all use the professional title ECE. *Ontario’s Early Policy Framework* (2013), written before *HDLH*, distinguished between ECEs and others working in the field in statements such as “registered early childhood educators and other early years professionals” (p. 17). The deliberate exclusion of the title ECE in *HDLH* matches a practice used by some ECEs, who, in casual conversations, avoid identifying themselves as an ECE or “sidestep the question . . . to avoid unpleasant questions and negative assumptions” (M. Jones et al., 2019, p. 127). Not wanting to label oneself as an ECE emphasizes how devalued and oppressed ECEs are in Ontario. Freire (1968/2012) stated, “Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them” (p. 63).

HDLH (Ontario MoE, 2014) uses the building tasks of *identities* and *significance* to minimize the importance of the ECE role in the early learning and care system. Using the tool of *Discourse*, *HDLH* tries to construct and maintain the identity of the educator, which neither includes the ECE professional nor acknowledges their unique skills and identity.

Another way ECEs continue to be undervalued is through the *social language* of practice. *HDLH* employs technical vocabulary when defining pedagogy, first by using *intertextuality* and referencing the Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning’s (2007) definition: “Pedagogy is ‘the understanding of how learning takes place and the philosophy and practice that support that understanding of learning’” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 5). But in the next sentence, *HDLH* simplifies the definition of pedagogy to “how learning happens” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 5). The choice of these definitions minimizes the importance of the ECE and the art of teaching.

A second term missing from *HDLH*—a pedagogical guide—is the word “teach.” “Teaching” is used but once, in reference to a practice to avoid: “the focus is not on teaching” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 15). The word “teacher” is used only four times in reference to the profession and three times in reference to the environment. Yet these words are prominent in definitions of pedagogy elsewhere. For example, Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines pedagogy as “the art, science, or profession of teaching” (para. 1); the Cambridge Dictionary (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, n.d.) defines it as “the study of the methods and activities of teaching” (para. 1). The textbook *Empowering Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education* states, “Pedagogy is how you approach your professional practice in relation to teaching and learning. The image of who you are or will be as a teacher, combined with a view of the child as a learner, forms a pedagogical orientation” (Dietze & Kashin, 2016, p. 19).

Pedagogy is the art of teaching. In the sociocultural context, this art includes listening to children, knowing when and how to ask questions, understanding the children’s interests, planning ways to explore those interests through play and inquiry, and guiding learning. According to *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014), educators work; they do not teach. Policymakers appear to have avoided specific titles and dumbed down certain concepts to avoid confusion and promote working with children and building relationships with families. This tactic contrasts with the view of educators as “knowledgeable . . . professionals” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 7).

HDLH highlights the importance of the environment in the early years by calling it “the third teacher . . . valued for its power to organize, promote relationships, and educate” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 20). The situated meaning of the words “teach,” “teacher,” and “teaching” hold value and status. In *HDLH*, they are used to promote the value of the learning environment over the value of the ECEs, who are not teachers: they are workers who work with children.

HDLH and the narrative of the underpaid ECE

Although *HDLH* does not address the underpaid ECE directly (Ontario MoE, 2014), it promotes the narrative of the underpaid ECE highlighted in the building tasks of *significance*, *identity*, and *politics* through *Discourse*, *situated meanings*, *intertextuality*, and *figured worlds* (Gee, 2014). ECEs have recited variations of the statement “I’m not in this profession for the money” for years. *HDLH* reinforces the notion that ECEs teach and care for children not for money, but rather for the child and the emotional rewards of teaching. Statements include “there is no more important work than this” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 28); educators do “meaningful work” (p. 7); “children’s early experiences last a lifetime” (p. 4); “there is perhaps no relationship that holds greater responsibility or reward than relationships we develop with children” (p. 4); and “the value of the early years educators cannot be overstated” (p. 19). Through these statements, *HDLH* can be viewed as maintaining the illusion that society respects and values the ECE for their charity, commitment, and contribution to the common good. ECEs have been literally subsidizing childcare in Ontario for the good of society by receiving grossly inadequate pay and are encouraged through *HDLH* to maintain the fictional reality that being overworked and underpaid should be the norm.

HDLH and the narrative of the overworked ECE

The building tasks of *significance*, *practice*, *politics*, and *identities* (Gee, 2014) are used in the *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014) to normalize the profession’s work demands. The statement “all educators who deliver high-quality early years programs know that you are never done” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 9) highlights the expectations. Cumming and Wong (2019) state that an ECE’s “work is highly complex and challenging, characterized by distinctive emotional, intellectual, relational, economic and discursive demands” (p. 266). In contrast, *HDLH* uses *significance* and *politics* to suggest that the challenges ECEs have in caring for and educating young children are normal, and this hard work is for the overall good of society. The continued use of *politics* and *identities* highlights who is a “good” educator: “the best educators” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 19) develop relationships with children, coworkers, families, and the community; they are reflective practitioners and colearners who play, observe, reflect, plan, engage in professional development, create pedagogical documentation, support the development of self-regulation and overall well-being in children, and deliver high-quality programs.

For years ECEs have been vocal about being overworked; most are not provided time for planning, reflection, peer meetings, or engaging in meaningful conversations about curriculum and pedagogical approaches (Johnston, 2021; Powell, Fearn, & Burrell, 2021). In a video, Ontario early learning and care program supervisors dismissed the notion that ECEs do not have the time to engage in reflective practice and advised that this practice can be accomplished in the classroom while they are with the children (ONGov, 2014b, 1:19). The supervisors suggested that the best professional learning is done in the classroom, focusing on critical reflection and collaborative inquiry with peers and in communities of practice (ONGov, 2014a). Just as *HDLH* uses *practice*, *politics*, and *identities* to reinforce oppression, by having the supervisors acknowledge ECEs’ complaints regarding the lack of time, money, and formal professional development, they normalize the overwork as part of being a “good” ECE.

Further assumptions made in *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014) include the understanding of what pedagogical documentation is and how it is created and used to inform practice, methods to support self-regulation, and the type of play that supports the holistic benefits the document promotes. These complex concepts are left to the

ECE to figure out alone by characterizing the educator as a lifelong learner. Outside of a few conceptual videos discussing these concepts, ECEs are expected to find or create their own professional development and attend it outside of their teaching hours. *HDLH* suggests, using *practice*, *politics*, and *identity*, that a “good” ECE can not only find the time but also know how to complete pedagogical documentation and support children’s developing self-regulations skills. This tells ECEs who do not understand or have not been taught how to meet these expectations that they are incompetent or “bad.”

Shortly after Australia introduced a new early years framework conceptually similar to *HDLH*, Kilderry et al. (2017) interviewed five ECEs about how the Australian government supported its implementation. The educators reported feeling “out of the loop” (Kilderry et al., 2017, p. 350), wanted to know more about the concepts being presented, and expressed stress, confusion, and apprehension. When the researchers asked educators, “What does it [pedagogy] mean to you?” the responses included “I don’t use it” (Kilderry et al., 2017, p. 347). Kilderry et al. suggested that with just a basic introduction and little to no support or additional training in how to implement the framework, educators developed a superficial understanding of the new concepts and practices. *HDLH* does not provide examples or suggest steps to create pedagogical documentation (Ontario MoE, 2014), eliciting confusion and stress (Kilderry et al., 2017; Livingstone & Hydon, 2019).

The key to a deep level of understanding is meaningful adult learning opportunities and professional development with the ability to discuss and use new strategies and practices. In Ontario, when professional development is offered, ECEs are usually responsible for the training fees, the time is unpaid, and sessions are in the evenings or on weekends. Despite not receiving paid planning time to complete or interpret pedagogical documentation (Johnston, 2021; Powell, Fearn, & Burrell, 2021), educators are mandated to create a minimum number of pieces weekly and monthly (Johnston, 2021). This process has created an oppressive competition among childcare programs to generate the most documentation (Johnston, 2021), implying that volume equals quality, when in fact ECEs have pointed out that it impedes quality. Taking time away from engaging with children, interrupting their play to stage photos, and generating as many documents as possible seems counterintuitive to quality and adds to the overall workload (Johnston, 2021).

In a market-based neoliberal system, parents want the highest quality early learning and care option for the lowest possible cost. This creates competition between early learning and care programs and ECEs to show how they are better than others, increasing workload and stress for ECEs as they write more pedagogical documentation to prove their worth (Halfon & Langford, 2015; Johnston, 2021; Powell, Langford, et al., 2020). By normalizing unpaid overtime, defining what a “good” ECE is and does, and positioning this work as being for the overall betterment of society, *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014) uses the building tasks of *politics*, *practice*, and *identity* to set the expectation of overworked ECEs and reinforce their oppression.

HDLH and the narrative of the overpoliced ECE

HDLH (Ontario MoE, 2014) promotes the policing of ECEs, ensuring certain practices are engaged in and others are not. Employing Gee’s (2011, 2014) tools, my analysis revealed that *HDLH* uses the building tasks of *practice*, *identities*, *connections*, and *significance* to continue the oppressive narrative and promote neoliberalism. Page’s (2017a, 2017b, 2018) model of surveillance highlights the levels of oversight to which ECEs are subjected, reinforced by *HDLH*.

First, *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014) uses *significance* in promoting vertical surveillance. For example, a year after *HDLH*’s publication, the Ontario MoE issued a policy statement changing the Child Care and Early Years Act (2014) and requiring licensed childcare programs to use *HDLH* to guide pedagogical practice and policies (Ontario

MoE, 2015). This manoeuvre moved *HDLH* from a resource to a mandated policy for childcare programs overseen by Ontario MoE program advisers. These advisers police childcare programs and ECEs to ensure compliance with regulations, standards of practice, and pedagogical practices such as pedagogical documentation. Program advisers will issue noncompliance orders directly to the ECE and inform the CECE of any infractions. *HDLH* threatens ECEs with reminders of the expectations and requirements of ECEs registered with the self-governing body.

HDLH (Ontario MoE, 2014) uses *practice, identity, and connections* by correlating reflective practice with the “good ECE.” Perryman et al. (2017) state that “the phrase ‘reflective practitioner’ is now normalized within the discourse of the ‘good teacher’ and feeds into the translator’s role of encouraging teachers to ‘own’ that which the school defines as good practice” (p. 748). Reflective practice is prominent in *HDLH* and in the competency lists of the good educator. Through reflective practice, “educators consider their own practices and approaches and the impacts they have on children, families, and others” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 19). *HDLH* states that the process of reflective practice is “the basis of high-quality programs” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 20) and that “through critical reflection, educators test long-standing views and taken-for-granted practices and consider new approaches and ways of thinking about their work” (p. 20).

Reflective practice is a metacognitive process where a person thinks about their thinking, questioning their actions and feelings. Self-reflection and critical reflective practice in education is not an intuitive process. It takes education, practice, and training to master. When a practitioner writes down their private reflective thoughts but must share them, those thoughts move into the public domain (Cotton, 2001; Cushion, 2016; Denison et al., 2017; Page, 2017a; 2017b). Once the thoughts are public, they are open for scrutiny and analysis; “they may be controlled by the dominant discourse” (Cotton, 2001, p. 515). Cotton (2001) suggests that reflective journals intended to be private and confidential could be used as evidence against the educator. They could also be viewed as a confession and interpreted in ways outside the original context and meaning. Cushion (2016) states, “Reflective or ‘critical friends’ can serve to reinforce practitioners’ self-surveillance as well as contribute to the construction of docility” (p. 90). By endorsing the practice of collaborative inquiry, where ECEs must make their thoughts public, *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014) promotes a method of self-surveillance.

Reflective practice is essential to the education profession and teacher growth. It becomes a concern when the practice is mandated by governments and those in positions of power because it can be used as a method of surveillance (Cotton, 2001; Courtney, 2016; Johnston, 2021; Perryman et al., 2017), especially when it is mandated to be shared with colleagues and superiors. This surveillance method should be viewed as oppressive, especially when the acts of writing and interpreting the reflection are expected to be completed during lunch breaks or after work (Johnston, 2021). Perryman et al. (2017) state that “the reflective practitioner is an accepted and expected characteristic of the ‘good teacher,’ and good schools” (p. 748), again normalizing oppressive practices.

The reflective practitioner is also highlighted in a section of *HDLH* boldly titled “What’s Most Important” (Ontario MoE, 2014, p. 11): What is most important is that educators are provided with ongoing opportunities “to engage in critical reflection and discussion with others about pedagogy and practice to support continuous professional learning and growth” (p. 11). Sharing reflections with others in meetings can create a hierarchy of “good” and “bad” reflectors, reinforcing *HDLH*’s characteristics of the “good educator.” The hierarchy of good and bad reflectors is reinforced in a video entitled “Pedagogical Leadership: Guiding Teaching and Learning in Early Years Settings” (ONGov, 2014a), in which a supervisor discusses her disappointment in an ECE who was unable to verbally explain her practice. Personal and confidential critical reflection of teaching practice is an important part of professional development but should not be mandated to be shared with others.

Pedagogical documentation can also be viewed as a form of intrapersonal surveillance. ECEs create and present pedagogical documentation to parents, children, peers, managers, supervisors, community agencies, and the Ontario MoE (Johnston, 2021). Pedagogical documentation includes pictures and stories of what has taken place in the classroom and an interpretation and critical reflection of the activities, which others are asked to comment on (Johnston, 2021). The documentation and reflection are scrutinized for quality and depth, and feedback is provided.

Madrid and Dunn-Kenney (2010) discussed the emotions connected to teaching and the guilt, fear, and stress ECEs feel to comply with regulations and be “good.” These strong emotions were related to the feeling of being watched at all three levels of surveillance. ECEs are expected to be happy, caring, helpful, selfless, competent, and capable, all while regulating their own emotions (A. Davies et al., 2022). ECEs who developed mental health conditions due to stressors such as the high level of surveillance, overwork, lack of respect, and financial stressors are no longer considered a “good ECE” (Corr et al., 2017; A. Davies et al., 2022). The CECE requires its members to self-disclose mental conditions or disorders within the licensing renewal program. A. Davies et al. (2022) suggest that the CECE and *HDLH* send the message that ECEs who have “experiences of emotional distress are presented as incompatible with being a ‘good educator,’ ‘good mother,’ or helping professional” (p. 25). In short, *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014) uses the *identity* of the “good ECE” as a reflective, nurturing, capable, and competent person, while normalizing the amount of oversight and surveillance placed on them, adding to the naturalization of the oppressed ECE.

Discussion and recommendations

HDLH (Ontario MoE, 2014) is celebrated as a transformative sociocultural resource for all early learning and care programs in Ontario, and policymakers will likely look to *HDLH* to guide the development of an assessment for quality early learning programs. However, my examination of the document’s language using Gee’s (2011) method of critical discourse analysis suggests that neoliberalism and the naturalization of the oppressed ECE are prominent in the resource. In answer to the research question, *HDLH* adds to the oppressive narrative of the underpaid, undervalued, overworked, and overpoliced ECE. These oppressive practices are presented as normal and to be expected by anyone entering the field.

The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) program will see over 86,000 new childcare spaces in Ontario (ONGov, 2022). To support this incentive, 14,000 new ECEs must be hired (Cheese, 2022). However, ECEs are not mentioned on the federal and provincial websites that outline the implementation plan (Government of Canada, 2022b; ONGov, 2022). There is a critical need in Ontario for ECEs; classrooms and entire childcare programs are closing due to a staffing shortage. Yet, ECE cries for help due to burnout, stress, and lack of support are not heard by any level of government (A. Davies et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2021). As a result, ECEs leave the profession, and new graduates do not stay in the field for long if they even enter it (A. Jones, 2022). With the current expectations presented in *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014) of what is “normal” to be a “good” ECE, it is unlikely that preservice ECEs will stay in the field longer and even more unlikely that people will consider the ECE profession. To begin to transform the current power dynamics for ECEs in Ontario and disrupt the neoliberal narrative, I present five recommendations.

Recognize registered ECEs as professionals

The first action must be for Ontario to recognize registered ECEs as professionals different from others working in childcare programs. The CECE (2022) states, “the training, knowledge, and competencies of early childhood educators are distinct and unique from other professions. The specialized skills of ECEs provide for collaborative

opportunities with other regulated professionals” (para. 1). This knowledge and the skills and training of the ECE must be highlighted within policies and curriculum documents published by Ontario’s MoE. This recognition must happen outside of the generic definition of the educator. This recognition is imperative. Also, given that ECEs are professionals, they need to be paid more than a living wage and valued for the education and care they provide. They need support with their mental health concerns and paid sick days. They need paid time outside of lunch and breaks to discuss, plan, and reflect on their practice privately. ECEs in Ontario do not need more oversight, policies, or quality indicators.

View early learning and care as a right

Second, to minimize the influence of neoliberalism and market-based practices that oppress ECEs, early learning and care must be viewed as a right. For this shift to occur, the early learning and care system must be deprivatized. Provincial and federal governments must fully fund childcare and pay ECEs more than a living wage. They need to recognize ECEs as essential to implementing quality early learning and care programs for children.

Engage in a transparent consultation process with ECEs when creating policies

Third, before creating a method to assess quality early learning and care programs or any new policies or frameworks, ECEs need to be consulted and asked what they need, with input into a fully transparent consultation process. The government cannot make these changes independently. A token consultation must not be celebrated. Real effort must be made to connect with ECEs. ECEs must have a full and active part in this change implementation, not simply be informed afterwards. Freire (1968/2012) stated, “Leaders cannot treat the oppressed as mere activists to be denied the opportunity of reflection and allowed merely the illusion of acting” (p. 126). Including frontline ECEs at the table so that they may provide their first-hand knowledge and insights into the daily reality of early learning and care and what is needed to support them is vital to the success of high-quality universal childcare in Ontario.

Support ECEs

Fourth, ECEs need support. They need classroom support and strategies to help the many children in care who need guidance to regulate their emotions. They need support to learn how to reflect critically on their practice without the requirement to share their reflections. They also need a clear explanation of the process of pedagogical documentation. The Ontario MoE should look to jurisdictions beyond Italy for resources and ideas to create a solid sociocultural discourse in early learning and care. Examples from British Columbia’s Early Learning Framework (BC ELF; Government of British Columbia, 2019a) and accompanying resources such as *Play Today* (2019b) provide ECEs with pedagogical direction, information, and documentation examples. The BC ELF also contributes “to reconciliation through implicitly and explicitly honouring Indigenous authorities in education” (p. 4). The BC ELF includes First Nations, Métis, and Inuit ways of knowing. Another framework to consider is *Te Whāriki* (New Zealand MoE, 2019), New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum, which “was one of the first national curriculum frameworks for early childhood education” (p. 7). *Te Whāriki* takes a sociocultural approach to learning (Bennett, 2005; Blaiklock, 2010; Hedges et al., 2018) that integrates settler and Māori ways of knowing. It has been widely praised worldwide by ECEs and academics alike (Blaiklock, 2010). *Te Whāriki* and additional resources provide a clear explanation and examples of pedagogical documentation to support the implementation of a sociocultural curriculum.

Integrate settler and Indigenous ways of knowing

Finally, the Ontario MoE should take inspiration from the BC ELF and *Te Whāriki* and create a new framework

that integrates settler and Indigenous ways of knowing. With the implementation of CWELCC, the Ontario MoE has an opportunity to make a change. It can create a multicultural curriculum framework and guide that takes an authentic sociocultural approach to learning. This document could inspire collaboration among First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and settlers in Ontario. The new framework must recognize the professional ECE and provide clear pedagogical directions, examples of play, play-based learning projects, self-regulation, and documentation from multiple ways of knowing.

Conclusion

The planning of Canada's national childcare system presents an opportunity to provoke change. In Ontario, more research is required to understand how the MoE uses discourse to maintain the status quo. Specifically, further study is required to examine the influence of developmental discourse in MoE policy and frameworks. Researchers may wish to examine how these policies and frameworks are manipulated to include developmentalism while simultaneously discouraging its use in *HDLH*.

I firmly believe that *HDLH* (Ontario MoE, 2014) offers false generosity (Freire, 1968/2012) by appeasing the advocates for a more holistic approach to education while continuing to normalize the oppressive practices brought on by neoliberalism and developmentalism. Ontario's MoE deliberately chose to add or withhold particular words to highlight a particular narrative. Those choices, in turn, served to manipulate meaning, construct the ECE identity, and maintain neoliberalism's power through the distribution of knowledge (Foucault, 1972, 1978, 2001). The instructions and principles dictate what is normal for a "good ECE." And through constant surveillance of ECEs by the CECE, MoE advisers, parents, coworkers, peers, and themselves, power and oppression are maintained.

Freire (1968/2012) stated,

Revolution is achieved with neither verbalism nor activism but rather with praxis, that is, with *reflection* and *action* directed at the structures to be transformed. The revolutionary effort to transform these structures radically cannot designate its leaders as its *thinkers* and the oppressed as mere *doers*. (p. 126, emphasis in original)

I hope that ECEs and their supporters can identify false generosity and charity as continued strategies for oppression (Freire, 1968/2012) and advocate for purposeful and meaningful change to the current structure of Ontario's early learning and care system.

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