

## **Shifting the Facades of Normality in Early Childhood Education: Summoning the Voice of ECE**

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### ***Abstract***

*The purpose of this paper is to unravel discourses that exist in the field of Early Childhood Education (ECE). Discourses which have created a blinding disconnect between the normalized ideas of ECE and educators, and the challenging realities. Through the examination of powerful influences, the paper correlates such influences to the scope of leadership and advocacy within the field of education. In the first section of the text, the author examines the social, historical, and political influences that have developed deeply embedded 'norms' within ECE. Through this dissection, the paper illuminates the embeddedness of common perceptions and practice. Furthermore, pointing out the broadening affects a lack of leadership and advocacy has on communities and societies. Some of the implications include: children and public space, working conditions for educators, and social injustices. The paper transitions to underline the criticality for new understandings; seeking to challenge educators and societal collectives to question what we want education to look like in our communities. Additionally, emphasizing the need for leadership and advocacy in ECE in order to critically address normalized implications.*



*It is aspired that through this paper the need for leadership and advocacy in ECE is made evident. Beyond this, gaining the realization that ECE can be a space for leadership and advocacy, and that it can exist through sustained efforts to critically analyze our world. Through seemingly simple acts such as engaging in dialogue and everyday practice, educators possess the potential to become activists for themselves, children and families; asserting their voices in favour of social justice.*

**Keywords:** *early childhood education; outdoor education; nature-based education; pedagogical documentation; leadership; advocacy; norms.*

## ***Introduction***

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is often portrayed as a place of discovery: discovery of self, discovery of the world, discovery of each other. A part of this, ECE depicts a space where people work cooperatively, a space that fosters children's curious engagement, and which works toward supporting our communities for the better. Although these qualities do in fact benefit several people in several ways, I highlight these common portrayals as a heeding. What is important in acknowledging these characteristics, is that: yes, educators may work cooperatively, yes, children's curiosity may be nurtured, and yes, this work can benefit communities – however, they fail to illuminate a lack of critical collaboration, the realities of tensions and conflicts in life, the unfair working conditions of educators, and the muted voices of educators, children and families. Education is not an innocent field. Yet, systems and powers have numbed those associated with the field in having the ability to shift the facades of normality.

The purpose of this paper is to summon the voice of ECE; to explore how the concepts of leadership and advocacy have provoked me to think about ECE as an attainable site for leadership. I truly believe that we cannot create change without first acknowledging what has shaped our current way of being. After a sharing brief reflection of my own struggle of embodying leadership in ECE, the first part of this paper will examine the social, historical, and political influences that have developed deeply embedded 'norms' within ECE. The second part of the paper will highlight a shift which emphasizes criticality and new understandings; questioning what we want education to look like and why leadership is crucial for ECE. Furthermore, demonstrating some of the various ways in which leadership and advocacy can live in ECE.

## ***An Aha Moment***

Recently I experienced a moment where I was called within myself to decide what education, specifically early childhood education, meant to me; and my role in it. Two of my peers led a presentation which addressed the poor staff retention in ECE. At the end of their presentation, they asked the class two questions: how many of us were continuing beyond the degree program to pursue a different career (ECE essentially as a stepping stone in our career paths), and how many of us planned on staying in the field of ECE



(Contemporary Issues in ECCE, March 1, 2018). Admittedly, I had entered the bachelor program almost two years ago as a means to eventually teach in the public-school system. I could not see myself working in a field that was undervalued, offered poor wages and little to no benefits. I, like many others, was on the pursuit of job security for my future. Yet, when asked this question, I hesitated. It was as I watched majority of my classmates raise their hands in recognition of their future departure from ECE when I had my ‘aha moment’. With three others, I raised my hand with uncertainty and at the same time a revived passion; *I am* planning on staying in the field of ECE. If not us four, who will be the advocates for this meaningful field of work?

### ***Shaping of the Current***

Addressing the social, historical, and political influences that have shaped the conditions of ECE today is extremely important. It begins to unravel the complicated and intertwined ways of being an educator; particularly in Western society. When questioned in a study about advocacy in ECE, an educator made the following remark: “I don’t think childcare people make good advocates because they’re too nice, and you know, our people are first of all caregivers...” (Macdonald, Richardson, & Langford, 2015, p. 106). This brief statement validates the need for troubling conventional norms. Whether this educator was aware of it or not, they were perpetuating embedded discourses that silence leadership in ECE.

Unfortunately, the quoted educator is not the only one who does not see a place for leadership and advocacy in ECE. Several educators find such topics impertinent to the job (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013). It is due to discourses such as, the ‘discourse of niceness’ and an ‘ethic of care,’ that has hindered the ability for educators to shift away from the confines of conformity (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013). Working within the discourse of niceness limits educators’ capacity to discern alternative ways of being. It avoids the messiness and tensions of life, enforces that leadership can only be executed by particular titles or powers, and removes space for educators to engage in critical dialogue (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013; Woodrow & Busch, 2008). Hard and Jónsdóttir (2013) point out a ‘shame and blame’ culture which segregates educators to their occupational roles, rather than utilizing the diversity of various work backgrounds and knowledges. By succumbing to these passive roles, educators sustain the stereotype that the field of ECE is a women’s job; that these

‘feminine’ qualities of being caring nurturers should be the capacity of our conduct (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013; Vintimilla, 2014; Woodrow & Busch, 2008).

Acker (as cited in Ailwood, 2008) asserts that, “maternal imagery is very strong in discussions of teachers and teaching and has deep historical roots” (p. 162). Historically, the notions of feminism and maternalism not only informed how educators taught children, but it also shaped how women themselves were taught to be educators; requesting that women be aware of and awaken their “natural motherly instincts” (Ailwood, 2008, p. 159). These idealisms have led to position women within the, “pink ghetto” of ECE and consequentially the view of women in the greater society (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013). It is not by accident that the work of early childhood educators is undervalued (Ailwood, 2008). In another study, a female participant commented that, “I don’t think that we are very good at putting ourselves forward and being competent. It’s almost like it’s a dirty word leadership...it is just something that people see as containing too much ego” (Hard as cited in Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013, p. 313). The understanding of leadership existing through the portrayal of masculine qualities is another reason as to why leadership is restricted in ECE; because ECE is an occupation for gentle, nurturing women, leadership is not suitable (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013). As a consequence of leadership being portrayed as egocentric and masculine, for the women who do challenge and critique, others often feel threatened or attacked by the ‘malicious’ and ‘aggressive’ attitude.

Evidently, the mentioned discourses have made prominent configurations to what ECE should look like; many of the mentioned discourses relate in some extent to neoliberalism. Sims (2017) prompts that, “neoliberalism has become so entrenched in our thinking that for many, there is no alternative: it is simply the way the world operates” (p. 2). This is an alarming statement. Especially considering that the focus of neoliberal order is to hegemonize and govern citizens (Vintimilla, 2014). How does education then ‘operate’ in a neoliberalism system? Neoliberal order revolts nonconformist behaviours and uses education systems as a production line with performance-based outcomes; which is difficult to comprehend considering education used to be for the purpose of fostering active participants in society (Duhn, 2010; Sims, 2017). Focusing on school readiness through measurable standards in order to generate future economic contributors, children who are not meeting these standards are placed in a deficit position, along with their families (Duhn, 2010; McTavish, 2012; Sims, 2017). Through this, educators are then in a position of conducting and monitoring progressions towards future “success”; and that is it. With increasing corporatization of early childhood settings, educators are considered as “experts in one thing only: teaching” (Duhn, 2010, p. 52). This system strips educators from any agency within their own field and develops teachers and teaching methods that neglect the diversity of beings; it deems universal and measurable practices apt methods for education



(Duhn, 2010; Woodrow & Busch, 2008). By not critiquing neoliberal order, we as educators are then “accepting that the best possible outcomes for children involve shaping them into a particular mold; ensuring they all learn what is defined in the standardized curriculum; and creating a future for them where they will function as uncritical neoliberal consumers...” (Sims, 2017, p. 8). It is because of these suppressing powers that educators

must embody leadership. Being an educator is not a place to be passive; educators indeed demonstrate forms of leadership every day, however these societal influences have distressed educators in believing that leadership looks differently (Woodrow & Busch, 2008).

### ***What is Education?***

I put forward the question, what is education, inspired by Coulter & Wiens (1999), in an effort to call educators into collaborative inquiry. We cannot assert leadership and advocacy in ECE if we do not have an understanding of what we are advocating for. Currently the education system is perpetuating inequity. For example, “at risk” children and families who do not fit within predetermined ‘norms’ are treated unjustly based on the way the system operates (Sims, 2017). Without leadership and advocacy in education, even new graduates of ECE will be shaped neoliberally with as Henry Giroux (as cited in Sims, 2017) claims a, “pedagogy of ignorance whose hidden curriculum is the teaching of political and intellectual conformity” (p. 3). Curriculum “becomes a recipe” (McTavish, 2012, p. 9) and educators conduct merely “blanket practices” (Sims, 2017, p. 4). With these social injustices thriving through the education system, it is imperative for change to occur. To take a ‘risk’. Biesta (2016) contends that, “if we take the risk out of education, there is a real chance that we take out education altogether” (p. 1). Rather than viewing one another based on generalizations or seeking to find harmonious compliance, recognizing and appreciating the ambivalence of *human* beings; acknowledging the value in the entanglements and tensions (Biesta, 2016; Coulter & Wiens, 1999; Giugni, 2011). This shift is not a simple task and upholds the need for leadership and advocacy. Coulter & Wiens (2010) offer the following consideration:

Canadians must decide what kind of society they want to create and what kind of

education is consistent with that society. In this task, educational leaders have critical roles, not to define visions, or create artificial consensus or manipulate public opinion, but to bring communities together to discuss what is good and worthwhile. We need people to begin such debate by suggesting possibilities, listening carefully to others and moving the conversation along. (p. 7)

### ***Leadership and Advocacy in ECE***

As mentioned, education currently operates as a system that considers children as ‘investments’ for the future; increasing corporatization strategies to curriculum (McTavish, 2012; Woodrow & Busch, 2008). This system directly affects children and families, it affects the professional identity of educators, and it maintains inequitable norms. There is an urgent need for leadership and advocacy in ECE. If corporations continue to expand in the field, who will be the voice for children and families as educators fade into the background? As Coulter & Wiens, (1999) point out, “we need people who are attempting to be clearer about what they are trying to do. We need *educational* leaders” (p. 7).

In order for leadership to develop in ECE settings, we must critically revise the current discourses of leadership and recognize that leadership lives in everyday practice in a variety of forms; thus, engaging the ‘activist professional’ (Woodrow & Busch, 2008). As of right now, “leadership lacks its own identity;” (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013; Woodrow & Busch, 2008, p. 86) its restrained definition reflects the absence of it. Educators are not incorporating or acknowledging forms of activism, despite their lives being directly impacted (Macdonald et al., 2015). The activist professional challenges the discourses of leadership and utilizes the diverse leadership qualities of others; this in the pursuit of new perceptions of ECE (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013; Woodrow & Busch, 2008).

Woodrow & Busch (2008) suggest that, “to prepare new teachers to be activist professionals requires teacher education programs to be based on critical pedagogies which challenge solidified beliefs about what constitutes good practice” (p. 91). Educators and those who train future educators can manifest leadership through continuous questioning. Asking questions such as: “what are we doing, why are we doing this, what is it like for the children when we do this, are we achieving what we set out to achieve, are there other ways we could try?” (Sims, 2017, p. 7). Duhn (2010) adds that embracing characteristics, for instance, critical thinking, collaborative dialogue and risk taking, creates a professional



identity that concurrently establishes an array of curricula and pedagogical approaches which reflect the multiplicity of human beings. These shifts in educators' thinking and methods, enables the professionalism of the sector to be a form of advocacy in itself (Duhn, 2010).

Although any step towards an advancement in leadership and advocacy in ECE is valuable, collaborative effort is crucial for significant change to occur. It is not restricted to educational colleagues; it can extend to include children, families, and communities. Collaboration advocates for social justice; by collaborating with children, educators can then adapt curriculum and pedagogies according to children's unique and diverse abilities (Sims, 2017). It is also not limited to exclusively finding a consensus amongst a group; alternatively, positioning ourselves in the tensions and uncertainties (Giugni, 2011). Hard and Jónsdóttir (2013) describe collaborative leadership as, "a stance of nonjudgmental inquiry, is receptive to the critical scrutiny of others, and assumes the view that something new or unique might arise for a dialogue that could reconstruct the participants view of reality" (p. 321).

As educational leaders, educators need to continuously be accountable and reflective of their practice. Coulter & Wiens (1999) state that, "how teachers teach becomes part of what they teach; how leaders lead becomes part of what their followers learn" (p. 6). We need to be aware of prejudices, essentializing discourses, and our perceptions of education. The concept of knowledge, for example, can be interpreted and used as a quantifiable resource of measuring abilities. Alternatively, knowledge as meaning making can "contribute new understandings of what professionalism in education may look like if it becomes the continuous process of experiencing the teaching self in its relation to the world" (Duhn, 2010, p. 56). Another example of a seemingly comprehensible concept is the use of language. Without continuously engaging in reflective and critical practices, educators may be unknowingly using languages that perpetuate discourses, stereotypes, and social injustice (McTavish, 2012). The concepts just mentioned, knowledge and language, are two of the endless variety of aspects we as educators incorporate in our daily practice. How we approach and utilize these concepts offer possible tools for advocacy.

Leadership in ECE advocates the revision of believing children are growing within particular expectations or roles, to viewing children as active participants in the world (Giugni, 2011). As leaders who have made the personal choice to work with young children, we have the responsibility to do just that – work *with* them. As Hard and Jónsdóttir (2013) state, ECE should be, "a children's place and public forum, where children and adults meet and which are capable of many projects and many possibilities: social, cultural, economic,



political, aesthetic, ethical, etc., some predetermined, others not predicted at all” (p. 322). ECE as a public space puts forward movements that cannot be bound to the walls of a centre. It engages children to question and critically think about their place in this world, able to initiate transformation. Giugni (2011) expresses, “...I saw children as *producers* of their social worlds in complex activist ways, rather than in ways that appear limited to ‘participat[ing] fully and actively in society’ as it exists and as perhaps they exist” (p. 15).

The ways in which leadership and advocacy can manifest in ECE are unlimited. As discussed, some of the actions include: using critical pedagogies for training new educators and as a method of self-reflective practice (Duhn, 2010; Sims, 2017; Woodrow & Busch, 2008); engaging in collaborative leadership that embodies complexities and diversity (Giugni, 2011; Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013; Sims, 2017); utilizing daily conceptions as advocacy tools (Duhn, 2010; McTavish, 2012); and promoting children as active participants in their world and shaping ECE as a public forum (Giugni, 2011; Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013). These opportunities for advocacy are not finite. Other methods can include the use of pedagogical narration (Berger, 2015), participation in the transference of policies to practice (Sims, 2017), even just the seemingly simple act of *listening* to children (Davies, 2011).

### ***The Voice(s) of ECE***

Throughout this pursuit of addressing the possibility and need for ECE to be a space for leadership and advocacy, I mentioned the muted voices of educators, children and families. As a fellow educator, Braidotti (2016) signifies that, “...I believe firmly that my task is to fight untruths and injustices with the instrument of critical reason, but also by speaking truth to power both in classrooms, and in the public sphere” (p. 3). We must work in partnership with one another to create changes for public spaces and social justice. From the small step of working ethically every day, to engaging publicly about the concerns of the ECE sector or considering ECE as a long-term career and livelihood rather than a stepping stone (Macdonald et al., 2015); leadership and advocacy is possible... *we have a voice*.

### ***Conclusion***



Braidotti (2016) states that, “critique and creation work hand-in-hand” (p. 4). I am hopeful that through examining the ‘norms’ of ECE and their origins, questioning our purpose, and by offering a variety of ways leadership and advocacy can exist in ECE; the voice of ECE was summoned. A lack of leadership and advocacy in ECE affects everyone. It affects how we build communities and what conversations we have with one another. On top of that, it affects: the amount of agency we allow children to have in public space, the families we work with, the professional development and work conditions of educators, and the injustices that continue to live through practice. It requires a sustained effort to critically analyze our world. It is a movement which contends for equity; acknowledging the entanglements of life and viewing each other through our abilities and potential. It is something which we, in reality, often demonstrate each day; by staying in the field, working in an ethical manner, and allowing children to have a voice. Now we must recognize and strengthen these meaningful acts. Leadership and advocacy are attainable in Early Childhood Education.

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*Ligaya's professional interests include: building collaborative relationships between Nature and education, reconceptualizing embedded norms that exist in the field, and committing to the engagement of advocacy and leadership in early childhood education.*