

## Node-ified Ethics: Contesting Codified Ethics as Unethical in ECEC in Ontario

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### Abstract

In this conceptual article, I argue that there is a difference between codified ethics and the ethical. I begin by situating code of ethics in the broader professionalization movement in early childhood education. Drawing upon Gunilla Dahlberg and Peter Moss (2005), I discuss the dematerialization of early childhood educators (ECEs) and the instrumentalization of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ontario through the implementation of the Code of Ethics by the College of Early Childhood Education (2017). Thinking with Eve Tuck's (2018) question of "How shall we live?" (p. 157), I take up a critical invitation from Sharon Todd (2003) to consider how codified ethics in education may be rethought "as a relation across difference" (p. 2). I work conceptually with the imagery of nodes from the film *Sleep Dealer* by Alex Rivera (2008) as an aesthetic device to examine the effect of codified ethics on ECEs. Finally, in conversation with Joanna Zylińska (2014) and Tim Ingold (2011), I re-frame instrumentalized nodes/codes of ethics within the complexity of knots and meshworks to recover the ethical in early childhood education. I offer this piece as a warning that solely relying on codified ethics completes the transformation of the ECE into a worker technician and may be leading us toward a dystopian future and as a call to activism to engage in the complex ethical work required in the small everyday spaces of the early childhood classroom.

*Keywords:* early childhood education, codified ethics, ethical, nodes, dematerialization, instrumentalization



## **Node-ified Ethics: Contesting Codified Ethics as Unethical in ECEC in Ontario**

Are codes of ethics ethical? Some argue that the reduction of ethics into universalized moral rules favours a scientific and technical rationality for solving problems over an ethical and political response to issues encountered in daily human and more-than human relations (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Todd, 2003). I begin this article by situating code of ethics in the broader professionalization movement in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Though codes of ethics are common in ECEC, emerging out of the broader professionalization movement in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada (Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario, 2008; Australian Early Childhood Association, 1990; College of ECE, 2017; Early Education, 2011; Feeney & Kipnis, 1989; The Office of Early Childhood Education, 2022), regulatory bodies, such as the College of ECE in Ontario, are rare. The rarity of regulatory bodies in ECEC means that they have not been explicitly included in critiques of the instruments of professionalization, nor in advocacy regarding regulation of the sector. In this article, I contest the ethical as described in codes of ethics both generally and specifically as they have become legally enforceable in the ECEC sector in Ontario through the establishment of the College of ECE (2017). Thinking with Eve Tuck's (2018) question of "How shall we live?" (p. 157) and a critical invitation from Sharon Todd (2003), I consider how ethics in education might be "rethought together as a relation across difference" (p. 2). Drawing upon Gunilla Dahlberg and Peter Moss (2005), I discuss the dematerialization of early childhood educators (ECEs) and the instrumentalization of ECEC in Ontario through the implementation of the Code of Ethics by the College of Early Childhood Education. I engage in a speculative critique of codified ethics located within a regulatory body by invoking the imagery of nodes in Alex Rivera's (2008) film *Sleep Dealer*.<sup>1</sup> The film depicts a violent techno-rational step into a dystopian future where workers are connected to a network through cables and wires inserted into their bodies via nodes. I work conceptually with the idea of nodes, depicted in the film as points of connection in a network, to present a haunting metaphor for the dematerializing and instrumentalizing effects of codified ethics on ECEs, and in conversation with Joanna Zylinska (2014) and Tim Ingold (2011), I reframe instrumentalized nodes/codes of ethics within the complexity of knots and meshworks to recover the ethical in early childhood education. I offer this speculative piece as both a warning against the instrumentalization of ECEs and a call to activism to reposition ethics as a relational practice in ECEC and to reclaim the imagery of nodes/knots as points of ethical relations (Ingold, 2011; Zylinska, 2014).

### **Codes of Ethics and the ECE Professionalization Movement**

During the late 1980s and early 1990s movements to professionalize ECEC were gaining momentum across Europe, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (Cannella, 1997; Langford et al., 2013; Osgoode, 2006; Popkewitz, 1994; Saracho & Spodek, 1993; Urban et al., 2012). Professionalization in ECEC was driven by a number of factors including, but not limited to, an increasing demand for the accountability of ECEs by the public and the struggle by ECEs themselves for better wages and working conditions as well as the recognition of ECEC as professional work (Cannella, 1997; Langford et al., 2013; Osgoode, 2006; Popkewitz, 1994; Saracho & Spodek, 1993; Urban et al., 2012). In the mid-20th century, in Canada and the U.S. specifically, the proliferation of child study and child development theories began to form the foundations of preservice training programs for ECEs (Cannella, 1997), which further contributed other strategies of professionalization such as certification, credentialing and licensing of ECEs and ECEC programs (AECEO, 2010; Saracho & Spodek, 1993). The creation of codes of ethics

also emerged out of this movement toward professionalization and were intended to provide guidance and consistency for ECEs in navigating the moral and ethical dilemmas they grappled with in their everyday work with young children and families (AECA, 1990; Early Education, 2011; NAEYC, 1998; see also Feeney & Kipnis 1989; Katz, 1984; The Office of Early Childhood Education, 2022).

ECEs in Ontario, like their counterparts internationally, have historically suffered from low wages and poor working conditions including a lack of respect, job security, and benefits (Child Care Sector Human Resources Council, 2013; Doherty et al., 2000). Achieving professional status, it was hoped, would address these issues and bring about better wages and working conditions for ECEs (Langford et al., 2013; Urban et al., 2012). As the professional association for ECEs since 1950, the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) has been actively working toward the professionalization of ECEs through certification, credentialing, and professional development as well as actively advocating for the recognition ECEs in the form of professional pay and decent work conditions (AECEO, 2016; Langford et al., 2013). The AECEO developed its own code of ethics in 1982, which was revised in 1994 and distributed to all licensed childcare programs in Ontario (AECEO, 2010). Two years later, the AECEO campaigned and proposed legislation for the establishment of a regulatory body. Claims put forward by the AECEO suggested that a regulatory body would realize the goal of “legislative recognition” of ECEC as a profession and, therefore, was expected to naturally translate into professional pay and better working conditions (AECEO, 2010, p. 21). Though the AECEO’s attempt to pass their bill for a regulatory body was unsuccessful in the Ontario Legislature, they continued to lobby for a College of ECE and in the meantime voluntarily assumed the role of a regulatory body for ECEs predominantly through their certification process (AECEO, 2010).

In 2007, the College of ECE was finally established in Ontario. The first of its kind, this regulatory body ushered in a new era of professionalization signaling progress and promise for ECEs in Ontario. With the creation of the College of ECE a new code of ethics was introduced. Like its predecessor, the College of ECE’s code of ethics outlined ECEs’ moral and ethical responsibilities to children, families, colleagues, the profession, the community, and the public (College of ECE, 2017, p. 7). Alongside the code of ethics, the College of ECE also introduced six standards of practice: Standard I: Caring and Responsive Relationships, Standard II Curriculum and Pedagogy, Standard III: Safety Health and Well-being, Standard IV: Professionalism and Leadership, Standard V: Professional Boundaries, Dual Relationships, and Conflicts of Interest, and Standard VI: Confidentiality, Release of Information and Duty to Report. Each standard has three sections that outline the principles, knowledge, and practices required of ECEs in their practice as professionals (College of ECE, 2017, pp. 8-20).

The role of the College of ECE in establishing professional status for ECEs, however, is often misunderstood. It does not provide any direct benefits to ECEs themselves but rather indirectly raises the professional status of ECEs through its mandate to protect the public and to maintain the integrity of the profession (College of ECE, 2017). In exchange for the right to practice as and use the protected title of Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE), RECEs must not only abide by the College of ECE’s Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, but they must also meet the minimum requirements of a 2-year college diploma in Early Childhood Education at an accredited college or university, pay annual professional dues comparable to Ontario Certified Teachers (Ontario College of Teachers, 2022), and demonstrate evidence of their continuous professional learning (CPL).

While most codes of ethics in ECEC act as prescriptions for what professionals should and should not do, the location of a code of ethics in a regulatory body necessitates legal sanctions as consequences for non-compliance. Lichtenberg (1996) argued that codes of ethics do not necessarily require sanctions; however, when they do, they, in fact, contradict the true meaning of ethics because they impose external motives for acting ethically. This is evident in the way the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice as well as the other professional requirements mentioned are enforced by the College of ECE. RECEs are held accountable through a public registry, random audits of their continuous professional learning portfolios, and disciplinary processes and potential consequences, such as losing their license to practice, related to reported violations of the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice.

Initially seen as a victory in the fight for professional recognition of ECEs, the establishment of the College of ECE has arguably failed to deliver that promise. Instead of an improvement in ECEs' wages and working conditions, RECEs now face increased expectations and accountability, tighter surveillance, and more serious consequences for not meeting expectations. The AECEO itself acknowledges and identifies the discrepancy between the increase in professional expectations of RECEs and the corresponding lack of improvement in wages and working conditions as the "professionalization gap" (AECEO, 2016, p. 2). The irony is that the push for professionalization has come from educators and advocates. In their desire for change, educators have welcomed and even advocated for more training, certification, licensing, credentialing, and even regulations, such as codes of ethics, in the hopes that raising the status of the profession would also result in raise in their pay, improved working conditions and more respect to the profession (Langford et al., 2013).

This should come as no surprise, however. Though the struggle for professionalization, and the idea of what professionalism means in ECEC, has been important and critical for the feminist movement, it also has its critics. In 1997, Gaile Cannella prophetically wrote, "One can understand why women would hope that professionalization would lead to advanced status, respect, and more pay. However, professionalism has actually fostered the patriarchal, modernist notion of control and rationality" (p. 147). Jayne Osgood (2006) referred to this as the "regulatory gaze" (p. 5), pointing out that professionalism is a masculinist construct that cannot account for the emotionality of the work that educators do in caring for young children and where emotionality has no exchange value. Thus, when professionalism's patriarchal logics are applied to a feminized profession the result is increased regulation in the form of top-down policy making and disciplinary technologies, thereby creating, as I will discuss in the next section, ECEs as technicians.

### **Contesting Codified Ethics**

My primary concern in writing this article is that while Ontario has had a code of ethics since 1982, it was not until it became legally enforceable by the College of ECE that the code of ethics has come to dominate the profession in Ontario, so much so that I wonder if we in Ontario have lost sight of the ethical in ECEC. I explore the discrepancy between codified ethics and the ethical by turning to Todd (2003) who asks the question "WHAT, OR WHERE, is ethics in relation to education?" (p. 1). For Todd (2003), codified ethics instrumentalize education, making it about having the right knowledge and applying moral codes passed down by "experts," implying that we as ordinary people do not already act ethically towards others or that we are at least committed to acting ethically towards others. Todd (2003) also asks, "And what does this say about our experts' attitudes toward the 'ordinary people' who, ostensibly, are waiting for knowledge to be bestowed upon them that they might 'become' moral?" (p. 6). For ECEs, I also ask, how does the code of

ethics instrumentalize ECEC, and how does it dematerialize the educator by implying that they become moral when they adhere to the code handed to them, a code that is enforced by the experts? Importantly, Todd (2003) also reminds us of the position of experts and education in the context of colonialism and imperialism, thereby questioning their authority in determining universal moral codes. In this article, I am interested in exploring Todd's (2003) invitation to think about how "in focusing on conditions instead of principles, codes, and rules, ethics might be considered in terms of those *moments of relationality that resist codification*" (p. 9).

Keeping Todd's questions in mind, I build on Dahlberg and Moss's (2005) extensive discussion of the instrumentalization of ECEC through the discursive-material logics of neoliberalism and psychological theories of child development and argue that the codification of ethics in ECE completes the transformation (dematerialization) of the educator into a worker-technician. According to the Oxford English dictionary, the verb *dematerialize* means "to deprive of material character or qualities; to render immaterial" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). In this article, I take up the concept of dematerialization to explore how ECEs become estranged from their relational, ethical, and emotional selves, disappearing as they are transformed into technicians through the masculinist and instrumentalizing technologies of professionalism.

I explore this transformation in conversation with the near dystopian film *Sleep Dealer* written and directed by Alex Rivera (2008) and specifically through the aesthetic device of the film's imagery of nodes and node workers from which I have derived the concept of "node-ified" ethics. I draw on the following quote by Dahlberg and Moss (2005), who described the ways that ECEs are shaped by the logics of neoliberalism and return to it again and again as I pick up its threads and weave them into my argument:

Increasingly hegemonic economic and political regimes require the formation of a particular subject, autonomous, active, flexible, response-able, a bearer of rights and responsibilities, self-governing, a practitioner of freedom. New and continuous forms of discipline and control provide ever more effective ways to form and govern this subject. The subject is inscribed with scientific knowledge and instrumental rationality, forms of knowledge and reason connected to a regulatory mode [code/node] of modernity pledged to dispense with uncertainty and ambivalence. Technical solutions are an intrinsic part of modernity's instrumental culture. (p. 59)

Guided by this quote, and images from the film, I trace the regulatory mode of codified ethics through the aesthetic device of nodes that both inscribe and form the subject of the worker/educator through the instrumentalization of the work and the dematerialization of the body. Following this, I will return to Todd (2003), in conversation with Zylińska (2014) and Ingold (2011) to recover the conditions of ethical relationality in ECEC. I position this conceptual and speculative piece as both a warning and a call to activism, while also recognizing that it is itself a moment of activism as I risk engaging in a dark critique of the College of ECE in Ontario and suggest that codified ethics may be leading toward a dystopian future (if indeed we are not already there).

### ***Sleep Dealer* by Alex Rivera**

I will now conjure the imagery of nodes as depicted in the film *Sleep Dealer* as I weave in a critique of codified ethics through Todd (2003) and Dahlberg and Moss (2005). *Sleep Dealer* (2008) is set in Tijuana Mexico in a near dystopian future where South American migrant workers no longer need to cross the border to work in the United States. Instead, through nodes surgically implanted into their bodies, workers can connect remotely to robots somewhere across the border

in the U.S. By manipulating these robots, they can pick fruit, build skyscrapers, and even take care of children.

In large warehouses, row upon row of node workers in oxygen masks and translucent contact lenses that allow them to see through the “eyes” of the robots, move in slow, pantomime-like motion manipulating their robot on the other side (see Figures 1 and 2). Nodes in the film are used as a compelling and violent techno-rational solution to the “problem” of migrant workers. Nodes offer a future of “all the work without the worker” (Rivera, 2008, 36:27). Solving the problem of the unpredictable, unreliable, uncertain worker is also the function of codified ethics where the worker/RECE becomes invisible and irrelevant so long as they perform the work and do not violate the code.

### Figure 1

*Image of the Main Character Memo as a Node Worker*



*Note.* Image from the film *Sleep Dealer* (Rivera, 2008, 39:13). Copyright 2008 by Alex Rivera. Used with permission.

**Figure 2***Image of Node Workers in a Factory*

*Note.* Image from the film *Sleep Dealer* (Rivera, 2008, 316:19). Copyright 2008 by Alex Rivera. Used with permission.

In the film, we meet the main character, Memo Cruz. He and his family are farmers in a small South American town where the government controls the water, held in a heavily guarded reservoir behind a huge dam. Memo and his father must pay for small amounts of water to take back home to water their meagre crops and to use for cooking and washing. The government is always looking out for aqua terrorists who try to steal the water. When Memo's home-made transistor radio is noticed by the government, he is mistakenly targeted as an aqua-terrorist. A drone is sent to bomb his home, killing his father. Devastated and distraught that his home-made radio caused the death of his father, Memo leaves home and heads for Tijuana. He has heard of nodes and hopes that he can become a node worker so that he can send money back home to support his family. For Memo, the idea of becoming a node worker is uncertain and yet it holds promise as the solution to his desperate situation, much like the Ontario ECE professionalization movement's desire for a College of ECE and codified ethics to solve the desperate problem of poor wages and working conditions.

We also meet Rudy Ramirez, the soldier who carries out the drone attack that kills Memo's father. In this dystopian reality, drone attacks are televised like game shows and incite viewers in the fight against aqua-terrorists. This is Rudy's first mission. He controls the drones through his own implanted nodes. The first drone attack is a direct hit on Memo's house and as his drone hovers over the burning building, Rudy watches Memo's father drag himself out of the house bloodied and broken but still alive. Memo's father looks at the drone hovering over him. The host of the show announces to the audience that it is a rare occurrence for a soldier to get a chance to look into the face of the enemy. The show host and the audience are in a frenzy as they cheer on Rudy to kill the terrorist. As Rudy looks into the pleading face of Memo's father, he realizes at the

last second that Memo's father is not a terrorist at all, but it is too late. There is too much at risk. He pulls the trigger. Deeply troubled by what he has done, Rudy seeks out Memo to make things right and, in the end (spoiler alert), Rudy uses his own node connection to blow up the dam in Memo's hometown.

What does it mean to think of both codes of ethics and nodes as “technical solutions [that] are an intrinsic part of modernity's instrumental culture” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 59)? Staying close to this description/depiction of the ECE in neoliberal times, there are a number of points of connections between the College of ECE's Code of Ethics (2017) and Rivera's (2008) nodes that I wish to explore, namely the dematerialization and instrumentalization of the ECE through the privileging of the scientific and technical over the ethical and political, through distance and the acceptance of regulation in exchange for the false promise of freedom, and through forms of discipline and violence that force compliance in exchange for the ethical and political. Or how we get “all the work without the worker” (Rivera, 2008, 36:27).

### **Dematerialization and Instrumentalization of the ECE**

#### **The Privileging of the Scientific and Technical Over the Ethical and Political**

The dematerialization of node workers bodies occurs directly with the act of having nodes implanted into their arms and upper back. The human body, as it was, disappears and is transformed into something else by the implantation of nodes, which are like electronic ports in the flesh into which needles attached to cables can be inserted. Instrumentalization happens when the cables are inserted into the nodes and connect to the Internet and to a corresponding robot somewhere in the U.S. The imagery of the dematerialization of workers' bodies in the film through the implanting of nodes (see Figures 3 and 4) can be imagined as the dematerialization of the RECE through the implanting or inscribing of scientific knowledge (child development) and instrumental rationality (neoliberal regulation) transforming the RECE into a worker-technician. Once implanted with nodes, ECEs, like node workers, can hook into the network, the machine, “[in]to a regulatory mode [node/code] of modernity” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 56), into a profession dominated by the instrumentalizing developmental and neoliberal discourses that dominate it; discourses that do not require or recognize complex ethical relationality but rather seek to eradicate the “uncertainty and ambivalence” of human and more-than-human relations (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005, p. 59) through the neutral or apolitical application of codified ethics. I also see the dematerialization of the human through nodes and codes of ethics as related to Dahlberg and Moss's (2005) de-politicization and de-ethicalization of ECEC through the privileging of the scientific and technical over the ethical and political. Taking the ethical and political to be that which makes the human *human*, means that reducing the human to the scientific and technical is in effect a dematerialization of the early childhood educator into a replaceable worker-technician. What is more, the scientific and technical also “privileges the universal over the local” (p. 56) thus dematerialization through distance becomes even more evident.



**Figure 3**

*Nodes Being Implanted Into Memo*



*Note.* Image from the film *Sleep Dealer* (Rivera, 2008, 35:02). Copyright 2008 by Alex Rivera. Used with permission.

**Figure 4**

*Connecting to the Machine via Nodes*



*Note.* Image from the film *Sleep Dealer* (Rivera, 2008, 37:29). Copyright 2008 by Alex Rivera. Used with permission.

The organization of the College of ECE's code of ethics around distinct standards is also instrumentalizing and dematerializing as it separates each standard into predetermined outcomes of achievement that operate independent of each other. Each standard is like a discreet node. Standard I: Caring and Responsive Relationships (College of ECE, 2017, pp. 8–9), for example, stands alone from all the other standards, yet it constitutes and infuses everything that a RECE does. Separating caring and responsive relationships from curriculum and pedagogy or health, safety and well-being compartmentalizes and simplifies each of these expectations within its own category, with its own set of recognizable and countable outcomes. Caring and responsive relationships, however, are difficult to quantify and are only recognizable when they are not caring or responsive. Otherwise, caring and responsive relationships are taken for granted while other standards that can be measured like curriculum and pedagogy or health, safety, and well-being are given precedence.

An ethical dilemma that has been a central question in my own experience as a RECE, and that drives my research, addresses the tensions between the expectations for curriculum and pedagogy and engaging in caring and responsive relationships with children in the everyday moments of an early childhood classroom (Johnston, 2019). Without the material support of paid planning time, I, like many RECEs, was expected to complete all the requirements for planning, documenting, and sharing documentation with families during the confines of the workday, but often ended up working outside of my paid working hours or completing paperwork while in program with children. When I made an ethical choice one summer to forego the paperwork in favour of truly being present with children and families, I was “caught” and reprimanded during a licensing inspection for not having my program plan complete. The messages I took away from this experience were that the paperwork was more important than the relationships I was engaged in, that I was not a “good” educator, and that the curriculum I was implementing did not count if it was not written down. The certainty of the paperwork outweighed the uncertainty of relationships. I had tried to unhook myself from the nodes and, therefore, became unrecognizable and unmanageable, so I was re-inscribed with compliance with the techno-rationality of the paperwork over the ethical relations.

### **Distance and the Acceptance of Regulation in Exchange for the False Promise of Freedom**

The nodes in Rivera's (2008) film work to dematerialize the human and the body in the way that the work takes place across vast distances and transforms the human into a robot on the other side. I see the “autonomous, active, flexible, response-able subject” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 59) as a dematerialized subject. In *Sleep Dealer* distance manifests as no direct human oversight of the node workers in the factory. Rather, workers are managed and regulated from a distance through technology. In much the same way the code of ethics regulates RECEs from a distance through their formation as autonomous subjects, just as I was governed from a distance through the paperwork. The images in Figure 5 depict a moment in the film when Memo sees the reflection of the robot he is controlling in a pane of glass. In this moment he realizes that he has become the machine. Similarly, I argue that RECEs reflect and are reflected by the College of ECE's code of ethics and standards of practice.

**Figure 5**

*Memo sees Himself as the Robot Reflected in a Pane of Glass*



*Note.* Images from the film *Sleep Dealer* (Rivera, 2008, 47:11 and 47:18). Copyright 2008 by Alex Rivera. Used with permission.

The formation of the subject of the RECE thus occurs as the College of ECE grants educators the right to call themselves a Registered ECE. Simultaneously RECEs become subject to the code of ethics and standards of practice in their dedication to upholding their ethical (and personal)

responsibilities to children, families, their colleagues and the profession, the community and the public. Like Todd's (2003) argument that educators become receptacles for knowledge in the form of codified ethics, as RECEs internalize the code of ethics and standards of practice governing themselves according to these codes and standards and acting autonomously within them, they come to recognize themselves and are recognizable by their knowledge of adherence to the code of ethics. Drawing on my own example again, had I continued to sacrifice the relational and less visible aspects of my work with children and families so that I could complete the material aspects of the work, I would have been recognized as a good educator (Johnston, 2019).

These forms of regulation are readily taken up as the trade-off for the freedom and promise of the technology. While nodes offer the promise of work, the code of ethics offers the promise of professionalization, creating the subject as a "bearer of rights and responsibilities, self-governing, a practitioner of freedom" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 59). The freedom that Dahlberg and Moss (2005) refer to here is a certain kind of freedom that enables the autonomous subject to exercise "freedom-as-choice, especially through competent participation in the marketplace and rights-based contractual relationships" (p. 45). This illusion of freedom, however, only works through an elaborate system of convincing the population to govern themselves. For the ECEs this elaborate system now includes a legally enforceable Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, continuous professional learning requirements, yearly professional dues, and the threat of discipline or someone reporting them to the College of ECE.

What originally prompted me to investigate the imagery of nodes in *Sleep Dealer* in relation to the code of ethics was this notion that, just as workers in the film could only work if they had nodes, ECEs in Ontario can only work and use the title of RECE, if they are registered with the College of ECE. There is a widespread misunderstanding that the College of ECE is supposed to do something for ECEs, through the recognition of their education and expertise, when in fact, as stated earlier, the mandate of the College is to "protect the public interest and the integrity of the early childhood education profession," not the professional. Again, it states that "no person shall engage in the practice of early childhood education or hold himself or herself out as able to do so unless the person holds a certificate of registration issued under this Act" (College of ECE, 2017, p. 3). In other words, I speculate that in a dystopian reality that this could easily be read as one must have nodes to work as a RECE.

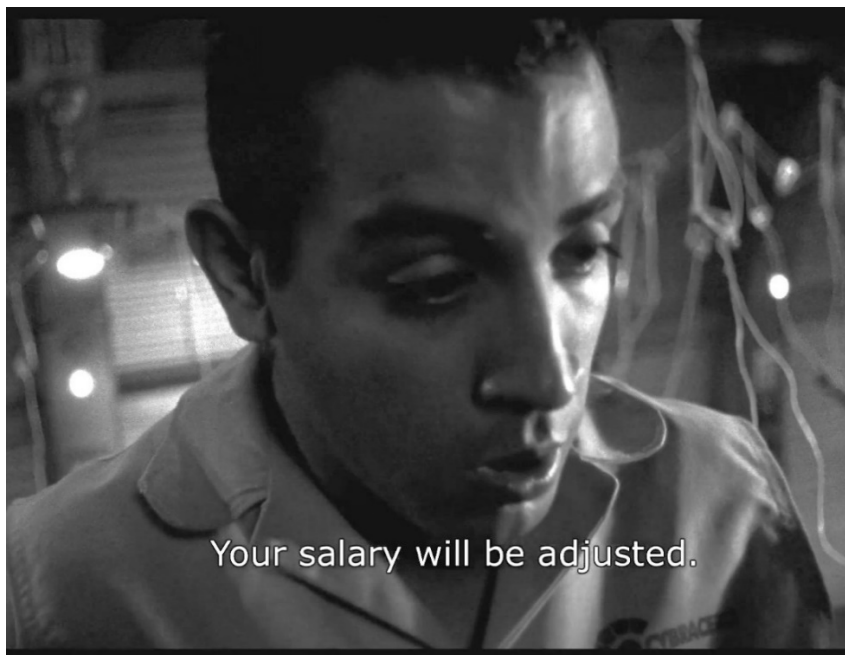
### **Forms of Discipline and Violence That Force Compliance**

Finally, once dematerialized, node workers/ECEs become surveillable, punishable, and replaceable through the very connections that legitimize their work. Node workers in the film are docked pay if the network detects a pause in their productivity (see Figure 6). When Memo nearly passes out from over work and exhaustion, he is startled awake by an electronic voice telling him that he has been inactive for 10 seconds and his salary will be adjusted. Node workers are also susceptible to infection and possibly fatal surges of electricity that may feedback from the network/machine into their bodies through the nodes. Similarly, ECEs are highly susceptible to illness especially during COVID when working with unvaccinated children. When a node worker is no longer able to work, they are unhooked, and another takes their place. Indeed, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) noted that nation states must cultivate a "ready supply of suitable labour – flexible, responsive, skillful" (p. 49) to remain competitive global markets, recognizing preschools as technologies that maintain current labour participation and foster future human and social capital. Strikingly, Rivera's (2008) imagery of nodes and node workers in factories eerily echoes Dahlberg and Moss's (2005) use of the metaphor of the factory to describe early childhood programs

rendered by neoliberalism as services rather than educational spaces. They noticed how “the concept understands institutions as places for applying technologies to children to produce predetermined, normative outcomes, for the efficient processing of children by workers-as-technicians” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 28).

### Figure 6

*Memo’s Productivity is Monitored by the Network/Machine.*



*Note.* Images from the film *Sleep Dealer* (Rivera, 2008, 1:06:28 and 1:06:37). Copyright 2008 by Alex Rivera. Used with permission.

RECEs, subject to the code of ethics, are always under surveillance by the College of ECE through their annual professional dues and through random audits of their professional learning portfolios. RECEs are also surveilled by the public through the public registry of members in good standing, and by their supervisors and colleagues. Every RECE under Standard IV: Professionalism and Leadership is responsible to “report professional misconduct, incompetence and incapacity of colleagues which could create a risk to the health or well-being of children or others to the appropriate authorities” by their colleagues (College of ECE, 2017, p. 15). This standard opens a lot of grey areas and exposes the non-neutrality of codified ethics, where racism, for example, can seep into personal and professional judgements. Recall Todd’s (2003) warning that the moral authority in determining codes of ethics is founded in colonial and imperial ideals.

In my own experience of being reprimanded for not having completed my paperwork during a licensing inspection, I faced considerably mild punishment; however, I was aware that it could have been worse had I not been protected by being in a unionized position. Punishment such as the suspension of one’s right to practice can also occur because an RECE has not paid their professional dues on time, or they have not completed their expectations for Continuous Professional Learning (CPL), or they have falsely claimed to be a Registered ECE. For RECEs who continue to make low wages paying yearly professional dues can be a financial strain. As well the expectations for CPL require time to engage in some form of learning that may or may not be paid for, or that either requires time outside of working hours or time off work to complete. The process of documenting one’s CPL is also a time-consuming process that is not supported within the paid workday. In essence, the expectations on RECEs for maintaining their professional status directly impacts them financially. When RECEs are working on their own time, they are essentially lowering their wages even more, whereas registering as an RECE is meant to significantly increase wages.

As for replaceability, we are currently witnessing a retention crisis in the ECE workforce in Ontario (Jones, 2022b) due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its exacerbation of the historic and systemic issues of poor wages and working conditions. The response has been to increase recruitment—simply train and replace a new set of workers. Billions of dollars have been poured into compressed college programs and free tuition for ECE students (for example see Durham College, 2022; George Brown College, 2022), while the current wage floor for ECEs has been announced at \$18.00 an hour, well below what ECEs who work in Full Day Kindergarten make and well below what is needed to have a livable wage in Ontario (Jones, 2022a). If RECEs are simply replaceable then the transformation of the RECE into the worker technician is complete. The ethical educator is not needed to be present, only a dematerialized body that adheres to the “new and continuous forms of discipline and control [that] provide ever more effective ways to form and govern this subject” (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005, p. 59). All the work without the worker. Is this how we shall live?

### **Rethinking the Ethical**

I return now to Todd (2003) and her concern with rethinking ethics and education as an ethical relationality. What Todd (2003) means is that we must not solely rely on an epistemological understanding of ethics in education, an ethics based on having the right moral knowledge and applying it to the knowability of the Other through categorizing their social and material position in relation to intersecting forms oppression. Rather, education and educators must also take up a philosophical understanding of the Other. Todd (2003) refers specifically to Levinas’s concept of the Other as a radical alterity with whom we are already in ethical relationality. How is ethical

relationality already an orientation that punctures the codified standard of caring and responsive relationships? How might embodying this ethical relationality re-materialize the ECE?

In *Sleep Dealer*, Rudy Ramirez, the soldier and drone operator who kills Memo's father, thinking that he is killing an aqua-terrorist, is confronted with the ontological otherness of Memo's father when he looks into his face (see Figure 7). This moment creates uncertainty for Rudy that he cannot reconcile. While the expectations of his employment are that he carries out orders in destroying the enemy, once he is confronted with the face of the Other as a radical alterity and *not* as an enemy (even though in the moment of seeing the face of the Other, he does follow orders), he is deeply troubled by his actions which he now experiences as unethical.

### Figure 7

*Rudy Looks Into the Face of Memo's Father.*



*Note.* Images from the film *Sleep Dealer* (Rivera, 2008, 16:16 and 16:31). Copyright 2008 by Alex Rivera. Reprinted with permission.

Rudy's next actions answer this question. No longer able to comply with the expectations of the system, Rudy is compelled to make an ethical choice to use his nodes, his connections to the system, to subvert it. Together with Memo, he sneaks into the node factory, connects to his drones, and uses them to blow up the dam in Memo's village (see Figure 8). This act brings relief and access to water for everyone in Memo's village. Though this act brings more uncertainty for Rudy's future, it also brings hope and a way of living well together. So, "what happens to ethics and [early childhood] education when learning is not about understanding the other but about a relation to otherness prior to understanding?" (Todd, 2003, p. 9). How might we recover nodes as a way of enacting ethical relations like the way Rudy uses his nodes to act ethically in relation to the Other? Again, Todd (2003) invited us to think about how "conditions instead of principles, codes, and rules, ethics might be considered in terms of those *moments of relationality that resist codification*" (p. 9). What are these conditions in ECEC?

### Figure 8

*Blowing up the Dam.*



*Note.* Image from the film *Sleep Dealer* (Rivera, 2008, 1:22:11). Copyright 2008 by Alex Rivera. Reprinted with permission.

In *Sleep Dealer*, blowing up the dam is a moment of relationality that resists codification. Rudy knows that killing Memo's father was unethical even though it was sanctioned by the state, and he was lauded as a hero for killing an aqua-terrorist. Blowing up the dam is an ethical act that defies the status quo and the disciplinary technologies of the government. It is extremely risky and in fact Rudy must leave Tijuana and go into hiding. He can no longer be a soldier; he can no longer



work. At the same time, it creates conditions for an ethical relationality between Memo and Rudy that extends beyond them to Memo's family and his village. Likewise, my choice to be present with children and families was also a moment of relationality that resisted the codification of writing the program plan. Time and support were the resources being held behind a dam. In the neoliberal and patriarchal context of professionalism in ECE, not having paid planning time meant that I was expected to do more with less time and support and constantly worked against my ethical commitment to cultivate caring and responsive relationships with children and families. This is the reality for many RECEs currently and even more so with the increased expectations for cleaning and sanitizing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It may be why RECEs are leaving the profession and why preservice students are choosing to bypass this profession and use their college training as a stepping stone to somewhere else. For me, not doing the program plan and writing this article are small moments of blowing up the dam, of resisting the codified identity of professionalism. It is risky. However, the current masculinist construction of professionalism is also risky and harmful. There is too much at stake not to take the risk. Ethical relations require time and are not quantifiable. How then do we reconceptualize professionalism in ECE as ethical relations? Materially RECEs need to have paid time in their workday to collaborate with each other about what this means in their own situated contexts. They also need other ways of thinking about their work and valuing the ethical relations they engage in every day.

In considering how we might recover nodes as conditions for ethical relations, I draw on Zylinska's (2014) work to think about how nodes are a network of relations in conversation with Ingold's (2011) concepts of meshworks and knots. Zylinska (2014) was concerned about how we live in the context of the Anthropocene, this geologic time that we are currently living in as one that has been greatly impacted by human interaction, and that warnings of an oncoming dystopian, ruined future. In response, Zylinska (2014) argued for a minimal ethics that hinges on a repositioning of the human from a place of supremacy, predicated on scientific ontologies that claim certainty in knowledge, and that use knowledge to create technological rationalities to justify their degradation of the planet, to a place of human singularity that acknowledges our actions as contingent and consequential. From this place of singularity, Zylinska (2014) invited us as humans to see ourselves as situated always and already in relation to the processes of matter and time that extend beyond our capacity to comprehend them.

Zylinska (2014) thought about the human as "an entangled and dynamically constituted node in the network of relations to whom an address is being made and upon whom an obligation is being placed, and who is thus made-temporarily-singular precisely via this address" (p. 74). This conceptualization of a node is different from the intentional function of nodes in *Sleep Dealer* in that it invites uncertainty, ambivalence, and complexity in its singularity. It resists codification. The instance when Rudy looks into the face of Memo's father a node is created that did not exist before. It was not predetermined. Memo's father addresses Rudy who is obligated in that moment to respond to the radical alterity of the Other. Even though he does not act ethically in this moment, the obligation to make things right drives him to use his position as a node in the network to respond to the address.

Further, Zylinska (2014) reconceptualized nodes from a techno-rationality into a relational ethics by reconceptualizing the network not as a dematerializing system of cables leading to somewhere, but as a network of relations. Rudy, Memo, and Memo's father form a network of relations operating within and outside of the techno-rationality of the network. Referring again to my own experience shared earlier, I think about how the ethical choice I made to engage deeply

in a network of relations with children and families was a response to the address placed on me by the Other, and how it also created nodes of ethical relationality in the network that were unrecognizable to the licensing inspector.

Zylinska's (2014) use of the word *network* in relation to the concept of a node, however, still echoes a sense of the scientific and technical. I want to trouble further this by intersecting with Ingold's (2011) thinking of meshwork and knots to reposition and situate nodes as more than static and organized points of connection. For Ingold (2011) networks evoked images of efficient points of connection that one can be connected to and may be entered into from various points or nodes in the network. A meshwork, however, is much less organized, technical, and predictable than the concept of a network suggests. Ingold (2011) also envisioned a meshwork as storied and thus relational:

It is a world of movement and becoming, in which any thing—caught at a particular place and moment—enfolds within its constitution the history of relations that have brought it there. In such a world, we can understand the nature of things only by attending to their relations, or in other words, by telling their stories. Indeed, the things of this world *are* their stories, identified not by fixed attributes but by their paths of movement in an unfolding field of relations. Each is the focus of ongoing activity. Thus, in the storied world, things do not exist, they occur. Where things meet, occurrences intertwine, as each becomes bound up in the other's story. (p. 199)

Ingold's (2011) meshwork conjures sensorial images of looped and knotted string or rope entangled together and instead of nodes he thought with knots. In fact, node and knot both originate from the Latin *nodus* (Etymology online, n.d.). Where a node is a point of connection in a network that one can connect into (and disconnect from) as illustrated in the imagery in *Sleep Dealer* (2008), a knot in a meshwork gives the feeling of a deeper processual permanence. The meshwork is created through the making of knots and/as stories in and with the work. The human is thus repositioned in relation with the storied knots in the meshwork. The human's place in the meshwork is also contingent on their relations and the stories that are woven together through their relations. In this way the meshwork then makes space for "uncertainty and ambivalence" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 56) as well as for variability and unpredictability. To create a meshwork requires trust and "relations across difference" (Todd, 2003, p. 3) that respond to the ethical and political in human and more-than human relations. What would it mean to recognize the knotted and storied meshworks in ECE that interrupt coded and technical networks? Or to take up Dahlberg and Moss's (2005) concept of "children's spaces" or "meeting places ... where the coming together of children and adults, the being and thinking beside each other, offers many possibilities" (p. 28), as not just physical spaces but also social, cultural, and discursive spaces where stories are woven together into the fabric of democracy. Might it reassert the ethical into early childhood practice as professionalism?

Everyday ECEs encounter the radical alterity and otherness of the children and families they share spaces with. They are story tellers with children and families, attuned to and continuously co-creating conditions of relationality and care, yet the storied meshworks of their relations are continually reshaped and fitted into techno-rational networks of accountability and compliance and node-ified ethics. Like my own story of non-compliance, I had no longer accepted this reshaping of my practice, the counting of my work only as the recognizable program plan instead of an impromptu trip to the park. Our collective call to activism is to reassert the ethical in early childhood education by recognizing and valuing the knotted and storied meshworks of

educators that already exist, and to support them with the professional pay and working conditions that provide them with the time and space needed to engage in the ethical relations that blow up coded and technical networks.

In this article, I have taken up Tuck's (2018) question of "How shall we live?" (p. 157) to problematize the ethical in codes of ethics in ECEC. I began by situating codified ethics within the broader context of professionalization in Ontario and internationally and offering a critique of how professionalism has not brought ECEs the promised material recognition they were seeking but has rather resulted in more regulation. Drawing on Todd (2003), I took up a philosophical critique of codified ethics and explore her invitation to rethink ethics in education as an ethical relationality. I then weave together Dahlberg and Moss's (2005) analysis of neoliberalism's creation of early childhood educator as a worker-technician, the College of ECE's Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice and my own experience as an RECE along with the aesthetic device of nodes in the dystopian film *Sleep Dealer* (Rivera, 2008), to explore how codified ethics, as they become enforceable within a regulatory body such as the College of ECE, instrumentalize and dematerialize the early childhood educator. Finally, in conversation with Zylinska and Ingold, I repositioned nodes and networks as knots and meshworks and offer this article as both a warning and a call to activism to reposition the ethical and relational as central to early childhood education, to nurture not only the lives of children and families but also the ethical, political, and liveable futures of early childhood educators.

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<sup>1</sup> View the official trailer for the film at <https://www.sleepdealer.com/packages/sleep-dealer-the-movie/videos/sleep-dealer-official-trailer>