

Pandemic-Provoked “Throwtogetherness”: Narrating Change in ECEC in Canada

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This research was funded through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Connections grant.

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Abstract

In Canada, multiple, intersecting, and incommensurable narratives promote investment in a public ECEC system. These dominant narratives are typically justified through an entanglement of discourses, including gender equity, colonialism, developmentalism, investment in children as future workers, and childcare as social infrastructure. With COVID-19, renewed economic arguments propose ECEC as an essential service, jump-starting an economy ravaged by the pandemic. Taking up a conversational approach, we question the potency of dominant narratives proliferated in media and policy initiatives as a way to effect large-scale change, and we seek to better understand alternative narratives of ECEC. We are drawn to those spaces where a range of new texts and narratives are generating possibilities for transformative changes. We co-create a bricolage of minor stories (Taylor, 2020) of change, keeping in mind Eve Tuck's (2018a) theory of change and Elise Couture-Grondin's (2018) premise of stories as theory.

Keywords: early childhood education, policy, change, COVID-19, colonialism, throwtogetherness



Pandemic-Provoked “Throwntogetherness”: Narrating Change in ECEC in Canada

“A Time to Organize, Not to Agonize” (Braidotti, 2020, p. 467)

We are meeting over Zoom—a now very familiar space and practice that was born of the urgency and intensity of the COVID-19 lockdown. The particular 2-year *ECE Narratives* Project highlighted in this article began in April 2020, just at the moment when the response to COVID-19 provoked dramatic changes to the way most of us work and live in the world. Given the pervasiveness of the lockdowns, we moved our planning and research meetings online and our in-person events from physical meeting places to virtual meeting spaces. In these virtual spaces, we have had hundreds of conversations trying to make sense of the uncertainties and inequities in early childhood education and care (ECEC)¹ made particularly visible throughout the lockdown. We have shown up weekly—10 framed faces across four time zones—we have virtually entered each other’s homes—grateful for the project and each other. Within the context of our lives and this work, we are advocates, activists, educators, and researchers engaged in various roles with responsibilities that are often entangled and mutually informative. We, too, were experiencing the crisis. Our conversations over Zoom became a life line. And given the sudden and unexpected focus upon childcare within the pandemic, we were determined to better understand—in this moment of incredible disruption—how change in ECEC has happened and how we might quickly contribute to this national and very public conversation.

This article emerges, with hope, from within the context of a Canada-wide Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Connections grant. We four, Esther, Jane, Monica, and Pam, part of the group of 10 framed faces, are working within the *ECE Narratives* Project (<https://ecenarratives.opened.ca/>). Our primary research focus is on change in ECEC in Canada. In the context of this focus, we ask: What are the narratives that create, describe, and perpetuate change; how do they work; and what do, or might, particular narratives offer to the present and future possibilities for ECEC within Canada? As we began the project, our collective sense was that there were and have been many narratives aiming to influence change in ECEC in Canada, and that change has happened and continues to happen. Each of us has participated in change in different ways, changes that have made differences in the present while offering possibilities for future practice and policy. Collectively we have also experienced change in ECEC in Canada as a never-ending story (Mahon, 2000; Pasolli, 2019), a what now/where to now story, one that Kate Bezanson (2018) characterized as the government of Canada’s stop-start relationship to the field of early learning (p. 191). In this article we narrate personal stories of change in ECEC as we experienced them within the *ECE Narratives* Project.

In our desire to think about and with narratives of change within ECEC, our *ECE Narratives* research group was able to create conditions and invitations for national and international conversations. Our approach to this research has been to take up conversations as bricolage with conversations acting as *point of entry texts* (POET) (Berry, 2004, p. 108). Collectively and individually, we narrate change as we experienced it in conversations with people in ECEC: policy advocates, educators, and scholars within Canada and internationally. To facilitate these conversations, and over the course of our two-year project, the *ECE Narratives* Project organized two webinars, the first in June 2020, a full year before the federal commitment of \$30 billion dollars for early learning and child care (Tasker, 2021). At that time, we held conversations with ECEC policy influencers—some well-known and some who had been working unseen for decades. In our second webinar, in November 2020, we held conversations with ECEC

educators who were thoughtfully, persistently, and creatively staying focused on their relations with children and their families as childcare centres strove to stay open or as they re-opened. In conjunction with the webinar conversations, ECEC educators from across the country shared visual representations of their experiences animating the actions they were taking to stay connected with families, children, and community in spite of spatial and temporal shifts created by COVID-19 to the provision of care (<https://ecenarratives.opened.ca/webinar-collages/>). Our third event occurred across 2021–2022, when we had conversations with international and Indigenous policy makers and educators. From these conversations, we created videos and research briefs bringing together insights and possibilities for changes to ECEC in Canada.

Moving Forward With Uncertainty

To learn about change in ECEC through conversations as bricolage, and in the context of this paper, we focus upon discourses and related narratives we heard within the first webinar. What are these narratives and what are they telling us about change in ECEC? What might we imagine for our collective futures? Our first webinar, held on June 10th, 2020, was entitled: *Moving Forward With Uncertainty: The Pandemic as Déclencheur* for a Competent ECEC System Across Canada/ Aller de l'avant dans l'incertitude : La pandémie comme catalyseur* de transformation d'un système plus adapté d'éducation à la petite enfance à travers le Canada* (<https://ecenarratives.opened.ca/policy-narratives/>).

For this webinar, we brought together policy experts for a round table discussion on current ECEC realities and initiatives across Canada. The focus of the webinar was to illuminate and respond to the impact of the changing perceptions and realities in childcare as COVID-19 affected the lives of children, families, and society overall. It was our response to events unfolding immediately around us. Collectively, we had knowledge, resources, and networks to draw on. We were ready to act. Specifically, Monica was deeply engaged at the political level in ongoing advocacy work/responses to the crisis and she invited individuals with whom she was working to share their knowledge and insights. The webinar conversation came together very quickly. In making sense of how this happened, we experienced what Doreen Massey (2005) described as the “throwntogetherness” of place, “an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories,” always and crucially “the combination of order and chance” (p. 151). Through planning on a national scale, we had a SSHRC grant, and although not by chance, but certainly unexpectedly, we were in a pandemic. Thus, at the beginning of the pandemic, we had collectively and fortuitously created a place where we could, as Rosi Braidotti (2020) suggested, “organize rather than agonize” (p. 3).

In the first webinar, two groups of panelists took part: the first panel was composed of well-known childcare speakers from national childcare organizations, while the second was composed of speakers, lesser known, whose work was largely behind the scenes, out of sight, underground—people whose focus was to bridge the work of the advocates with that of policy makers and politicians. We were only 3 months into the pandemic, and a palpable sense of urgency permeated the webinar discussion. There was no doubt that ECEC in Canada was in crisis. We hoped that governments and policy makers might share our sense of urgency in this moment, and be compelled to act. We were energized and inspired. We found ourselves in the position of being able to do something—to bring people together at an auspicious moment for a public conversation. To our surprise, the event drew over 400 registrants. For us, this moment in time and space animated Massey’s (2005) notion of the significance of the public place and the “politics of the

event of place” (p. 149): the pandemic politics of Canada and the newly and unexpectedly public space of the virtual.

Unanga’s scholar Eve Tuck (2018b) theorized that when we are thinking about how change happens, there is no single best answer. Tuck suggested that to gain an understanding of change we need to move into the messiness of conversations, to take seriously the practice of conversation within all its “mired contestations” (Tuck, 2018b, 6:08). What we learned in these mired contestations is that when narrating change there is no single best answer, no single narrative; rather, narrating change in ECEC in Canada reverberated with Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw’s (2010) theorizing of “flows, rhythms, and intensities” (p. xii); moving into the messiness of conversation is “inventive” rather than “predictive” (p. xii). As we discussed possibilities arising from our long-standing and ongoing conversations, we were engaged with re-conceptualist ECEC scholarship (Ashton, 2015; Iannacci & Whitty, 2009; Moss, 2018; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2005;). In the introduction of *Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible: A Memoir of Work in Childcare and Education* by Helen Penn (2019), Michel Vandebroek, drawing on Foucault, described the purpose of contesting early childhood as working “to interrogate such discourses that are presented as evident, to shake up habits, ways of thinking, familiarities and to re-problematize these” (p. vi). We considered hegemonic discourses and those less dominant. As Peter Moss (2018) reminds us, a dominant discourse “never manages totally to silence other discourses or stories. ... These stories may be unheard by power and consigned to the margins, for the time being at least, but they are out there to be heard by those who listen” (p. 7). We heard many stories, and as we listened and re-listened to these stories, we could hear stories narrating change.

Narrating Change

We intend this next section to be read as a bricolage of ideas from our conversations—particular moments in time emanating from our first webinar that are echoing, reverberating, repeating, haunting. In effect, these conversational moments act as point of entry texts generating the bricolage (Berry, 2004, p. 108). Collectively created through our conversations, we now share our individual narratives, narrating stories of change, recognizing their intersecting, partial, and resonating natures. Monica animates “strategic pester power,” its persistence over time, in numerous spaces, and with and by a variety of people. *Pam* considers the shifting context of Indigenous knowledges and ways of being as they are re-materialized in pedagogical and literary texts by Indigenous peoples. Jane takes a closer look at ECEC pedagogy as an alternative—and potentially transformative—narrative of change, unfolding in and through Canadian ECEC curriculum frameworks. Esther describes how an ECEC educator co-creates new texts with children, creating renewed relationships to families, community, and land, providing hope in a time of great uncertainty.

Monica: Strategic Pester Power

I am a Treaty Four person, second generation Canadian, living and working with First Nations and Metis communities in Saskatchewan and Ontario. I am grateful and humbled by the wisdom and respect for the traditional knowledge of the Metis Nation and many First Nations, shared with me by elders, educators, and students.

Two years have passed since *ECE Narratives’* first policy webinar; 2 years that changed our worlds. Two years since childcare was deemed as an essential service in the face of the

pandemic, and 2 years since the 50-year struggle in childcare was brought to fruition. On April 19, 2021, Canada's first female finance minister Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland announced a \$30 billion dollar commitment to creating a Canada-wide early learning and childcare program.

It was just over 50 years ago that the *Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* (Bird et al., 1970) called for national publicly funded childcare, the ramp to women's equality. The principal rationale was women's equality and access to the workforce to contribute economically. In subsequent decades, federal governments, both Liberal and Conservative, have offered various rationales, and promises for childcare and yet failed to deliver (Friendly & Prentice, 2009). For the most part, childcare in Canada has survived as a private service delivered within a market model system (Beach & Ferns, 2015). While several countries belonging to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have established stable, universal, and public ECEC systems, Canada has not. As I think about my involvement with childcare, over 40 years as an early childhood educator, director, advocate, and researcher, and the multiple rationales for public investment in childcare, I can see that we are trapped—trying to find the one “right” narrative—the narrative that would compel the government to invest. If only we could find it. We were obsessed. WE needed THEM to do something. Like Penn (2019), “I thought of myself as someone without power or influence or connections” (p. 33).

Penn (2011), who served as rapporteur for Canada's participation in *Starting Strong II* (OECD, 2006) provided a summary and analysis of multiple rationales that drive governments to implement ECEC policy. She asserted that “sticky policies” and their rationales are rooted in countries' histories, changing contexts, and public opinion. To open up the discussion of rationales, Penn (2011) suggested that “the job of academics and intellectuals—and students—is to step back a little and analyze policies and their underpinning rationales, to be skeptical” (p. 28). Our challenge is to take up Foucault's suggestion to interrogate, disrupt, and re-problematize dominant discourses (Penn, 2019). In the pandemic, Canada's rationale for investment highlighted the dominant discourses of economic returns and women's equality which economist Armine Yalnizyan (2020) described as the “she-cession.” Yalnizyan asserted that women were disproportionately affected financially by the pandemic and proposed that a Canada-wide early learning and childcare system would mitigate the negative impact and support women's equality.

As part of our research, we collected ECEC media narratives, which included: ECEC as an essential service for the economy and for women re-entering the workforce; ECEC as necessary for child development; and articles on quality care, education, pedagogy, and practice. The dominating media discourse of childcare as an essential service—for essential health care staff—was a critical one which had the ironic effect of silencing or obscuring other narratives such as those being lived and told by educators. For example, early childhood educators forced back to work during the lockdown were expected to provide warm, loving care while maintaining social distancing between adults and children as well as between very young children; they were required to meet enhanced health and safety requirements without support for additional staffing or appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). In the first webinar, we heard from more than one speaker that children's experience of lockdown childcare held new stories for families about the value of childcare for their children. These narratives were largely missing in the media.

In the first webinar, the Honourable Myriam Monsef, minister for women and gender equality, was invited to bring greetings. In her remarks, Minister Monsef thanked participants for mobilizing, for advocating, for “bringing us along with you ... please don't stop” (Monsef, 2020,

7:20–8:19). This makes me think about the “us” and the “them.” Who is “them” and who is “us”? Often, we construct women in government as other than “us.” Are we putting up false barriers? Getting in our own way? In a recent publication, Joanne Lehrer and I (Whitty et al., 2020) reflected on the involvement of several women politicians who were involved in childcare policy issues in Ontario and Quebec. We noted that politicians, too, worked within and against their own parties, sometimes traversing lines. I was beginning to realize that it wasn’t about us and them. As Braidotti (2020) wrote, “WE are in *this* together, but we are not one and the same” (p. 1).

The “we” in our first webinar included several well-known spokespeople, for example, Martha Friendly, Margo Greenwood, Don Giesbrecht, and Morna Ballantyne. There were also panelists who have worked behind the scenes, quietly and invisibly. One panelist spoke about the informal “mommy network” amongst journalists, who prioritized column space for pro-childcare reporting. Panelists were asked to address questions such as the following:

- Early childhood education and care is a high-profile issue right now, can you share your views about why ECEC is in the spotlight?
- Why has it been so difficult to advance a universal childcare system?
- How is Indigenous ECEC different?
- How has the world changed and what does that mean for childcare?
- Are there new arguments emerging now to support a Canada-wide universal public childcare system?

In *Conflictual and Cooperative Childcare Politics in Canada*, Rachel Langford, Susan Prentice, Brooke Richardson, and Patrizia Albanese (2016) analyzed and compared relationships between advocates and both Liberal and Conservative governments when a national childcare program was being proposed. They identified co-operative relationships, conflictual relationships—and at times, conflictual—co-operation. Thinking with these ideas, I considered how they might help to explain why we have stalled, time and time again; what impedes our progress? Is perfection the enemy of good? Conversation in the webinar circled around whether it was possible for multiple narratives to come together in a single Canada-wide childcare system that jump-starts an economy ravaged by the pandemic, and addresses equality for women and children’s well-being in the present, as well as their education and care. We stall on this conundrum, which Kate Bezanson, Andrew Bevan, and I (2021) described as “complexity inertia.” We suggested,

Just because something is complex doesn’t mean it’s impossible. Rather, it compels an approach that bypasses tried-and-failed, ideological or non-system-building models... There are no shortcuts in system-building. (Bezanson, Bevan, & Lysack, 2021, n.p.)

What was it that finally compelled this government to deliver a Canada-wide early learning and care program? The “strategic pester power” of advocates was identified by Honourable Carolyn Bennett (personal communication, April, 19, 2021), a long-time childcare advocate who worked tirelessly within the Liberal party and cabinet, along with other female ministers, to deliver on the long-awaited national childcare program. In the moment, multiple narratives from multiple sources converged. With a grand-scale financial commitment and the political will expressed so clearly in the budget announcement, the new challenge becomes, how do we build a childcare system? At a recent national symposium on building the national system, the Honourable Karina Gould (2022), minister of families, children, and social development, challenged those in the room

and advocates across the country to shift how we work, emphasizing, “It is different being an advocate on the outside than it is being a builder on the inside ... It doesn’t mean don’t call us out, that is your job—but how can we be constructive? This is an important moment ... We cannot build that system without each and every one of you.” The question of who is “we” continues to resonate.

Pam: “There has Never Been Such a Framework for Our Children and Our Families.”

I live and work on the east coast of Canada in Wolastoqiyik territory in what is now called New Brunswick. Wabanaki families have lived here for thousands upon thousands of years. My mother’s and father’s families have lived here for just over 200 years. Although Peace and Friendship Treaties were signed by the Crown with the Wabanaki Peoples between 1725 and 1779, many settlers, including myself, are just coming to understand our responsibilities as Treaty People. Cree storyteller, writer, activist, trapper, and lawyer Harold Johnson (2007) in *Two Families: Treaties and Government*, wrote of his family and mine:

I have become convinced that my family will not be freed from tyranny until your family members free their minds from tyranny. Not until the dominant culture ceases to assume that its structures are natural, necessary and superior will it cease to impose its ideology over my family. ... My family's survival as Indians depends on your families leaving us room to be Indians to be independent and self-sufficient. (p. 121)

In June 2020, Cree researcher Margo Greenwood, spoke at our first webinar, *Moving Forward With Uncertainty: The Pandemic as Déclencheur*. She spoke directly to the realities of Canada’s colonialism, the historic and extensive harms done to Indigenous families and children through imposed structures and ideologies. Greenwood (2020), whose research focuses upon the well-being and health of Indigenous children and families, made very clear to the webinar participants, that colonial practices in Canada have resulted in current-day realities where immediate and intergenerational harms and trauma for children and families are evident in ECEC politics, policies, and practices:

When you consider our history and our current day realities of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Peoples in Canada, we cannot deny the colonial reality of Canada nor the fact that the First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Peoples have been marginalized in their own lands. We cannot deny any longer that colonialism has always been and continues to be about power and the insistence that some have power at the expense of others. (7:09–7:39)

Tuck (2018b), in her talk, “I Do Not Want to Haunt You, But I Will,” named colonialism as a longstanding theory of change in what is now called Canada, a theory that meets with change reluctantly. Tuck (2009) proposed interrupting this colonial power with Indigenous power, working against colonialism as “a flawed theory of change” (p. 409), a theory that perpetuated(s) damage-centered research, intended “to document peoples’ pain and brokenness to hold those in power accountable for their oppression” (p. 409). Tuck (2009) advocated for suspending damage and enacting desire-based change, with “wisdom and hope” (p. 416), in part through the recognition of the local knowledge, narratives, and values carried by Indigenous People. She respectfully acknowledged that although there was a need to expose “the uninhabitable and inhumane” conditions which Indigenous Peoples continue to live in, a new historical moment calls for a shift from damage-centered research (Tuck, 2009, pp. 415–416). She suggested instead a move towards narratives of desire—to seek the layers, the complexity, the contradictions, the “not yet and not anymore” (Tuck, 2009, p. 417).

Referring specifically to the COVID-19 realities that once again “shone a light” upon persistent inequities within childcare in Indigenous communities, Greenwood (2020, 8:00) described the critical development and place of the *Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework (IELCCF)* (Government of Canada, 2018), pointing out that Canada is finally enacting a distinctions-based approach in ECEC with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples (FNIM). Specifically, Greenwood noted that the *IELCCF* foregrounds the safety and happiness of children and self-determination within and across nation-to-nation relationships. It is a very different starting point than other early learning and child care curriculum (ELCC) frameworks in Canada. Indigenous knowledges, languages, and culture are at the heart of the FNIM frameworks. Self-determination and children’s cultural identities are centred. A distinctions-based approach, Greenwood (2020) stressed, is unique in the history of Canada: “There has never been such a framework for our children and our families” (2:16–2:30). Greenwood’s haunting statement calls up centuries of the damage that has been, while opening spaces for enacting a more desired future. As Greenwood (2020) further noted, “So our children are at the core of our nations and they are its survival and ensures its continuity” (6:55).

In May 2021, 1 year after listening to Greenwood speak in the first webinar, and as we were preparing a presentation for a national conference, we learned that the unmarked graves of 215 Indigenous children were found at the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc community in the southern interior of what is now called British Columbia. The locating of unmarked graves across Canada is a stark reminder of the deep harms orchestrated against particular children, families, and communities by colonial policies and practices that created and maintained Indian Residential Schools from the 1830’s until 1996. As of May 24, 2022, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Memorial Register has confirmed the names of 4130 children who died while attending Indian Residential Schools (Supernant, 2022). Kisha Supernant explained that many families were never notified of the deaths of their children; bodies of their children were never sent home; and survivors who were children at the time remember children who went missing, and in some cases these survivors were responsible for digging graves of children who had died. The immediate and intergenerational effects of this traumatic policy are now highly visible within Canadian popular media. Many settler Canadians are waking up to narratives of loss of children, culture, language, spirituality, and community, narratives of loss and lack, that Indigenous Peoples have been speaking to and about, living with, re-telling, and resisting for a very long time.

In her research with Indigenous life writings and epistolary texts, Elise Couture-Grondin (2018), drawing from Braidotti’s concept of affirmative ethics, took up the practice of affirmative readings, which “follow a non-oppositional logic in which difference is taken as incommensurable singularity, instead of conceiving of Indigenous difference in a binary opposition to white settlers” (p. 318). For Couture-Grondin (2018), affirmative readings, which could also be applied to the creation and reading of Indigenous ELCC frameworks, place the “ethical reach of a text” beyond raising awareness or being educative, to the possibility of transformation by “offering alternative views of relationships, and by enacting different types of relationships in the literary field in which readers can engage” (p. 323). There is a possibility to engage with incommensurability, “in ways that counter the mechanisms of cognitive imperialism and appropriation/elimination” (Couture-Grondin, 2018, p. 321).

Affirmative readings, a taking up of affirmative ethics can also be engaged as a reading-response with picture books authored and illustrated by Indigenous Peoples. Nicola Campbell (2005), in *Shi-Shi-etko* places two stories side by side. In her one page austere black and white

preface, Campbell, a Nl̓eʔkepmx, Syilx, and Métis author, living in British Columbia outlines the history and harms caused by policies of residential schooling, asking the questions, what would it mean to live without families, to live without communities? The beautifully crafted, colour images by Kim LaFave show the daily life of an Indigenous community in the four days prior to Shi-shi-etko being taken from her family and community. These two apparently incommensurable stories stand together in the book, the Indigenous story justly taking up more time and space—being told and heard in its own right.

Swampy Cree author, David A. Robertson and Julie Flett (2016) of Cree Metis descent, in *When We Were Alone*, tell a different kind of double story, that of a young girl learning from her Nokum. Nokum speaks to her granddaughter about how she and a friend lived through their residential school days remembering and taking up cultural and linguistic practices from home “when they were alone.” Leanne Simpson (2018, as cited in Couture-Grondin, 2018) affirmed, that with stories, Indigenous Peoples “pick up things where we were forced to leave them behind, whether songs, dances, values or philosophies and bring them into existence with the future” (pp. 49–50)—which is what Nokum does in this story with the conversation with her granddaughter, a conversation that can be engaged with, witnessed, and learned from by all inhabitants of Turtle Island.

Indigenous texts, including *Shi-shi-etko*, *When We Were Alone*, and the distinctions-based *IELCCF*, foreground different knowledges and stories than colonially based ELCC frameworks and colonial picture books. These Indigenous texts stand together, and are very different from most of the texts I have read for most of my life. At the moment, many Indigenous texts are written in English; thus, once again I benefit from Indigenous knowledges at the cost of Indigenous languages. My hope is that with the resurgence of Indigenous languages, with the translation and production of more Indigenous texts in Indigenous languages, and considering the foregrounding of Indigenous languages in the *IELCCF*, a different Indigenous future is materializing. Returning to Johnson (2007), perhaps in the foreseeable future, my family will finally leave space for his family “to be independent and self-sufficient” (p. 121).

Jane—ECEC Pedagogy—The Beginning of a New Story

The place I call home is on Treaty Six territory, where I grew up and later raised my own family in amiskwaciy-wâskahikan, the nehiyawewin (Cree) name for Beaver Hills House, now known as Edmonton. I have fond childhood memories of playing in the bush on the banks of the swift flowing kisiskâciwanisîpiy, until recently known to me only as the North Saskatchewan River. Since 2016, I have been living and working on the traditional and unceded territory of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc people in the nation of Secwepemcúl'ecw, in the first place where the presence of unmarked graves of children believed to be as young as 3 years of age who died while attending residential schools in Canada, was confirmed in May 2021.

In the spirit of story as theory, and conversation as bricolage, I will look more closely and critically at ECEC pedagogy as an alternative narrative of change, given momentum in Canada through the provincial ELCC frameworks created in each of the 10 provinces, and most recently a distinct First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Indigenous Framework named above as the *IELCCF* (Government of Canada, 2018). ECEC pedagogy is a new story, with the potential to shape the direction of change in this moment of possibility for ECEC in Canada. I was initially inspired by a comment in the chat in the first webinar from Iris Berger, one of our research team members:

What if we move the narrative beyond ECEC as an “essential service” for the economy, and focus on children, early childhood educators (who are more than a workforce), the role of ECEC in community, and the unique ECEC pedagogy? (Personal communication, June 10, 2020)

The creation of ELCC frameworks in Canada followed the release of the OECD review of ECEC (OECD, 2001; OECD, 2006) and the follow-up analysis of pedagogical approaches by John Bennett (2005) who led the OECD review, calling for pedagogical frameworks to be organized around a statement of principles and values, broad overarching goals, and pedagogical guidelines for reaching those goals. Like others on our *ECE Narratives* research team, I became involved in creating a framework in my home province at the time, leading the design of the participatory action research that created *Flight: Alberta’s Early Learning and Care Framework* in 2018.²

Our process in Alberta was critically and generously informed by the Early Childhood Research and Development Team that created the *New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care~English (NBCF~English)* in 2007, one of the first in Canada. Pam Whitty (2009) described the participation of over 1300 early childhood educators involved in creation of the *NBCF~English* as a process of “reclaiming, reconstituting, and textualizing conversations and conversational moments of pedagogical learning and care from childcare educators” (p. 37). We followed a similar path in Alberta, working with early childhood educators to document stories of curriculum that was “already happening” as a starting point for pedagogical conversations (Hewes et al., 2019). Resources made available through the research project made it possible for educators to talk with one another during their workday about what they were doing and experiencing with children and families, and what they wanted to do. The process of talking about their pedagogy was challenging at first. Slowly, tentatively, and occasionally powerfully, these conversations, the “stories the players tell themselves about themselves” (Geertz, 1972) nurtured educators’ identity, agency, confidence, and valuing of their work. Anna Szytko (as cited in Hewes & Lirette, 2018), one of the project pedagogical mentors, recognized, “Our staff meetings will never be about ‘who left the lint in the dryer’ again.” Rebekah McCarron (as cited in Hewes et al., 2019), a new early childhood educator, realized a change in her sense of herself as an educator: “What I do does matter, and this realization has forever changed me” p. 49). These were heady times, when it sometimes felt like practice had leapt out ahead of theory, leaving the research team behind in our “bumptiousness” (Haraway, 2016, p. 1). We wrote and published and presented collaboratively alongside educators about this story of change (Hewes et al., 2019; Hewes et al., 2016; Makovichuk et al., 2017; Whitty et al., 2018). As others have noted, the ELCC frameworks have been helpful in moving thought and practice away from and beyond developmentalism, and towards story as the starting point for pedagogy.

Setting aside for a moment my unapologetic joy at having played a small part in such an uplifting initiative, I am reminded that we are still at the beginning of the story of ECEC pedagogy in Canada. Critical questions are surfacing about the representation of diversity, inclusion, and difference in socio-pedagogic curriculum frameworks, particularly in relationship to the positioning of Indigenous pedagogies. The notion of incommensurability, in particular an “ethics of incommensurability” (Tuck & Yang, 2012), offers insight. In a critique of South African early childhood policy, Norma Rudolph (2017) outlines how well-intentioned efforts to address the poverty of Indigenous peoples by “adding on” Indigenous content to ECE curricula have failed because they do not address “fundamental issues of commensurability and hierarchies of knowledge that silence Indigenous perspectives and ways of being prevalent in different

communities” (p. 95). Speaking to the incommensurability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous world views, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) deepen our understanding, with their description of an ethic of incommensurability “which recognizes what is distinct,” maintaining that Indigenous and colonial worldviews cannot always be “aligned or allied” (p. 28). Building on these ideas, Couture-Grondin (2018) wrote:

Incommensurability 1) insists on spaces of knowledge that cannot be appropriated; 2) signals the impossibility of comparing and putting differences on a single scale; and 3) accepts misunderstanding as a problem that does not have to be resolved or reconciled. (p. 15)

Socio-pedagogic frameworks offer an alternative to theme-based planning and prescriptive curricula. In our efforts to enact a co-constructed, locally and culturally situated, values-based pedagogy, we forget that curricula do not exist in isolation and that all of us remain “engulfed in neoliberal, and neocolonial thinking” (Tesar, 2015, p. 192). In *Troubling Settleness in Early Childhood Curriculum Development*, Emily Ashton (2015) contended that “a social pedagogical approach creates an air of comfort rather than critique” (p. 93) and asked:

What differences are irreducible? When might inclusion be best refused? How might taking up incommensurability contest the taken for granted assumptions underpinning inclusion and diversity rhetoric in early childhood curricula? (p. 82)

These are urgent and provocative questions for our pedagogy. We have an opportunity as well as an obligation to act (Johnson, 2021). What would it look like if we truly believed in Greenwood’s (2020) vision that it is through children that a better world will be achieved? What if we follow Ashton’s (2015) advice to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016) of incommensurability as a productive space, rather than trying to resolve differences? And to document children’s struggles to make meaning of difference (Ashton, 2015, p. 91)? What would taking up an *ethic of incommensurability* look like in early childhood pedagogy?

Esther: Finding Our Place in the Story, and the Story is Not Finished ...

I live and work on Treaty Four territory, within the Canadian prairies, the ancestral lands of the nēhiyawak, Anihšīnāpēk, Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis/Michif Nation. My father’s side of the family arrived as settlers from England and Holland and have been in Canada for generations. My mother arrived in this country as a young teacher from Scotland. I am a first generation Canadian on her side. I grew up in the Northwest Territories amongst the Dene and Inuit peoples. Western narratives were all that I learned as a young child. I distinctly remember seeing brown faces looking out of windows on separate buses headed to St. Patrick’s school. As an adult, I now understand where they were going each day. At this moment, I live less than 100 km from where Treaty Four was signed in 1874. As a white settler, I am learning my place in this story.

During the lockdown, when our project began and our first webinar was quickly and intentionally organized, I found myself struggling with a lack of childcare. At that moment in time, I was propelled into the role of juggling parenting, homeschooling, scholarship, and teaching. As my children were underfoot, the narrative of childcare being an essential service rang true for me, but there is more to this story. Feeling isolated in my own work, I saw that my children were experiencing this as well. Their friends and educators were now faces on a screen. Their interactions with people were from a distance, strained, and tension filled. Relationships have

changed for all of us. Children's connections to their ECEC friends, educators, and spaces have been disrupted. However, disrupted relationships run deeper than the pandemic. In Canada, our violent colonial history has created and continues to create disrupted oppressive relationships (Little Bear, 2000).

Writing about the incommensurability of Indigenous and colonial worldviews as a non-Indigenous person, Morgan Johnson (2021) argued that an ethic of incommensurability calls on White settlers not to explain or try to resolve differences or to be bystanders to the conversation, but rather to stand aside, using their position of privilege to open a space for listening to Indigenous worldviews as distinct. Johnson (2021) went on to explain that White settlers are obligated through an ethic of incommensurability to understand who we are in the story of settler colonization, "locating ourselves within a narrative without undermining the ontologically distinct experience of the other" (p. 42) because "we are all part of the story of destruction and/or theft of land, but we have to understand who we are in that story. Some of us may be victims and some may be beneficiaries, but we are all part of the story" (p. 46). What does this mean as we rebuild relationships, as we work towards truth and reconciliation, and as we create a national ECEC system across Canada? The pandemic has perhaps provided an opportunity to move forward differently, and not return back to the way things were (Henderson & Little Bear, 2021).

It has now been over 2 years since we experienced global lockdowns; however, we continue to struggle with the ongoing impacts from the pandemic. As we emerge from this collective experience and with the federal announcement of \$30 billion dollars for the ECEC sector, there is an added motivation to move forward intentionally and collectively. Braidotti (2020) pointed out that there is a need "to start by questioning who 'we' might be to begin with" (p. 467). With the notion of ethics of incommensurability and who we are in the story as a starting place, I share a profound experience in one ECEC program, in which children and adults grapple with who we are in the story of the land and how we shall live in relationship to one another.

It was the last day of school. My son, his kindergarten teacher, and his classmates were preparing to share their land acknowledgement during a ceremony for the grand opening of their Food Forest a co-created garden project. A permaculture expert helped with the preparation of the soil. A grandfather taught them how to plant tobacco in a good way. A Cree teacher helped name their Food Forest. The educator explained that she attended professional development courses to learn about local plants, stating that "when I saw some buffalo berries and sea buckthorn growing by the Creek, I knew we could grow those" (personal communication, December, 5th, 2022). The children worked with dirt and seeds, plants and water. The creation of this garden took many months. The garden was full of edible plants that the children and their teacher had learned to care for; plants that would thrive in this particular place, had been carefully chosen. There was excitement in the air, as this was one of the first face-to-face events that the school had held since the pandemic began. Smiling maskless faces were everywhere; being outdoors allowed a sense of freedom from the safety protocols that everyone had become accustomed to. Parents and family members were chatting and mingling, reconnecting or meeting for the first time. The children lined up in front of their garden, a beautiful painted mural behind them, a co-created project in which every student in the school had contributed. The ceremony began as families looked on, every child participating, hands and bodies fully engaged with actions and words; words that traveled through their bodies as they moved their arms in unison, speaking to each other, the earth, and their families. The teacher, her colleagues, and the children had co-created text, illustrations, and actions for their land acknowledgement. This was an ongoing process intended to be meaningful

and accessible to the youngest children in the school. Each afternoon the children practiced the words and actions. Each day the children and adults lived out these phrases as they walked in nature, planted and cared for their garden, learned Cree words and phrases, experienced the story of the land, and walked and learned alongside Indigenous Elders and community members. The children were given space and time to experience and express their relationships to land, humans, and nature.

The following land acknowledgement book is being shared with permission from the teacher. All the words have been included as co-created by the children and adults. However, only a few of the beautiful illustrations are being shared where appropriate.

Figure 1

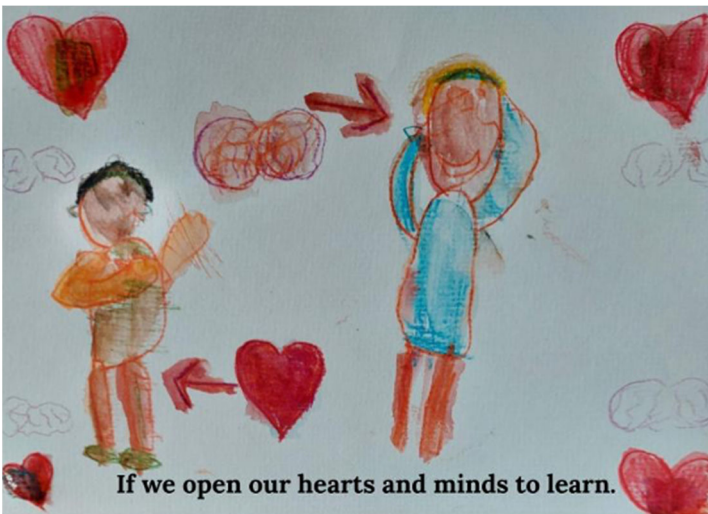
Land Acknowledgement Book Cover



Figure 2

We Know the Land We Live On is Alive



Figure 3*If We Open Our Hearts and Minds to Learn*

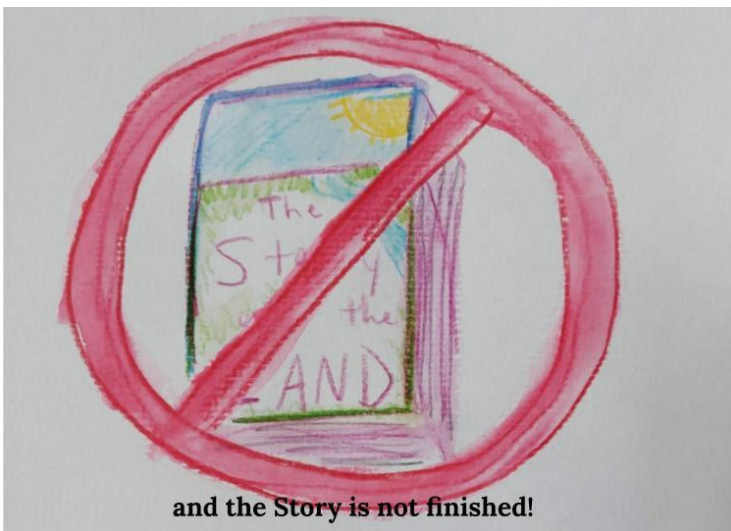
Note. The text reads: “Mother Earth and the first land protectors have stories and teachings to share with us, if we open our hearts and our minds to learn. We take care of this place alongside our relatives the nêhiyawak, Anihšīnāpēk, Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota Nations and later, the Métis, settlers and then newcomers. Together, we are Treaty Four People.”

Figure 4*We Are All Part of the Story of the Land*

Note. The text reads: “That means that together, we are part of a living promise to protect Mother Earth along with the water, the plants, the flyers, the swimmers, the crawlers, and each other. We are all part of the Story of the Land ...”

Figure 5

And the Story is Not Finished



Note. The text reads: “AND THE STORY IS NOT FINISHED ... We choose to heal the land and the broken relationships here so that everyone can learn and grow in harmony with nature and each other for as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the river flows.”

While I watched my son recite the land acknowledgment on that hot summer day at the end of his kindergarten year, I was filled with hope. Seeing children as active participants in the story of the land and providing those opportunities within ECEC programs, moves beyond current narratives of ECEC as an investment in children as future workers, as a jump start for the economy, or as an essential service for women’s equality. This alternative narrative brings forth the importance of relationships, for children, for adults, for land. Could these actions and this text be a way to envision how we shall live (Tuck, 2018a) within ECEC? Perhaps this is an example of the possibilities that the incommensurability of Indigenous and colonial worldviews can offer to ECEC pedagogies (Ashton, 2015) and how it can look if we take this “incommensurability seriously as a pedagogical starting point” (Ashton, 2015, p. 91).

My son’s kindergarten teacher reimaged her place in the story of the land; she troubled her teaching practice and decentered her settler knowledge, creating space for the knowledge of Elders, community and the land, building relationships that cross boundaries (Henderson & Little Bear, 2021) and impact learning. She also worked alongside children in authentic and productive ways. In our first webinar, Greenwood (2020), referring to her dream of a world in which all children are free from oppression, powerfully stated, “Children are not just passive recipients but that this better world will be achieved through them” (1:58–2:06). Watching the children live out their land acknowledgement embodies what Greenwood has expressed. Children, when provided with the opportunity, are active participants in their story of the land. Following Tuck’s (2009) provocation to move from a damage-centred focus in research to one of desire while bringing what we have learned about damage along with us, I see hope in this moment.

This brings me back to a recent conversation our group had when Monica asked: “What is the thread of hope that runs through this work?” We paused in silence, thinking about the pockets of hope exposed within the seemingly crumbling systems cascading around us. Then we spoke ...

We see hope in the amazing work some educators are doing. We see hope in the underground, behind the scenes work of policy influencers and makers, passionate about universally available childcare in Canada. In spite of the persistence of post-colonial practices, we see hope in the cracks in colonialism. We see hope in young children.

In Closing ... Shifting From Damage to Desire

In this article our intent has been to narrate change in ECEC in Canada specifically as we experienced it in the context of pandemic as provocation, and within the *ECE Narratives* project. In questioning the potency of dominant narratives, our minor stories (Taylor, 2020) took on new meaning as a productive starting point for moving our thinking from damage to desire. As we engaged in conversation about alternative narratives and new texts, we were able to co-create a bricolage of minor stories. We became more fully aware of the deeply embedded and damaging nature of colonialism and how paralyzing it can be, and of the possibilities of moving beyond—from damage to desire. In Monica’s narrative of change there was a movement from “us” and “them” to “we,” a recognition that there are no short-cuts in system building, that the search for one right narrative is naïve, and that we cannot let complexity inertia become an excuse for inaction. In Pam’s narrating of change, she considers our responsibilities as Treaty People and the spaces created by particular Indigenous texts centring Indigenous knowledges, languages, and cultures. These texts shift from damage to desire while presenting the possibility of creating new Indigenous futures, and new ways of being for White settlers that focus on the taking up of incommensurability as a pedagogical starting point (Ashton, 2015) for ourselves and the larger life endeavours in which we are engaged. Jane narrates the ways in which working with curriculum frameworks opens a space for educators to value their own work, and brings forward thinking that positions incommensurability as a productive space in relationship to ECEC curricular goals of diversity, inclusion, and difference. In Esther’s narrating of change, she sees hope in the way that one educator was able to co-create opportunities through which children’s ways of knowing were valued, local knowledge was honoured, and the agency of the land was acknowledged. Through intentional and caring practice children and adults were able to work towards finding their place in the story of the land.

Because of the pandemic we had extended opportunities to experience movement of thought through conversation in an extraordinary moment of change for ECEC in Canada. Conversation, community, co-creation, and co-authorship were made possible through the use of various digital platforms. The crisis in ECEC, made more visible by the pandemic, reframed the scope of our research. Our “throwntogetherness” in a pandemic moment inspired us to bring people together for a broader public conversation in a virtual space, to story a multi-faceted bricolage, narrating change in ECEC in Canada.

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¹ We use the term ECEC throughout the paper to be consistent with the terminology of the OECD. In Canada ECEC is also commonly referred to as early learning and child care (ELCC) in the context of the frameworks.

² The Alberta framework was first published in 2014 as *Play Participation, and Possibilities: An Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Alberta*. In 2018, it was re-issued as *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework*.