Embracing Our Power: ECE Students' Experiences Creating Spaces of Resistance in Post-Secondary Institutions

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Abstract

In this paper, we, four students with diverse social locations, explore the development of preservice educators' professional identities as political resisters. Through our experiences in an Ontario college, we found commonality in our emerging need to resist "alarming discourses" (Whitty et al., 2020, p. 8). By dissecting and analyzing the neoliberal narrative perpetuated by our educational institution, we refused the notion of being the *good ECE* (Langford, 2007). Rejecting the universalism and totalism of Western European curricular and pedagogical inheritances, we set out to create a space to embrace alternative narratives to critically question our role and the expectations of our profession in a neoliberal world. This space was used for ECEC advocacy and brought together our student community, creating an opportunity to mentor while fostering human connections from our stories. Through collaboration, we reaffirm the importance of building community and reciprocal mentorship for nurturing and developing political agency within our field. We are motivated to sustain this critical space, to serve as a place of resistance for other students who question "universal truths." Education comes from more than the diploma received.

Keywords: Early childhood educators, professional identity, resistance, student advocacy, post-secondary institutions, ethics of care

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The early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce has been no stranger to challenges and these are well-documented (Akbari & McCuaig, 2022; Jones, 2022; Lysack, 2021). Discontent and frustration grew among early childhood educators (ECEs) as the pandemic continued to exacerbate poor working conditions across Ontario, Canada.[1] During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was common for ECEs to feel forgotten on the frontline (Powell et al., 2021). The new Canada-wide early learning and child care bilateral agreements[2] were unveiled with elusive solutions, adding another layer of complexity to the ECEC field. Still, countless students continue to enter the turmoil by registering into ECEC programs in colleges across Ontario. We, four such students, two undergraduates and two graduates, are connected through our shared experiences within a post-secondary institution. Our journey of establishing a student-led advocacy group[3] was a purposeful action designed to incite a transformation within ourselves and the profession we embrace.

Like most students entering ECEC programs, we aspired to educate within a responsive early years environment, supporting children while pursuing a rewarding career. We failed to see that in taking on this role, we committed ourselves to insufficient salaries, poor benefits, and little to no planning time. In each of our post-secondary classes, there was minimal reference to what our profession lacks; rather, the primary focus was what we could learn and ultimately provide as a *good ECE* (Langford, 2007). The good ECE is defined as having specific qualities of "passion, happiness, inner strength, caring and alertness to individual needs" (Langford, 2007, p. 339). Further, the ECEC diploma largely centred on skill development, and, in contrast, the third year of the ECEC degree introduced the opportunity to question the teachings and truths, prompting our analytical lens and leaving us with cognitive dissonance. Through the introduction to postfoundational theories and theorists such as Moss, Deleuze, and Penn, our minds were piqued, our senses stimulated, and our professional trajectories altered.

These new learnings allowed us to identify dominant narratives in ECEC, including the hegemony of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, Brown (2003) claimed, is a set of economic policies that reach all aspects of social life, "extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action" (para. 7). It is not strange that early childhood provision in Canada, as in many rich and democratic countries, is just another product of the market for parents to consume (Moss, 2019). Through the appropriate technologies, the educator, as an expert technician, ensures children as human capital are developed to fulfill the demands of the workforce of the future, reaping the high returns of ECEC (Moss, 2019). Furthermore, neoliberalism does not begin or end in the early years. Post-secondary institutions, following the neoliberal design of high-profit, are compensated when students achieve academic success. Jeppesen and Nazar (2012) revealed that post-secondary education removes academic freedom and replaces it with dependence on achieving successful assessments to lead prosperous professions. By following these ideological interests, neoliberals shape the path of ECEs who are professionally supportive of children and families but often ill-equipped to value advocating for their professional careers.

Consequently, rejecting totalizing features proposed by dominant narratives in ECEC offered a new beginning for us. This awakening was supported by the encouragement and constant provocation from our "femtor,"[4] Monica Lysack. Historically, mentorship has impacted students' success at every education level, providing career guidance and support. However, according to our experience, women mentoring other women adds a unique value to this relationship. In a

gendered profession such as ECEC, a femtor connects on a deep personal level with the struggles of those in the ECEC profession as they navigate and perform their roles as mothers, aunties, daughters, students, academics, and educators. As care lies at the heart of ECEC, the femtor and femtees relationship unfolds within *an ethics of care* (e.g., Rosen, 2019, p. 79). Thinking femtorship relations within an ethics of care, offers incommensurable "value for reconceptualizing self and other through relational frames of interdependence" while making conscious choices of people's needs, their sociocultural-political context, and the power and inequalities inherent of care relations (Rosen, 2019, p. 80).

The ideas introduced by our femtor allowed us to become involved in Canadian ECEC politics where political action and mobilization are needed. We discovered our political prowess, manifesting a place of resistance. Identifying the pervasive effects of neoliberalism in our profession and the curricular practices of our post-secondary institutions presented us with an urgent and necessary "source of contestation" (Vintimilla, 2014, p. 79). Casual meetings with the seven original members led to rich discussions, and, when an assignment was introduced, a few original members welcomed the idea of creating a student advocacy group. The headiness of enacting our political power produced nervous energy that original members and new recruits embraced alike. We collectively moved forward, creating a community to advocate for the future of our profession. It was a risk driven by our need to build this community of like-minded students and professionals seeking to resist "alarming discourses" (Whitty et al., 2020, p. 8). In this process, we shared, digested, and examined each of our stories, together and separately, to reveal the commonalities and differing directionalities of our professional paths. On the cusp between learning and taking action is where we found ourselves.

We present community and mentorship to describe our experiences in forming the student advocacy group during three different moments, as original members (the provocateurs), as new members (emerging femtors), and lastly, fostering allyship, a reflection on advocacy as a necessity. Following, we reflect on a neoliberal system and how it has permeated post-secondary students in institutions, producing "good" and efficient ECEs. The teachings within educational institutions transfer into the early years responding to specific images of the child, the educator, and childcare programs. Thereafter, we discuss how a student educator challenges the dominant discourse and refutes the insincere and tokenistic measuring stick that follows best practice. In breaking away from Western ideologies and our role as the so-called good ECE (Langford, 2007), we forge ahead with a student resistance movement. By embracing reconceptualization and storytelling, we become professionally prepared for the socio, political, and complex issues that lie ahead. Ultimately, we examine the presence of "alternative futures" (Moss, 2017, p. 12) to re-imagine the possibilities of the ECEC field.

Storytelling Without Monologue

Storytelling is a fundamental feature of human expression (Klevan & Grant, 2022) that serves to make meaning and reframe theories and understandings (Dei, 2017). Thus, narratives, while subjective and deeply personal, are also in constant dialogue with others. Similarly, Klevan and Grant (2022) pointed out that narratives are entangled and messy because there is always "something of our narratives from the past in the new narratives we shape together, through our new dialogue" (p. 46). Stories can provide counter-narratives that serve to challenge, dismantle, and reframe dominant narratives (Dei, 2017), both globally and locally.

Our social locations are unique to us. We are from different backgrounds, cultures, and family dynamics, and we recognize how our stories connect within the wider picture of the Canadian early years landscape. Storytelling allows us to come together and offer our collective stories to educators like us, hoping our experiences resonate with others. The plurality of our stories provides unique narratives that nurture our professional identities, as Dei (2017) asserts, "our discourses cannot be monologues" (p. 13). As care professionals, our stories might seem irrelevant, dismissed from the dominant, and deemed illegitimate. However, we aim to transform our post-secondary institutions and early childhood settings to disrupt and push back against dominant narratives that prescribe students' behaviours and subjectivities. A focus on advocacy and the few poststructuralist and posthumanist theories introduced by our femtor stirred up provocations. These influences had an important role in our directionality as advocates and the formation of our professional identities.

To this, we present our stories.

Storytelling

Camila

When I reflect on how I became an early childhood educator, I like to say that it was meant to be; it was written in the stars, you may say, but in reality, it was not. I immigrated to Canada in 2014, and, as the wife of a skilled worker, I could not perform my profession because it was regulated. The first time I heard about Early Childhood Education (ECE) was when the caseworker of WoodGreen Community Services funnelled me into the profession. I will not describe my confusion when holding a BA in Psychology, the only career path offered to me was pursuing a diploma in ECE. I have found this to be a shared experience among immigrants, especially racialized immigrants from the Global South. As an immigrant, one's credentials and qualifications are often deemed irrelevant, but as a woman, you are considered suited for care work. Believing the caseworker had my best interests in mind and was an expert in the matter, I followed.

With no further ado, I went on and completed my ECE diploma, which was not difficult because, as a psychologist, I was already familiar with theories of human development, neuroscience, and Developmentally Appropriate Practice. After graduation, I became a Registered Early Childhood Educator in a toddler room of what was considered a high-quality, for-profit childcare centre. During this time, I did not understand why I felt so defeated, unmotivated, and lacking purpose in such an important role. Due to frustration, I decided to further my education with the goal of improving my working conditions and professional recognition.

During my degree in Early Childhood Leadership, I was inspired by one professor, today a femtor, who encouraged me to question everything through critical pedagogy. By continuously challenging my thoughts and assumptions about what it means to be an educator in a neoliberal system, this professor took me, along with many of my peers, on the irreversible road to advocacy by positioning us as ECEC leaders. It was a genuinely liberatory experience.

Today, I am completing my Master's in Early Childhood Studies, and it was at the juncture between seeking professional recognition and needing to learn more about the field that I chose this path. Also, after a lot of introspection, I realized that I was motivated by the need to prove to myself and all the caseworkers out there that we, immigrant women, can achieve more than what

is prescribed by neoliberal worldviews. Contrary to neoliberal hierarchies of human and productivity values, care work is important work. As such, I choose to care.

Tammy

As early as I can remember, life was hard. I was a latchkey kid before it had a name. At age 4, I came home alone every day after school. My sister, aged 7, was instructed to walk with me, but her aversion to home led her to the path of friends. My disappointment was futile. In hindsight, I simply wished I'd had the same option. In fairness, my mother and my father were both raised in homes of absent parenting. Therefore, my siblings and I received a mirrored version of that neglect.

As an unwed Indigenous woman, my maternal grandmother had all eight of her children taken at birth. This affected my mother. She was surrendered to dysfunctional grandparents and then, as an Indigenous adult, feared the 60s scoop and her own children's removal, although she denied her heritage to anyone that asked.

Our family did not foster love, respect, or connection. Intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous families, my mother's included, did not support a foundation for positive, intimate, or deep-seated feelings. Rather, it cultivated fear, hurt, and bitterness, leaving little room for growth, maturation, or peace.

Parenting through generations of trauma themselves, my parents raised three children that carry residual effects of neglect and trauma. Personally, I possess enough grit and tenacity to manage my wounds. My siblings hang onto the damage like a lifeline even though it swallows them whole, and wreaks havoc on each of their relationships. After my parents passed and drowning in my siblings' trauma, I untethered myself from the obligation of parenting my adult brother and sister. We are now all but estranged.

During my first pregnancy, I began voraciously researching. I knew how not to parent; unfortunately, I did not know much about how to parent. Developmentalism saturated most books I read, and I was concerned that fostering love, a healthy connection, autonomy, and open communication were rarely mentioned in the parenting books, magazines, and grey material. Upon reflection, I realized that I was desperate to sever the intergenerational trauma (that I had yet to label) that plagued each generation of my family, from my great-grandmother down.

My adverse childhood experiences and the predominant developmental focus of the materials I researched led me to question where I could find the tools and resources I was personally in short supply of, which may help me teach and nurture social and emotional well-being for my own children. In my pursuit of the parental education I lacked, I researched early childhood education, the field of ECEC, and the colleges that offered the program. In 2012, intrigued with the idea that I could learn how to be a support system for others, perhaps parents with similar stories as mine, I entered the ECE college program with both hope and trepidation. Fast forward 20 years, and I am immersed in ideologies, paradigms, and discourses related to questioning the importance placed on developmentalism for the children in our care. In raising three children of my own, I am aware of the uniqueness of each child and their development. Ultimately, my femtor and the content she introduced permanently altered the trajectory of my thoughts, career, and life.

Lu

Childhood. Two decades ago, my teenage mother relinquished me. A girl serves no purpose in my culture. She placed me quietly on a doorstep, which turned into another doorstep. My identity eventually became the granddaughter of a family that wished me to bring future Ivy League status.

The next 20 years brought them disappointment as I failed to meet their expectations time and again. Vanity is an ugly trait that this family carried, and I failed to meet their envisioned expectations. Abandonment I knew first hand but just to ensure I never forgot, all but one of the adoptive relatives tormented me with frequent reminders that I was abandoned at infancy. The incessant reminders were to emphasize that I was not worthy to be a part of their family. Fear plagued me.

Rebellion came as I moved from my top university to a college for an ECE program. This decision was met with disdain as my adoptive family felt contempt for the profession and the institution.

Beauty is Only Skin Deep. My excitement showed, walking into my first ECE placement, a distinguished not-for-profit childcare centre. The excitement quickly waned when my centre advisor shared with me a dog-eating festival from my home country. Understandably, I was baffled. She then asked, "Have you ever eaten dogs before?" Frustration, embarrassment, and shame, along with other negative emotions, flooded my brain. For the rest of that placement, I questioned this profession. In subjecting me to the same question relentlessly, my centre advisor invoked my fear of not being enough, once again.

Surviving placement was a significant feat, and I was able to bring confidence to a for-profit childcare centre following graduation. The reward for my efforts was being labelled a dictator, in reference to my race, for questioning expired anaphylactic medications, mouldy bottles, and untrained staff. A dramatic situation ensued and I knew my time at the centre had come to an end. I resigned immediately, yet, pondering where support is for ECEs that encounter centres' willingness to hire unqualified staff and ignore health standards.

Not All Rainbows and Butterflies. Questioning the dominant narratives has ignited my commitment to move beyond developmentalism and the harmful side of ECEC. My experiences and finding the advocacy group created by my colleagues has made me a stronger early childhood educator. Despite my challenges, I advocate for the people in our field, our profession, and myself. My colleagues and femtors, Dhanna, Monica, and Danielle, continue to enlighten me by resisting and challenging the dominant discourses in ECEC as I walk beside them one step at a time.

Grace

Giving more to others than I do to myself has been my undoing. I have often felt lost in my commitments as an older sister, mature daughter, and group organizer, each prompting responsibilities that have added to my plate. In so doing, each diminishing my responsibility to myself. Nevertheless, these roles have contributed to my growth and aided in my evolution as a leader. I hold no regret toward the energy I have devoted, but I ponder if I have given too much and neglected my wants and needs?

Fulfilling my ambitions and wants has gradually peppered my recent years, my acceptance to a post-secondary ECE diploma program included. Consuming a vast amount of knowledge, I was pointed to the "true" practices of this field. I was immediately humbled on day one of my first

field placement. I felt defeated. Unhappy with my performance, I scolded myself for not memorizing the various steps and stages of theories. Later on in my studies, I would come to recognize that the practices deposited into me were but one approach and would not satisfy the complexities of caring and working with children.

The hope I needed came in the form of a degree program focused on early childhood leadership. We were not only asked to question the diploma teachings, but we were also expected to. Though some were unsettled, I was excited and eager to pick apart my knowledge and explore unfamiliar perspectives. We were challenged to ask the hard questions such as, "What is next?", "Who does this truly benefit?", and "Is this the only way?" My predicament now lies in entering the field. These complex thoughts bring complex anxieties. After 4 years and immense growth, I am still questioning and wondering how to be a good early childhood educator.

Thinking With Stories

Storytelling is not only engaging but a tangible illustration of the complex ways that the world has influenced another's life. A personal story creates an open space to share relatable narratives. In sharing our stories, we became aware of the prevalent issues in the field, driving us to explore advocacy to identify ourselves as resistors. This collaborative process allowed us to relate to each other and invite student stakeholders into the fold. In bringing in multiple opinions and voices with impactful stories, we created an environment to evaluate the needs in our field and celebrate the successes. Through dissecting the contradictions and similarities in our stories, we move toward examining these experiences within the larger conversation of ECEC advocacy in Canada.

As women with different social locations and diverse ethnic backgrounds, at the juncture of multiple intersections, we come together with our collective stories. Through exploring Black feminist thought, including specific reference to the essential work of the Combahee River Collective, Collins (2015) explained:

> The work of the Collective foreshadows important ideas within intersectional knowledge projects, namely, viewing the task of understanding complex social inequalities as inextricably linked to social justice, or the intersections not just of ideas themselves, but of ideas and actions. (p. 8)

As Collins (2015) pointed out, Black feminist thought as a form of knowledge and collectivity, empowers people who have been traditionally oppressed and disadvantaged by a "global system of social injustice" (p. 9). As students, and prospective ECEs in the field, we are moved by the power of collective ideas and relational frameworks to transform society. It is our compounded stories that bring us together as allies. While our stories share some commonalities, it is within our distinct experiences that we come to recognize the diversity existing in the ECEC workforce. There are so many stories to be heard.

Community and Mentorship

Through dialogue and humility, we created a space to contest ideologies and negotiate our roles and experiences. In building this shared space and inviting others to contribute their perspectives, we embraced that we were only people attempting to learn more than what we knew (Freire, 2005). Our aim was, and still is, to share our stories and build a community of collective experiences that allow us to formulate hypotheses about the systems we are in and how to negotiate the expectations of our roles and professional identities.

In so doing, we focus on the value of community building and human connections that defy neoliberal logics of individuation and blatant personal gains. There may be no clear incentives or academic awards to showcase group membership or to advance careers. Instead, our value resides within the relations we have built and the experiences and stories we share.

Our perspectives in this section summarize the life of the advocacy group during three different stages. The formation and continuation of the student advocacy group was established by our unique experiences as provocateurs and emerging femtors. Finally, we reflect on the value of building community, mentorship, and fostering allyship to sustain spaces of resistance. These moments illustrate both the challenges and successes we have encountered during this journey.

The Provocateurs (Camila & Tammy)

With our ideologies set on fire, an assignment initiated by our femtor had us ablaze with excitement. We co-created a student advocacy group within our post-secondary institution. Our profession was fighting for the rights of ECEs. We dared to enter the chaos with the intent of fusing our advocacy efforts with those immersed in the heart of advocacy in Ontario such as the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario and the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. The original members began with fervour, inciting grandiose ideas. It began with giddy excitement, stories of past experiences, triumphs, and bitter disappointments, eventually rising into "storm-the-castle" suggestions on how to improve the working conditions of ECEs. In retrospect, while we agreed we wanted to see a change in our field, we also realized we were students with different social locations, each with unique perspectives, and our agendas did not align. Although our end goal was the same, the plan of action was a forked road and our group could not agree on the same path.

We, alongside some of the original members, anticipated our purpose to be building a community to enhance students' competency and love of advocacy. As undergraduates, we wanted to share with other students, early in their emerging studies, the enticing knowledges and perspectives that led us to question and criticize ECEC as we knew it. We were provided a unique opportunity to accomplish this as the diploma and undergraduate programs coexist and had access to the same professors and online resources. While some members embraced the chance to connect with all students, others considered this approach a waste of the group's energy and resources. These other members felt we should enact a more radical approach if we wanted to see significant changes in the existing field. We, the provocateurs and a couple of the original members, strongly believed in the importance of community building, in "radical friendships" (Bailey et al., 2022) and "reciprocal mentoring" (Swadener & Nagasawa, 2017, p. 207), to actively challenge dominant discourses about ECEC for the students in our program. A connecting link between the provocateurs was the idea that we need diverse theoretical and practical influences for alternative narratives to be lived and reflected in the shared experiences of the student members. The presence of a critical friend (Brewer et al., 2021) provides an opportunity to discuss, challenge, and critically ponder ECEC. It is the stories and experiences of students and our colleagues that infuse theory and create the knowledge that should inform policy making.

The antithetical ideas caused bitter dissension and led to a break in the collective agreement and adversity ensued. A disagreement in creating the group's purpose led to a conflict that shook our core values and put into question our beliefs and commitments towards the group, creating mayhem in its wake. The detonation left behind overpowering emotional distress. The destruction was immeasurable and the harm interfered with proceeding forward as a collective. Clearly, our

perceptions of advocacy and building a community were misaligned. Our goals diverged and so did the members.

The original group dispersed. Some of us who stayed wondered if we built space for everything, for the “nice” and the “nasty”? Did we give up too soon? Did hurt feelings steer the outcome? The conflict remained unsolved as one member of the group abdicated without notice. Our partnership was strengthened due to the conflict, and, with the remaining members, cultivated respectful and inclusive ways of interacting and celebrating our differences.

Despite the failure to launch the original group, we, as initial advocates, prompted an invitation to welcome a new set of students to think critically about advocacy. As new graduates relating and existing with undergraduate students, our responsibilities within the group were modified to be enablers by providing guidance towards common goals, proxies to represent the student community, and provocateurs, inciting and igniting discussions. Being conscious of our previous experiences and challenges served as a catalyst to reframe our purposes as we recruited and welcomed new members to embark on this co-journey.

Emerging Femtors (Lu & Grace)

Enticed and captivated by an extended invitation from the same femtor, we, two current students, joined the alumni members in their advocacy journey. We were hesitant at first because we lacked confidence in our ability to advocate for ourselves and the wider field. Even though we had both started questioning the dominant narratives of our profession, we were unsure how to proceed. Admittedly, we anticipated the group to be more established and knowledgeable than us. Contrary to our expectations, we were perplexed by the immediate trust and parity we felt within the community.

This advocacy group, formed at our institution, provided an open space by fostering feelings of comfort and generating a sense of security within the both of us. Through reciprocal sharing, we offered our stories; each was appreciated and valued, and we felt comfortable. Thus, our relationship with the alumni began as equals, and a balanced sense of power allowed for equal commitment in forming the group. They became our mentors, inspiring, encouraging, and challenging us as new members. This promising mentor-mentee relationship was built from a basis of trust in one another and in the group. Their mentorship and confidence in us provided a foundation we could build upon.

There was now a palpable sense of responsibility and accountability in our leadership. However, building a new community together was not an easy task. Although we were thankful for being recognized as a formalized group, our institution required specific roles and responsibilities from us as current students. We felt moments of uncertainty as we attempted to navigate the expectations required of us as executive members, namely, our duty to design and execute monthly meetings. Despite our attempts to share these duties, the two of us felt an imbalance between the appointed positions and the ones truly enacted by the assigned members. Consequently, the work of many fell on a few.

To this, we question, what is motivating us to sustain this advocacy community? For the two of us, ECEC advocacy started as an interest that quickly became a passion. This passion grew as we committed to this space and the members within. Advocacy feels undeniably tied to our professional identities now. Our values and knowledge as educators have evolved from our work as advocates, which motivates us. Yet, we are concerned that we will be unable to continue this

community with the challenges we endure. If this space disappears, we are fearful that a portion of our professional self will be lost.

Fostering Allyship

Mentorship for us is learning and lending from one another. With this in mind, we focused on the process, on the journey of building and forming relationships. We found intention in this collaborative space by combining academic and work expectations. Through this advocacy forum, as a collective group, we can apply critical thinking to make meaning of our social realities, as we should be able to do more than regurgitate the academic content. Our roles as educators have us actively advocating for children and families but not for ourselves and we ask ourselves, why do ECEs not see themselves as political agents?

A student's lack of awareness is perpetuated by a post-secondary institution's failure to equip them with the competencies to advocate for the ECEC field. Throughout our years, we have heard and debated the gaps in our profession with our college professors; however, only a few mentioned advocacy. Jones et al. (2019) believed that student engagement in sociopolitical areas is initiated by social policy courses that allow students to understand the history of care work in Canada and how it affects our professional identities. Thus, our resolution lies in continuing this endeavour. We are motivated to sustain this critical space, to serve as a place of resistance for other students who question so-called universal truths. We believe that post-secondary institutions deem advocacy an afterthought and rarely provide spaces for educators to contest, explore and reflect on their political competencies.

What does the future hold for other student advocates in our community? We are unsure. We are struggling to recruit new executive members who are not just willing to fulfill the institutionalized role but also willing to work toward reconceptualizing ECEC. Education, in itself, is not neutral (Freire, 2005). We agree that the formation of educators as political agents is a very complex undertaking. Educators' formation is determined by a dialectic process that includes the development of student subjectivities, influenced by their institutions and interactions within their larger socio-political contexts (Urban et al., 2012). As recent graduates, we believe that the failure lies with many colleges and universities neglecting the introduction of advocacy for ECE students. Advocacy could help up-and-coming ECEs support our precarious sector.

To see the changes we envision (big or small) and build a "competent system" (Urban et al., 2012, p. 515), advocacy is required at the forefront of our profession. The creation of competent early childhood systems demands educators to understand the whole system as its creation highly depends on the "reciprocal relationships between individuals, teams, institutions and the wider socio-political context" (Urban et al., 2012, p. 515). Consequently, competent educators actively engage in critical conversations, posing critical questions about their role while co-constructing their professional identity.

Indeed, Urban (2008) supported what we envision by encouraging those participating to contribute "critical questions" (p. 149), allowing an opportunity for a myriad of potential answers as this helps form a collective group with "new understandings" (p. 149). Asking what matters beyond developmentalism, what are the responsibilities of post-secondary curriculum for ECE students, and how can we recruit ECEs to advocate for themselves are just a few of the critical questions we invoke. Similar to Urban's (2008) efforts, as student advocates, we embrace "a complex *ecology of the profession*" (p. 149), relating it to one another, as well as to the advocacy space that we created. In line with Urban (2008), we propose spaces of sustained reciprocal

relations that allow for the creation of professional epistemologies rooted and contextually situated within ECEs' practices. These efforts challenge traditional ideologies of professionalism that correlate professional development with isolated courses and workshops that respond to skill development. Despite our efforts to incite others and welcome them into our community, we have yet to see a positive response. We agree with Jones et al. (2019) that student educators are often divorced from advocacy. However, revolutionizing the field cannot be achieved without new educators joining seasoned advocates to mend the historical problems our profession has endured.

Neoliberalism in Post-Secondary Education

In conversations with ECEs, Vintimilla (2014) understood that in the forming of the educational collective, a "politics of niceness … characterized by a commitment to social harmony, to a common good" (p. 84) is predominant and remains prevalent in the field today. Informing post-secondary education curricula, this "politics of niceness" (Vintimilla, 2014, p. 84) minimizes ECEC to merely an instrumental, observable, and standardized practice. Thus, it is not unusual that, as Langford (2007) found, the good ECE is typically portrayed as having caregiver qualities such as being emotional, supportive, and warm. This reductionist and gendered description of our profession is mirrored by ECE preservice programs.

To start with, these images and discourses of the good ECE (Langford, 2007) represented in textbooks, discussions, and assignments in post-secondary education neglect to encompass the intersectionalities of the workforce, mostly consisting of newcomers, immigrants, and visible minorities (Gestwicki & Bertrand, 2003). As Dei (2017) critically pointed out when referring to institutional structures, they "are them [Whites] and they are the structure. The structures are also, a creation of the dominant" (p. 4). As such, educational institutions' curriculum outcomes serve to sustain and reproduce the benefits, privileges, and entitlements of the dominant (Dei, 2017). In serving governmental guidelines, post-secondary programs usually include classes such as Observation in which methods heavily rely on child development theory. The observation tools taught then set the stage to document children's interests and skills, but without consideration of their relations, culture, and context. Again, this mechanistic observation of young children to document their learning obliges children to fit our scripts, and when they do not perform as expected, the children are deemed as deficient. Consequently, the importance of developing critical thinking, to disrupt the status quo perpetuated by curriculum and pedagogies at every educational level, is needed.

Unknowingly, we participated in the neoliberal educational project, where our role was to perform as expected, as apolitical, to simply be immersed in our classroom bubble. Likewise, Freire's (2005) "banking" concept of education positions students as ingesters of knowledge and what is considered truth, summarizing how they engage in passive consumerism of academics while subjected to "a fragmented view of reality deposited in them" (p. 73). Such educational instruction, according to Freire (2005), leaves little room to develop "critical consciousness" (p. 73) in students and ECEs. We can speak to this firsthand.

The initial introduction to *difference* and postfoundational theorists challenged us and our previous learning. We were motivated to investigate further through exploring each theory and questioning the neoliberal narrative. We began recognizing the "inadvertent political and social consequences" (Brown, 2003, para. 4) of neoliberalism and specifically how it finds its way into education, producing "subjects, [and] ways of behaving" (Vintimilla, 2014, p. 80) and unwittingly, manufacturing the good ECE (Langford, 2007).

In recent years, ECEs have been lulled into believing that, through an emergent curriculum, they are following and respecting children's individualities. Instead, they are unconsciously applying effective technologies that yield specific learning outcomes, "'future proofing' children to fit this world" (Moss, 2019, p. 22). Documents provided by the government to increase accountability and productivity of childcare services benefit the agenda of dominant societal structures. We experience this first hand through standardization and implementation of tools to measure quality. As such, quality standards that govern our practices are defined by outsiders instead of representing the lives and entanglements of children and educators, in a specific space and place. Neoliberalism rationality makes it difficult for some to recognize that we must resist the narrative of so-called high-quality education, which uses measuring tools and developmentally appropriate practice. In this vein, Brown (2016) elaborates that governance operates to attenuate normative conflict and "buries contestable norms and structural striations" (p. 6), hiding authoritative and coercive power. These replacements allow for dominant narratives, such as high-quality education, to remain unattended and uncontested, perpetuating unsustainable ways of being. As we envision it, we introduce and participate in the storied lives of children, families, and educators allowing us to engage in small acts of refusal.

Neoliberalism in the Early Years

Neoliberal imaginary and governance impacts education, outlining the possibilities of ECEC by offering specific images of the child, the educator, and the childcare centre while increasing standards of practice and regulation (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). As such, discourses of quality, assessments, school readiness, and interventions, among others, are deployed without a second thought (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Subsequently, the educator utilizes prescribed practices preparing children to be school ready and eventually, a productive citizen applying their skills to secure economic prosperity for themselves and their country by providing a competitive advantage (Moss, 2019). Similarly, as we alluded to earlier, while emergent curriculum may seem like a progressive departure, there are shared ideologies of competency, flexibility, and individualism that might re-enact the same neoliberal script but with a different label.

ECEs in the field that follow a developmental framework foresee children growing "out of their needs through linear instruction and increasingly demonstrate independence in their taken-for-granted skills and knowledge" (Langford, 2020, p. 24). For example, ECE training programs recite Piaget and his theory of knowledge acquisition that focuses on children's scientific thinking. Penn (2014) argued that "to learn about child development has been to learn about Piaget" (p. 44). Conversely, little is said about the rapid evolution of science knowledge that overthrows Piaget's thoughts, "his theories represent the time warp in which many people are stuck" (Penn, 2014, p. 44). Within developmental frameworks, children are viewed as subjects that are moulded and reshaped through innumerable unconscious discursive practices that occur in different social encounters (Langford, 2020). This predominant view not only portrays children as "empty vessels needing to be filled" (Moss, 2019, p. 53) but also represents developmental stages as universal. Curiously, through these (not so) universal conceptualizations of childhood, development, and achievement standards, some children are perpetually deemed as lacking skills and already behind, especially Black and racialized children (Nxumalo, 2021). These dominant ideas of children and childhood, influenced by developmental psychology, limit our pedagogy and curriculum, reducing the role of the child as a mere receiver. We openly reject these notions.

According to Dahlberg and Moss (2005), within our education and care system, the dominant discourse suggests that children, through technical practice, are educated to "become the

future solution to our current problems" (p. vii). On the other hand, recognizing other stories, noted Dahlberg and Moss (2005), contests the premise of the dominant discourse, notably embracing alternatives derived from a multitude of origins and diverse theorists. While dominant narratives claim universality and righteousness, the presence of alternative narratives serve as a source of contestation. Relatedly, Moss (2019) asserted, "A discourse may be dominant, yet it never manages totally to silence other discourses or stories" (p. 7). Based on our experience, we witness structured curriculum ideas as predominant, such as the themed-based approach or educators seeking activities to develop those skills deemed valuable, such as literacy and numeracy. Pedagogical practices that reflect on the issues of the world, those that address inequalities and aim for social justice, are minimal, perpetuating limited ideas of childhood, education, and care. Instead, we see stagnant curriculum, a lack of pedagogical reflection and a tendency to preserve childhood innocence in most aspects of ECEC.

Welcoming the intention of other narratives averts sameness. Other narratives permit us, students, educators, and scholars, to "abandon our preconceptions" and reframe thought and knowledge as the creation of "new understandings" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 116). Other narratives enable educators to critically think about their practices beyond complying with the fixed and reprocessed curriculum that emerges as unending theories and thoughts parroted year after year (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Other narratives allow us to recognize that dominant narratives are just one story.

These universal, unidimensional ideas of childhood, children, pedagogies, and curriculum also usher a simplistic, unidimensional image of ECEs and the field overall. For us, advocacy, while not actively promoted within our post-secondary classes, has been a source of respite from the developmental pedagogy pushed in our program and field. Inadvertently, we met with peers and began dissecting the dominant structure of developmentalism, reverting to the fact that there must be an alternative. Among our small group, we slowly unpacked the alternative narratives of Penn, Moss, and Deleuze, to name a few, mindful that these new concepts were not the primary practice of our institute but a small inclusion to only one class. The alternative narratives we were introduced to became a springboard for our group, and although they take on different forms for each member, we welcome the multiplicities of their stories and experiences. As such, creating spaces of contestation and resistance offers students the opportunity to relate to each other and grasp how their stories intertwine within the neoliberal discourse. In this process, individual and shared strategies of resistance emerge. Our aspirations are grand; collective stories ignite us.

Challenging and Resisting the Dominant Discourse

As we move away from the discourse of developmentalism that inundates ECEC today, we reject the universalism and totalism of Western European conceptions of childhood and normality. We recognize that these developmental frameworks reinforce discourses deemed at risk, easily attached to marginalized and racialized children, families, and communities. Ideally, educators would stop seeing children as needing to be saved from the fatalism of their communities and instead learn to celebrate, embrace, and incorporate the whole child in the shared space. How can educators challenge such discourses if all they have been taught is to take out their measuring stick to see how the child is performing?

Consider the educator, compelled to follow human technologies and datafication while dispensing what is considered high-quality education (Moss, 2019). Specifically, implementing standardized assessments while collecting documentation on children encourages educators to

continue the narrative and impose benchmarks to increase "compliance to prescribed standards" (Moss, 2019, p. 13). Hence, the focus is on the investors, governments, and parents, rather than the children, perpetuating the "measuring stick" mentality.

Although we cannot completely quiet the presiding neoliberal ideology, the resistance of ECEs provides a vast and diverse movement (Moss, 2017). According to Moss (2017), ECEs are spirited and strong resistors that examine alternatives theoretically, bringing diverse advocacy ideas together to enhance ECEC. The educator as advocate, in a market-oriented childcare system, refuses damaged-centred narratives (Tuck, 2009) by enacting ECEC as a deep ethical and political work (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). ECEs resist by fostering desire-based pedagogies that contextualize and situate damage narratives to grasp the whole story, bringing hope and depathologizing deficit (Tuck, 2009). On the contrary, as post-secondary students in a neoliberal educational system, we had not experienced diverse theoretical frameworks and had been minimally exposed to voices of authors that seek to amplify the resistance movement in education.

Post-secondary institutions provide training for the workforce that bring into educational spaces the compliant good ECE (Langford, 2007). However, attending to the "conditions of our time" (Vintimilla, 2020, para. 8) demands educators be connected to the socio-cultural and political conditions of their geographies. Educators need to be empowered to talk confidentially about complex issues to introduce those ideas into their programs. Otherwise, education becomes a project divorced from the realities and necessities of our time.

Our student advocacy experience increased our focus on the realities our communities face. Further, it advanced our professional preparedness by connecting us with colleagues from different professional backgrounds, motivating us to learn more about our educational system and how politics impacts our career and increases our political accountability. Creating a space of resistance allowed us to build a network of students and colleagues that bring into the group diverse knowledges that keep us aware of current issues.

Embracing, and inserting ourselves into, the larger resistance movement allowed us to explore our uncertainties and evolve our critical lens within the field. In creating an advocacy group, our ECE academic community became a part of the resistance. But, challenging and resisting comes with a high cost. The unease of questioning years of achieved learning outcomes left us with hushed discussions of where we should draw our boundaries. Our fear of questioning the traditional narrative and our post-secondary curriculum is real for us but we stand together. With this paper, we call for post-secondary institutions to shift towards contextualizing their teachings and openly acknowledging their complicity in perpetuating neoliberal tropes. In so doing, realizing that students are owed an education beyond tokenism and developmentalism.

The Story Continues

We, as post-secondary resisters, are a collective that ideates "alternative futures" (Moss, 2017, p. 12). We find worth in our deep discussions and contribute to meaning-making with community members, reaping the rewards of "reciprocal mentoring" (Swadener & Nagasawa, 2017, p. 207). Despite the value of our discussions, we question the impact of our actions and if they are enough to provoke change.

"Envision[ing] alternative futures," (Moss, 2017, p. 12) demands that we think differently, but as Jameson (2003) argued, "It's easier to dream the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (p. 76) and we venture to say that about many of the "isms." The pressing issues we experience

today require a different approach to reconceptualizing our practices and ECEC overall. We cannot envision alternative futures without acknowledging capitalism, neoliberalism, and, in particular, sexism and patriarchy and how each influence ECEC. Consider ECEs, their role assumed as a romanticized and devalued version of the *carer* rather than the builder of a child's holistic foundation in the early years. To date, advocacy addressing the pressing issue of the carer misconception has been boldly ignored. We either accept this ignorance while being the good ECE (Langford, 2007) or rise in defence of our professional reality.

Neoliberalism has engorged the Canada wide early learning and child care system. This system, created uniquely by each province and territory, has the potential to be a viable alternative narrative for the future; however, the government's economization of everything has permeated this vision. Ontario educators are stupefied by the provincial government's exclusion of their essential work contributions and the lack of commitment to improve their poor working conditions, inadequate wages, and benefit plans (Akbari & McCuaig, 2022). Our country will soon discover that the system cannot effectively run without ECEs. This prompts us to evaluate the state of ECEC in Canada, and we recognize that developing advocacy competencies in post-secondary programs is necessary to support our current ECEC system. More student voices are needed to strengthen advocacy in ECEC. We know it is time for change.

To provoke change, we bring forward alternative narratives that enrich and diversify ECEC, distancing us from the gaze of dominant narratives. Our audacity as advocates has led us to agree with Arndt et al. (2018) that we are a diverse group of ECEs, yet, we "have more in common than what separates" us (p. 112). Through our distinct stories, we form collective knowledges that challenge, disrupt, and dismantle western onto-epistemologies. In some cases, advocating with students simply offers a space for ECE students to enhance their political agency. In other instances, it provides space for their stories, each bringing value to student advocacy.

Despite our failures and triumphs within the group, we reaffirm the importance of building community and reciprocal mentorship for nurturing and developing political agency within our field. We volunteer with this new advocacy community to illuminate students' concerns and introduce new concepts and narratives. And at the same time, we empathize with the altruistic advocates that have endured a career-spanning fight for the rights of the educators in our field. Researchers, advocates, professors, and government representatives have sacrificed immeasurable time and energy toward making sustainable changes. We join them. We attempt to become bridgers, bringing diverse levels of experience towards building a better understanding of the field, acting as a connection between new students and seasoned advocates. In doing so, we asseverate this space as political agents and open it up for all those wanting to challenge or critically question the dominant narrative. As provocateurs and emerging femtors, we stand in solidarity with students and seasoned advocates alike.

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[1] We are situated throughout Ontario, Canada, on Indigenous unceded and ceded lands.

[2] "The Government of Canada made a transformative investment of over $27 billion over 5 years as part of Budget 2021 to build a Canada-wide early learning and child care system with provinces and territories" (Government of Canada, 2022, para. 1). For more information see https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories.html

[3] This paper reflects on our experiences of coming together as an advocacy group. The opinions expressed within this paper are solely the opinions of the four authors. We do not aim to speak on behalf of others who experienced the same circumstances.

[4] "femtor" or female mentor. We purposely decided to use the word femtor to describe our distinct bond to disrupt traditional ideas of mentorship. With this move, we seek to bring forward the continuous work of many women whose life work has been dedicated to inspiring, mentoring, and igniting others to reconceptualize ECEC.