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PROFESSIONALISM FROM THE STANDPOINT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

by

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Honours Bachelor of Arts, Early Childhood Education, Ryerson University, Toronto, 2010

A Major Research Paper  
Presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in the Program of  
Early Childhood Studies

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2011

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# PROFESSIONALISM FROM THE STANDPOINT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

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Master of Arts  
Early Childhood Studies  
Ryerson University

## ABSTRACT

In this research project, findings from qualitative interviews with four early childhood educators (ECEs) in Toronto, Ontario are presented. Using Feminist standpoint theory and methodology as a guiding theoretical framework and research paradigm, the purpose of this research was to examine professionalism from the particular standpoint of ECEs. The findings presented in this paper indicate that feminist standpoint theory and methodology offer the means for revealing what ECEs think and want as professionals, and can be used as a theoretical tool to analyze the relationship between the experienced, material realm and the conceptual, discursive realm of ECE professionalism. A thematic analysis of the collected data identified two themes. The first theme illuminates the lived realities of ECE work, and highlights how ECEs' experiences of professionalism are shaped by their material conditions. These lived realities however, are to a certain extent at odds with the meanings that the ECEs in this project ascribe to professionalism in the second theme, which appear to be shaped by dominant discourses about professionalism. The discussion of the findings focuses on the process of building new knowledge that accounts for these contradictions and aims to address the divide between the conceptual realm of professionalism with the material, experienced realm of ECEs' everyday work.

Key words: early childhood educator, professionalism, professionalization, feminist standpoint theory, materiality, discourse

## Acknowledgements

Desta - You are my happiness, I love you.

My family - Thank you for the endless love, support and understanding. I am the luckiest person in the world.

Rachel - You brought out the best in me, and in this project. Thank you for sharing your knowledge and passion in early childhood education. Even though I often felt that this project was too big and complex for me, you always had a way of making it seem exciting and possible and I thank you for that.

Martha - Your work and knowledge has been so influential to me as a student of early childhood education. Thank you for being a part of this project.

The participants - Thank you for contributing your experience to this project, for sharing your truth.

My peers - No one understands the way you do. Your friendship, knowledge, and support kept me going till the very end. One day we will have our radical childcare centre!

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## 1. Introduction

Professionalism in early childhood education is not a widely researched topic in Ontario or in the rest of Canada. Canadian early childhood educators (ECEs) work in a field that remains underdeveloped and fragmented at both the provincial and national level (Friendly & Prentice, 2009). ECEs face systemic barriers in establishing themselves as professionals because as Langford (2010) has stated, “North American society accords early childhood educators little expertise, authority, and status” (p. 292). To address this issue there has been a slow but consistent move towards increasing the professionalization of ECEs in Ontario. Simpson (2010) refers to professionalization as “the process of change that occurs before members of an occupation become professional and take a degree of control over the technical aspects of their work” (p. 270). He further defines professionalism as “the dispositions and orientations of professional groups and individual professionals to their status and work” (Simpson, 2010, p. 270).

At a national level, the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council<sup>1</sup> (CCHRSC, 2004) has been working to promote “professionalization, unionization and advocacy” as “key strategies that can work together to improve wages, benefits and working conditions, and support a skilled workforce” (p. 10). In Ontario, the most significant development in professionalization has been the establishment of the College of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario<sup>2</sup> (CECE) in accordance with the provincial Early Childhood Educators Act of 2007. The Early Childhood Educators Act defines the nature and scope of the profession’s practice and determines the requirements needed to be registered with the regulatory college and to practice under the title of

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<sup>1</sup> The Child Care Human Resources Sector Council will hereafter be referred to with the acronym, CCHRSC

<sup>2</sup> The College of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario will hereafter be referred to as ‘the college’ or CECE

'early childhood educator' (CECE, 2011). Additionally, the implementation of full-day kindergarten in Ontario has positioned ECEs as a key staff member in this ambitious new program. As first articulated by Pascal (2009) in his proposal to the Ontario government for changes in the early childhood system, it is hoped that ECEs will form "a unique professional classification within school boards" which will also "support the professionalism of the sector" (p. 34).

Considering these recent developments, it seems an appropriate time to embark on an in-depth exploration of ECE professionalism in Ontario. While professionalization is in its earliest stages in this province, there is a wealth of international literature that has explored processes of professionalization and the concept of professionalism in early childhood education. This literature which identified that significant challenges arise in the pursuit of professionalism, has inspired me to address the topic of ECE professionalism in Ontario . The purpose of this research was to particularly examine professionalism from the standpoint of Ontario ECEs themselves. Qualitative interviews with four ECEs in Toronto were conducted in order to start building an understanding of how ECEs experience and define professionalism in their everyday work. Feminist standpoint theory and methodology was used as a guiding theoretical framework and research paradigm for this research project. The findings presented in this paper indicate that feminist standpoint theory and methodology offer the means for revealing what ECEs think and want as professionals, and can be used as a theoretical tool to analyze the relationship between the experienced, material realm and the conceptual, discursive realm of ECE professionalism. The following questions have guided this research:

1. How do early childhood educators experience professionalism in their everyday work and lives?

2. What does professionalism mean to early childhood educators?
3. What new knowledge about professionalism can we gain from the standpoint of early childhood educators?

### **Key Terms and Definitions**

In Ontario, the term early childhood educator (ECE), refers to people who are registered with the College of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, and work under the title of Registered Early Childhood Educator or RECE. The term ECE has been chosen as a unifying term for the group of people now registered with the CECE, however, there are a number of job titles that are still informally and commonly used for registered ECEs. The professional association for ECEs in Ontario, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario (AECEO), lists the possible job titles that ECEs may work under as: preschool teacher; child care worker; day care worker; childcare practitioner; home visitor; private-home day care visitor; nursery school teacher; educational assistant (in public school settings); early literacy specialist; early childhood program staff; ECE resource teacher; and special needs consultant.

The term Early Childhood Education and Care or ECEC refers to and encompasses the variety of programs and services within which ECEs may find themselves working. These could include but are not limited to childcare centres, family (or home) childcare, nursery schools and kindergartens both public and private. The AECEO lists eighteen potential settings that ECEs may be employed in; however the majority of ECEs are employed in one of the four settings listed above with the highest percentage in childcare centres and family childcare (CCHRSC, 2009).

The ECE workforce refers to the broader collection of people who educate and care for young children in Ontario. The 'workforce' as it will be referred to includes early childhood

educators and assistants, home childcare providers, teaching assistants and kindergarten teachers (CCHRSC, 2009). Early childhood educators and assistants make up the majority of the ECE workforce (CCHRSC, 2009)

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Feminist standpoint theory.**

Feminist standpoint theory is the guiding theoretical framework for this project and has played an essential role in determining who the participants of this research have been, the questions that guided the research, the methods used to answer the research questions, and the analysis and interpretation of the data collected. Feminist standpoint theory claims that women have a unique standpoint on the world due to their marginalized position within society (Harding, 2004). This marginalization and resulting oppression is sustained through structures of society that have been shaped by patriarchal and capitalistic ideologies that divide the masculine and feminine realms of being, and that attribute more value to the roles and work that is carried out in the masculine realm. Smith (1999) has referred to these encompassing structures and system as the 'ruling relations'. Weeks (2004) has written, "standpoint theory cuts into this system by trying to make specific connections between certain modes of gendered subjectivity, women's laboring practices, the gender and racial divisions of labor, and global capitalism" (p. 184). Through these connections, feminist standpoint theory argues that we can see how women become marginalized, especially in capitalistic economies that place little value on the "reproductive labor" of women which "include many of the most common modes of women's labor not only in the home but also in the wage labor market" (Weeks, 2004, p. 185). Drawing from Rose (1986), Weeks (2004) has claimed that "despite its importance, this labor is often

invisible and many of the skills developed in and through these practices are naturalized and undervalued” (p. 185).

In her influential work on feminist standpoint theory, Smith (2004) theorized two gendered modes of existence created in the modern western world; the first being the “governing conceptual mode” taken up and dominated by men, and the second being the “bodily” or “natural” world which is the place of women (p. 26). As explained by Smith, “the two worlds and the two bases of knowledge and experience don’t stand in an equal relation... the world as it is constituted by men stands in authority over that of women” (Smith, 2004, p. 22). This type of thinking “has its roots in a Cartesian mind/body dualist philosophy” (Manning-Morton, 2006, p. 45) where the rational is associated with masculinity and the public sphere of science and knowledge while the bodily and emotional are seen as essentially feminine and part of the private sphere.

For ECEs, the persistence of this gendered ‘dualist philosophy’ within the ruling relations of society perpetuates the notion that their work is associated with the bodily/natural world. Within this dualist philosophy caring for children is “seen as an extension of women’s ‘natural’ domestic sphere” and as “a job that entails daily immersion in the physical frailty of bodily processes and...the intensity of unpredictable and fluctuating emotions” (Manning-Morton, 2006, p. 45). This image of the ECE comes into conflict with the ECE as a ‘professional’ because Davies (1996) has argued professionalism “was forged in historical processes where the key actors were men and where one might expect that cultural notions of masculinity would again have a bearing” (p. 669). But the existence of this conflict or contradiction is what gives feminist standpoint theory such relevance in this project. Feminist standpoint theory acknowledges that women may have to negotiate between their actual, lived work experiences in

the bodily/natural world and processes of power and control such as professionalism that are “based on and built up within the male social universe” (Smith, 2004, p. 22). It is precisely in this position that women acquire what has been termed a double or bifurcated consciousness which serves as the basis for their unique standpoint (Smith, 2004; Brooks, 2007).

Further, feminist standpoint theory suggests that this bifurcated consciousness is a tool for creating “strong objectivity” in the search for knowledge (Brooks, 2007). This strong objectivity brings to the forefront experiences and knowledge that would otherwise be overlooked by the dominant group (i.e. white males) (Wylie, 2004). Feminist standpoint theory therefore challenges dominant conceptions of objectivity that claim neutrality as a starting point. Instead feminist standpoint methodology relies on the “limited location” and “situated knowledge” (Haraway, 2004, p. 87) of those who have little stake in maintaining the oppressive status quo and “have no cause or motivation to misconstrue reality” (Brooks, 2007, p. 67). In this project, it is ECEs’ strong objectivity that is being sought as a means to build knowledge about professionalism in the Ontario early childhood education field.

Through documenting the standpoints of four registered ECEs, the aim of this research is to begin to build a collective standpoint for ECEs in Ontario. The purpose of building a collective standpoint is to bring together ECEs’ common experiences to build “alliances that are needed to wield power” in order to “forge social change... and take a stand on a particular issue” (Brooks, 2007, p. 76). The knowledge gained through examining the lived experiences of ECEs can provide “a starting point for the self assertion of [ECEs’] identity, and challenging those identities imposed by conventional stereotypes that form part of hegemonic ways of thinking from the point of view of the socially and politically dominant” (Bowell, 2011, para. 13). However, it is important to note that ECEs may have differing standpoints, and with ECEs, as

with women, it is inherently problematic “to reduce all women to a group sharing one experience and a single point of view, or standpoint” (Brooks, 2007, p. 70). Further, it is crucial to acknowledge as Narayan (2004) has that “the thesis that oppression may bestow an epistemic advantage should not tempt us in the direction of...romanticizing oppression and blind us to its real material and psychic deprivations” (p. 223). Moreover, ECEs may inhabit both the bodily and conceptual realms but choose a different or less critical interpretation of the relationship between the two.

Perhaps most importantly for this project, “standpoint theories try to consider the ontological and epistemological consequences” of women’s caring labour practices (Weeks, 2004, p. 187). Weeks (2004) explained that “the category of labor can be deployed to provoke political debate over questions of social value” (p. 187). This is acutely important as it is the caring role of ECEs that continues to marginalize them and maintain their ‘unprofessional’ status in the ruling division of labour. As Smith (1999) has written, “child care and family are not articulated to the ‘main business’ organizing jobs, let alone a career process, in government and economy” (p. 39). By examining the topic of professionalism from the standpoint of ECEs, and from the standpoint of the marginalized, it is the goal of this project to provide a greater understanding of how the ruling structures of our society limit the capacities of ECEs to function as professionals. An understanding of society from the standpoint of ECEs will expose “not only the shortcomings in the system but also...the need for change and new solutions” (Brooks, 2007, p. 60).

### **My bifurcated consciousness.**

My interest around ECE professionalism is a result of my position as both an aspiring ECE, and as a student of early childhood education and more recently early childhood studies at

the graduate level. Through my studies, I became fascinated with the topic of professionalism; however, I had a growing concern that the theories and concepts I was applying to ECE professionalism in graduate school did not represent the lived realities of ECEs working in the field. This is and was the bifurcated consciousness that I lived with every day. I had to constantly negotiate the analysis of current processes of professionalization and interpretations of professionalism in the conceptual world of graduate school, while trying to determine how I was going to apply all these 'ideas' to the actual bodily/experienced practice of being an early childhood educator. As Harding (2004a) has written, "it is starting off thought from a contradictory social position that generates feminist knowledge" (p. 134). My contradictory social position as a quasi-academic in graduate school was provoked by an overwhelming feeling that I was missing what ECEs in the front lines of the field think and experience regarding professionalism.

While this research is grounded in feminist standpoint theory, some of the literature which supports the research draws on post-structural theories. While I agree with (feminist) post-structural claims that knowledge/truth is subjective, and that the individual is shaped by socially constructed discourses which regulate and control their individual subjectivities (Osgood, 2006), I maintain that studying ECE professionalism at the level of discourse would continue to perpetuate a bifurcated consciousness. I therefore, sought a theory and methodology for this project that would sharpen an understanding of professionalism in relation to the material realities of ECEs and dominant discourses that may influence ECEs' work. A critical analysis of discourse that aims to expose dominant forms of power and control is important, but I was concerned with finding a source of knowledge that can be collectively known (and experienced) by ECEs as a means to challenge and create new discourse. It therefore became evident that I

needed to find out how ECEs experience and define professionalism, and build my work from there. While my position as a feminist researcher will undoubtedly influence every step of the research process, I hope to equally expose the standpoint of four ECEs through qualitative interviews, and begin to identify what professionalism means to them and how it is experienced in their everyday lives.

## 2. Literature Review

### **Where is Early Childhood Education as a Profession in Ontario?**

Early childhood educators in Ontario have experienced a significant shift towards professionalization. Since 2008, the establishment of the College of ECEs (CECE) has led the workforce towards acquiring a number of elements that are needed to define and maintain a 'profession'. As described by Urban (2008), the college fulfills the following functions that form the foundation for a typical "professional system": monitoring professional performance, establishing a professional "code of conduct", and setting requirements for entrance into the profession (p. 140). In a recent release by the college it was stated that their "Code of Ethics and the Standards of Practice communicate to others the scope and nature of the early childhood education profession" (CECE, 2011, p. 6). As a regulatory body, the CECE is the first organization in Ontario (and the only one in Canada) that ECEs are mandated to join and, therefore, the first platform for reaching ECEs in Ontario with a common set of definitions, standards and ethics related to professionalism.

While the regulatory college is the most recent development for ECEs in Ontario, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario (AECEO) has been working for the past sixty years to organize and advance the ECE profession. The work of the ACECO along with advocacy groups such as the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, as well as ECE training institutions in Ontario, has contributed to the development and maintenance of ECE professionalism prior to formal recognition through the regulatory college. It is, therefore, valuable to look at where early childhood education in Ontario stands as a profession as formal processes of professionalization increase. To undertake this examination the following section will borrow heavily from the work of Katz (1988).

Although Katz was writing over twenty years ago, her work is still highly relevant particularly since little has changed for the ECE profession in North America. Drawing on sociological literature, Katz (1988) used eight criteria necessary for claiming an occupation as a profession to gauge where early childhood education stood as a profession. The criteria are: social necessity, altruism, autonomy, distance from the client, standards of practice, code of ethics, prolonged training, and specialized knowledge.

This discussion will also incorporate other literature that has focused on ECE professionalism and processes of professionalization for the ECE workforce. Much of this literature comes from other English speaking countries such as the UK, Australia, New Zealand and the US which, like Canada, have historically had a split system of education and care causing similar issues with professionalism for the ECE workforce. However, some of these countries have moved further than Ontario or Canada with ECEC policy reform which includes government funded reform programs targeted at professionalizing the ECE workforce.

### **Social necessity.**

Katz's first criterion is social necessity which implies that "the work of a profession is essential to the functioning of a society" (Katz, 1988, p. 75). While the social necessity of ECEC services may still be challenged by some, the acknowledgment of the importance of early childhood programs and services has grown stronger over the past ten years. The most influential report of the past ten years, *Starting Strong II* published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2006, has provided credible evidence that ECEC is essential for the well-being of children, women and families within society and that increasingly ECEC services are being viewed as a 'public good'. Further, Friendly and Prentice (2009) have identified that "many of Canada's new social realities... make ECEC both necessary and

important” (p. 28), not only for children and families but also for the economy, equity, and social solidarity. In Ontario, the articulation of this social necessity has slowly been manifested in policy. However, as with the rest of Canada there remains a divide between services associated with early education and those with childcare (Friendly & Prentice, 2009). Childcare services continue to be viewed as a support for working parents and, therefore, as a private commodity, while early education (i.e. public kindergarten) is seen as a universal entitlement (Moss & Bennett, 2006). While ECEs are being supported by mounting evidence of the importance of their work, they are still struggling to carry out this work in a fragmented and underfunded system of ECEC programs.

### **Altruism.**

The next criterion is altruism which is arguably the foundation of the field itself. ECEC in Canada is entangled in a history of altruism with the origins of ECEC services in the charitable and voluntary work of mostly women and religious organizations in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Atkin, 2001). What were at the time called Crèches or Day Nurseries were established as an alternative to orphanage care for children of working mothers (Friendly & Prentice, 2009); as well, these first centres were viewed as a form of integration for children who were seen to be disadvantaged by social factors such as immigration or poverty (Atkin, 2001). Women working in the early institutions of ECEC were positioned as social missionaries, involved in the nurturing and caring of young children for the purpose of spiritual and moral uplift and reward (Finkelstien, 1988). To this day, ECEs are trained to believe that the importance and purpose of their work is to ‘make a difference in the lives of young children’ above all else, including their own needs and interests (Langford, 2008).

The altruistic roots of the ECE profession pose some unique challenges for professionalism. Reliance on this altruistic history may reinforce the idea “that women teachers’ professional identity can only be found amid the so-called ‘virtues’ of the private sphere, which is ultimately viewed as contemptible in the context of a ‘real’ profession” (Dillabough, 1999, p. 381). Unlike male dominated professions where altruism is viewed as heroic, the altruism in ECE is associated with mothering and self-sacrifice. Osgood (2006) has identified the “double bind of oppression” experienced by ECEs as they try to work within their “established model of professionalism characterized by high emotion and a culture of care”, but are rejected from and unable to “satisfy dominant definitions of professionalism” (p. 9).

#### **Autonomy and distance from the client.**

Autonomy is the next criterion and one which exposes a multitude of complexities for ECE professionalism. Katz (1988) explained that autonomy is derived in two ways; the professional is autonomous from the client and from the institution or organization that employs them. In relation to their employers ECEs have remained relatively autonomous due to the fact that most work for small, non-profit organizations that rely heavily on staff to guide and carry out program implementation. Oberhuemer (2005) remarked that elements such as program implementation have actually been “an area of professional autonomy” (p. 12) for ECEs as they work within a system with no mandated curriculum frameworks or guidelines. However, ECEs’ autonomy is individualized as opposed to organized because of the lack of a unified professional association and “occupationally related social institutions established and maintained to provide essential services” (Spodek & Saracho, 1988, p. 60). In this way ECEs have remained disconnected or autonomous from each other, which is arguably detrimental to creating and maintaining a unified group of professionals.

Autonomy from the client is also problematic as the work of ECEs is inherently based on relationships and collaboration with families and communities (Dalli, 2008). Thus the notion of ‘autonomy from the client’ derived from typical models of professionalism is in contradiction to a desirable attribute for ECE professionals. Davies (1996) has argued that “professions can represent themselves as autonomous only by ignoring or misrepresenting the work of others” (p. 670). For example, the doctor maintains his autonomy from the client by detaching himself from the nurse or secretary who makes up the additional work that must take place in order to effectively care for the patient. The doctor, is therefore, able to maintain the idea of autonomy, professional authority and expert, while the more personal and administrative tasks are carried out by the ‘non-professional’ support worker.

Closely related to autonomy is the next criterion, distance from the client. Similar to the example stated above, the doctor can only maintain distance from the client if a support worker of some kind is fulfilling the other tasks that are necessary to properly care for the client. In turn Katz (1988) identified that “many specialists and teachers in early childhood education resist this aspect of professionalism” (p. 78). This is because distance from the client implies ECEs that are emotionally detached from the children they care for and the children’s families. However, as Moyles (2001) and others have identified there is a persistent paradox in professionalism for ECEs as they struggle to fit their own professional standard of ‘building close relationships’ into a socially respected model of professionalism. As will be discussed further, certain constructions of professionalism marginalize and “run counter to the beliefs and practices of most ECEC practitioners” (Osgood, 2006, p. 9).

### **Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics.**

The next two criteria, standards of practice and a code of ethics have recently been fulfilled by the CECE (2011). Katz (1988) has written that “true professional status...requires a common code of ethics adopted by all practitioners within a given cultural or national community” (p. 77). Additionally standards of practice ensure that the public, regardless of personal or social characteristics are guaranteed an equal amount of “knowledge, skill, insight and ingenuity” from an ECE professional (Katz, 1988, p. 79). As was stated by the CECE (2011) “these standards convey certain expectations for which it is reasonable to hold members of the profession accountable” (p. 6).

Both of these criteria play an important role in establishing what professionalism in ECE is. However, Urban (2008) has identified the contradictions and tensions that arise when quality improvement measures such as standards of practice are applied to the ECE workforce while ignoring the deficient system of programs and services in which they continue to work. Additionally, Osgood (2009) has argued that there is a deficit discourse in current policies related to ECE workforce reform in England. Through critical discourse analysis, Osgood (2009) identified how processes of standardization and regulation are used as a means to place blame for low quality services on the ECE workforce, and to conclude that ECEs are lacking competencies and are in need of these processes. This discourse simultaneously diverts attention away from the gendered and classed assumptions that perpetuate the marginalization and structural disadvantages that affect ECEs (Osgood, 2009).

### **Prolonged Training.**

Katz (1988) has written that “a major defining attribute of a profession is that it requires entrants to undergo prolonged training” (p. 79). The CECE now formally mandates the minimum

length and type of training that one must have in order to work under the title of an 'ECE'. To be registered with the CECE you need to have at least a two year college diploma in ECE.

However, research has indicated a need to increase the scope (Silin, 1988; Osgood, 2006; Langford, 2008), and length of pre-service training for the ECE workforce (CCHRSC, 2007). Some ECEs in Ontario do hold a specific university degree in ECE, however, the majority have a two year diploma (CCHRSC, 2009). A large portion of the workforce has either one year or less of college and work in the system as assistants or home care providers (CCHRSC, 2009).

Recruiting and retaining qualified ECEs has been a challenge in the early childhood education field. The low wages and poor working conditions associated with the work of ECEs have made it increasingly difficult to retain ECEs with higher levels of training (CCHRSC, 2007). In 2009, the CCHRSC reported that the average salary for an ECE was \$20,155/year, compared to certified teachers who earn an average of \$57,166/year. As Kagan, Kaurez and Tarrant (2008) have argued, the heavy reliance on parent fees as a means of funding childcare limits the ability of employers to raise ECEs' wages. Kagan et al. (2008) explained that, "increasing teachers' compensation without infusing the system with substantial amounts of new resources from either government or business may make ECE program entirely unaffordable for many families" (p. 69). Additionally in Ontario, provincial legislation still requires only one 'trained' ECE per each group of children in regulated settings. These minimal standards may encourage employers to hire untrained staff as a means of reducing costs.

### **Specialized Knowledge.**

Katz (1988) has defined a profession as "an occupation whose practices are based on specialized knowledge" (p. 81). Child development has been positioned as the specialized body of knowledge guiding the ECE profession (Canella, 1997). Silin (1988) has remarked that "as

members of a field without social or economic recognition, early childhood educators have sought professional status through asserting the scientific knowledge base (i.e. child development theory) of their practice” (p. 124). This specialized knowledge was brought to the forefront by Pascal (2009) in his vision of full-day kindergarten in Ontario. Pascal (2009) recommended that all staff in the full-day program, including certified kindergarten teachers must be “skilled at applying child development knowledge” (p. 32). When a debate ensued about the staffing model of the program which recommended full-time ECEs and a half-time certified teacher, advocates used the argument that ECEs hold specialized and crucial knowledge in child development (AECEO, 2009; Langford, 2009).

However this body of specialized knowledge has been increasingly scrutinized by academics working within critical and post-structural theories. Canella (1997) deconstructed the concept of child development and concluded that “child development theories have fostered dominant ideologies and created privilege for those in power (p. 63) and “has ethnocentrically institutionalized a global child in the image of the Euro-American middle-class” (p. 93). Also critical of child development theory, Moss (2006) and Osgood (2006) have argued that the current discourses grounded in this expert knowledge base position ECEs as technicians who must be able “to apply a defined set of technologies through regulated processes to produce pre-specified and measurable outcomes” (Moss, 2006, p. 35). This echoes a much earlier critique of the use of child development as the basis for ECEs’ specialized knowledge by Silin (1988), who argued, that the narrow focus on developmental psychology “reinforces a technocratic-mindedness that ultimately subverts teachers from achieving real power by denying them the right to define their own knowledge and ... access to other forms of knowledge” (Silin, 1988, p. 125).

## **Challenges to ECE Professionalism**

Using Katz's (1988) sociological based model for professionalism sharpens our understanding of the challenges that ECEs confront when trying to conform to an ideal of professionalism that reflects a "masculine project" (Davies, 1996, p. 669). The next section will explore these challenges further by analyzing and highlighting how the 'non-system' and 'women's work' shape ECE professionalism.

### **The non-system.**

Katz's (1988) concept of ECE professionalism is challenged by the lack of a stable, publicly funded system of ECEC programs and services within which ECEs can carry out their work. Working within what could be more appropriately called a 'non-system' of programs and services, ECEs face multiple barriers to fulfilling and maintaining standard aspects of professionalism as described by Katz (1988). With the exception of publicly funded kindergarten, ECEC services in Canada are provided through a mixed-market model of delivery. Additionally, ECEC is a provincial responsibility creating a variation of services across provinces. Although a minority of ECEC programs in Ontario are run by municipalities, the majority are delivered by non-profit or community-based organizations and commercial enterprises. This mixed market means that most services are disconnected, inconsistent and fully reliant on the ability of parents to pay fees in order to fund programs. Although there are multiple issues for children and families with this model of delivery, it is the effects on the workforce that will be highlighted here.

The public education system is a useful example of "occupationally related social institutions" (Spodek & Saracho, 1988, p. 60) which enable the organization of a group of professionals to establish and maintain a state of professionalism. Within the public education

system elementary teachers share many commonalities with ECEs such as being a female dominated workforce with similar historical struggles for recognition and equitable work conditions and opportunities (Cannella, 1997). ECEs, however, do not work within a public system. The public education system has given certified teachers a forum to establish unified standards for training, unite the profession through a provincial union which also acts as a professional association, create wage and career ladders, and maintain a certain level of collective autonomy and control over the working environment. In comparison, ECEC (including publicly funded kindergarten as a component) is most often referred to as a ‘patchwork’ of programs that “are in effect poorly connected silos” (Friendly & Prentice, 2009, p. 33).

Within such a ‘non-system’ the ECE workforce becomes split between those who are employed in publicly funded kindergartens and ECEC programs and those employed (mainly with the youngest children) in regulated care centres that are either privately owned or non-profit organizations. Further there is a considerable portion of the workforce who are self-employed in family/home childcare where no caregiver training qualifications are specified in provincial regulations (Beach et al., 2009). The OECD (2006) highlighted that the workforce in Canada is split between ‘education’ and ‘care’ and that similar to other countries with market model provision of ECEC, “early childhood educators working closest to the school gate are better trained and rewarded” (p. 158). The Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC, 2004) reported that “child care staff who work in small centres are often isolated and interact with a limited number of colleagues, and family child care providers usually work alone” (p. 10).

Typical ideas and practices of professionalism are, therefore, difficult to establish in the non-system of ECEC. As Oberhuemer (2005) wrote, “the market model in particular generates highly differential systems of training, payment and employment conditions” (p. 9). ECEs in

Ontario find themselves situated in a workforce in which there are many differences to negotiate and understand. Variations in the type of centre, the auspice and structure, how it functions, how many staff are trained, what curriculum or pedagogical philosophy is followed, what title the educators have (i.e. ECE, teacher, care provider, educational assistant), and how ECEs are compensated are examples of the multiple realities that exist for ECE professionals. In this broader context, professional concepts such as specialized knowledge, prolonged training and autonomy as mentioned above, would be applied differently across the sector. The various levels in qualifications also mean that despite the establishment of a regulatory body in Ontario, registered ECEs are still working with colleagues that are not registered. Remarking on a similar context in England, Osgood (2006) has written that this non-system results in “ECEC practitioners lack[ing] a unified identity or a shared belief in themselves as a ‘professional’ group” (p. 7). Further, Urban (2008) has remarked that current calls for professionalism in ECE put practitioners in an “impossible situation” in which “they are expected to act professionally – within a professional system that is largely unprofessional” (p. 146).

Kagan et al. (2008) have explained that “contemporary ECE [early childhood education] needs to be understood as a market that is compromised” which is often “characterized by low entry requirements for workers, low wages...imperfect consumer knowledge, and limited protections” (p. 68). Within this non-system ECEs are marginalized by market forces and as Kagan et al. (2008) wrote, “ECE teachers actually subsidize the market because of their forgone wages” (p. 70). Prospects for increasing pre-service training or establishing mandated professional development in these circumstances are seriously limited. In England, a government funded program to train a cohort of Early Years Professionals (EYPs) at the graduate level had limited effects across the workforce due to the lack of concurrent reform in the actual system of

ECEC (Simpson, 2010). Lloyd and Hallet's (2010) research with a new group of EYPs found that "the absence of the professional recognition, respect and reward" determined that "this new professional status lacks most of the essential characteristics associated with professionalism... and that concern is justified as to how long these EYPs can be retained in the children's workforce under these conditions" (Lloyd & Hallet, 2010, p. 83).

Over twenty years ago, Spodek, Saracho and Peters (1988) wrote that "to attempt to establish standards of professionalism without addressing the issue of professional compensation is to deal with issues of professionalism in an unrealistic way" (p. 193). In 2007, the CCHRSC faced the same type of dilemma in regards to the unanimous support for increased educational requirements within the field. This dilemma was characterized by the fact that "higher training requirements will lead to greater respect and recognition – but without corresponding remuneration there is little likelihood of attracting stronger students" (CCHRSC, 2007, p. 28). Perhaps most devastating is the fact that the non-system of ECEC portrays to society that the ECE workforce is therefore unprofessional. As highlighted by Osgood (2009), governments are quick to place the blame for low quality and inadequate service on the 'unprofessional' ECE workforce while simultaneously obscuring the structural "inconsistencies, ambiguities and injustices" that affect their work (p. 738). This blame is additionally of concern, given the gendered nature of the work and the overrepresentation of women in the ECE workforce.

### **Women's work.**

In Canada, more than 96% of ECEs and assistants are women and ECE is the sixth most female dominated occupation (CCHRSC, 2009). The gendered composition of the workforce is a reflection of the prevailing ideology in this country, that caring for young children is a private family responsibility and women's work. ECEs are, therefore, positioned as 'substitute mothers'

which further reinforces the notion that “little or no education is necessary to undertake the work” (Moss, 2006, p. 34). Additional concerns are warranted as an increasing number of women from working class backgrounds (Osgood, 2009; Langford, 2010a) and racialized groups (Langford and Janmohamed, 2008) enter the workforce. As argued by Langford and Janmohamed (2008), “the early childhood sector is characterized by low wages, and this creates a potential and further risk to marginalized members from racialized or immigrant groups” (p. 22). How then does ‘professionalism’ as it is commonly defined make sense when ECE work is deemed as ‘natural’ women’s work?

In Canada, Atkin (2001) has described how the foundation of the work that ECEs do was established mainly by women in a voluntary capacity. This can be contrasted with the beginnings of formal public education which was created and dominated by men and then only later opened up to women as men decided to leave the profession (Canella, 1997). The women who worked in these first ECEC settings were “fueled by a complex set of values peculiar to upper-middle-class White women of the time, whose intellectual origins date back to their Victorian predecessors and whose feminism and social commitment was entangled with imperialist ideology” (Atkin, 2001, p. 32). Within a similar historical context in America, Finkelstein (1988) argues that the “pioneers of early childhood education... created a norm of early childhood professionalism that projected women as spiritual nurturers who took joy from the work of social reconstruction, moral uplift, and childhood achievement and creativity” (p. 19).

While the early pioneers of ECEC were innovators and humanitarians with predominantly positive intentions for children and the public good, their actions also contributed to reinforcing the patriarchal assumption that caring for young children was ‘naturally’ women’s work. While the work of caring for children may forever be dominated by women, what becomes

problematic is the way that ‘women’s work’ is viewed within society and the implications it has on those women who do such work. Caring for young children is considered to be part of the ‘natural’ abilities of women and placed in opposition to more technical or scientific knowledge that may be acquired through formal training. This opposition creates a persistent paradox as mentioned above, in that ECEs cannot claim the aspects of their work that revolve around ‘care’ as a basis for their specialized knowledge. The ‘care work’ that ECEs perform involves looking after children’s physical needs, and includes toileting, diapering, feeding, and being constantly emotionally available and responsive to children’s individual needs. Especially with very young children, ‘care’ also involves building close emotional relationships with families and communicating with them on a daily basis. Despite the importance and necessity of ‘care’ in ECEs’ work, the skills and knowledge that are associated with this aspect of their work are not as valued as the scientific and technical knowledge that they may have.

Women who work in a more ‘educational’ role (i.e. kindergarten or nursery school teachers) are, therefore, more likely to be viewed as professionals than those who work with very young children (i.e. infants). Moss (2006) has argued that this reality reflects the historical divide between ‘childcare’ and ‘early education’ and the “purposes, principles and values” (p. 31) that society attaches to each. Manning-Morton (2006) wrote:

This context [of division] has allowed a concept of professionalism to emerge that values some practitioners’ areas of expertise more than others... This discourse has its roots in a concept of professionalism which values knowledge over skills... so knowledge about children’s learning is seen as superior to the ability to help a child with their toileting (for example) (p. 44).

Like mothering, it is assumed that any and all women can perform the care work done by ECEs and that the work can be carried out for intrinsic as opposed to monetary reward.

Langford (2008) has argued that this reward is firmly entrenched in the discourses prevailing in ECE training programs, and this notion is “employed as a discursive resource to manage the material realities of ECE work” (p. 93). Langford (2010a) has further contended that the concept of ‘child-centred pedagogy’ can be linked to ECEs’ altruistic work. Langford has suggested that in child-centred pedagogy the ECE retains a maternal role and faces the impossible contradiction of being ‘child-centred’ while simultaneously being marginalized (in regards to professionalism) for that same practice. Furthermore, there is an added dimension to the ECE’s maternal role when ECEC services are viewed primarily as a means to allow women/mothers to enter the labour force without acknowledging that many ECEs are also working women/mothers whose needs are not being addressed (Osgood, 2009). This dual role is particularly evident for home childcare providers. Osgood (2009) has noted that through policy discourse it becomes “evident that the ECEC workforce is positioned in the role of servitude to (middle-class) families” (p. 737) and that “messages that are conveyed reinforce gendered and classed assumptions associated with the nature of the work” (p. 737). It could be argued that working women being supported by childcare provided by ECEs in this maternal role is a replication of the patriarchal division of labor between men and women in the typical ‘professions’ (Davies, 1996) and in the home (Smith, 2004). In other words, the female ECE is subjected to the role of ‘mothering’ (now for other mothers) that is once again positioned as the invisible support role that requires neither learned expertise or high levels of recognition and compensation.

Consequently, professionalism does not neatly apply to the work of ECEs. This however, does not mean that it does not exist. The work of ECEs has largely developed outside of the dominant professional system allowing ECEs to acquire a unique set of practices that are largely

based in the feminized concepts of an ethic of care and the realities of emotional labour (Osgood, 2006a). Academics in early childhood have been interested in “an increasing number of other discourses” (Moss, 2007, p. 230) that can incorporate these concepts into alternative perspectives for ECE work and professionalism. For example, Moss (2006) argues for a reconceptualization of the ECE as “the worker as researcher” as opposed to technician:

The worker as researcher is... a reflective and dialogic practitioner, whose work depends on relationships and the ability to listen and engage in dialogue...research is part of everyday practice and can be conducted by everyone... co-constructing knowledge, as well as identities and values (p. 36).

Osgood (2006a) has sought to “create an alternative conception of professionalism, one that acknowledges the unique nature and complexity of educating and caring for young children, [and] holds the possibility of providing a means of resisting an imposed and inappropriate definition” (p. 193). Urban (2008) has promoted a “critical ecology of the profession, in early childhood and beyond, that is informed by the political and social realities that produce knowledges and practices (p. 146).

However, alternative conceptions of professionalism are marginalized in western countries that promote neo-liberal, masculine notions of professionalism which favor rationality and instrumentality (Dillabough, 1999; Moss 2006). Furthermore, Cannella (1997) and Moss (2006) have argued that neo-liberal ideologies position educators as apolitical actors who are individually responsible for their own success as educators and the success of the children. The political and social realities surrounding educators, women and children are therefore neglected while a narrow definition of professionalism concerned with ‘defining and defending borders’ is taken up (Moss, 2006, p. 38). From this perspective, Cannella (1997) has argued that while “professionalism has been part of the struggle to win equal respect and pay for women”, it continues to foster the “patriarchal, modernist notion of control and rationality” (p. 147).

The ECE continues to work as these debates about the definitions of professionalism circulate. The ECE knows and experiences certain knowledges and a certain daily practice that revolves around caring, nurturing relationships and collaboration. While also functioning within a 'professional' world that demands of the ECE to subscribe to a specialized body of knowledge and prove her worth by performing a defined set of standards that are seen to be of value by the state and the patriarchal ruling structures. Without a socially accepted alternative, the ECE may manage this reality by taking "an instrumental stance where 'mothering' is replaced with procedural forms of quality control or an identification with masculine forms of competence as the sole mechanism for achieving professional autonomy" (Dillabough, 1999, p. 381).

### **Research Involving ECE Professionals**

This research project builds on several studies that have been concerned with the impact of changes to ECEC systems and processes of professionalization on the ECE workforce. Osgood (2004) examined ECEs' perceptions of government reform in England that aimed at increasing ECE workers' entrepreneurialism as a crucial component of professionalism in the field. Osgood (2004) wrote that:

Across both of my studies practitioners from all sectors believed that their view and commitment to caring for each other; the local community; and parents and children were all 'steam rolled' by reforms that favoured rationality, commercialism and measurable outcomes (p. 14)

Confirming earlier research by Moyles (2001), Osgood (2004) concluded that ECEs place the greatest value on passion, caring, collaboration, and community in their definitions of professionalism. However these values were increasingly at odds with, and undervalued in relation to dominant approaches to professionalism. The above studies also came to a similar conclusion in that ECEs "frequently perceive themselves as powerless... because of insecurity about professional status" (Moyles, 2001, p. 89). Yet as Osgood (2004) noted, the ECEs in her

study were “committed to enhancing their professionalism” and were “heavily involved in a range of training, much of which they funded personally” (p. 13).

Investigating a government funded training program in England, Lloyd & Hallet (2010) sought to explore the effects of graduate level training on newly designated Early Years Professionals’ (EYPs) ideas of professionalism. These researchers concluded that while participants in the EYP program felt that they benefitted from the training, the initiative did not fulfill standard criteria for professionalism and participants still lacked a cohesive professional identity and a sense of belonging to the profession. Simpson’s (2010) research with EYPs in England came to a similar conclusion. Using a phenomenological approach, Simpson (2010) concluded that EYPs’ experiences of professionalism are dependent on “circumstances that are potentially enabling and inhibiting in regard to their professional positioning” (p. 276). The impact of the fragmented, split and inconsistent system of ECEC was evident in both studies that involved EYPs. Despite graduate level training and newly recognized professional status, Simpson (2010) argued that EYPs’ experiences of professionalism were most affected by their immediate work environment and the discourses circulating “within the relations that EYPs formed with colleagues when participating in communities of practice” (p. 279).

The impact of a supportive work environment and colleagues on ECEs’ perceptions and experience of professionalism was also evident in the case study carried out in Australia by Fenech, Sumison and Shepherd (2010). Fenech et al. (2010) argued that the peer group that the ECEs participants had permitted them to resist and challenge notions of professionalism that went against their preferred practices grounded in an ethic of care. For these ECEs, professional empowerment was a result of “a peer group of like-minded, critically thinking university-qualified teachers; a highly supportive management body of early childhood experts and

families; and parents prepared and able to pay fees that supported above-regulation ratios and teacher qualifications” (Fenech, et al., 2010, p. 101). Manning- Morton (2006) noted that infant and toddler caregivers in England lacked this social capital (in training, support and recognition), and used action research to empower ECEs’ professional self-worth and increase their understandings of the emotional labour they were involved in. The results of the action research indicated that with adequate support, and space and time for appropriate reflection and communication with colleagues, the infant and toddler caregivers felt more empowered in their professional roles. Manning-Morton (2010) reported that this empowerment manifested itself most clearly when the participants put a government led training strategy on hold so they could negotiate “financial recognition and practical support for the additional role they are assuming in their workplaces” (p. 44).

In a considerably more supportive policy environment in New Zealand, Dalli (2008) focused her research on collecting early childhood teachers’ (as they are referred to in that country) views on professionalism in order to contribute to a “ground-up perspective that can enable a reconceptualised view of professionalism that reflects the reality of early childhood work” (p. 174). Dalli (2008) was also concerned about the inclusion of aspects such as love and care that are important components of ECE work yet remain excluded in dominant discourses around professionalism. Dalli (2008) was able to collect the views of 139 teachers working in a range of licensed early childhood services through a postal questionnaire. Her analysis did identify collaborative relationships, professional knowledge and a pedagogy of care as important themes around professionalism articulated by early childhood teachers. As well, ECEs showed support for increasing professionalization through regulation and unionization alongside the New Zealand equivalent of certified teachers (Dalli, 2008). However, more recent work by Duhn

(2010) focused on the increasing privatization of ECEC services in New Zealand and suggests that corporate providers have very different conceptions and intentions for professionalism. Through a comparative case study, Duhn (2010) argued that “the privately delivered model assists the production of neo-liberal discourses of professionalism” (p. 54) and that centres that do not conform to neo-liberal discourses are finding it increasingly difficult to compete in the marketplace of ECEC.

### **Summary**

In summary, the literature review has highlighted some complexities and challenges of defining professionalism in the field of early childhood education. The research cited in the last section provides evidence that ECEs both want to be professionals, and are active participants in processes of professionalism in the field. There is some evidence that ECEs do incorporate their caring role into their notions of professionalism. There is also other evidence that various structural realities such as the specific work setting (i.e. high quality, private), policy reform, and position within the field (i.e. infant caregiver, EYP) impact perceptions of professionalism. Cognizant of the need to increase the status of the profession, ECEs both resist but are subjected to certain processes that are guided by a hegemonic model of professionalism that often does not challenge the social and political realities that the majority of ECEs face.

While the above studies were based on qualitative data collected through focus groups and interviews (Moyles, 2001; Osgood, 2004; Fenech et al., 2010; Lloyd & Hallet, 2010; Duhn, 2010; Simpson, 2010), open-ended questionnaires (Dalli, 2008) and action research (Manning-Morton, 2006), none of this research was carried out in Ontario or Canada. This project aims to fill this research gap by undertaking qualitative interviews/conversations with a small sample of female ECEs in Toronto. Feminist standpoint theory and methodology was used as a strategy to

both collect and analyze ECEs' experiences with and definitions of professionalism. The questions guiding this research project are as follows:

1. How do early childhood educators experience professionalism in their everyday work and lives?
2. What does professionalism mean to early childhood educators?
3. What new knowledge about professionalism can we gain from the standpoint of early childhood educators?

### **3. Methodology**

#### **Approach, Strategy and Rationale**

In order to explore professionalism from the standpoint of ECEs I had to apply a research methodology that would allow me to acquire information about their lived experiences. Using feminist standpoint theory as a guiding theoretical framework influenced my decision to interview ECEs and to build on their experiences and insights to answer my research questions. Feminist standpoint as a grand theory positions the lived experiences of ECEs as a valued source of knowledge. Brooks (2007) has written that “a feminist standpoint is a way of understanding the world, a point of view of social reality, that begins with, and is developed directly from, women’s experiences” (p. 60). My approach to this research, therefore, was concerned with accessing information from the particular social location of ECEs in order to transform this new knowledge “into a systematically available scientific resource” (Harding, 2004a, p. 129).

A qualitative research strategy was necessary for this project. The desire to build knowledge from the lived experiences of ECEs required that I have a conversation with ECEs and allow them the space and time to answer questions in a detailed and individualized manner. Henwood and Pidgeon (1995) have argued that there is an affinity between feminist research and qualitative methods because “many qualitative approaches...emphasize the importance of the generation of new ways of seeing rather than the testing of prior theory, allowing research to proceed in innovative and progressive ways” (p. 9). Similarly Creswell (2009) has written that those who engage in qualitative strategies of inquiry “support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation” (p. 4). Qualitative interviews specifically, were therefore, chosen as

the most appropriate strategy for moving from “paradigm to the empirical world” in this project (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 22).

### **Sample**

Following approval from the Ryerson Research Ethics Board, participants for this project were purposively selected based on the following criteria: they were twenty years of age or older; they were a registered ECE or RECE; they were currently working in an ECEC setting with children between birth and six years of age; they were working under the title of ECE; and they were working in the Greater Toronto Area. A small sample size of four participants was chosen in consideration of the short time line and limited resources for this project. Although more research will have to be conducted to further explore the findings of this project, this sample of participants can begin to build a preliminary understanding of professionalism from the standpoint of ECEs. I selected one participant purposively based on my knowledge that she matched the selection criteria. The other three participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method which required that I give my contact information and a brief description of the project to colleagues of mine who then passed on the information to potential participants. In order to maintain confidentiality, I asked my colleagues to pass on information without asking the people they gave it to if they would participate in the project. Potential participants could then contact me personally and decide whether to move forward with their participation in the project.

Participants were first sent a recruitment email (see Appendix) and asked to verify that they matched the selection criteria and would be able to fulfill the requirements of participation in the project. After confirming their interest in the project, participants were emailed a follow-up email (see Appendix) with a copy of the consent agreement (see Appendix), and were also

asked to verify a time and location that they could meet for the interview. The following profiles give a brief description derived from the interview data of the four ECE participants. The information is limited in order to maintain participant confidentiality. As well, pseudonyms have been given to each participant.

### **Participant profiles.**

All of the participants were female, although I did try to recruit a male ECE but he informed me that he had left his work in a toddler room to pursue another opportunity. I also observed that all the participants were from groups considered by Statistics Canada (Statistics Canada, n.d.) to be a visible minority group or by post-colonial theorists (Kirkham & Anderson, 2002) to be a racialized group. I did not ask participants specifically what race or ethnicity they considered themselves to be, their country of birth or their age, however these details did emerge in some of the interviews.

#### ***Jane.***

Jane has been working in the field since she completed her ECE diploma. She has worked in two centres over the past six years which she describes as dramatically different from one another. Currently Jane works in a private nursery school that operates much like a private kindergarten with half day programs that are only provided during the school year. Although Jane feels that her salary is not enough to support a family in the future, she says that her workplace is keeping her in the field and that she loves her job very much.

#### ***Naya.***

Naya just completed a degree in ECE. Up until recently Naya was supplying in an infant room in a private childcare centre. Disappointed with working conditions and compensation in the field, Naya has decided to pursue a graduate degree where she can focus more on research.

Naya also has extensive experience in teaching and managing a private elementary school in her country of origin.

*Aiyla.*

Aiyla has had a diverse set of experiences in the field including working as a lead ECE and as a supervisor in childcare for seven years. She has an ECE diploma as well as additional certificates in Advanced Administration in ECE and Autism and Behavior Science. Aiyla currently works in the full-day kindergarten program and is planning on returning for a second year in that position.

*Georgia.*

Georgia has her ECE diploma as well as a diploma in Deaf Studies. Although she said she loved working in childcare over the past few years, she took a position in a full-day kindergarten program this past year and plans on continuing in that role. Georgia described herself as a risk taker and said she was not afraid to “push boundaries in terms of professionalism”.

**Data collection**

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each of the four participants. The qualitative method of semi-structured interviews was particularly valuable as it allows for the use of a short interview guide focused on the research topic, but is also flexible enough to build and ask new questions based on participants’ responses and comments (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Hesse-Biber (2007) has also noted that “interviewing is a particularly valuable research method feminist researchers can use to gain insight into the world of their respondents” (p. 114). In harmony with feminist standpoint methodology, the in-depth interview was necessary in order to “gain rich data from the perspectives of selected individuals on a particular

subject” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 123). The in-depth interview as described by Hesse-Biber (2007) is ‘deep’ in content and not necessarily in length. This depth comes from asking questions that promote participants to share their personal experiences, and by approaching the interview as a conversation.

I met with each participant one-on-one for approximately 90 minutes in various locations that were convenient for the participants. All efforts were made to choose settings that were both private and quiet enough to allow for an accurate recording of the interview. The interviews were recorded using a portable audio recorder. After participants reviewed and signed the consent agreement, I began each interview by asking the participants about themselves and their work history as an early childhood educator. I proceeded with the interview using my interview guide (see Appendix); however I remained flexible throughout the data collection period about asking new questions. For example, after the first interview with Aiyla I realized a useful probing question would be to ask if participants felt that they belonged to a professional group. The amount of data collected through each interview varied depending on both the participant and the extent of my probing questions. Some participants were more eager to share their stories and opinions, while I became more confident and prepared in asking questions with each interview.

### **Data analysis**

In order to analyze the data gained through interviews with participants, I chose to follow the six phases of thematic analysis presented by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analysis strategy was chosen because Braun and Clarke (2006) provided the most clear and detailed method for working with the type of qualitative data that I had collected. This approach also facilitated a better explanation of how the collected data was analyzed which contributes to the trustworthiness of the research findings (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Although Braun and Clarke

(2006) have argued that thematic analysis can be used across theoretical approaches, it is important to note that feminist standpoint theory and my own experiences and beliefs around ECE professionalism for ECEs had an impact on my choice of a data analysis strategy. For me, the use of thematic analysis provided an opportunity to try and establish common themes across participants' diverse standpoints and, therefore, start the process of building a collective standpoint. While the unique experiences of each participant were evident in the data and need to be respected, I was also concerned that I keep with feminist standpoint theory which claims that "achieving a shared position, or standpoint, on a particular issue promotes the most promising course of action for social change – a solid base from which to fight" (Brooks, 2007, p. 76).

### **Phase 1.**

The first phase outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) is 'familiarizing yourself with the data'. In this phase, I first transcribed each interview verbatim using the slowest play back mode on my audio recorder and simultaneously typing what I heard into a Word document on my computer. Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that transcription can "be an excellent way of familiarizing yourself with the data" (p. 87). I felt that through first transcribing the interviews and then re-reading them for any typing errors I became familiar with the main ideas within each interview and began to notice some connections across interviews. During this phase, I also started taking notes and writing down ideas that seemed to be significant or that could have led to future codes and/or themes. Finally, I used member checking with three of the four participants to verify that the transcript was accurate and that participants felt comfortable with the use of that interview for further analysis. Because I could not compensate participants, I chose not to make the transcript reading a mandatory component of participation. Instead participants were given the option in the consent agreement to have the transcript emailed to

them, meet with me to go over the transcript, or not to see the transcript. Three participants had the transcript emailed to them and the fourth chose not to see the transcript. Member checking is an important strategy to increase the credibility of qualitative research and having participants review the transcripts is an important step in strengthening the trustworthiness of the project (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). However, research credibility would have been further strengthened if participants had been asked to review the analysis of the data and provide feedback on interpretations of the data (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

### **Phase 2.**

In this phase, I began to generate initial codes following the guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). During the first round of coding I identified 67 codes across the four interview transcripts. During this phase, the coding was “data-driven” so that codes were identified “without trying to fit into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Additionally codes were generated at the “latent level” which Braun and Clarke (2006) explained “goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualizations” (p. 84). This level of coding also implied that I was interpreting the participant’s responses and in reality the “analysis that is produced is not just description, but is already theorized” (p. 84). I chose this approach rather than a purely semantic one because I felt that it would better represent the depth of the individual participant’s standpoints and produce a richer description of the data. It is in this stage of the research that I as a researcher had to adopt a stance of “conscious subjectivity” and be aware that I will never be able to fully “hold up a mirror to participants’ views” (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995, p. 15). As explained by Braun and Clarke (2006)

“researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum” (p. 84).

After marking codes on the margins of the printed out transcripts, I copied and pasted all the relevant data segments into a new document that listed the 67 codes and corresponding data. Several data segments were listed under two different codes and opposing codes or contradictions in the data were also noted. Although my goal was to find common themes across the interviews, I did not want to lose any significant differences between participants’ experiences and definitions of professionalism. Lastly, I made notes to record my initial ideas of potential themes to be confirmed in phase 3.

### **Phase 3.**

In phase 3 I began to search for themes within the codes created in phase 2. In order to organize the 67 codes I printed the code titles and cut out each one individually. I was then able to physically move around the codes and try and establish an initial thematic map that grouped similar codes together. During this process I was continually referring back to my initial list of codes and the original transcripts to verify the data surrounding the codes and if and how they fit with other codes. In this phase four themes were created.

### **Phase 4.**

In this phase I reviewed and refined the themes created in phase 3. After reviewing the themes, I decided that in order for a theme to be further refined there had to be at least one coded extract from each of the four interview transcripts in each of the sub themes that made up the two main themes. Although Braun and Clarke (2006) have determined that “the ‘keyness’ of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures” (p. 82), I felt that it was important for a theme (or subtheme) to be mentioned by all the participants if I was going to try to articulate a

collective standpoint on ECE professionalism. However, participants did not have to have identical opinions or experiences pertaining to the theme. It was just important that they spoke of the theme with a similar reference point (i.e. experiencing professionalism in ECE). After applying these criteria, I was able to identify two main themes and six sub-themes. I then reviewed the themes according to a process set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) and determined that there was a coherent pattern within the themes and that I could move forward with the chosen themes. Additionally, I reviewed the two themes not refined in this phase and determined that two of the codes included in a discarded theme could be included in one of the main themes.

After settling on the main themes in this phase, I re-read the entire data set to “ascertain whether the themes ‘work’ in relation to the data set”...and “to code any additional data within themes that has been missed earlier” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). No additional codes were generated from re-reading the data set and I felt confident about moving forward with the themes. To further enhance the dependability of my analysis (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011), I used the strategy of peer debriefing which allowed for a peer to review and ask questions about my data analysis (Creswell, 2009). During this process, I was able to further enhance my analysis when my fellow graduate student acting as my ‘peer debriefer’ identified additional codes in one of the discarded themes from phase 3 that could be included in the final themes.

### **Phase 5 and 6.**

The last two phases presented by Braun and Clarke (2006) involve defining and naming themes and writing up the findings. In this phase my research supervisor acted as ‘peer debriefer’ as we worked together to name and articulate the findings. Although the underlying ideas of the original themes remained, my interpretation of the themes was enhanced as my supervisor helped me to link feminist standpoint theory to my understanding and write up of the findings. These

conversations with my research supervisor also encouraged me to re-read the entire data set for a final time, and include more of the collected data in the final write up. My findings were, therefore, further clarified and enhanced by “involving an interpretation beyond the researcher” (Creswell, 2009, p. 192), and a stronger integration of the project’s guiding theoretical framework and methodology.

The first theme was titled “Professionalism is shaped by Material Conditions”, and consisted of the following sub themes: work setting, colleagues, and professional affiliations. The second theme was titled “Professionalism is shaped by Dominant Discourses about Professionalism” and consisted of three sub themes: specialized knowledge is at the core of professionalism, professional development is an essential aspect of professionalism, and passion and dedication is a necessary aspect of professionalism. The theme titles and write up of the findings were structured to distinguish the separation of the two themes along the material and conceptual realms of professionalism described by the participants.

### **Limitations**

This research was limited by a number of factors. Due to the short time line and limited financial resources, I was not able to collect as much data from the participants as I would have liked. Specifically a second interview or a follow-up interview to complete a comprehensive member check of the data analysis and findings would have strengthened the trustworthiness of the study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The short time line for the study also meant that I was only able to collect data from a small sample of participants which, in turn, limits the transferability of the findings to the experiences and thoughts of the broader ECE workforce. Additional research is needed to build on the findings of this project. Lastly, this project is limited by the fact that the participants gave varying levels of time and detail in the interview.

This could be a result of my inexperience in designing the interview questions, the lack of compensation given for participation, or simply because participants were not willing to share all of their thoughts and experiences with me as the researcher. Being an ECE who was also in the position of researcher meant that I was both an insider and outsider in relation to the participants (Hesse-Biber, 2007). This relational positioning could have impacted the interview situation as the participants might have felt I would judge their answers.

Despite these limitations, every effort was made to establish an adequate level of trustworthiness as described by Thomas and Magilvy (2011). Trustworthiness can be likened to the concepts of validity and reliability in quantitative research and include “truth-value (credibility); applicability (transferability); consistency (dependability); and neutrality (confirmability)” (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 152). The credibility of the research was enhanced by “prolonged and varied time spent with...the interview transcripts, writing the final report and using the words of participants” (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 153). Although transferability is limited by the sample size, “a dense description of the population studied” (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 153) has been provided which allows for readers to achieve some understanding of what some ECEs experience as professionals and how they think about professionalism. As with most qualitative research the purpose of this study was not to generalize the findings to the entire ECE workforce, but instead to describe and explore the experiences of a particular group “in context of a specific site” (Creswell, 2009, p.193).

To strengthen the dependability of this research, a clear and detailed account of the research methods used and the rationale behind my choice of methods was provided. Using feminist standpoint theory and methodology throughout each part of this project also strengthens the dependability of the project and allows additional researchers to “follow the decision trail

used by the researcher” (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 153). Lastly, confirmability has been established in this research by providing a clear articulation of my own theoretical positioning and indicating how and why this theoretical position affected the research process (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Most specifically, I have tried to stay true to the conviction that this research can begin to build knowledge from an examination of the thoughts and experiences of ECEs, and that this knowledge is in fact as objective as any knowledge which is always influenced by material realities and social locations.

#### 4. Findings

The purpose of this research was to examine professionalism from the standpoint of early childhood educators (ECEs). In depth interviews with four ECEs in Toronto were conducted based on the assumption that ECEs' particular social location provides an important starting point for building knowledge about professionalism in ECE work. Considering that participants were asked how they experience professionalism and what it means to them, it is not surprising that the two themes that emerged seem to answer each of these questions respectively. What was most striking in the analysis of the data were the specific elements, or sub-themes, that constituted the participants' experiences of professionalism, and the dominance of a particular discourse within the meanings that they attached to professionalism. The themes that emerged were in fact consistent with claims made by feminist standpoint theory and methodology that knowledge can be understood as arising from the material and the conceptual/discursive realms.

The first theme illuminates the lived realities of ECE work, and highlights how ECEs' experiences of professionalism are shaped by the material conditions of their work which include work settings, colleagues and professional affiliations. These lived realities, however, are, to a certain extent, at odds with the meanings that the ECEs in this project ascribe to professionalism which appear to be shaped by dominant discourses about professionalism. These discourses are present in the second emergent theme in which the participants defined professionalism as a continuous process of applying and expanding their specialized knowledge in child development. Knowledge about ECE professionalism is therefore constructed by the participants both through "discourse" defined as a "social force that sets the terms for the construction of reality", and through "materiality" which are the concrete, immediate and daily experiences that also "constructs and shapes discourse" (Hirschmann, 2004, p. 325).

## **Theme 1: Professionalism is Shaped by Material Conditions**

Material conditions were identified as the central factor that shaped the participants' experiences of professionalism. Furthermore, this theme highlights how the participants experienced professionalism at an individual level in their work setting, through social relations with their colleagues both within and outside of their work setting, and through broader social relations with the profession and professional affiliations.

### **Work setting.**

All four participants used extensive examples from their current and past work settings to describe how they experienced professionalism and what factors affected how they felt about professionalism both personally and for the field of ECE as a whole. The setting within which the participants worked was described as either facilitating or inhibiting (or both) what they believed to be professionalism. Naya had a particularly difficult time finding a job where she felt she could, as a professional, apply the theory she had learned in her ECE degree program. Supplying in an infant room in a private childcare centre, she described with frustration the physical labour that dominated her work, and daily practices that were inconsistent with the theory she learned in her training:

I found that for me that's not the kind of environment I enjoy at all... it's like just the whole day is feeding them, changing them... sweeping the floor and the children are on their own, and I just feel you know I haven't gone through so much school and so much experience to do this work... it is important but then you have to prioritize between the two... I want the focus to be the children and this just a part of the daily routine... but in their case the focus is cleaning, changing pampers... the children are all on their own, crawling here, crawling there...

Naya was also passionate about non-profit service provision and believed that her field placement experiences in public and non-profit centres had provided much stronger examples of professionalism than her current experiences in a private centre. She identified elements such as

opportunities for professional development, more access to supplies and materials, and better pay as experiences that promoted professionalism. This was a key issue for Naya because she felt that there was a marked difference in professionalism based on auspice. She stated “I think professionalism would be promoted if there were more not-for-profit daycare centres, and the profit ones were monitored very strictly”.

Similarly, Jane remarked that her experience of professionalism drastically changed from one setting to another. But, unlike Naya, Jane’s current work in a private nursery school has proven to be a more supportive professional environment than previous work in a non-profit centre. Jane commented that “literally from the first job to the second job was completely life changing”. Jane described her experience in a previous job working with infants of teen mothers:

I made ten dollars an hour to start and it only went up to twelve...I worked ten hour days...and the children were sick a lot, there was a lot of CAS cases, and having to report to CAS, children being taken away...it was very high stress, low pay... they weren’t getting support workers, understaffed and underpaid, it was very high stress.

Noting a number of differences in her current work setting such as staff meetings, organized provision of annual CPR workshops, higher child-staff ratios, engaged parents, and higher pay, Jane remarked that it is “just little things that change the way you look at your job really...it’s a very good place”. Jane also considered the social connections she made through her work at the nursery school as beneficial. She stated:

I don’t get paid for the summer but through connections at the school I’ve become the art teacher at the drama camp... so I don’t have to go on unemployment...lots of parents want tutoring and babysitting... so there’s a lot of extra little perks working there that I would never have gotten at the other place.

Holding positions in the new full-day kindergarten program within the public school system, Aiyla and Georgia talked about how the new setting affected their experiences of professionalism as an ECE. Aiyla and Georgia both described being frustrated with the emphasis

given to break times and rules within the school board and how they viewed this focus as unprofessional. In Georgia's experience, the school administration was more concerned with not getting in trouble with her union than with meeting the needs of the children. She stated that the school is "really focused more on employee satisfaction than they are on curriculum and education sometimes". Georgia identified a key change in her role as an ECE within the full-day program:

The focus is a lot different... that whole social emotional part, that development aspect is kind of swept under the carpet. I find it a bit of a challenge to understand more in terms of what I view as professionalism to be, bring it in to where I am now, and looking at it and going well this what I've always done, this is what I think is right.

Georgia also commented that through union meetings with other ECEs in the full-day kindergarten program, she discovered that ECEs were having very different experiences in the new program. She noted, "my role is way different than somebody's role at another school". However, Georgia also remarked that "the fact that we're in the [school] board speaks a lot in terms of getting viewed as professional... not viewing us as the babysitter's club".

Aiyla described the realities of working in the new full-day program, and explained that the amount of space and staff-child ratios in the program make it difficult for her to carry out her defined role as an ECE in the program. Elements of the program that were identified as part of the ECE's responsibility, such as implementing play-based learning and creating learning centres were being overshadowed by curriculum demands and managing the children. Aiyla remarked that "it's just that it's very difficult to...follow the curriculum and follow...Pascal's vision in that sort of setting where you're just like this is a lot of kids, we have a small room".

## Colleagues.

Within their work settings the participants' relationships with colleagues impacted on how they experienced professionalism. The need for supportive and like-minded colleagues was evident in the participants' responses. Furthermore, participants were aware of and impacted by the material conditions affecting their colleagues. Naya was particularly disappointed with the professionalism of colleagues working with infants in her workplace and thus felt disconnected as a professional from these colleagues. Naya also described that "there is a disconnect between the degree and diploma", saying, "I am a little disappointed with professionalism, what it means to me and what it generally means, I keep wondering if it is me whose got the wrong idea. The way it is, it is not professionalism". After working in an environment where she experienced colleagues who were not committed to their work or willing to implement what she believed to be best practices she explained:

I also understand that you feel that you're not being paid for so much so why should you put in that much effort, you're putting the amount of effort you're being paid for ... I understand where she was coming from but for me it's not something that I want to be a part of.

Aiyla also spoke about her experiences in which she saw low pay as a barrier to heightened levels of professionalism among her colleagues and to moving the field forward. She stated:

A lot of people work because they need to work and not because it's their passion...but it is quite difficult when you ... have this vision, you want this vision to work because then down the road it will just make life a lot easier for so many people.

All of the participants stated that despite factors such as low pay or unsupportive work settings, ECEs are responsible for acting professionally and being committed to their work.

Georgia contended that "it comes down to the individual and ... that person...just willing to go the extra mile in that centre". However, she did remark that it can be difficult for ECEs and that

“a lot of ECEs just tend to just stay back more than they want to move forward”. Similarly, Naya reflected on being a supply teacher and remarked “I was being paid \$10.25 on supply but if I accepted that job it’s my responsibility to deliver... so if you accepted it at \$11 then you need to put in your best”. Georgia, however, experienced a stronger connection to the profession and increased professional support through her relationships with other ECEs outside of her own workplace. She said:

I have a lot of [ECE] colleagues in different workplaces so it’s nice to get together and talk about what’s going on with all of them... I associate with them a lot more, a lot of us get together to talk about stuff and it’s nice to do that once in awhile.

Jane identified the strong effect that a group of colleagues can have on how she experiences and feels about professionalism stating:

When I meet other ones who don’t take their job seriously, or they’re not looking to expand on the child’s learning, they’re just there to watch them play or color... they’re not singing, they’re not reading, they’re not answering questions, they’re blowing the child off... I’ve met teachers who are just awesome and professional, and I feel like I’m around professionals, and other times I’ve met teachers that have ignored a child cause they’ve pooped themselves... and just stuff like that, I feel how are you here? ...why?

Like Naya, Jane had witnessed some very poor practices among colleagues which led her to believe that professionalism was something that is not practiced across the field. Additionally, Naya, as well as Jane, described how their racial background affected their experiences. For Jane, her experience growing up as the only person from a racialized group in her area made her feel more determined not to be the ECE who acts unprofessionally. She stated:

I think I’m lucky to have a job in that area, where I grew up there was not any other people of my race... I felt I worked hard to get where they were and I wanted to stay there, there was no way that I was going to slack off... or become that employee that shouldn’t be there.

Naya, on the other hand, mentioned that a colleague who owns a private nursery school told her:

You should try for government jobs... maybe there is more equity there but in the private sector the directors I hire and the main teachers are white...because that is what the parents feel comfortable with... even though the support staff is different ethnicities... and maybe the support staff is doing more work than the lead, and has more knowledge, but the colour does make a lot of difference.

Jane and Aiyla also experienced gossiping among their colleagues and identified such behaviour as a significant barrier to professionalism. Gossiping was described as an inherently female trait and as Aiyla explained, “when you have that much estrogen in one building, there will be gossip”. In her experiences as a supervisor, Aiyla did not tolerate gossiping behavior and added:

You need to understand that if you want to be more respected and you want to get paid more than that has to stop... you have to conduct yourself professionally, diplomatically and you don't start gossiping about parents as soon as they leave... it's not professional... in my experiences I think that's what is the worst part of child care.

Aiyla also felt that gossiping deterred male ECEs from staying in the field. She stated “I've tried hiring males to work in childcare and they're wonderful... but yet again the women are gossiping, you know they share too much”. Jane identified the lack of male colleagues in her work settings as a problem and believed that more male ECEs would promote professionalism.

Jane explained:

I honestly just think we need more men... I think people would listen if more men were complaining on our end...as someone who's graduated I feel if they said well I want to have a family and I don't have benefits and I'm barely making this much money here and I need to provide for my children and my wife and whatever, that people would listen more.

However Jane also acknowledged that:

It's especially hard for men to join [the profession] because people have that misconception of well that's really weird, why would you [the male] want to work with children? [They think]That seems a bit suspicious to me, you must be a creep.

Jane, like Georgia, also experienced colleagues who did not seem willing to advocate for the profession or to get involved in advocacy work aimed at advancing the profession. Jane questioned whether it was “fear of... not being taken seriously... being told by coworkers or other ECEs you’re wasting your time, or looking at the past. Since nothing has changed for however long... so why would it change now kind of attitude”. Similarly Georgia’s experiences made her feel that:

There’s not a lot of ECEs out there that I find will advocate for it... and that’s the missing piece I think... for the actual profession... I think a lot of people don’t feel like they have that power and that’s what I think is missing about being... a professional ECE.

Georgia also compared ECEs to teachers and commented that “when you look at other professions, like teachers, they can stand up and say no, this is not my role, I am a teacher, this is what I do... and they have all those avenues to go in fighting”. In the full-day kindergarten program Georgia experienced the importance of having professional support and advocating for her role but it was difficult because as she explained, “there’s only a hundred of us this year [in the school board]”.

### **Professional affiliations.**

Lastly, experiences of professionalism were affected by each participant’s broader social relations with the profession through their access to, or knowledge of professional affiliations. Experiences with the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario (AECEO) were mentioned as an important factor for some of the participants and allowed them to feel connected to the profession. Georgia explained how the AECEO helped prepare her for the hiring process and a new role in the full-day kindergarten program. She stated:

Having those connections, the coalition (Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care) and the AECEO, I found them to be really helpful in terms of what was going on in the community... I mean they’re a hub for resources... I knew nothing about

what goes on in the board... I knew about what my affiliations were when I came in, I knew about my rights, so I took that into there. Going okay, this is what I have, and the good thing about doing that is the fact that I have it and nobody else does... even my co-ECE in the room doesn't have those affiliations because she's an internal hire.

Acting as a mentor, teaching other ECEs through professional development with the AECEO and/or as a placement supervisor for college students, were roles that made Aiyla and Georgia feel like professionals. Being able to share their experiences and pass on their expert knowledge to their (future) colleagues was important to these two participants. As Georgia stated, "I mean it's our community that makes us stronger". The impact of experiencing a strong connection with the AECEO was evident in Aiyla's sense of pride in the ECE profession. She said:

I'm very proud to be in this profession, it's something that I think is a cornerstone of what our society is, especially these days where ECEs are pretty much raising the children... we are forming what society is going to be like... people don't really understand that.

Experiencing a group connection to the profession was also impacted by the professional affiliations promoted within the participant's work setting and among their colleagues. Working in the full-day kindergarten program Georgia explained that many of her ECE colleagues are internal hires who previously worked as teaching assistants in the school board. She remarked that "it's a weird variant of ECEs" and that they do not share with her the same professional identity or experiences. Additionally, Georgia commented that her co-ECEs did not have the same professional affiliations as her and were, therefore, disconnected from the broader field of professionals with which she associates.

Neither Jane nor Naya experienced a connection to the AECEO through their workplaces or individually. This lack of connection to a professional organization was described by Naya:

There needs to be a hub where information filters in and you can find that there's an opportunity here, there's an opportunity there, and there should be that

networking. I think that is lacking in our field, in our profession, in our professionalism, that networking and that [being] united together.

Likewise, Jane's experience made her feel that she was not connected to the broader ECE workforce. She was, therefore, supportive of the establishment of the Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE):

It seemed like every other professional had some sort of group or union or something... and it's like everything is so individualized [in ECE], it's not a school board, everything, like down the street could be private, and then could be low income, could be anything, so there really is no one that we all went to until this started happening which is nice.

Other participants also expressed support for the College of ECEs. Aiyla stated:

We have a lot of inconsistencies in child care...we really need to re-do our framework and say this is what professionalism is, everyone has to be on the same page... but if we have this governing body now and able to put this governing body to work, then perhaps we can make things a lot better.

Aiyla described the role of the college in legitimizing the profession to the broader society. She added: "I'm glad it's finally taken off... even though we feel that we've always been a profession, it's nice to be noticed that we are... we need people to see us more as a professional rather than a glorified babysitter". Georgia also supported the establishment of the regulatory college, however she noted that "I feel bad for the people that are working for less than minimum wage, a lot of ECEs who are have to pay that fee". Naya, in contrast, did not feel that the College of ECEs played an important role in her experiences of professionalism:

My membership doesn't make me professional, it just makes me feel that I'm part of a [regulatory] body... because I feel that there should be some kind of stratification of education and training... and they should have some basic criteria, maybe years of experience... because they lump you all together... like if I look at my daughter who is 19, and if she was going into ECE, the level of her professionalism would be very different to mine, but if we're both registered at the College of ECEs we'd be lumped together.

## **Theme 2: Professionalism is Shaped by Dominant Discourses about Professionalism**

The second theme identified through the data analysis reveals that the participants define professionalism around an ECE having specialized knowledge in child development, and being dedicated to applying and expanding that knowledge. The meanings that the ECE participants attached to professionalism highlight the influence of dominant discourses of professionalism that shape how these ECEs think about who they are as professionals. Furthermore, the participants' conceptualization of professionalism brings into focus how they must negotiate between the meanings they ascribe to professionalism within a conceptual realm and their actual lived experiences within the material realm that shape how they experience professionalism.

### **Specialized knowledge is at the core of professionalism.**

All four participants referred to specific knowledge in early childhood education as being an important aspect of what professionalism means to them and what makes them feel like a professional. The participants either referred specifically to child development knowledge discourse or to knowledge gained through their pre-service training. Georgia explained that “for me it’s about labeling yourself, making sure that you’re knowledgeable about child development, really it is being able to sit there and talk to a parent and not get stuck on things”. Jane described professionalism as “feeling like you went to school and now you are a professional”. Likewise Naya stated “I think my training and experience makes me feel like a professional”. Aiyla described feeling empowered by her specialized knowledge, remarking “as an ECE I have always felt very empowered with my knowledge... I just feel very empowered as an ECE that I can make some changes”.

There also seemed to be a consensus among the participants that being able to apply their specialized knowledge was an important component of professionalism, Aiyla explained this perspective:

You need to be able to apply your knowledge, so whatever you learn, it's great if you learn it but you also have to be able to apply it...in a professional standpoint if you can't apply it, well what's the point right?.

For Naya not being able to put the theory she learned in her ECE degree program into practice prompted her to reconsider working in the field. Naya explained, "I really like to work in an environment which is... conducive to...the way I've learnt things...because I want to put into practice what I've learned". Similarly in the context of the full-day kindergarten program, Georgia described performing her role as an ECE in the way she was trained, despite pressure to behave differently in this public school environment. Georgia believed that her role as an ECE was to provide social and emotional support to the children and that "is the professional thing to do". She further explained:

A lot of parents, and I mean this is part of professionalism as an ECE... a lot of parents will approach me about health issues... about personal social issues with their children... that makes me feel a lot more like a professional as an ECE.

Other participants also mentioned having the ability to guide or give advice to parents made them feel like a professional. Being an expert with a specialized body of knowledge was a positive aspect of their work, and was articulated by Aiyla:

Because they come to me with certain things and I can offer those things up in networking meetings or in workshops that makes me feel that there is an aspect of professionalism, that they do have that respect that we're not just a caregiver, that we're not...a babysitter.

Aiyla's comment reflects a common perspective among the participants that their training in ECE sets them apart from other caregivers and elevates their status as a professional.

**Professional development is an essential aspect of professionalism.**

Professional development was identified by all participants as an important aspect of professionalism. For Aiyla, a professional is “someone who constantly tries to better themselves, and is always researching and doing best ethical practices, that’s for me the epitome of what professionalism should be”. Professional development was also seen by participants as a way to promote professionalism in the field and avoid ECEs becoming burnt out or “static and stagnant”, as Naya described it. Jane suggested that some type of mandatory system for professional development similar to the one in place for certified teachers would be useful for ECEs:

I think it would just be great, I know this would bother a lot of people, but if it was mandatory...I don’t even know if it was like two years or five years after you graduated, to do a refresher or something, a refresher week.

Jane was not offered professional development through her workplace and stated that “a lot of times your employer won’t help you pay for it which also puts a strain, [because you have to consider] are you going to miss work and miss the pay cheque?” Naya and Aiyla also identified the need for a mandatory system for professional development.

Professional development was also viewed as a means to reach ECEs across settings and as a way to increase compensation for ECEs in the field. Participants both supported and wanted increased access to professional development. For Georgia, professional development played an important role in preparing her for a position in the full-day kindergarten program. Additionally, she maintained that it may even be useful to extend the pre-service training for ECEs by a year to include more professional development, and more opportunities to engage in advocacy and become connected with the broader field of ECEs. Georgia also argued that extending pre-service training would strengthen ECEs’ confidence, and added “they teach you the

fundamentals and hands on training which is amazing, but I think a lot of what lacks in colleges is how to assert yourself and be confident in your role”.

While the participants agreed that professional development was necessary and important, there was also general consensus that higher qualifications were not recognized in the sector. Naya reflected on being told by a potential employer that going to get her degree to compliment her ECE diploma was not necessary. She described feeling disappointed that the College of ECEs did not recognize her higher levels of education and training. From Georgia’s perspective, ECEs working in the full-day kindergarten program with undergraduate or graduate degrees were not being recognized by the union or receiving higher levels of compensation. Jane also acknowledged that her colleagues with higher credentials were not having an easier time finding a job or getting paid more which made professional development even less attractive. Jane stated, “I’ve learned from other women who have [additional qualifications] other than an ECE that are still getting the same pay as someone who just has their ECE”. However, the participants expressed a common belief that a passionate and dedicated ECE would engage in professional development anyway.

**Passion and dedication is a necessary aspect of professionalism.**

From the participants’ standpoint, a professional is passionate and dedicated to their work as an ECE and, therefore, aims to expand and apply their specialized knowledge. Passion, in particular, was seen as a driving force behind ECEs pursuing higher levels of professionalism both through professional development and through a commitment to applying best practices. Aiyla explained that, as a supervisor, she expected ECEs to pursue professional development, commenting “that shows you’re committed to your job and you’re providing the best care and knowledge to these kids, right because it’s not just about you, it’s about the whole system”.

Passion was also regarded by the participants as being an important factor in determining whether or not ECEs put in the effort to apply their specialized knowledge to their work. Naya commented:

I feel whatever you do you must do it with a passion... so for me professionalism comes from the love of doing things rather than just doing them for the sake of doing them...because you can't do anything else, or you can't get into any other program so you've done this... for me that's professionalism.

Levels of professionalism seemed to be associated with the extent of ECE dedication to the field, both in their everyday work and in their participation in activities that aimed to improve their skills and knowledge. Aiyla explained:

I am very passionate about what I do, when I see that people do not take the opportunity to make every moment a learning moment I am floored... I'm just like this is your job, you only have this much time with them [children] and if you're not taking every moment as a teaching moment then what are you here for?

Jane remarked that professionalism means "to be wholeheartedly committed to your job".

Similar to other participants, she felt that it was unprofessional to do the work of an ECE if you were not passionate about your work. It was also expected by the participants that a dedicated ECE would take the necessary steps to apply and expand their knowledge and remain passionate about their work despite challenging factors such as working conditions. Jane elaborated:

You don't work with children to make money... and they told you that right at the beginning of school... they said if you would like to make money this is the wrong field...one of the very honest teachers said that... you should reconsider, if you don't love children you shouldn't be in this field, if you want to make money working with children you shouldn't be in this field.

## **Summary of Findings**

Two key themes emerged from a thematic analysis of the data. ECEs who participated in this project define professionalism in similar ways, by emphasizing a specialized knowledge unique to the field, professional training, and passionate dedication to their work. At the same

time, they described how their experiences of professionalism are impacted by common factors which include work settings, colleagues and professional affiliations. These two themes combined suggest a particular standpoint on professionalism that includes the lived realities of being an ECE, and the discourses which circulate within the field on what ECEs should know and how they should behave as professionals. The next section will seek to discuss these findings, linking them to existing literature examined earlier in this paper as well to claims made in feminist standpoint theory about how understanding the material and conceptual realms in which marginalized groups such as early childhood educators work can assist us in conceptualizing alternative forms of professionalism.

## 5. Discussion

This research is grounded in the conviction that early childhood educators' particular experiences are a valuable source of knowledge that can contribute to our understandings of professionalism in the early childhood education field. As both women and ECEs, the experiences and insights that the participants in this project described provide us with knowledge about professionalism that is not necessarily revealed through an examination of dominant models, discourses and concepts of professionalism. Furthermore, the participants shed light on the contradictions that arise for ECEs when the materiality of their professional experiences are not accounted for in conceptual frameworks for professionalism. This discussion of the findings can begin to build new knowledge that accounts for these contradictions and aims to address the divide between the conceptual, discursive realm of professionalism, and the material and bodily, experienced realm of ECEs' everyday work.

Research findings described in the previous section identified two themes that potentially can be used to develop a collective standpoint on professionalism for Ontario ECEs. Bowell (2011) has further explained this collective process:

The emergence of standpoints is a collective process occurring through recognition and acknowledgement of others who occupy more or less the same standpoint as oneself... the emergence of a standpoint does not consist merely in the telling of individual women's narratives... Thus the epistemic process whereby a standpoint emerges enables the occupants of that standpoint to gain an element of power and control over knowledge about their lives...they become knowing subjects in their own right, rather than merely objects that are known by others (para. 13).

The purpose of building a collective standpoint is not to ignore the participants' unique experiences as Brooks (2007) has stated, but rather to "build alliances, develop a common position, and take a stand on particular issues" (Brooks, 2007, p. 76). This research represents a

preliminary understanding of an ECE standpoint on professionalism, which can only be sustained by further dialogue, debate and action.

### **The Material World of Professionalism**

The lived everyday realities of professional work described by the ECEs interviewed suggest that the ‘non-system’ of programs and services in Ontario impacts on ECEs’ understandings of professionalism. Within this ‘non-system’, ECEs appear to be highly dependent on their specific material conditions for experiencing and understanding professionalism at different levels. A work setting or a group of colleagues can either promote or inhibit feeling like a professional with little influence coming from the broader ECE workforce. This was also a common finding in the research reviewed for this paper in which issues such as work setting (Osgood, 2004; Duhn, 2010), colleagues (Fenech et al., 2010; Simpson, 2010) and professional affiliations (Lloyd & Hallet, 2010) were identified as significant factors shaping ECEs’ individual understandings of professionalism. Osgood’s (2006a) observation of professionalism in England is markedly similar to this study’s findings in Ontario where she found that “the fragmentary way in which different providers coexist” and “the absence of a unified collective mouthpiece” (p. 196) are significant obstacles to professional affiliations among ECE professionals.

Within their individual work settings, the participants identified the material conditions that they need to support their professional work as ECEs. However, the absence of some or all of these conditions coupled with the variation of conditions across work settings highlight the difficult situation that ECEs face in pursuing professionalism and being a professional. According to Moyles (2001), these material conditions are largely a result of “the lack of clear perception in our society as to what kinds of values, respect, funding or time young children’s

education and care should demand” (p. 85), and pose challenges to the ECE profession that are not as central for other professions that work in areas such as healthcare or formal education. From the participants’ perspective, professionalism is not something that is simply taken for granted in the ECE context but is instead a process in which ECEs have to fight against all material odds in order to maintain their sense of professionalism.

It is clear that the ‘non-system’ of ECEC does not support the participants to deal with the complexities of their work. Urban (2008) has remarked:

Early childhood education is a messy business. Its ‘practice’ unfolds in interactions between children and adults, individuals and groups, families and communities, laypersons and ‘professionals’... Situations and ‘problems’ that early childhood practitioners are dealing with on a day-to-day basis are highly complex (p. 144).

The participants poignantly described how they negotiate these interactions on a daily basis and come to understand professionalism. Naya and Jane’s experiences working with infants illuminated the ‘messiness’ of ECEs’ lived work realities. Both of these participants experienced low levels of (perceived) professionalism, compensation and support in their roles as infant caregivers. Yet as Jane described it, she was working in a setting with infants of teen mothers with a high number of Children’s Aid cases and children with special needs, probably one of the most difficult and important jobs an ECE could have. Furthermore, Naya’s negative description of the considerable physical/manual work of cleaning up after and taking care of infants’ physical needs, highlights the need to further our understanding of how this labour is still largely treated as not professional (Manning-Morton, 2006). Moreover, it is likely that the emotionally demanding labour of taking care of very young children coupled with the low levels of support, recognition and compensation make it difficult, as Manning-Morton (2006) has stated, for ECEs “to develop a sense of professional self-worth, which in turn may impact adversely on

practitioners' commitment to provide well for children" (p. 43). For Naya and Jane, the impact of this work was seen in their choice to leave those positions.

Georgia and Aiyla's daily experiences in the new full-day kindergarten program also revealed the multiple challenges that ECEs face in pursuing a sense of professionalism. Although Pascal (2009) saw this work setting as an opportunity to increase professionalism within the ECE workforce, it is evident that these ECEs are still struggling with their professional roles within the program. The material realities of their work suggest that ECE professionalism may be weakened within a work setting that has already been established to support another profession (certified teachers). The presence of this new work setting may only serve to reinforce the education/care split (OECD, 2006) of the ECE workforce in Ontario, and become yet another setting where ECEs are individually isolated in their struggle to experience professionalism. While Georgia did acknowledge that working within the school board was an indicator of ECEs "being viewed as professionals, [and] not just as the babysitters club", the full-day kindergarten program also posed particular challenges for her in terms of professional relationships with colleagues and professional affiliations.

Within her full-day kindergarten program, Georgia described colleagues who did not share the same experiences and professional affiliations as herself. As well, she indicated that the small number of ECEs within the larger school board made it challenging to get the voices of ECEs heard. However, she did identify ECE colleagues from outside of her immediate work setting as having a positive impact on how she experiences professionalism. These types of social relations identified by all of the participants, indicate the need to break down the barriers of isolation sustained through the participants' disconnected work experiences. The literature on ECE professionalism presented earlier also examined ECEs' social relations with colleagues.

Similar to Simpson's (2010) research based in phenomenology, the experiences of the ECE participants in this study showed the "extent to which these relations [with colleagues] can be negative and characterized by conflict" or positive (p. 278). The collegial relationships between ECEs and their influences on processes of professionalism described by the participants appear to confirm the strong impact they have on understandings of professionalism. As the participants described it, this impact can be a result of colleagues' behaviours, attitudes, levels of training, experiences or professional affiliations, which vary across settings and the workforce.

Within these isolated contexts, an ECE is influenced by the 'discourses' that circulate at the material, experienced level (Simpson, 2010). The value that a group of colleagues places on issues such as implementing best practices, professional development, or advocacy translate to the individual ECE. Jane, for example, identified colleagues who were reluctant to participate in professional advocacy because of "fear of not being taken seriously... being told by coworkers... you're wasting your time". Moreover, issues of compensation, race (i.e. perception of parent's preference for white supervisors/directors) and gender (i.e. having males in the field) appeared to infuse the participants everyday experiences and their relations with colleagues. Similar to the participants in Osgood's (2004) study, the ECEs in this study seemed to employ a 'passive resistance' to these issues that affected their everyday work. This resistance manifested itself in participants' experiences with professional colleagues and work settings where they either chose not to connect with particular colleagues, or to leave the setting all together.

This reality suggests that professionalism is not an individual process in ECE; ECEs do not work alone, but instead thrive in communities of practice where shared ideas of their work and professional identity can be nurtured. Dalli's (2008) research has made similar claims that ECEs describe collaboration with colleagues as a critical part of professionalism. Dalli (2008)

reported that the ECEs in her study equated professionalism with “a mixture of behaviours, attitudes and skills underpinned by the common values of support for colleagues; respect for others; non discriminative working relationships; and aspirations for a working environment that is democratic, respectful and pleasant” (p. 181). This indicates that ECEs experience professionalism if they are part of and supported by a unified group of professionals. However, it was also evident from the findings in this study that this group of professionals has to extend beyond ECEs’ immediate work settings and encompass the broader ECE workforce.

The participants did refer to the larger professional network when they described their professional affiliations and how they affected their experiences of professionalism. However, there were inconsistencies in regards to participants’ knowledge, use, and appreciation of their professional affiliations with organizations such as the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario (AECEO) and the Ontario College of ECEs (CECE). These inconsistencies suggest a reality that ECEs face in their everyday work lives in that despite the presence of a regulatory college and a professional association, ECEs still do not have the support they need or a strong connection to the profession as a group. Jane, for example, expressed appreciation that the CECE was finally going to provide a place for ECEs to come together; however, she also did not have any awareness of the AECEO. Naya also did not have a connection to the AECEO and was further frustrated by the CECE as a regulatory body. The lack of recognition for her university degree in ECE from the CECE only reinforced the lack of recognition Naya already felt working in the field. Aiyla and Georgia, on the other hand, described very positive experiences with the AECEO but, as Georgia remarked, her colleagues in the full-day kindergarten program did not share this affiliation once again leaving her isolated in her work setting.

Both the positive and negative aspects of participants' experiences with their broader professional affiliations suggests a need for a stronger focus on building connections between ECEs through professional organizations in this province. Regulation through the CECE is a necessary aspect to increasing professionalization. However, it is evident that the ECEs in this project need more support at the local level to come together as a profession in order to make use of the colleges' standards and negotiate what the college means to them as a professional group. Lloyd and Hallet (2010) identified this problem as well and wrote that among the participants in their study:

A need was acknowledge for a 'collective voice' with 'shared agencies' to be actively engaged in 'supporting change', a group that could operate as a vehicle for 'networking', to access 'training', to learn about 'policy and legislation'...The lack of such a professional body provides yet more evidence of the problem surrounding the attempted professionalization of the early years workforce (p. 83).

In Ontario, we do have a professional association in the AECEO, but it was evident that the participants had varying levels of knowledge about and experience with this professional association. Georgia's comparison to other professions such as certified teachers that have "avenues to go in fighting" reveals that despite being connected to the AECEO she did not feel that ECEs have a collective voice as a profession. A regulatory body provides a public accountability mechanism to heighten the legitimacy of the profession, but how does this regulation actually promote professionalism? As Langford (2010) has written:

There are certainly advantages to developing professional institutions such as regulatory colleges to lift the early childhood education workforce out of a secondary labor market. But at the same time, these institutions are top-down expert systems that can increasingly define and regulate the early childhood educator, who may become more distant from understanding the possibilities of his or her own authority (p. 302)

The process of professionalization must, therefore, aim to concurrently enhance the role of a professional association such as the AECEO. Similar to the role that the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) plays for certified teachers, the AECEO advocates for, and supports the ECE profession in claiming their authority as a group of professionals. The ETFO also acts as a union for certified teachers, which is another aspect of professionalism that needs further examination in the ECE context. The AECEO cannot provide the same resources and security for ECEs that the ETFO can provide for certified teachers because the ETFO functions as both a union and a professional association. However, it was the AECEO who fought so hard for legislative recognition and the establishment of the regulatory college for the ECE profession. Yet arguably, many ECEs are unaware of this fact, and now faced with a mandatory registration fee with the college, paying the annual (voluntary) fee to the AECEO may not be realistic for many.

This contradiction is indicative of the constant obstacles that ECEs face for improving their working conditions. Regulation through the college allows ECEs to establish themselves within the dominant model of professionalism; however the regulatory body does not play a direct role in bringing the profession together to pursue a collective professional identity and improved material conditions. ECEs are likely asking: Why should I have to pay to be regulated when I do not make enough money to justify paying to be a member of my professional association? This question is not meant to imply that ECEs should not in fact follow the standards and ethics the CECE has produced, but rather to highlight the relations of power that push the profession towards a certain model for professionalism that does not necessarily facilitate professionalism in their everyday lives. This tension between the conceptual and material worlds of professionalism will be further discussed in the next section.

## **The Conceptual World of Professionalism**

It is evident from the findings in this study that the participants conceptualize professionalism around their specialized knowledge in child development. Having, gaining, and using their specialized knowledge dominated their feelings and thoughts about who is a professional ECE. Through the initial coding of the data, specialized knowledge was the most obvious theme identified among the participants. The dominance of this ‘discourse’ was further emphasized by how the participants’ material conditions were positioned as a barrier to practicing their specialized knowledge. This finding is especially important because it reveals the ruling relations in which ECEs may function within. These ruling relations are part of both the broader societal system that promotes an idea of professionalism that is about claiming power through a scientific knowledge base; as well as through a training system that promotes child development knowledge as the foundation for ECEs’ professional knowledge. How then, do ECEs manage the material realities that inhibit them from experiencing professionalism as it is defined in the conceptual realm?

Despite the effects of material conditions on the ECEs’ capacity to enact a dominant model of professionalism, the ECE participants in this project still take up the masculinist concept that “professional knowledge is gained by dint of a lengthy and heroic individual effort” and that “expertise deriving from a formalized training based on science is central to a claim to professionalism” (Davies, 1996, p. 669). Here we can begin to see what has been argued by Narayan (2004) in that “mere access to different and incompatible contexts is not a guarantee that a critical stance on the part of an individual will result” (p. 222). Instead, ECEs may choose consciously or not, to conform to patriarchal concepts that are created and maintained in the ruling relations of our society in order to gain legitimacy. Social legitimacy is a necessary

component of professionalism and as Langford (2010) has articulated, “early childhood educators have authority when they are knowledgeable” (p. 298). The authority claimed by the participants in this study is important and needs to be respected. Further, claiming and working from a body of specialized knowledge is not an inherently bad thing. On the other hand, this specialized knowledge of child development was formed in the ‘male social universe’ which is concerned with the rational/educational role of the ECE as opposed to the multiple roles that an ECE experiences which involve emotion, caring and physical labour.

The question remains then: what would be a professional knowledge base for Ontario ECEs? As professionals, the participants want to apply and expand their specialized knowledge, however, their lived experiences do not facilitate a simplistic application of child development theory. Take Jane, for example, who goes from being a nursery school teacher during the school year to a babysitter during the summer. Or Naya, who realizes that she did not go to school for four years to change diapers and clean tables. When the ECEs in work in a capacity that is explicitly about caring, are they still professionals? How do they conceptualize this aspect of their work? These are critical questions that need to be asked as understandings of ECE professionalism in Ontario are developed. The ECEs in this project excluded roles related to physical and emotional labour from their conceptualization of professionalism. In fact, the complex material conditions experienced by these ECEs related to “labouring” seem to actually promote a stronger attachment to the specialized knowledge that gives them professional authority. This is arguably because neither the larger social structures of professionalism nor the ECE training system acknowledge these ambiguous and multiple roles that ECEs live in their professional work. Faced with this complexity, Manning-Morton (2006) has argued, “that in order to gain professional recognition, a female dominated workforce might prioritise adopting

rational/‘educative’ practices and seek to distance themselves from physical and emotional care” (p. 45). But is this possible, when ECEs work with the physical and emotional bodies of young children? How can they articulate this reality as part of professionalism?

The ECEs in this project seemed to rely on the altruistic foundations of the ECE profession to manage the complexities of their difficult work. Through passion and dedication, the participants felt that an ECE could apply and expand their specialized knowledge and carry out their professional work. As described by Jane, she was told by an ‘honest’ teacher that she should not go into the field of ECE to make money working with children. This resonates with Langford’s (2008) findings that indicate the institutionalization of a discourse in ECE training programs “that calls on young women to make a difference in the lives of children” (p. 79). Like the ECE students in Langford’s (2008) research the- ECEs in this project “employed the discourse without questioning to any great extent its underlying value or problematic nature as part of women’s and marginalized work” (p. 93). Rather than naming and conceptualizing the ‘care’ work that is inevitably part of participants’ lived experiences, the ECEs in this project attach this aspect of their work to a form of self-sacrifice that is the responsibility of the individual ECE. As Osgood (2009) has argued this ‘individualization discourse’ is used in ECEC and promotes “normative assumptions – assumptions that it is the responsibility of the individual to raise the profile of the status of childcare through personal motivation and commitment” (Osgood, 2009, p. 738). An ‘individualization discourse’ is again at odds with the participants’ experiences of professionalism which identify a strong need for collegial support in their work as professional ECEs.

Hence professionalism from the standpoint of the ECEs in this study highlights the persistent neglect of actually increasing the capabilities of the workforce to address the oppressive structures that marginalize their work. As Finkelstein (1998) wrote:

The model of professionalism in early childhood education is one that promotes knowledge of child development as an indispensable professional ingredient but discourages efforts to raise the economic and occupational well-being of nursery school teachers, day-care workers, mothers and the variety of guardians who oversee the development of the young (p. 25).

Consequently, ECEs actively claim their expertise in child development knowledge and are being encouraged to do so through their training experiences and professional affiliations. While at the same time, they are excluded from the discussions and debates that challenge how this knowledge can be applied in difficult working conditions. As discussed in the literature review, child development theory has been critiqued by a number of scholars for its lack of attention to culture, gender, and sources of knowledge and power. Furthermore, this body of literature has actively challenged the role of the early childhood educator and offered multiple reconceptualizations of professionalism stemming from feminist, post-structural, post-colonial and critical theories. Moss (2007) refers to this situation as the “paradigmatic divide” in early childhood education in which there seems to be little to no communication between the ‘reconceptualizers’ and proprietors of the ‘dominant discourse’ of child development. The consequence, Moss (2007) has argued:

The absence of dialogue and debate impoverishes early childhood and weakens democratic politics. ‘Mainstream’ policy and practice are isolated from an important source of new and different thought, while a dominant discourse is given too much uncritical space and increasingly undermine democracy by the process of depoliticisation (p. 233).

Thus, while critical theories and emancipatory frameworks are being explored in academic literature (also in this research), ECEs themselves continue to experience a very

technical and general level of training grounded in developmental psychology. This ‘technical’ training does not provide ECEs with the “cognitive tools...to make sense of their experiences [of professionalism] in and of the world...to name and think about their experiences in ways that properly represent those experiences” (Bowell, 2011, para.16). Compounding this lack of intellectual tools, Cannella (1997) has argued that this technical training has been “constructed as nonintellectual” and is “consistent with medical views of women as those who would apply the information given them about children by physicians, and child-study perspectives in which women were believed to be emotional and lacking objectivity” (p. 145). The result of this is that despite claiming and pursuing a scientific and rational body of specialized knowledge, ECEs are still afforded little respect and authority for this knowledge. Professionalism from the standpoint of the ECEs in this research therefore exposes not only the inability of dominant models of professionalism to represent ECEs’ material realities, but also the inability of these models to improve the conditions of these realities.

### **Moving Forward**

In the last section, the contradictions between the lived realities and material realm of ECE work, and the conceptual realm of professionalism as articulated by the participants were highlighted. It is precisely these contradictions that feminist standpoint theory and methodology aims to examine as it searches for the ‘strong objectivity’ or the ‘situated knowledge’ of those groups whose marginalized voices are often unheard in dominant discourses. Based on my research, ECEs may not experience a linear and predictable path towards professionalism, but instead are constantly negotiating and pursuing professionalism within a fragmented, inconsistent and marginalized ‘non-system’ of work settings. Returning to Simpson’s (2010)

definition of professionalization, it is also apparent through this research that the participants may struggle to assume a “degree of control over the technical aspects of their work” (p. 270).

This struggle is due to the incongruence between the actual physical and concrete tasks that ECEs must perform in their every day work and the dominant model of professionalism in which ECEs function within. As both ECEs and women, the participants’ experiences and insights exposed a bifurcated knowledge about professionalism. This bifurcation reveals ‘cracks’ or ‘openings’ where ECEs may begin to question why their concepts of professionalism and who a professional ECE is, are not translating into their lived experiences. Comments such as the one made by Naya when she said, “I keep wondering if it is me whose got the wrong idea [about professionalism]”, or Jane questioning why some ECEs who seem to not care about their work are even in the field, need to be further investigated and discussed. Furthermore, the discourses that these material realities produce, such as ‘the profession is lacking’ and ‘it is up to the individual’ need to be critically analyzed and integrated into our broader understandings of ECE professionalism. The new knowledge that emerges from these discussions can then “begin to develop a systematic account of the world, together with its potentialities for change, as it appears from the standpoint of women” or in this case, early childhood educators (Jagger, 2004, p. 59).

To move forward, I find Urban’s (2008) argument to be highly useful as he points out that it is not just about the ECEs’ professional practice in particular settings but instead about “questioning practices at every layer of the early childhood professional system” (p. 145). Urban (2008) has written:

The professional system, and its practices, comprises individual and collective practices in any early childhood setting, as well as in training and professional development, in academia, in the administrative and political sphere, and in research in these contexts itself (p. 145).

This is especially important in light of the fact that professionalism from the standpoint of the ECEs in this project revealed that the dominant discourses within training institutions are ignoring the vast body of literature that argues for alternative conceptualizations of professionalism in ECE. For new ideas of professionalism to emerge, they have to be incorporated through every layer of the professional system. The entire system has to ask the critical questions: Why do we continue to use a masculinist model of professionalism for a feminized profession? And what do we achieve by using this model? As this research has indicated, professionalism for the participants is a dynamic process that is influenced by individual experiences, social relations and discourses. All of these factors must be considered at every layer of the system, and multiple discourses must circulate from, and within each layer.

If research and literature around professionalism in ECE is indicating that there are some innate contradictions between dominant models of professionalism and the actual work that ECEs do, then it is time that we start incorporating these arguments into the mainstream conversations about professionalism. As Smith (2004) has argued, "Our conceptual procedures should be capable of explicating and analyzing the properties of their [ECEs'] experienced world rather than administering it. Their reality, their varieties of experience must be an unconditional datum" (p. 30). Further research could begin to initiate these conversations through a range of opportunities that aim to discuss and define professionalism from the standpoint of ECEs in Ontario. The focus of this research could support the capacities of ECEs to think more critically about their work and/or build communities of professionals, from multiple settings, who can articulate a collective standpoint that acknowledges the everyday complexities of being an ECE. Neglecting to initiate this type of professional project poses a significant risk of continuing a

culture of professionalism in ECE that is highly individualized and incapable of creating permanent changes in the material conditions of practicing ECEs.

Borrowing from an ecological systems theory, Urban (2008) has argued for establishing a “critical ecology of the profession” (p. 146). From this perspective, the “wider social, historical, economic and political context” (Urban, 2008, p. 146) for professionalism is held up for analysis and directly connected to every level of the professional system. Placing the ECE at the centre of this system would also be a useful approach if the purpose is to facilitate ‘professionalism’ at the level of practice on the front lines of the field. The type of discussions, conversations and debates proposed must also consider “that such a project is, of course, not without challenges; in a struggle to redefine and establish a counter discourse practitioners will find their expert knowledge vulnerable to scrutiny” (Osgood, 2006, p. 11). This research can be considered part of this larger intellectual and advocacy project, which can only be sustained with a great amount of effort from the ECE professional system. As Harstock (2004) has commented:

The vision available to the oppressed must be struggled for and represents an achievement which requires both science to see beneath the surface of social relations in which all are forced to participate, and education which can only grow from struggle to change those relations (p. 37).

## **Conclusion**

This research was only a preliminary examination of ECE professionalism, and additional research is needed to further build a collective understanding of professionalism from the standpoint of ECEs in Ontario. However, the findings of this research indicate that valuable knowledge and understandings of ECE professionalism can be gained through speaking directly to ECEs and asking them about their lived experiences and definitions of professionalism. Qualitative interviews with four ECEs in Toronto, Ontario were conducted to gather the data for this research. Using feminist standpoint theory and methodology was particularly valuable for

highlighting the lived experiences of ECEs and analyzing how this materiality shapes their understandings of professionalism. The realities of the everyday work experiences that the ECEs described in this project highlights how the conceptual theories and structures that are promoted in dominant discourses about ECE professionalism do not necessarily take account of, or facilitate an understanding of these complex realities. Nor do they account for the very real and concrete marginalization that this female dominated workforce experiences despite the importance and demands of their work. Academic literature in the field of ECE has argued for alternative conceptualizations of professionalism in the field; however the findings of this research indicate that ECEs do not have opportunities to engage in discussions about these alternatives. This finding also suggests that the larger professional system of ECE is promoting and pursuing a masculinist form of professionalism that is about “defining and defending borders through specific scientific knowledge base, knowledge monopoly, long academic education and control over who may practice, and over occupational ethics” (Moss, 2006, p. 38).

This research has indicated that it is time to question if this path towards professionalism in Ontario is in fact appropriate for a female dominated workforce carrying out a highly gendered form of work. Not only is this model of professionalism problematic in the ECE context but as Moss (2006) and Langford (2008) have pointed out, it is also not sustainable unless working conditions change. Based on current retention information (CCHRSC, 2004; 2009), it is clear that ECEs are leaving the field and are not willing to sacrifice their livelihoods to educate and take care of children. The future of the workforce therefore “needs to encompass restructuring and rethinking” (Moss, 2006, p. 31) as working conditions improve. I propose that this research can be a starting point for the inclusion of early childhood educators in this restructuring and rethinking. Or as Hirschmann (2004) has theorized, this research can be seen as

a 'materialist moment' in which a group can share their experiences and consequently the 'experience' of realizing "that the existing dominant discourse is not "true" (p. 325). From this point, and from the standpoint of ECEs, we can then work together, struggle together, at all levels of the ECE professional system to develop and implement a new and more appropriate discourse of ECE work and professionalism.

## Appendix A: Initial recruitment email to potential participants

Hi XXX,

It is Shani Halfon here and I am emailing to ask if you would be interested in participating in my final research project in the Early Childhood Studies program at Ryerson University. The purpose of my research is to explore early childhood educators' experiences and perceptions of professionalism. Participants in this project must be twenty years of age or older, currently working in an Early Childhood Education and Care setting with children between the ages of birth and six years old, working under the title of 'ECE', registered with the College of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, and working within the Greater Toronto Area.

If you match the above criteria and are interested in participating in this research I would also like to know the details pertaining to your workplace such as, the age of the children you are primarily responsible for, what type of setting you consider your workplace to be (i.e. child care centre, nursery school, public school), auspice (i.e. non-profit, private or public), and the physical location of your workplace (i.e. within another institution or stand alone). However the name and address of your workplace is not required. Please send this information in your response to participate in this project, as I am specifically looking for four ECEs working in different early childhood education and care settings and need to ensure that I do not choose participants from very similar work environments.

Finally I would like you to know that your decision to participate in this research project is completely voluntary and if you choose not to participate I will completely understand. You do not need to provide a reason for not wanting to participate and your choice to not participate will have no effect on either your relationship with myself or with Ryerson University. If you are unsure about wanting to participate in this project please feel free to email or call me with any questions or concerns. I have provided my contact information below. If you do wish to participate in this project I will ask that you meet with me for one interview that will be a maximum of 2-hours in length. The time and day of the interview can be scheduled at your earliest convenience and a follow-up email will be sent with further details about the project, including a copy of the consent agreement that you will be asked to read and sign.

If I do not hear from you within two weeks I will assume you are unable to participate in this project at this time.

Thank you for your consideration,

Shani Halfon  
shalfon@ryerson.ca  
PH: 416 871 6356

## Appendix B: Follow-up letter to selected participants

Hi XXX,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research project on Early Childhood Educators' experiences and perceptions of professionalism. I am delighted to inform you that I would like to have you be one of the participants in this research project. Your participation in this project is invaluable to me and it is my goal to make this a worthwhile experience for you. To ensure that you have time to consider all aspects of participation in this research project I have attached a copy of the consent agreement to this email. Please take time to view this document and feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns. If after reading the consent agreement you decide that you will not be able to, or do not feel comfortable participating in this project do not hesitate to let me know and I will carry on finding a different participant. This decision will have no effect on your relationship with me or with Ryerson University.

Your participation in this project will require that we meet for 2 hours to have an interview. I will be tape recording the interview in order to transcribe the interview word-for-word into written format. At the beginning of the interview you will be asked to sign a copy of the consent agreement that is attached to this email. The interview can take place at either of two locations; the first option is a private room at a public library that is convenient for you, or the second option is a private space at Ryerson University. If you still wish to participate in this research project please let me know which dates you are available in the next 2 weeks to meet for the interview. Also please let me know if you would prefer to meet at Ryerson University or at a public library. If you would prefer to meet at a public library please let me know which area would be most convenient for you so I can find the closest public library in that area.

I look forward to hearing from you and thanks again,

Shani Halfon  
shalfon@ryerson.ca  
416 871 6356

## **Appendix C: Consent Agreement**

### **Ryerson University Consent Agreement**

#### **Talking professionalism: examining experiences and perceptions of ECEs in Toronto**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to be a volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

#### **Investigators:**

Primary investigator: Shani Halfon, ECE, BA; Candidate for ECS, MA at Ryerson University, School of Early Childhood Education

#### **Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this study is to explore four Early Childhood Educators' experiences and perceptions of professionalism. Descriptions of participant's experiences and perceptions around professionalism will be obtained through in-depth interviews that will ask participants to share their experiences as Early Childhood Educators and explain how their experiences influence their thoughts and actions towards professionalism in their work and the broader field of Early Childhood Education and Care. Participants who are chosen to participate in this study must be twenty years of age or older, work in the Greater Toronto Area, currently work in an Early Childhood Education and Care environment with children between the ages of birth to six years old, be working as an Early Childhood Educator (ECE), and be registered with the College of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario.

#### **Description of the Study:**

For this study you will be asked to do the following;

1. Respond to the initial recruitment email sent out by the primary investigator
2. Schedule a time with the primary investigator to conduct an interview
3. Read this consent agreement and voice any questions or concerns to the primary investigator
4. Meet the primary investigator at the arranged location for a 2-hour (maximum length) interview which will be audio taped and then typed out word-for-word by the primary investigator.
5. Review and sign this consent agreement before starting the interview.
6. During the 2-hour interview you will be asked to answer questions regarding your experiences leading up to becoming, and being an Early Childhood Educator, as well as describe how those experiences influence the way that you think about and experience professionalism in your work as an Early Childhood Educator.
7. Select your option for follow-up on the interview transcript at the end of this consent form.
8. If you request to have the transcripts sent to you through email and wish to address any concerns, you will be asked to respond to the primary investigator within one week.

Similarly, if you wish to meet with the primary investigator to go over the transcripts you will be asked to arrange a time to meet within a week from the day you receive the email.

**What is Experimental in this Study:**

None of the questions used in this study are experimental in nature. The only experimental aspect of this study is the gathering of information for the purpose of analysis.

**Risks or Discomforts:**

Possible risks associated with participation in this study include sharing information that is personal with the primary investigator, there is a possibility that you may reflect on unpleasant memories while responding to the interview questions and therefore feel discomfort during the interview process. Additionally there is a risk of your identity being exposed which could have an impact on your reputation, employment, financial and/or emotional well-being. If you begin to feel uncomfortable any time during the research project or interview process you may discontinue participation, either temporarily or permanently. In order to reduce the risk of your identity being exposed all conversations (both written and spoken), all audio recordings and all transcripts will be kept strictly confidential with only the primary investigator having access to these materials during data collection and analysis. The research supervisor, Rachel Langford will hear/see portions of the interview data but will not have access to your names. The only time that any of the data will be shared with the public is through the final research report which will use fake names for all the participants and will not identify the name or address of your workplace.

**Benefits of the Study:**

This study aims to benefit the Early Childhood Education workforce by contributing to the current discussions around professionalization and professionalism in the field. Further this study aims to specifically highlight the lived experiences and realities of Early Childhood Educators so that leaders in the field have information to consider when making plans that will potentially affect Early Childhood Educators' everyday lives and experiences in the workplace.

While it is not guaranteed that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study, it is hoped that you will benefit from the time to reflect on your work and share your experiences in order to influence the field of Early Childhood Education and Care.

**Confidentiality:**

In order to maintain confidentiality all conversations, data and personal information will only be viewed by the primary investigator and the research supervisor during the process of the study. All written documents including emails, interview transcripts and consent agreements will either be saved on a encrypted USB key which only the primary investigator will be able to access with a password; or if the written documents are physical hard copies such as signed consent agreements and printed copies of interview transcriptions, only the primary investigator will have access to these documents.

In order to ensure that nobody other than the primary investigator can access the data, none of the data collected for this study, including audio recordings or written transcripts will be sent through email or mail, nor will it be saved on the laptop of the primary investigator. The only exception will be when the transcript is sent to you through email if you choose that option at the end of this agreement. When not in use by the primary investigator all physical documents will

be kept in a locked cupboard in the office of the research supervisor, Rachel Langford. Additionally all audio recordings of interviews will be kept in a locked cupboard in the office of the research supervisor, Rachel Langford. The audio recording of the interview with you will be used in order to transcribe the interview into written format and will then be destroyed. At the end of the project all the data, including written transcripts and digital files will be stored in a locked box in the office of Rachel Langford for one year. After one year they will also be destroyed.

If you decide to stop participating in this study at any time, all information and data concerning you will be immediately destroyed.

Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of fake names in the final research report as well as in any additional reports or presentations that are a result of this study.

In order to ensure that you feel that your personal information and identity will remain confidential, you will have an opportunity to read the interview transcripts which will be a written copy of the recorded interview word for word. You will have the opportunity to provide the primary investigator with any concerns or changes that you feel are necessary to keep your identity confidential in the final report.

Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent allowed by law.

**Incentives to Participate:**

You will not be paid to participate in this study.

**Costs and/or Compensation for Participation:**

You will have to give up approximately 3 hours of your time to participate in this study, plus travel time. Meetings with the primary investigator will be scheduled at your convenience but you will have to sacrifice either your personal or paid work time. As well you will have to travel to the interview location which may result in transportation costs.

**Voluntary Nature of Participation:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to stop your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are allowed.

At any particular point in the study, you may refuse to answer any particular question or stop participation altogether.

**Questions about the Study:** If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact.

Primary Investigator: Shani Halfon at 416 871 6356

Research Supervisor: Dr. Rachel Langford at 416 979 5000 ext. 7635

If you have questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant in this study, you may contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board for information.

Research Ethics Board: 416 979 5042

c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation

Ryerson University

350 Victoria Street

Toronto, ON M5B 2K3

**Options for follow-up review of interview transcript:**

Please check how you would like the primary investigator to follow-up with you regarding the written transcript of the interview you participate in:

\_\_\_\_ I do not want to see the transcript of my interview, the primary investigator does not have to contact me or send me copy of the transcript

\_\_\_\_ I would like a copy of the written transcript to be sent to me through email so that I can address any concerns, edits or deletions I see/want in the interview.

\_\_\_\_ I would like to meet with the primary investigator to view the interview transcripts and discuss any concerns, edits or deletions I see/want in the interview.

**Agreement:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this agreement. You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix D: Interview Guide (including interview protocol)**

### **Confirmation of the interview:**

One or two days prior to the interview, the interviewer will confirm the date, time and location of the interview to minimize last-minute eventualities. As well as confirming the appointment, the interviewer should also indicate the estimated duration of the interview.

### **Commencement of interview:**

Greet the participant and make sure they are comfortable, ask them if there is anything they need and let them know where the washroom is located. Present consent agreement and go over details of participants' rights and what is being asked of them. Stress voluntary nature of participation and that participant's personal identity will remain confidential. Remind participant that they can choose not to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. Let participant know that the interview is being audio recorded and identify where audio recorder is located. Explain the purpose of the interview and the format the interview will take.

### **Interview:**

#### **Question 1:**

How did you become an early childhood educator (ECE)?  
What is it like being an ECE?

#### **Possible prompts for further exploration of question 1:**

Did you always want to be an early childhood educator?  
Do you think (put specific experience mentioned by participant) changed the way you think about early childhood education from before you had that experience?

**Question 2:** How do you experience professionalism in your work as an early childhood educator? What, if any factors influence the way you experience professionalism?

#### **Possible prompts for further exploration of question 2:**

What activities or aspects of your work make you feel like a professional?  
What does it mean to be a professional?

**Question 3:** What does professionalism mean to you? Considering your own experiences in the past and currently in your work as an early childhood educator, how do you think your experiences have shaped your perceptions of professionalism?

#### **Possible prompts for further exploration of question 3:**

Have you had any experiences that have changed the way you perceive professionalism in your work?  
What aspects of professionalism are important to you?

### **Closing Interview:**

Ask participant if there is anything else that they would like to add to their answers. Thank participant for their time and let them know that if they chose to have the interview transcript sent to them they will receive an email in approximately 2 weeks with a copy of the written transcript.

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