

Critiquing Ontario's Childcare Policy Responses to the Inextricably Connected Needs of Mothers, Children, and Early Childhood Educators

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The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the chronically inadequate childcare infrastructure in Canada and across much of the world. Government responses have been many and varied within and between countries, provinces, municipalities, and local communities. Embracing a feminist ethics of care lens, this paper examines how the needs of mothers, children, and early childhood educators were recognized as interconnected (or not) in Ontario's childcare policy discourse and action throughout the pandemic. Findings indicate that children were rarely discussed beyond being a “burden” to their parents (and therefore the economy) while children's and early childhood educators' childcare experiences and needs were largely absent in any policy discussion or action. The only group to receive widespread media and political attention were mothers, whose ongoing struggle to “balance” paid and unpaid (care) work became heightened and visible en masse throughout the pandemic. We offer overarching observations and recommendations for childcare policy stakeholders and actors as we look to build new possibilities for Canadian childcare beyond the pandemic.

Key words: COVID-19; childcare; gender; early childhood educator; policy; politics

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the chronically inadequate childcare infrastructure in Canada and across much of the world. The mass closure of regulated childcare programs across Canada throughout the pandemic brought heightened attention to the importance of childcare, at least instrumentally. Toddlers photobombing Zoom meetings became a normal part of the workday as parents struggled to be both full-time workers and caregivers (with no breaks on either front). Similarly, the regular pings and dings of phones and laptops became a steadfast interruption for children learning to navigate their place in the world. Meanwhile, educators often sat on the

other side of those pings and dings frustratedly trying to engage the minds of young children while divorced from the children's physical bodies and spaces. The hard truth was that there was and continues to be overwhelming anxiety, uncertainty, and disruption in our daily lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With no roadmap, children looked to adults and adults to each other and their elected leaders for immediate and ongoing guidance. Government responses have been many and varied within and between countries, provinces, municipalities, and local communities.

Embracing a feminist ethics of care (FEOC) lens, this paper examines how the needs of mothers, children, and early childhood educators (ECEs) were recognized as interconnected (or not) in childcare policy discourse and action throughout the pandemic. After a brief overview of FEOC theory, we analyze the Canadian childcare policy context heading into and throughout the pandemic, arguing that governments have adopted a care-less approach to children, mothers, and early childhood educators. We next look specifically at how each group was positioned in Ontario's pandemic policy responses, noticing if and/or how the inextricable needs of mothers, children, and educators were considered. Finally, we offer overarching observations and recommendations for childcare policy stakeholders and actors as we look to build new possibilities for Canadian childcare beyond the pandemic.

Feminist ethics of care

Feminist ethics of care (FEOC) theory is commonly perceived as a framework to examine caring relations at the interpersonal level, but there has always been and continues to be a parallel focus on policy and politics (Barnes, 2012; Engster & Hamington, 2015; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Tronto, 2013). The intersection of feminist care ethics with political theory challenges dominant neoliberal political, social, and economic structures that systematically devalue, if not occlude entirely, the caring relations necessary for human life, societies, and cultures to flourish. Working in the UK, Marian Barnes (2012) asserts: "Good social policy decisions are not only those that generate workable solutions, but also ethical ones" (p. 160). To achieve these good decisions, she argues that care-full policy outcomes require care-full policy deliberations whereby Joan Tronto's five principles of caring relations (attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and trust) are upheld. In this way, Barnes makes the case that participatory democracy itself is not enough. All stakeholders must not only be included in the process but have the opportunity to actively deliberate *with care*.

Working in the United States, Tronto (2013) adds a fifth stage of caring to her theorizing of the care process: caring *with*. While caring *about* (noticing need), caring *for* (taking responsibility for addressing the need), care *giving* (care work), and care *receiving* (response from person being cared for) have always been acknowledged as occurring within a broader sociopolitical context, the addition of caring *with* brought attention to the idea that "care needs, and the ways in which they are met, need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality and freedom for all" (Tronto, 2013, p. 23). For Tronto, similar to Barnes, care is not only something that is valuable for individual people in relation with other individuals but is a dynamic *process* foundational to a democratic political order.

The "feminist" component of FEOC is also important to discuss. While recognizing that gender intersects with other social variables, which differentially affects power relations, a central tenet of FEOC theory is that care has been and continues to be gendered. While women are no more reliant on care than men, neoliberal societies are structured in a way whereby care is seen as "natural" for women, of little value to contemporary economies/society, and impermeable to change. While the complex and constant nature of caring *about/for* others as well as the actual acts of caregiving are left to increasingly marginalized and racialized women (97% of ECEs in Canada are women), their (our) voices and experiences are sidelined in the political/policymaking arena. The Canadian

legislature, for example, currently has the most female members of parliament in history though they still comprise only 30% of the legislature. In less observable ways, the voices of women—particularly those with time-intensive caregiving responsibilities (mothers, early childhood educators) or those who require care (children)—do not have the same opportunity to be active in public discourse and/or the political arena. The end result is that gendered caregivers—those doing the ethical, time-intensive, complex cognitive and emotional work of care work—become an afterthought rather than a starting point in the policy process. Similarly, the needs of children—who have no formal mechanism of participation in public/political life—rarely, if ever, enter political discourse.

In this paper we explore how childcare policy, heading into and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, grappled with (or did not) the intersecting needs of mothers, children, and early childhood educators. We use the term *intersecting* to pay particular attention to how public narratives and policy responses throughout the pandemic created care affinities and tensions related to the inextricably connected care needs of these three social groups. Care tensions occur when the care needs of one group are pitted against the care needs of another group, creating conflict. Care affinities are established when the care needs of different groups are understood to be inextricably interdependent, generating solidarity.

The national childcare context

Childcare policy process and outcomes in Canada are consistent with the care-less approach Tronto and Barnes problematize (Powell et al., 2020). While it has long been recognized that the federal government has an important role to play in the leadership and funding of childcare in Canada, the approach of “passing the buck” has historically left provinces with more responsibilities related to the provision and oversight of childcare programs with fewer resources to address childcare needs of Canadian children, families, and educators (Friendly & White, 2012).

Prior to the pandemic, Trudeau’s minority Liberal federal government signalled an interest in revisiting the childcare file after over a decade of federal policy neglect (Richardson & Langford, 2018). In 2017, Trudeau’s majority Liberal government released the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework (MELCCF) organized around the principles of quality, accessibility, and inclusivity (Government of Canada, 2017). Commitments to the MELCCF were reaffirmed in 2019. While welcomed by the sector, advocates pointed out that the funds allocated were a far cry from the \$8 billion (1% of the national GDP) that the OECD recommends wealthy nations spend on childcare (OECD, 2006).

In relation to the policy process, the federal government did make strides toward participatory policymaking with the establishment of the Expert Panel on Early Learning and Childcare in 2018. One of the key outcomes of this panel was the recommendation that a national childcare secretariat be established. Just prior to the pandemic, establishing this secretariat was included in the federal minister of families, children, and social development Hussen’s mandate. While the pandemic put a hold on this work, \$4.3 million was earmarked for the secretariat in 2021–2022 in the November 30 federal financial update with the promise that funding would be “ongoing” (Government of Canada, 2020c).

Without strong federal or provincial leadership, the status quo is a residual market model positioning childcare as a fee-for-service commodity. A market conceptualization of care continues to occlude the possibility of childcare being positioned as a public good/responsibility whereby all children and families have access to pedagogically enriching, meaningful learning/care experiences (Beach & Ferns, 2015). Similarly, a failing market model of caring for children perpetuates the systematic exclusion of time- and resource-strapped caregivers (mothers and educators) from the policy process.

There is room for optimism, however. On September 23, 2020, amid growing public awareness and concern about the gendered impact of the pandemic through language such as “she-cession” and “she-covery” (Trichur, 2020), former governor general Julie Payette made the monumental announcement that “the Government will make a significant, long-term, sustained investment to create a Canada-wide early learning and childcare system” (Government of Canada, 2020b). This announcement was followed by an astonishing commitment of \$30 billion in new federal funds earmarked to build a pan-Canadian childcare system (Government of Canada, 2021). Currently (revisions completed in July 2021), the federal and provincial/territorial governments are in the process of negotiating bilateral agreements to guide provinces in relation to these childcare funds. While each province/territory differs in approaches to childcare policy, that the federal government has expressed a preference for expanding regulated childcare programs in the nonprofit sector is promising. A pan-Canadian childcare system that is funded by the federal government has the potential to meaningfully interrupt the status quo market model of childcare provision across Canada. In provinces where provincial governments prefer tax breaks and/or funding the for-profit sector (e.g., current Conservative governments in Ontario and Alberta), there is both great potential and great danger in terms of imminent ECEC policy (in)action. We remain hopeful that strong leadership and funding at the federal level will create the necessary infrastructure to reposition caring for children as a public, rather than private, responsibility.

What happened to childcare during the pandemic?

As mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic spurred multiple and varied policy responses—some directly related to childcare and others less so. Within the pandemic federal childcare context described above, this analysis focuses primarily on what happened in Ontario, the most populated province, which experienced and continues to experience some of the highest numbers of COVID-19 cases. Ontario is also an interesting case because the childcare community is well organized. Both the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario (AECEO) and the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) actively engage educators, sector leaders, and families in the childcare policy conversation through regular outreach and networking activities while also seeking to maintain collegial working relationships with government officials.

On March 17, 2020, just less than a week after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the pandemic, the Ontario government ordered all regulated childcare centres to close immediately. Three days later, with the recognition that childcare was necessary to keep essential services running, the Ontario government announced they would open “emergency” childcare for “essential” workers. The first emergency childcare centres were opened in municipal childcare centres in Toronto. The cost was exclusively covered by municipal and provincial governments, resulting in no parent fees. Such a collaborative emergency response across municipal and provincial governments has not been seen in Canada since the Federal Province Wartime Day Nurseries Act (1943–1945), when governments organized to fund and deliver childcare for women contributing to the war effort during WWII.

By early May, the provincial government partnered with other private (mostly nonprofit) childcare providers to open over 100 emergency centre- and home-based childcare programs. What was unique about emergency centres was their significantly smaller group sizes coupled with a heightened focus on decent work for educators. Many childcare programs offering emergency care used their own funds to top up educators’ wages. Preliminary feedback from the sector suggests that emergency childcare programs allowed more care-full interactions between children, educators, and families because there was more time and space for meaningful, sustained interactions (Powell et al., 2021).

Still, most licensed childcare programs (over 5,000 licensed centres) were left to fend for themselves in a failing

market-system. Licensed home-based providers (who were allowed to remain open) received no directives from the province. With no source of revenue (centres were banned from collecting parent fees through a provincial order on April 10, 2020) and no end to the pandemic in sight, ECE leaders expressed concern about the short- and long-term viability of both individual childcare programs and the sector more broadly (Powell & Ferns, 2020).

Furthermore, surviving the pandemic was an administrative nightmare for childcare program supervisors and directors. In order to receive the provincial funds on which they relied prior to the pandemic, childcare programs were required to apply for pandemic-related funding through two federal initiatives: the Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) and the Canadian Emergency Rent Subsidy (CERS). Given that the government of Ontario did not increase its expenditures on childcare during this period, it appears as though the provincial government was trying to ensure that all businesses (CEWS and CERS were not specific to childcare) accessed all other paths to funds before turning to them. However, with childcare programs already overwhelmed trying to navigate daily changes to operating requirements amid immediately dangerous conditions (physical distancing is often not possible when working with very young children and widespread access to PPE in childcare centres was not available until well past the first wave), applying for these funds was burdensome to leaders of an exhausted and scared workforce. Not surprisingly, public policy solutions that served other businesses well were not appropriate for childcare programs fundamentally incongruent with market principles (Richardson, 2021). International childcare policy scholars have expressed similar concern as to whether “market-based systems are most effective for future-proofing the ECEC sector in different countries” (Park et al., 2021, p. 261).

The AECEO and the OCBCC came to play a key role supporting regulated childcare programs, early childhood educators, and families struggling to navigate the unprecedented pandemic waters. In collaboration with the sector, they created 27 specific recommendations to inform the government’s plan for reopening childcare programs. This report was overtly ignored by the provincial government in its abrupt June 9, 2020 announcement that childcare centres could reopen 3 days later (June 12, 2020). Despite calls for financial support, it was not until September 2020 that new funds flowed to the sector to materially support childcare programs’ safe reopening. Childcare was identified as a priority area of the federal government’s Safe Restart Agreement in July 2020, whereby \$127 million was earmarked for childcare in Ontario (Government of Canada, 2020c). While the funds were welcome, they were not nearly enough to stabilize the sector (most of these funds went to purchasing PPE for staff).

On October 2, 2020, just after the federal announcement of its intentions to pursue a pan-Canadian childcare system in September 2020, Premier Ford’s Conservative government released proposed changes to the Child Care and Early Years Act. The changes stood in stark contrast to the federal announcement about a pan-Canadian childcare system, acting to roll back regulatory standards by allowing for younger children in larger groups with less staff, reducing the staff qualifications, and proposing an unlicensed childcare “registry” (essentially giving the false impression that unlicensed childcare programs will have government oversight). There appeared to be little, if any, awareness on the part of Ontario’s Conservative government about the dangerous consequences of these changes for mothers, children, and educators. It was at this point that we (the authors) became acutely concerned that policy actions at the provincial level were failing to consider the intersecting needs of Ontario’s mothers, children, and educators in pursuing these significant, harmful policy changes.

Methods

Data consisted of formal policy documents published by the government of Ontario that directly related to the funding, delivery, and/or operation of childcare programs between March 2020 (when the pandemic was declared) to December 2020 (the second wave occurring at the time of writing). Five press releases issued by the

government of Ontario and one *Guide to Operations* published specifically by the Ministry of Education were analyzed. A handful of easily accessible popular media documents were purposefully drawn upon to illustrate and/or contextualize insights that emerged from the policy document analysis. Informed by a FEOC, the authors read the policy documents with the following questions in mind:

1. Are mothers/children/educators mentioned in the document? How? In what context and in what way?
2. Are the needs of mothers/children/educators represented at all? If yes, how?
3. What care tensions (conflicting needs) and/or care affinities (congruent needs) emerge in relation to children, mothers, and educators?

Each of the three authors reviewed the documents separately with a particular focus on one group (children or mothers or educators). We then met virtually to further discuss emerging care affinities and tensions in relation to each other's analysis. After these conversations we each wrote up findings related to our assigned group, placed our findings in one document, and collaboratively sent the document around for each of us to review, add to, and/or edit.

A lack of policy attention to the intersecting needs of mothers, children, and educators

The next three sections describe how childcare policy responses and public narratives failed to address the fact that the needs of mothers, children, and educators are inextricable. Children were rarely discussed beyond being a “burden” to their parents (and therefore the economy), while children's and early childhood educators' childcare experiences and needs were largely absent in any policy discussion or action. The only group to receive widespread media and political attention were mothers, whose ongoing struggle to “balance” paid and unpaid (care) work became heightened and visible en masse throughout the pandemic (Government of Canada, 2020c; Gregory, 2020; Ho & Dunham, 2020; Pinsker, 2020).

Mothers

The on-the-ground-reality was that mothers, overburdened with care responsibilities prior to the pandemic, were left to pick up the pieces of inadequate childcare policy planning and responses. The expectation quickly became that parents, typically mothers, could simultaneously work and care for their children at home. The largely invisible work that goes into caring for children increased exponentially as any support to do this work (let alone do it well) evaporated. According to researchers in Australia, Canada, and the United States, a more gender-balanced household division of labour did not make up for the lack of external supports in caregiving responsibilities (Alon et al., 2020; Johnston et al., 2020; Qian & Fuller, 2020). Johnston et al. (2020) found the opposite: “Existing asymmetrical distributions of childcare obligations in Canada and Australia were amplified during the pandemic” (p. 1). Canadian data further revealed that “gender employment gaps among parents of young children widened considerably between February and May 2020, net of differences in job and personal characteristics” (Qian & Fuller, 2020).

While governments expressed explicit concern about “parents,” the concern was not initially gendered. The word *mother* did not emerge in either of the Statistics Canada reports examining the pandemic's impact on parents and children (Statistics Canada, 2020a, 2020b). Policy responses at all levels of government across Canada have prioritized getting “parents” back to work and the economy “back on track.” The first key policy action was the opening of no-fee emergency childcare programs for “essential workers” (doctors, nurses, police, grocery clerks),

staffed by qualified early childhood educators. Parents who fell outside of the “essential” category (i.e., most parents) were left struggling to keep up with paid employment while simultaneously ensuring their children received at least minimal care.

Continuing to ignore gender, a press release from the Ontario government published June 9, 2020, titled “Helping Parents Return to Work” (Government of Ontario, 2020c), announced childcare centres were allowed to reopen and all emergency childcare centres would close by June 26, 2020. At the federal level, the policy narrative around the Safe Restart Agreement was to ensure there was “childcare for returning workers” (Government of Canada, 2020c). “Restarting” the economy was the clear goal of the \$19 billion allocated to this policy. In both cases, the term parents was preferred over mothers, whereby parents were understood to be valuable in as much as they could contribute to the formal market economy.

Media coverage, however, consistently emphasized the struggles of mothers to maintain their careers amid increased childcare responsibilities (e.g., Fuller & Qian, 2020; Gregory, 2020; Perelman, 2020; Pinsker, 2020). Gender then entered the political context when a female economist first remarked that the pandemic had caused a “she-cession” and needed a “she-covery” (Trichur, 2020). Subsequent reports from various public and private sector organizations (Dean, 2020; Royal Bank of Canada, 2020; Stanford, 2020; Sultana & Ravanera, 2020) reinforced the necessity of a COVID-19 “she-covery” with a focus on increasing the labour force participation rate of mothers. This language was picked up by politicians (notably Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland) and ultimately came to a head in the Speech from the Throne announcement whereby addressing the “she-cession” appeared to be the main motivation to pursue a pan-Canadian childcare system. In this way the impact of the pandemic was acknowledged to be gendered, though the solutions were limited to objectifying mothers as untapped economic producers.

Children

Throughout the pandemic, conceptions of children appeared to shift quickly from pandemic innocents to pandemic problems. Initial policy analysis shows an intensification of a medical/hygienic approach to caring for young children in out-of-home settings, positioning children as a “risk” or “super-spreaders” who were incapable of adhering to and/or coping with public health measures (e.g., being unable to limit social contacts and/or physical distance).

Between April and mid-August popular media downplayed the importance of children in COVID-19 responses with headlines such as “Children do not appear to be COVID-19 ‘super-spreaders’” (Payne, 2020). By June, researchers began to challenge policymakers to consider vulnerable children and the *effects* of COVID-19 on them. *The Raising Canada 2020* report suggests that many of the top 10 threats to children (poverty, physical inactivity, food insecurity) are in danger of worsening as a result of COVID-19 (Children First Canada, 2020). Then, by late August, as more childcare programs reopened, newspaper coverage turned to alarming headlines positioning children as a risk, as in “How do you detect the young silent spreaders of coronavirus as Canadian schools reopen?” (Miller, 2020). Other concerns emerged that young children would not wear masks properly and/or that children would be fearful of educators wearing PPE. Perceptions of children’s innocuous role in the pandemic appeared to be shifting.

Children’s pandemic experiences entered the policy arena quite accidentally in relation to emergency childcare. While the essential service discourse driving provision occluded children from the childcare policy conversation in that it became a service to prevent complete economic shutdown and social chaos, the policy results of this discourse were in many ways helpful for children, mothers, and educators. In the context of the pandemic,

some emergency childcare centres were characterized by smaller groups of children, better working conditions for educators, and free cost for mothers. This approach appears to have created clear care affinities for mothers, children, and educators. Feedback from the sector indicates that children, mothers, and educators had positive relational experiences in publicly funded emergency childcare programs (Powell et al., 2021).

Once emergency childcare centres closed, two conflicting narratives about children in childcare emerged. On the one hand, the government communicated in its *Operational Guidelines to Reopening* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020) that it “recognizes that physical distancing between children is difficult and encourages childcare staff and providers to maintain a welcoming and caring environment for children” (p. 18). Similarly, another official government document, *Building on How Does Learning Happen (HDLH)*, asserted: “[The] emotional well-being of the child should be given the same level of care and attention as immediate health and safety needs” (Government of Ontario, 2020d). At the same time, the Ontario premier, along with the ministers of health and education, stated that when childcare centres reopen, the “number one priority is the health and safety of our children” reinforced by extensive COVID-19 protocols (Government of Ontario, 2020e).

This focus on regulations was heightened when the Ontario Ministry of Education released and prioritized the regulatory amendments to the Child Care and Early Years Act. In opposition to messaging in the documents quoted above, these amendments significantly affect the capacity of educators and children to engage in safe (i.e., smaller group sizes reducing transmission) let alone meaningful (i.e., reflective, thoughtful) care relations. The regulatory changes sought to *increase* the number of children in groups and *reduce* educational qualifications of educators. Economic bottom lines superseded both the medical/hygienic and care-full/ethical approaches to caring for young children. Furthermore, the limited energy and resources of advocacy organizations, those doing the care-full work to acknowledge children’s needs, had to be diverted to prevent this major step backwards.

In Canada, little policy or media attention was given to the actual perspectives of young children on COVID-19 and their capacities to care about what was happening in their families and communities. One of the few studies that explores children’s perspectives on COVID-19 is a UK research project, Froebel Young Voices on COVID (Pascal, 2020), in which children voiced narratives of resilience and a desire to “get on with life” (particularly reconnecting with friends and family). Importantly the children’s narratives reveal that they understand the reasons for COVID protocols and are aware of political announcements about COVID-19. From the perspective of these researchers, children must be seen as active, competent humans who are capable of making connections between their own lives and the wider world. Therefore, they argue that children’s perspectives should contribute to childcare policy making.

Early childhood educators

Early childhood educators (ECEs) were largely invisible in COVID-19 childcare policy responses and discourse in Ontario. Outside of emergency childcare, programs were given little direction throughout the closure period and have faced, and continue to face, constant hurdles in the reopening process.

The minister of education, Stephen Lecce, minimally acknowledged the existence of ECEs, noting the importance of keeping them “safe” when he stated: “We need to protect the safety of the staff and children at these [emergency] centres” (Government of Ontario, 2020a). What was and continues to be missing is a real acknowledgement of the care needs of all ECEs. Failing to acknowledge these needs creates care tensions among educators, children, and families whereby educators are positioned as mere system components, their care needs increasingly in contest with the existing system.

The conceptual divide between educators and families/children was particularly pronounced when Minister Lecce

made the announcement that the government of Ontario was “protecting parents” (conceptualized as consumers) through prohibiting childcare programs from charging parent fees during the closure period (Government of Ontario, 2020b). Following up on this press release, Minister Lecce stated: “We are defending the interests of consumers and protecting parents’ hard-earned money by ordering child-care centres to stop charging fees for services not rendered” (Rushowy & Monsebraaten, 2020). While we do not dispute that families deserve relief from fees during the closure period (and beyond for that matter), this narrative positions educators as taking advantage of families and children without any acknowledgment of the financial uncertainty/pressure they were under, having received no financial support from the province. This care-less approach to policy had a direct impact on ECEs, already in a precarious financial position pre-pandemic and now struggling to manage their own care responsibilities alongside the stress of returning to work during a pandemic.

Lack of attention to the childcare workforce throughout the pandemic is not a result of an unorganized or uninterested sector. As previously noted, the AECEO and the OCBC worked collectively with ECEs, childcare programs, and other allies to create recommendations for government as they planned for the reopening of centre-based childcare (Powell & Ferns, 2020). Their report made a concerted effort to acknowledge educators’ needs, both as care-receivers and care-givers, ensuring educators were a priority rather than an afterthought. Powell and Ferns (2020) outline concrete actions (e.g., paid time to prepare for reopening, access to paid sick days, increased training on trauma-informed practice) that would allow educators to deliver the quality care the government purported to support. These recommendations were grounded in the idea that educators and the care they provide is foundational to *social* (rather than solely economic) recovery. When the report was ignored in the province’s reopening plans, the inherent care tensions between educators and children/families in a failing market model were exacerbated rather than reconciled.

Powell and Ferns (2020) further observed that the “invisibility of the workforce was amplified during the closure period” (p. 1) as the province explicitly restricted operators from using any provincial funding to support staff wages during the closure period and refused to extend pandemic pay to ECEs. Ironically, ECEs were essential for essential workers (i.e., mothers) to work yet were not regarded as essential enough to warrant the use of resources to support their wages, entrenching their position as a second-class group of women.

Perhaps most frustrating was the wide gap between the Ministry’s messaging in formal policy documents and their concrete policy actions. The *Beyond HDLH* document includes quotes from parents and educators giving the impression that there had been widespread consultation with the sector and acknowledgement of their intersecting needs. The reality was that there had been no systematic consultation at all. The Ministry played up the success of emergency childcare without acknowledging the lack of support for the rest (most) of the sector. Upon reopening, when emergency childcare centres were closed, the meaningful pedagogical experiences that occurred in emergency childcare were more out of reach than ever. Not only was this care-less policymaking alongside care-less policy outcomes, it was in many ways deceitful because it misrepresented what was happening in childcare programs for children, families, and educators.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of provincial childcare policy responses to the pandemic, it becomes evident that the inextricably connected needs of mothers, children, and ECEs were never cohesively acknowledged and/or considered at public policy level. The overwhelming focus of Ontario government was getting the economy “back on track.” Mothers were reduced to essential (emergency childcare) and/or untapped workers impeded by the constant needs of their children at home. Policy responses rooted in market logic drove a wedge between families

and educators, impeding advocacy efforts. Instead of highlighting the fact that families and educators ultimately have similar needs in relation to creating rich care and learning experiences for children, the Ontario government generated and then promoted the idea that educators/providers were out to take advantage of children/mothers/families through gouging them on fees for “services not rendered” (Government of Ontario, 2020b).

Perhaps what is most troubling is that the pandemic could have been a moment for care: Stories about the importance of good care—from long-term care to childcare—were plentiful (Armstrong et al, 2021). There was a great deal of space for parents to appreciate the work of ECEs, thereby promoting the potential for greater care affinities and solidarity among all three groups. Instead of seizing this moment as an opportunity to expose the intersecting nature of children’s, mothers’ and educators’ care needs and fundamentally rethink the care economy (Armstrong et al., 2021), government policy actions created care tensions—even when their own documents explicitly communicated the importance of good care. Tronto’s (2013) insight that “the purpose of economic life is to support care, not the other way around” (p. 39) becomes more relevant than ever. The neoliberal, market-driven idea that well-being, and the care on which it depends, is a product of market success prevented the possibility that life has meaning and value beyond mechanisms of economic growth or profit.

It is also surprising is how little changed between the first and second waves of the pandemic when the major crevices in the care infrastructure of our society were exposed. Childcare programs that prioritized caring relations between children, families, and educators (i.e., implemented smaller group sizes, topped up wages, maintained staff wages through some of the closure period) faced massive deficits in the absence of government support. Many of the community-based, smaller, nonprofit providers who prioritized responsive caring relations struggled, and continue to struggle, to outlast the pandemic. As has always been the case, the market continues to fail all three social groups. If the status quo continues, it is deeply troubling to recognize that market-entrenched for-profit providers (who have access to significant capital quickly) will be best positioned to reopen childcare “services” in the post-pandemic era.

The one glimmer of hope we have is that care-full early care/learning experiences became possible for a small subset of the population in the form of publicly funded emergency childcare programs. While these programs were only open for six weeks and to those deemed essential, a small group of educators, children, and mothers had a taste of care beyond the market model. Educators, operators, municipalities, public health, and the Ministry of Education came together, opening emergency childcare within two weeks of the pandemic being declared, illustrating that where there is political will there is a way.

As 2021 comes to a close, optimism related to childcare policy and the needs of the childcare community is focused at the federal level. It remains to be seen what policy mechanisms will be put in place to achieve the Canada-wide system promised in the Speech from the Throne. That “significant” “long-term” “sustained” funding to childcare was written into the 2021 federal budget is unprecedented and provides much-needed optimism (Government of Canada, 2020b, 2021). Shifting our gaze from Ontario to the national policy context is pressing as policy (in)decisions in the next few months hold significant weight for mothers, children, educators, families, and all citizens. Now more than ever, the childcare community must continue to build solidarity through recognizing their inextricable care needs and advocating for policy responses that create conditions for care affinities.

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