

Early Childhood Education in Canada During a Pandemic

Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, Coeditor, and Susan Prentice, Guest Editor

In Fall 2020, we circulated a call for papers for a special issue, “COVID and Beyond: Reconfiguring Early Childhood Education in Canada for the 21st Century.” In seeking submissions, we noticed that the COVID virus had thrown the issue of childcare, as well as the fragility of the early childhood education system, into sharp relief. We sought theoretical and/or empirical papers that reflected on the current moment and imagined a reconfigured future.

We were met with an enthusiastic response from the field, as authors proposed articles from research and ideas from practice. The seven articles assembled in this issue suggest the breadth of the myriad ways the pandemic touched the field. Collectively, the papers address curriculum, policy, licensing, Indigeneity, families, children, and more. Read as an assemblage, they illuminate the wide range of complex and varying effects the pandemic has generated across Canada.

Martha Friendly, Barry Forer, Rachel Vickerson, and Sophia Mohamed provide a detailed inventory of COVID and childcare in Canada, tracking a “tale of ten provinces and three territories.” They undertook the valuable work of documenting closures, shifting policies, and the sudden pivots that occurred from coast to coast to coast to manage the public health needs of children, staff, and families while also serving essential workers. Among other important lessons, the detailed review makes plain the varying capacities of different jurisdictions, a function of their diverse policy architectures.

Quebec’s more mature childcare policy framework meant its response differed from the rest of Canada. Sophie Matthieu unpacks how policy paradigms developed and shifted through the first and second waves of the pandemic. Since English-readers have little access to the details of Quebec, this paper does much to explain Canada’s (and North America’s) most developed childcare system.

Equally compelling, Brooke Richardson, Alana Powell, and Rachel Langford use a gender lens to critique policy responses, showing deep connections between the needs of mothers, children, and early childhood educators. In a field that has, for strategic and other reasons, sometimes sought to downplay the role of gendered stratification, this paper reasserts the necessity of a gendered lens.

Alongside systemic policy at the macro level, scholars addressed how the pandemic affected relations with and between educators and children in their everyday experiences in early childhood settings. Marie-Anne Hudson and Lori Huston advocate for inclusion of diverse ways of knowing, doing, and being in early childhood environments in order for the early childhood field to authentically be “all in this together.” Also calling for inclusion, Kathryn Underwood, Tricia van Rhijn, Alice-Simone Balter, Laura Feltham, Patty Douglas, Gillian Parekh, and Breanna Lawrence drill down into the complex experiences of children with additional support needs to produce insight into ableism, exclusion, and procedural bias.

New relationships and practices in early childhood care and education bubbled up in an organic, if troubling, process akin to fermentation. Coexisting with vulnerabilities and tensions are possibilities that can help make living and learning well flourish, and these are the foci of Nancy van Groll and Kathleen Kummer’s explorations in “Troubled Pedagogies and COVID-19.” Similarly, Sherry Rose, Kim Stewart, Pamela Malins, and Candace Gallagher reimagine early education using a posthumanist lens in their ideas from practice article. Writing with a communal disposition, they highlight the perspectives of a mother, a director, and an educator to open doors in early childhood education in times of crisis.

Childcare settings are astonishingly complex. Bringing together children, their families—especially their mothers—and early childhood educators, early childhood is nested in a multilayered ecosystem. A deep understanding of the fragility, necessity, and urgency of childcare means grasping macro, meso, and micro levels, juggling the diversity of Canada's 13 jurisdictions and complex funding and policy regimes. We recognize that a richer understanding would have emerged if we had been able to apply in much more depth an Indigenous lens—or lenses—on early childhood education.

For us, what the articles collectively emphasize is that the lack of a publicly funded early childhood education system made responding to the pandemic much more difficult—yet, we didn't need a pandemic to teach us that lesson.

Initial submissions were received at the end of the second wave, mere weeks before the federal government announced historic ambitions in the 2021 budget. Federal finance minister Chrystia Freeland rose in the House to commit more than \$30 billion over more than a decade, vowing, "I make this promise to Canadians today, speaking as your finance minister and as a working mother." As experts provided peer review, the third wave ebbed and flowed, and Ottawa signed bilateral agreements with provinces. At the time the authors received final word about their submissions and we crafted this editorial, a federal election was precipitously called and the fourth wave began to crest.

We do not know what the future holds for childcare across this country. But the pandemic exposed how clearly childcare is a central issue for Canada's children, families, parents, communities, and economy. Those who previously considered childcare a marginal issue and who disregarded questions of care, gender, intersectionality, and social reproduction have been shocked into a new appreciation of just how much the public world of production relies on systems, practices, and deeply rooted relations of care. Whatever comes next, we know this special issue contributes to a deeper understanding of how COVID will reshape early childhood education in Canada in a future yet to be written.