Experiences of Unbelonging and Ableism in the Early Learning and Childcare Sector in British Columbia

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In an era in which Canadian governments are focused on increasing families' access to affordable early learning and childcare (ELCC), there are increasing concerns about the inclusion of children with disabilities. This paper reports on the experiences of parents of children with disabilities in accessing ELCC programs in British Columbia. Findings highlight four interrelated themes: experiences of unbelonging; systemic mechanisms that reinforce unbelonging; impacts of unbelonging on children, parents, and families; and experiences of inclusion and belonging. The paper concludes with a discussion on opportunities for disrupting structural ableism and reorienting towards a childcare system in which all children can belong.

Key words: *children's rights, intersectionality, belonging, disability, inclusion*

In Canada, as governments strive to expand and improve affordable early learning and childcare (ELCC; Government of Canada, 2017; Government of Canada et al., 2018), children with disabilities continue to face barriers to access and participation[1] (Hyslop, 2022; Irwin & Lero, 2021; BC Representative for Children and Youth, 2023). Exclusionary structural barriers include inadequate public funding, professional development, and organizational commitments; a scarcity of childcare spaces; Eurocentric curricula; and systemic racism (Frankel et al., 2019; Irwin & Lero, 2021; Prentice & White, 2019; IECSS, 2022). Moreover, the positive impacts of Canadian governments' current investments in increasing the number of affordable childcare spaces are tempered by a lack of qualified early childhood educators (ECEs) to staff new programs and a high number of educators leaving this historically underfunded sector in search of higher paying employment (MacDonald & Friendly, 2023).

As a sign of the federal government's interest in an inclusive childcare system, Employment and Social Development Canada[2] contracted and funded primary author Gerlach to conduct an exploratory qualitative study in British Columbia (BC) on the experiences of parents raising young children with disabilities in accessing licensed centre-based ELCC programs. This paper describes the research methods and findings that center on four interrelated themes: (1) experiences of unbelonging; (2) systemic mechanisms that reinforce unbelonging; (3) impacts of unbelonging on children, parents, and families; and (4) experiences of inclusion and belonging. The final section of this paper discusses the implications of the findings in disrupting structural ableism in how ELCC programs are designed and delivered.

Central to the research discussed in this paper is the increasingly contested concept of inclusion, which the authors conceptualize as an experience that centers children's rights and capacities (van Rhijn et al., 2021) and values each child's unique, intersectional "cultural, spiritual, social and disability identities in the communities in which they live" (Frankel et al., 2019, p. 28). This understanding of inclusion disrupts "impoverished" but resilient notions of inclusion in terms of a child's placement or physical presence in a program (Teachman, 2016). Moreover, this view of inclusion recognizes difference as natural and disability as a valued form of human diversity (Underwood et al., 2019). This viewpoint resists the tendency to make "disability" the sole focus of a child's identity or experience and recognizes their intersectional identities and lived experiences, affirming the complexity of being human and disrupting hegemonic, normative assumptions of the "child" and "human development" (Goodley et al., 2019; Runswick-Cole et al., 2018).

Bordering the concept of inclusion is ableism—an all-pervading social force manifested when spaces, practices, attitudes, and policies center nondisabled perspectives and experiences, regardless of their intention (Eirikson, 2021; Underwood et al., 2021). Ableism exists in all our institutions as "a system of prejudice and discrimination that devalues and excludes people with disabilities" (Albert & Powell, 2022, p. 142) and is entrenched in how Canadian and similar wealthy societies and governments think about and create seemingly benevolent systems of "care" for children with disabilities (Gerlach et al., 2024; Goodley et al., 2019). Ableist assumptions and practices uphold disability discrimination and represent a profound barrier preventing children with disabilities from experiencing genuine participation and belonging in their communities and in ELCC settings (Balter et al., 2023; Lalvani & Bacon, 2019; van Rhijn et al., 2021). In this ableist environment, a lack of clear legislated inclusion policies or practices (Maich et al., 2019) denies not only young children with disabilities but also their peers, families, communities, and the childcare staff from experiencing the multifaceted, positive benefits of inclusive childcare (van Rhijn et al., 2021; Weglarz-Ward & Santos, 2018; Wiart et al., 2014).

Parents are uniquely positioned to understand both the needs of their families and children and the barriers and opportunities within child-serving systems, including childcare (Frankel et al., 2019). As such, parent perspectives are central to ensuring that ELCC programs are relevant and accessible and meet their needs and expectations (McIsaac et al., 2023). The perspectives, values, and preferences of parents are therefore vital in dismantling ableist structures and advancing the design and delivery of inclusive ELCC programs (Berggren & Newbury, 2023; McIsaac et al., 2023; Weglarz-Ward & Santos, 2018) and communities (van Rhijn et al., 2021).

"Inclusive" childcare in BC

The research discussed in this paper took place in BC. The provincial government identifies inclusion as a priority in their investment in the ongoing rolling-out of an affordable ELCC system in which all children can "participate fully regardless of their abilities" (Government of British Columbia, 2019, p. 4). The BC government's *Inclusive Childcare Toolkit* (2019) states:

> Inclusive childcare occurs when programs support the individual strengths and needs of each child. All children are welcomed, supported, and valued, which allows them to participate meaningfully in all aspects of the childcare program.... All childcare providers work together as a team to collectively meet the needs of all of the children, including children with support needs, in their care. (p. 8)

Currently, licensed childcare centres in this province are under no obligation to have an inclusion policy or accept children with disabilities. Rather, the infrastructure to support inclusive childcare in BC is largely dependent on two provincially funded programs: Supported Child Development (SCD) and Aboriginal Supported Child Development (ASCD). These programs provide consultation, extra staffing supports, and training with childcare staff to foster inclusive childcare. The ASCD program provides these supports in a culturally relevant and meaningful way with Indigenous communities, families, and children (Government of British Columbia, n.d.) Waiting lists for these services are high, and even when funding is available it can be challenging to hire qualified support staff, particularly in rural and remote communities (BC Representative for Children and Youth, 2023).

There is currently no explicit ELCC policy or framework on inclusion in BC, and the infrastructure to support inclusive childcare in BC currently spans multiple ministries. Childcare licensing is administered by the Ministry of Health. Since 2022, childcare is the responsibility of a re-formed Ministry of Education and Child Care, and the aforementioned SCD and ASCD programs are administered by the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

A conceptual shift: From inclusion to belonging

In the research discussed in this paper, "belonging" was employed as a conceptual framework. As an alternative and distinct international discourse, belonging has emerged in response to the tacit assumptions of normativity, developmentalism, and assimilation that tend to underlie neoliberal rhetoric on inclusion (Eirikson, 2021; Long & Guo, 2023; Pesonen et al., 2023). This conceptual shift is being taken up in diverse global contexts, including Canada, to further inform child-related practices, policies, and curriculum frameworks (Eirikson, 2021; Guo & Dalli, 2016; Pesonen et al., 2023; Puroila et al., 2021; Selby et al., 2018).

Belonging has long been identified as a basic human need characterized by embodied, subjective feelings and experiences of genuine acceptance, respect, safety, and comfort that contribute to self-worth, identity, and well-being (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023; Long & Guo, 2023). As a complex, multidimensional process, belonging develops primarily through reciprocal, positive relationships with others (Strnadová et al., 2018). However, experiences of belonging or the opposite, unbelonging, are also determined by broader, multifaceted structural factors, including dominant social and political values, beliefs, and assumptions and institutional policies. In the context of ELCC programs, belonging is structured through policies, curricula, and pedagogical approaches (Pesonen et al., 2023; Puroila et al., 2021).

Methods

This exploratory qualitative study was undertaken in 2022 by the two primary authors, Gerlach and Newbury, and was guided by the following question: *How do parents who are raising young children with disabilities experience accessing or trying to access formal childcare in BC?*

Recruitment

Following ethics approval from the University of Victoria, purposeful sampling and the researchers' extensive community networks were used to recruit participants, one of whom is this article's third author (Berggren). To enhance the trustworthiness of this study, an explicit goal was to recruit a diverse group of parents who could speak to wide-ranging lived experiences in relation to the research topic, including Indigenous and newcomer parents / primary caregivers with diverse gender, socioeconomic status, employment status, and family makeup in various regions raising preschool-aged children with varying disabilities or support needs. The stated target population for this project was parents / primary caregivers of children aged 0 to 4 years. Six parents of children a little older than the target age were strategically included to capture their valuable experiences, including transitioning from

ELCC to the education system. All those who participated were provided with an honorarium for their time and contributions.

Participants

Participants included 15 parents of young children with disabilities and three expert informants who had extensive experience in the ELCC sector in BC: a director of a childcare centre, an ASCD consultant, and a SCD consultant. To provide a context for the findings generated in this study, all participants were asked to complete a brief, anonymous, sociodemographic form. This information is summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Summary of Parent Participants' Self-Reported Sociodemographic Information (N=15)

Health region in BC	Vancouver Coastal Health Region	7
	Fraser Health Region	6
	Interior Health Region	2
Self-Identified Community Context	Urban	9
	Rural	6
Self-Identified Ethnicity	Caucasian/European descent	8
	Indigenous	2
	Indian/South Asian	2
	Afghan-Canadian	1
	Korean-Canadian	1
	Vietnamese	1
Country of birth	Canada	10
	India	2
	Afghanistan	1
	Malaysia	1
	New Zealand	1
Gender (this was self-reported with no categories offered)	Female	14
	Male	1
Relationship status	Single	4
	Married	10
	Common law	1
Level of education	Grade 11	1
	Diploma	4
	Associate degree	1
	Undergraduate degree	8
Paid Employment	None – student	1
	None – maternity leave	2
	Part-time	3
	Full-time	8

Is employment effected by access to childcare?	Yes	14
	No	1
Parent's age	25–29	2
	30–34	8
	35–39	1
	40+	4
Age of child with support needs (some parents had multiple children with disabilities)	2 years or younger	3
	3 and 4 years old	9
	5 years or older	6
Does child have a diagnosis?	Yes	13
	On waitlist or being assessed	5
# children <19 living at home	One	5
	Two	7
	Three	3
Reasons for needing childcare (some parents gave more than one reason)	So that parent(s) can work	12
	So that parent(s) can do other things / take care of themselves	2
	To support child's learning and growth	5
	To support child to socialize with other children	6

Table 2: Summary of Expert Informant Participants' Self-Reported Sociodemographic Information (N=3)

Position	**Health Region**	**Context**	**Education**	**Years of experience**	**Years in current role**
Childcare director/ provider	Vancouver Island Health Region	Urban	ECE diploma (IT-SN)[3] CYC degree	34 years	28 years
Supported Child Development Consultant	Vancouver Coastal Health Region	Rural	ECE diploma (IT-SN)	21 years	11 years
Aboriginal Supported Child Development Consultant	Northern Health Region	Rural	ECE diploma (SN) Bachelor of Education	35 years	6 years

Data collection and analysis

The researchers (Gerlach and Newbury) developed an interview guide. Parents who had been unsuccessful in accessing childcare were asked questions, including: *Can you tell me about your experience of trying to get your child(ren)* *with extra support needs into a regulated/licensed childcare program/centre in your neighbourhood or community? What do you think ultimately prevented you from accessing childcare for your child? Can you describe what kind of childcare setting you hoped to find for your child?* Parents who had been successful in accessing a childcare program were asked questions, including: *Can you tell me about what your childcare put in place to make sure that your child's health and development were being supported? Can you tell me about a positive experience with the program?* Several participants answered both sets of questions, as they often had unsuccessful experiences before finding childcare. Parents were also asked about the impacts of their childcare experiences on their family well-being.

Following informed, signed consent, Newbury conducted one approximately hour-long semistructured, in-depth interview with each participant between May and July 2022. Interviews took place in person, by videoconferencing, or by phone depending on participants' preference. All interviews were audio-recorded, and Newbury used HyperTranscribe© to transcribe all interviews and make analytical notes. Newbury used HyperResearch© to organize and inductively code interview data using a codebook that was informed by the research question and a preliminary literature review and iteratively expanded during the analytical process. Repeated readings and interpretation of transcripts by Newbury and Gerlach was guided by a reflexive thematic analytical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) leading to the identification of recurring themes. To enhance trustworthiness, participants' feedback on preliminary analytical themes helped to further refine a framing of the findings. A summary report was also circulated widely throughout the province among ELCC stakeholders and parents and received positive support (Newbury & Gerlach, 2022).

Findings

The findings are organized into four themes and related subthemes as summarized in Figure 1. Consistent with interpretive approaches to inquiry, the authors integrate key literature to interpret the findings.

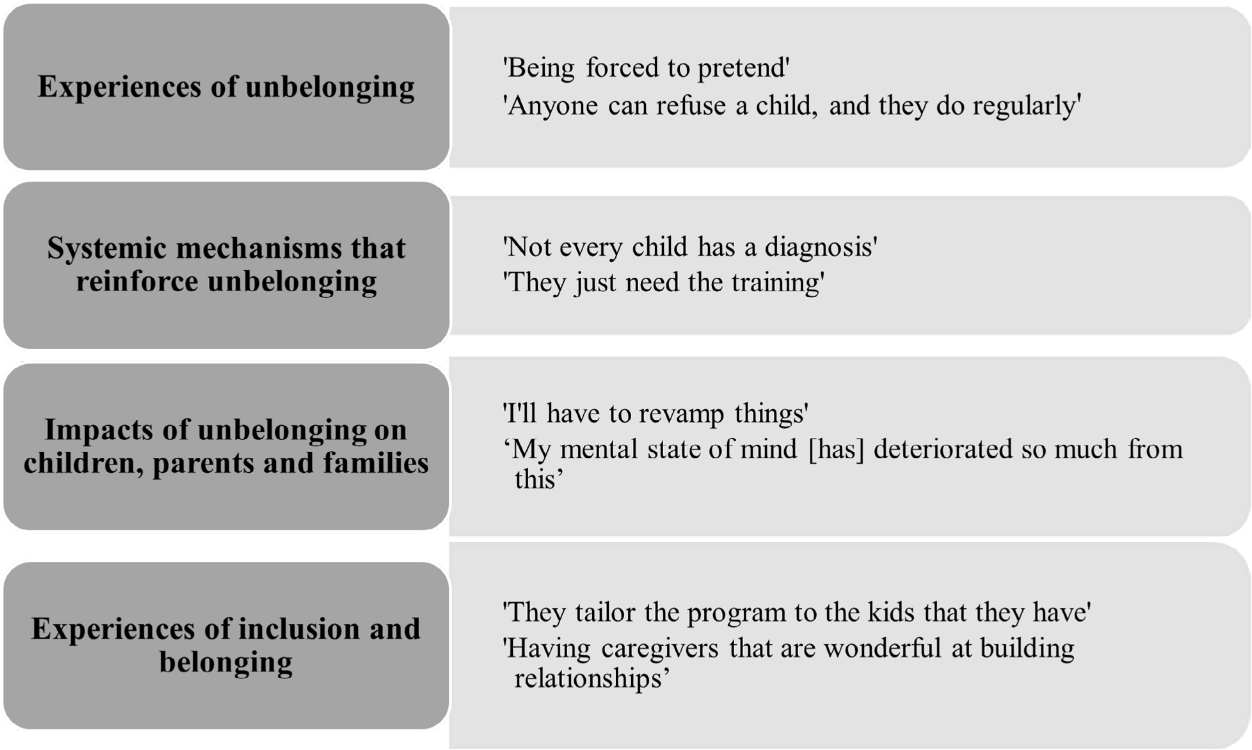

Figure 1. Overview of themes and subthemes.

Experiences of unbelonging

A recurring theme in the data were experiences of unbelonging that are captured in two interrelated subthemes that point to a childcare system primarily designed for “normal kids.”

Being forced to pretend. Parents described situations in which their children were able to attend a licensed childcare program if they were not “too” different and could “fit in.” Having to suppress elements of who they are was conveyed as being harmful for their children and for them as parents. As one parent shared:

> A lot of what autistic people go through in life is related to being forced to pretend that they are experiencing the world in what we understand a neurotypical person would experience the world. So, if the lights are too bright, they’re supposed to pretend the lights are fine. And if they don’t, people treat them differently, or they treat them weird, or they say you’re oversensitive.

Another parent added:

> I asked [an educator]: Are your teachers that are working at this daycare, are they not trained to work with all types of children or are they only trained to work with “normal” children? It takes a lot from a parent to ask that and exclude my son from being normal, but they were bringing me to that point.

Parents shared the ways they both implicitly and explicitly received repeated messages that their children were not accepted for who they were and did not belong. This included being required to show up during the day to help their child eat or do a fire drill or having to pick up and drop off a child at times that differed from other children. One parent noted: “At my last centre, they would keep her inside sometimes because they just didn’t want to deal with rolling her wheelchair on the grass, and they didn’t want to carry her.” Another parent said:

> And I feel like that was the main concern—if staff have to spend too much time with your child specifically, then it will take away from the other “normal” kids. So, although it’s not explicitly said, it’s implied that if you deviate too much from this quote-unquote norm, then they’re not interested in providing the supports for you.

Central to an ethos of belonging, children with disabilities are accepted as they are without having to change or fit into normative ideals, expectations, or environments (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). In contrast, these parents’ experiences show that even when their children were physically included in a childcare program, they were expected to conform to and accommodate programming designed for “normal kids.” Inclusion in this context reinforced normativity and unbelonging.

“Anyone can refuse a child, and they do regularly.” Experiences of unbelonging were also evident in parents’ recalling how their children were denied entry or asked to leave a program because of their diagnosis and/or support needs. Many parents were told that their child required extra supports to attend or maintain their attendance. As a result of long waiting lists for extra support, parents shared painful experiences of their children’s access to childcare being denied or significantly delayed. As one parent shared: “Anyone can refuse a child, and they do regularly.” With competition for limited childcare spaces, intake interviews were described as a list of difficult-to-meet criteria for acceptance and admission:

> And that was when it was sort of a vetting kind of a feeling. You fill out the forms, they call you, then you go in and desperately hope they can take you.... As you are there and going over the forms, it feels sort of like you’re falling down the notches. Oh, he doesn’t have that skill? Oh, that’s a concern, and oh that’s another concern.

Another parent explained: "Because there was such high demand for spots, they only wanted to take the cream of the crop. They didn't want to take those kids that were challenging. They didn't have to." Parents were also concerned about the consequences of their children being "rejected" from "normal daycare." As one parent voiced:

> If the normal daycares can't have our kids, then who's going to take care of them? They need a place as well. It's not like they can't do anything. They have capabilities, they do. It's just they have their own way to do things. And they shouldn't be ignored. I'm like, if they're ignored at this age? They have their whole life in front of them. Facing rejection? No. Nobody deserves that.

The data on "experiences of unbelonging" highlight parents' resistance to deficit discourses about their children and an incongruence between how they see their children and how they were viewed and treated in ELCC settings. As such, childcare programs reproduced the devaluing and enforced normalization of disabled children and their required participation in programming designed for typically developing children (Curran, 2013; Goodley et al., 2019). Failure to comply or fit in can result in parents and their children being outside of, and/or a burden to a seemingly ableist system of "care."

Systemic mechanisms that reinforce unbelonging

The data in this theme highlight two key systemic mechanisms that reinforce experiences of unbelonging.

"Not every child has a diagnosis." Unbelonging for children with disabilities in childcare was reinforced by the current, predominant funding model in BC being based on an individualistic, medical model of disability. As such, resources to support children in ELCC settings are primarily tied to children's individual diagnoses. Parents described how this funding structure complicated experiences for them and their children. Moreover, for some parents who had experienced harm within systems of "care," getting their child diagnosed was "a terrifying process":

> You have to go through MCFD[4], and that's not a safe space for a lot of people. Especially for myself as a Métis person … there's a lot of intergenerational trauma associated with the police, and also with child services.… I have to go to these people whose responsibility it is to remove my kids from me if they think I'm inadequate and I have to ask them for help? … It's a terrifying process to go through.

However, as one parent reflected: "It's interesting to note that not every child has a diagnosis, so that might be something to think about." Without a diagnosis many parents found their children slipping through the cracks, unable to access supports and in turn denied access to childcare. Alternatively, as the following parent shared, after a diagnosis was obtained, some parents were told that their children were no longer able to stay at a centre in which they were already enrolled:

> And I'm just like, what are the little things that you guys can't handle about him? If he hadn't gotten this diagnosis, most likely you would've just followed through and went on with treating him like all the kids that are there. But the fact that he's got this diagnosis, all of a sudden "oh my god, he's that special kid" and no one can really look after him.

Additionally, both participant groups noted that many children have different needs that are not "diagnosable" and consequently are unable to access resources or childcare supports. As one expert informant stated:

> I almost think they need to fund an extra staff member in every centre, because—and I can't stress this enough—it's not just about the one child that's labelled. There's more children that are *not* being diagnosed that are falling through the cracks than those that are already diagnosed, and I hate to use the word label but it is—that have the label, that have the diagnosis.

Many parents also told of seeking childcare well before they knew their children had extra support needs. In some cases, learning about the need for a diagnosis and then being waitlisted meant children were school aged before they were eligible for any support.

There was also evidence of how ELCC programs tacitly placed responsibility on individual parents (primarily mothers) to spend extensive amounts of time and emotional labour on advocacy and system navigation to find scarce childcare spaces and additional support services. As discussed in a subsequent theme, parents described how this administrative burden risked deeper poverty, isolation, and poor mental health. As a single mother who was struggling to find work and housing recalled:

> And then trying to apply for childcare subsidy … was a pain because it was a long process. And if something was off on paper work, they wouldn't accept it. They wanted things that I don't even have. They wanted stuff about their fathers, I'm like yeah, we're not together, they haven't even seen their kids. I'm a single parent. I can't wait six months for you to say you're going to help me or no you're not. Like this money helped me get into school and provide a better future for my kids.

Parents also shared feelings of being blamed when striving to access resources and advocating for their children while having to learn about and work their way through multiple bureaucracies and government ministries.

This data highlights how children's experiences of unbelonging and rejection are reinforced through an ableist childcare system in which children are viewed primarily through the lens of their disability (Long & Guo, 2023). Experiences of unbelonging were structured through "medical gatekeeping," individualism, and a fragmented provincial system of specialized support services.

"They just need the training." A further systemic factor that reinforced unbelonging was participants' repeated concerns about educators not being equipped to provide ELCC with children whose behaviour, abilities, or needs deviated from presumed norms. Parents described having to provide education about their children's conditions, how to support them, and what inclusion means. As one parent explained:

> I don't mean to speak badly about the teachers. I'm sure they're very nice people. They just need the training. The staff at the centre are very poorly trained when it comes to children with a little bit of extra needs. They need more training. I cannot emphasize that enough.

Several participants expressed the need for core ECE curriculum to be more inclusive of a diverse range of children, and voiced concerns that the special needs certification and ongoing professional development on inclusion were optional:

> They basically said something along the lines of, we won't turn away kids who have special needs. But what I told them is, that's not what inclusivity is! And they basically just shrugged it off as like, well we can't require all of our educators to have a special needs designation.

Another participant added:

> They didn't even really know what autism is—a social and communication disability—and so when they would have challenges with her and we would try to help them understand where she was coming from, they would always just default to like classic childcare stuff, like oh she's tired or she's hungry or maybe she's just not dealing well that day. I was just like, no, she's autistic and she is having trouble communicating with you.

Some parents noted that when educators were supported by other professionals, such as SCD and ASCD consultants, on a regular basis in their childcare setting, it led to increased inclusion. These professionals modelled in real time how to do things in a way that was inclusive of *all* children, working together with educators in the setting to cultivate a program-wide inclusive environment. Only one parent interviewed knew of a formal inclusion policy at the childcare centre their child attended.

This data emphasizes the need to move beyond belonging at the level of individual children and address the systemic mechanisms through which unbelonging is structured (Puroila et al., 2021). Such systems-level change requires a shared mindset and accountability by all stakeholders in the childcare sector (Pesonen et al., 2023).

Impacts of unbelonging on children, parents (mothers), and families

In describing their experiences of unbelonging, many of the parents were also vocal about the cumulative harmful impacts on their children, families, and their own health and quality of life, as described in the following two subthemes.

"I'll have to revamp things." When childcare was not accessible, parents explained how they were often left with difficult decisions, including moving to a new community, home sharing with another parent, extending maternity leave, or leaving work altogether. One parent described constantly having to adapt based on limited available supports: "I took the full 18 months [maternity leave] with my second. So that gets my first almost all the way to kindergarten. Then I'll have to revamp things and maybe try to get something in town here when I do go back." Some parents described finding a job in a neighbouring community because that was where childcare was available. Another described how she had to piece together a schedule of multiple childcare centres every week:

> I had him in four different places when I went back to work. I had to make a schedule at the beginning of every week to see who could take him for my five days of work. I eventually burnt out and couldn't do it anymore and left that job.

Parents reflected on how a lack of childcare became a defining feature of life, not only for their excluded child, but for the entire family. They also described how this resulted in a decreased quality of life for parents and children (including their siblings), with many parents having to put their time and energy—and financial and other resources—into creating informal supports with extended family members, friends, and parents in similar situations.

Parent participants in two-parent families shared that not being able to access childcare resulted in one of them having to leave their job—most often the parent who was earning less. The burden of leaving established employment seemed to disproportionately land on mothers. As one mother noted: "So in many ways not having access to childcare, it's shaped our whole life. I didn't go back to work until he was six. I was off that whole time—seven years." Similarly, another mother shared:

> My partner has a very good job that pays really well and he works crazy hours. So that's been really challenging for me. Whereas his career is farther ahead than mine is and we kind of need his job, so it kind of takes priority.

Losing one income was further compounded by the extra costs of raising a child with support needs:

> That full year we paid for [our son] $3,500 [for childcare]. But I then did a price analysis for how much we were paying for my daughter [who has support needs] for that same period, and it was $15,000. We were using our autism funding at that time, which was $6,000. But it was still $9,000 we were paying out of our pocket, and that was one year! So, I was like, holy crap, we can't do this!

In addition to losing a source of income, mothers shared how devastating it was to lose a sense of autonomy, fulfillment, and purpose. In addition, single mothers in this study explained that when childcare was unavailable, they had to rely on income assistance and other forms of formal and informal childcare support and found it extremely difficult or impossible to get a job or sustain a career. Further ramifications of unbelonging are expanded on in the next subtheme.

"My mental state of mind [has] deteriorated so much from this." Parents shared how their children's experiences of unbelonging in ELCC settings took an emotional toll on their children's early quality of life. Parents talked about how important it was to have access to childcare that offered enriching experiences, and they expressed concerns that their children lacked opportunities for joy, growth, and school readiness in their childcare programs. As one parent reflected: "He was happy for about a month. After that his smile just disappeared. He stopped laughing. Yeah, it tore open my heart." Another parent shared:

> She just wouldn't go in, and so I walked with them, and when I walked with her, I got her all the way up to the door and then it was just obvious she didn't feel safe, she didn't feel comfortable, she didn't want to go in. And I was just like, okay, well this is over. And we just went home.

Similarly, a parent reflected:

> But to be honest I don't think it's very good for him, because like I said, every day he comes home and I have to wind him down. He comes home to the point where he is banging his head and stuff because he's so overwhelmed.

Parents also described how they suffered due to constant advocacy for their children and witnessing their children being denied enriching experiences. Parents described marital strain, parenting stress, and poor health: "I don't know if you've gotten the gravity of my mental state of mind—it has deteriorated so much from this." Another parent shared: "There's not even been a single day that I have not cried, I have not woken up from my sleep, I get less sleep. It's a constant struggle." Similarly, other parents described the impacts.

> Everybody thinks me and my husband have our shit together. We don't. We're fighting at home; our marriage is about to collapse. Our kids are hiding from us when we're screaming at each other. We are not coping in any sense of the word. We had gone to family counselling and we still couldn't keep it together. I wasn't sleeping. We were overeating. We were drinking. All of it.
>
> Managing childcare, especially for a kid that you worry about how they're doing at childcare, is a lot of mental labour—extra mental labour. And for me, the idea of going back to work full time feels like I'm kind of going back to work to do two jobs. Because I'm going back to work, but then I have this huge other thing to manage that is very stressful and it wears me out.
>
> Of course, it's taken a toll with our marriage, with our lifestyle, because my husband deals with the same thing; feeling super exhausted and feeling really hopeless because we're constantly being told our son needs this but it's not available to him and how he's lacking this, he's lacking that. I don't even know how we've been dealing with that all this time.

For parents who experienced discrimination and marginalization in their daily lives, the additional stress of no or inadequate childcare was a compounding stressor. This is evidenced by a parent who brought herself to emergency when having what she referred to as a "mental health break":

> I said, we're here because … I'm fearful I'm going to hurt myself, I'm going to hurt my child. I can't do this. I was shaking. But we were both middle-class white people wearing nice clothes, and nobody ever

> once said, we need to call the Ministry of Children and Families.... They had a duty to report that.... We saw four different doctors and I said the same messaging to all of them. And they dismissed it because we looked like we were put together: I was with my husband, we were married, he was supporting me. It's so messed up.

Highlighting the strong connection between belonging and well-being (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023), this data provides insights into the profound and cumulative negative consequences of children's and parents' experiences of unbelonging on child-maternal-family well-being, including unemployment, financial hardship, gendered wealth disparities, poor mental health, and marital stress. Moreover, this data reinforces the power that childcare programs hold over families (Frankel et al., 2019) and the burden on mothers and parents who experience structural marginalization in their everyday lives (Hyslop, 2022; Underwood et al., 2019).

Experiences of inclusion and belonging

The above data paints a grim landscape. Nonetheless, there was evidence of how educators, SCD and ASCD consultants, parents, and other community members were steadfastly fostering genuine inclusion and belonging for children with disabilities in ELCC settings. With advocacy and support, some parents in this study who had found childcare in which their children thrived were excited to talk about their experiences so that others could learn about what it looks and feels like to create childcare spaces in which every child belongs.

"They tailor the program to the kids that they have." Participants described how, beginning with intake and extending into the day-to-day programming, childcare settings were tailored for the children who attended them rather than expecting children to adapt to predesigned, fixed programming. As one mother stated: ""They tailor the program to the kids that they have. They don't just have a schedule or a curriculum and then get a kid that that doesn't work for and just keep trying to push them into that box." Also, rather than using intake to evaluate a child's "fit" for a childcare setting, it was used as an opportunity to get to know the child—learning about what makes them unique—and to better understand how to ensure the childcare environment would be one in which the child could thrive. As another mother said: "He's surrounded by his friends and he feels like he's included."

Parents described how their children experienced a sense of belonging when the program was as much theirs as anyone else's and the necessary supports were provided to facilitate their full participation. In the following quote, a mother shares what she wants for her daughter:

> I want her to be included in everything. If you guys are doing water play, I want her there. That's my biggest thing—I want my child to feel like she's part of the class, and I don't want her to feel like she's being left out because she can't walk or she has to be held. They go for walks, and one of the teachers puts her in a hiking backpack so she gets to be included in the hike. I just want her to feel like she's one with the class.

Many participants reinforced that having adult-child ratios that realistically reflect what is required of educators to be present and engaged with a diverse range of children and their families was key for supporting inclusion and belonging. As evident in the following quotes, parents expressed compassion for educators who were managing more children than was realistic: "It's a lot. It's a lot for one teacher. I mean, even normal kids have issues, right? So just in that, kids with more needs, it's a lot problematic. And I cannot blame them. I myself get frustrated." Another parent added:

> Having enough adults is really important to be able to provide that extra care with young people. And I know, I work with children. I'll give a workshop for like 40 kids, or I'll give a workshop for like 10 kids, and the difference for what I can give to the kids in those workshops is significant. It's obvious.

Some parents noted that funding realistic ratios would help in shifting the burden away from specific children/families who can be perceived as creating additional work because their children are "different." Other parents shared positive experiences in childcare settings where there was always either an extra staff member or practicum students on a regular basis and, as a result, programs were more able to respond to the full range of *all* enrolled children. This benefits both the children in the centre and educators who are viewed as being often overextended when working to existing licensing ratios.

This data highlights that nurturing a sense of belonging for children takes place in and through relational practices and requires educators to think and do differently so that all children are participating to their fullest potential (Pesonen et al., 2023; Puroila et al., 2021). In addition, this data draws attention to how licensing ratios need to better align with and promote meaningful inclusion and belonging for all children.

"Having caregivers that are wonderful at building relationships." Belonging as a relational process was also evident in parents' descriptions of educators as being extensions of their families in which love, affection, attunement, and care were genuine and freely expressed. In describing the nature or character of "inclusive educators," parents talked about an attitude that was welcoming and warm and that let every child know they were valued.

> Something that's going to closely duplicate the sort of attachment and nurturing of parents.... The most important thing—that we've been blessed with, as well—is having caregivers that are so wonderful at building relationships and connections and attachments with our kids.
>
> I just don't have to worry about it. I can trust them. It is amazing, it is amazing. It just kind of shows you how it can be when you have the right people doing the right thing with the right education and experience. It really works really well.

Parents described educators' skills at ensuring that each child felt welcome and experienced belonging in "big and small ways." Examples included standing with a child at the fence to wave as their parent left or arrived, ensuring they had access to the activities that interested or excited them, and creating a quiet space when a child was overstimulated. Participants also recognized that having SCD or ASCD consultants in a program can have the effect over time of changing the program culture to one that was experienced by families and children as genuinely inclusive.

Caring relationships extended beyond the child to the parents as well, including two-way, respectful, and frequent communication. Parents stated that they liked to be informed about what was happening in the program—receiving photographs, updates, and artwork helped them to feel connected with their children's experiences. Parents also voiced that genuine inclusion involved them being meaningfully consulted and asked to share their expertise about their children. Regular, quality communication was also described as helping parents to create continuity for their children between their home life, their childcare setting, and the care they received from other professionals. It also helped educators to know how to best manage situations that could otherwise be challenging for them. As one parent highlighted:

> I'm excited to see if they have a plan and what they plan to do with my child. Because maybe I can implement that at home, and then if we work as a team ... he'll get a routine. And if there was communication, we could be a team, and it will help his learning. I just want to see my son thrive.

Building relationships and communicating regularly with parents was also identified as helpful in ensuring that educators did not make assumptions about their values and priorities when it came to their children's care. Importantly, mothers in this study reported that educators and professionals often defaulted to communicating directly with them, compounding the weight of responsibilities on them and the tacit disengagement of their partners.

The data in this subtheme is consistent with understandings of belonging as a relational process involving feelings of acceptance, safety, and comfort and the quality of interactions and relationships between parents, children, and childcare staff (Puroila et al., 2021). It also aligns with understandings that fostering belonging requires institutional support for a flexible, program-wide approach that facilitates participation and belonging by valuing and tailoring their programs with/for disabled children and their families (Balter et al., 2023; Underwood et al., 2019).

Discussion

This qualitative study generated insights into the experiences of parents who were raising young children with disabilities in accessing or trying to access formal childcare in BC. In moving beyond what the authors perceive as largely rhetorical notions of inclusion in the Canadian ELCC landscape, this research employed belonging as a promising conceptual framework. As evident in the findings, participants' narratives shed light on children's experiences of *un*belonging in a childcare culture tacitly underpinned by assumptions of normalcy and the othering of children who do not fit normative expectations (van Rhijn et al., 2021). In navigating this ableist environment, parents were implicitly "forced to pretend" and comply with pathologizing discourses and a silent assimilation process of normalizing their disabled children to gain or maintain access to childcare programs (Underwood et al., 2021).

These findings support existing evidence that young children with disabilities in BC (BC Representative for Children and Youth, 2023) and Canada (Irwin & Lero, 2021) are being denied opportunities to experience acceptance, meaningful participation, and belonging in ELCC settings during their critical early years of development and identity formation. Unfortunately, parents' experiences of children being "refused … regularly" from childcare programs, as described in this research, did not happen randomly or sporadically but appear to be widespread and upheld by "systemic mechanisms that reinforce unbelonging." In the findings on "not every child has a diagnosis," medical gatekeeping hindered children's belonging by restricting access to support services primarily to those with a diagnosis (Irwin & Lero, 2021). Thus, individual children are the primary site of attention and intervention rather than targeting system- and program-level changes.

The authors posit that an individualistic approach to resources and supports is compounded by the BC government's reliance on childcare operators to interpret and implement inclusion in the absence of any inclusion policy, framework, or mandate (Prentice & White, 2019). As previously mentioned, in the absence of a provincial inclusion policy or framework, SCD and ASCD programs are the primary mechanism for supporting inclusive childcare in BC. As evident in this research, an unintended consequence of an individualized approach is that it reinforces the assumption that all children with disabilities can only participate in a childcare program *if* they have funding through SCD or ASCD for an extra support person to meet their needs. This policy approach inadvertently absolves ELCC operators and educators from providing inclusive programs, particularly when childcare spaces are scarce and operators have the option to "refuse a child." An unintended consequence of inclusion being largely left up to the discretionary power of ELCC operators is the structural (re)entrenchment of unbelonging and ableism and the further marginalization of children with disabilities (Puroila et al., 2021).

The findings of this research support the need for provincial policy mechanisms requiring all licensed childcare programs to have an explicit policy on the meaningful participation and belonging of children with disabilities (Pesonen et al., 2023; Puroila et al., 2021). Dismantling unbelonging in an ableist system requires that federal and provincial childcare legislation and policies are intentionally designed to ensure the full participation of children with disabilities and not left as an unspoken add-on so that programs cannot "refuse a child" because of their disability or support needs (Van Rhijn et al., 2021). Such policies are needed to mitigate the "impacts of unbelonging" and to transfer the exhausting, time-consuming, and "invisible work" and responsibility for access to childcare off mothers' shoulders (Balter et al., 2023) and onto robust public policies (Maich et al., 2019; Underwood et al., 2019; van Rhijn et al., 2021).

In BC, a post-basic credential in special needs (inclusive care) and professional development opportunities focused on inclusion remain optional and additional to core early childhood education credentials (BC Early Years Professional Development Hub, 2022). A systemic change highlighted in the subtheme of "they just need the training" points to the need to address the ableist nature and current silencing of neurodiversity and disability in BC postsecondary ECE core curricula so that the othering of children with disabilities is not unintentionally reproduced in childcare programs (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). This requires that the rights of children with disabilities to participate and experience belonging is an explicit objective and core component of ECE curricula (Puroila et al., 2021).

In addition to evidence of families and children experiencing rejection and unbelonging, this research provides insights into belonging as a relational process (Strnadová et al., 2018). This involved educators who parents perceived as accepting their children as they were and being skilled "at building relationships" and "tailoring programs" in response to children's individual strengths, interests, preferences, and needs (Puroila et al., 2021). Further research that employs intersectionality is needed to better understand how participation and belonging and the harmful impacts of unbelonging on children, parents, and families in ELCC settings are differentially influenced by their diverse identities and social locations as they intersect with macro/government level, meso/program level, and micro/experiential factors and resources (Puroila et al., 2021). This research is needed to ensure that childcare policies and strategies are responsive to all subpopulations of families in BC and Canada, including low-income, Indigenous, newcomer, and immigrant families who are raising young children with disabilities.

Finally, the strong emotions that the topic of childcare evoked in parents during their interviews for this research and the findings on the emotionally harmful "impacts of unbelonging on children, parents, and families" speak to the embodied, emotive nature of belonging and unbelonging (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). Consequently, this study raises questions about who can claim a childcare program is inclusive. Perhaps this power lies not with childcare stakeholders but with children and parents as key change agents informing systemic changes so that children with disabilities can fully be themselves, meaningfully participate, and experience belonging in both ELCC settings and communities (Van Rhijn et al., 2021).

Conclusion

ELCC settings are microcosms of society in which children learn about differences and social hierarchies and in which unconscious ableist assumptions can take root. Genuine inclusivity and belonging in such settings for children with disabilities may be viewed as an essential stepping stone to dismantling pervasive ideologies about normalcy and ableist stereotypes and discrimination (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). This research supports shifts beyond rhetorical aspirations of inclusion and towards systemic changes that advance opportunities for the authentic valuing and belonging of children with disabilities in childcare programs (Puroila et al., 2021). Underlying the findings and recommendations in this paper is the need to disrupt the structural and pervasive nature of ableism so that children with disabilities can fully be themselves, meaningfully participate, and experience belonging in ELCC settings and communities.

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[1] *Children with disabilities* is used in this paper as being inclusive of children with developmental delays, neurodiversity, and chronic or complex health conditions.

[2] Employment and Social Development Canada funded similar research in three provinces: British Columbia, Quebec, and Nova Scotia.

[3] Infant-tot and special needs specializations.

[4] In BC, MCFD administers both specialized support services for children with disabilities and the child protection system in which Indigenous children continue to be highly overrepresented.

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