GETTING BEYOND EQUITY AND INCLUSION: QUEERING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

by

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Abstract

The Canadian early childhood landscape is changing substantially, pushing early childhood from a private family responsibility into the greater public policy discourse. New investments in early childhood services, combined with research that defines the importance of early years learning, requires a careful analysis of the professional preparation of early childhood educators. At the same time typical understandings of family and childhood are being challenged through legal and social policy reforms. Although Canadian demographic changes indicate a growing number of queer families with children, the gap in addressing the interests of queer identified parents and their children is exacerbated by the dominance of a heteronormative perspective in early childhood theory, training and practice. My study demonstrates the disparity between the professional preparation of early childhood educators in Ontario and how queer families are understood in the Canadian context. I draw upon queer theory to deconstruct how educators understand child development patterns and family composition including the newly defined family units that can include single or multiple parents of varying sexual identities that may consist of, but are not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and trans parents. Using qualitative methods, the research is grounded in data sources including text analysis of key early childhood texts, focus groups with early childhood educators who have graduated from ECE training programs in Ontario during the last decade and interviews with queer parents with young children enrolled in early childhood programs.
I argue that the inherent heteronormative discourse of developmentally appropriate practice silences queer in early childhood training and is embedded in foundational approaches including standards of practice, curriculum frameworks and textbooks commonly used in the training of early childhood educators. Notions of diversity, equity and inclusion structure this silencing. My study also found that early childhood educators have a narrow understanding of how queer parents may be similar or different from other parents. Educators have a limited capacity to support and engage with parents that do not fit the dominant framework of family identity. The queer parents’ narratives consistently present subtle forms of homophobia and transphobia through the silencing of their family in their child’s early childhood program. The results of the study provide an opportunity to reimagine the professional training of early childhood educators embedding a much richer theoretical grounding and teaching practice of diversity and difference that includes queer parents and their children.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Why Make a Queer Fuss?

Canada has seen a significant increase in queer parents having children through birth, adoption and surrogacy in the last decade. Combined with legal reform and social change, the definition of what constitutes a family has been turned on its head. In 2005, the Canadian government granted same-sex couples the right to marry in a civil union. In 2006, same-sex parents in Ontario were granted the option of enabling both parents’ names to appear on a child’s birth certificate (Rayside, 2008). Legal precedence no longer limits the number of parents a child may have to two. In 2007, an Ontario court recognized three people as the legal parents of a child (Epstein 2009). Not surprisingly, Statistics Canada (2012) confirms that 64,575 same-sex couples were counted in the Census, an increase of 42.4% from 2006. Of these couples, 21,015 were same-sex married couples and 43,560 were same-sex common-law couples. This estimate includes only those individuals that self-identify as being in a same-sex relationship but not those that identify as queer (a term often used broadly to include people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer). This suggests that the numbers would be much greater if all queer Canadians identified their sexual orientation and family status. Although Statistics Canada collects large scale data on how many Canadians identify as same sex and are living in couples, it does not identify how many are raising children. What we know from recent program developments such as the Queer Parenting Programs at The 519 Community Centre in Toronto is a large presence of queer parents. The program sees close to 800 parents and children from the Greater Toronto Area and surrounding
communities such as London, Hamilton and Barrie. Another 150 individuals are registered in queer and trans family planning and pre-natal courses (C. Veldhoven, personal communication, Dec 4, 2012). While data on queer parents remains limited, information that does exist suggests that queer families are a growing demographic in Canada. Assuming that queer parents participate in the workforce at the same rate as their heterosexual counterparts; it can therefore be expected that they also are increasingly represented in early childhood education (ECE) programs.

I have spent much of my career teaching and learning about the various aspects of diversity, equity and inclusion, and my interest stems from my own early experiences as an early childhood educator and as a faculty member in a professional early childhood training program. Professional training in early childhood education offers a wide range of perspectives on children that are English language learners, parents that are immigrants and refugees, children who have special learning needs and families that live in poverty. The experience of same-sex parents is beginning to get attention, yet the focus on assumed “best practice” in family relations between educators and parents is what remains dominant. I see a need to address an underlying premise that goes beyond best practice or developmentally appropriate approaches that demands attention be moved from a cursory glance of diversity and difference, to a deeper analysis of hegemony of discourse and a challenge toward a critical understanding of who creates knowledge and how it is put into practice. It is through this research project that I have understood the deeply integrated silencing of queer issues in early childhood studies. As an out queer educator, I am starting to see a fundamental shift in how childhood and families are understood. However, my study also demonstrates as Rich (1990) suggests
that silence in all its shapes and forms, needs to combatted in early childhood. A queer lens offers an innovative approach - it is with this lens that I aim to deepen the complexity of childhood and family in the context of early childhood studies. In my study I argue that the principles of diversity, equity and developmentally appropriate practice contribute to a hegemonic heteronormative order that is heavily invested in silencing sexuality and gender exploration in young children.

In my research, I investigate how queer parents experience their children’s early childhood education in Ontario and focus on families with children under the age of eight years old. The families who participated in the study had their children enrolled in a licensed early childhood program. I explore whether and how early childhood studies prepares educators to establish meaningful relationships with queer parents. My curiosity about how queer identity is named in early childhood training also led me to explore how early childhood educators understood gender development and sexuality in young children. I undertook data collection through text analysis by reviewing course outlines, core foundational textbooks and readings in courses related to child development and family engagement. I explore these materials at five colleges in Ontario that were in close proximity to programs that the families attend. I conducted focus groups with educators and interviews with parents to explore the relationship between the professional preparation of early childhood educators and the experiences of queer parents using early childhood programs for their children. In my study, I develop connections between what early childhood educators learn about families and what queer parents experience in early childhood programs.
Gamson (2000) argues that queer has been used in multiple ways as short hand for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans identity. Yet, this is often a volatile undertaking because it simplifies the complexity of different and unstable identities. It is also a term used in theoretical frameworks to situate research that deconstructs identity and sexuality. I use the term queer to describe the families in my study but I also use aspects of queer and post-structural paradigms to describe how I question, create and have a desire to shift early childhood research and practice. I have often been asked; isn’t ‘queer’ a derogatory term? I respond, “it used to be however it can also be used as a way to challenge the norm. Sears (1999) suggests, “those who teach queerly refuse to participate in the great sexual sorting machine called schooling wherein diminutive GI Joes and Barbies become star quarterbacks and prom queens while the Linuses and Tinky Winkys become wallflowers or human doormats” (p.5). In my life as an educator, I often need to suppress my urge to stop people from making assumptions and to stop categorizing children and their parents. I don’t always confront individual situations because I recognize that by questioning, by challenging the norm, by saying queer instead of same-sex, by using trans in an example of family, I heighten the salience of needing to reimagine how and what we teach.

In pursuing further research, I was interested in rupturing the dominant discourse of heteronormativity, and the propensity to silence queer identity in early childhood settings. I am interested in moving “queer” from a position of “other” to one that is more apparent in early childhood, affecting all parents and children. The experience of queer families or queer identity is not common to early childhood research or practice. Nor is it common in professional preparation programs. Although issues of diversity, equity and
inclusion have gained greater prominence, these are often limited to discussions of families who are immigrants, children who are raised in families led by one parent, or children who may be adopted or fostered. The narrative of inclusion plays a significant role in how early childhood educators discuss diversity and difference. Inclusion, however, is often discussed in relation only to language and culture. In an effort to create climates of inclusion for parents who may come from other cultures, issues of English language learners and the needs of second-generation immigrants are explored by a variety of scholars. All of this is important and not to be discounted because the reality of immigrants and refugees is critical to the knowledge that educators require; as are the needs of children growing up in low-income families. However, my goal is to infuse more complexity to how diversity, equity and inclusion are explored in early childhood education in ways that cut across modes of differentiation and open up new possibilities for understanding the multiplicity of diversity and difference.

The demarcation of legal rights that queer families enjoy in Canada provide a contextual lens that sets the tone of this study. There is a significant interest in the connections between parents and parent engagement in early learning; however, research related to this relatively new group of parents has been absent. Although queer rights are represented by instances where same-sex couples have the right to marry, to adopt children and the complicated birth arrangements permitted in Canada, the existing literature on the inclusion of queer families with preschool children in early childhood education programs is limited in the Canadian context. I am particularly interested in the professional education in Ontario as it relates to the specific legislative reform with respect to queer rights and the standards of practice for early childhood educators. There
are lessons to be learned from what is known about queer families in school settings and how queer parents may be involved in the education of their children. Early childhood education is a young profession, but in the last decade, it has gained the attention of governments and the public moving it from a marginal sector to a regulated and professionalized sector. With this comes the responsibility to ensure that professional training and practice has currency and embeds within it a critical view of what works and what needs to change. In Canada, each provincial and territorial jurisdiction is responsible for developing and monitoring its own early childhood professional education plan. In my study, I focus on Ontario as it relates most closely to my research and professional interests and offers a clear policy framework that has a direct impact on early childhood practice.

The research questions I address in my study are:

1) How does the notion of developmentally appropriate practice influence the dominant and heteronormative discourse in early childhood curriculum and practice?

2) How does the diversity, equity and inclusion paradigm in ECE professional education impact on the knowledge and capacity of early childhood educators to support queer families; and

3) How are the voices of queer parents represented in the principle of parent engagement?

The chapters that follow present three findings on the dominant discourse of heteronormativity in ECE training programs and teaching practice. First, I argue that an inherent heteronormative discourse and the silencing of queer identity in early childhood
training is embedded in foundational principles such as developmentally appropriate practice. My study reveals that the provincial standards of practice and early childhood policy frameworks in Ontario perpetuate the limitations of ideas related to diversity, equity and inclusion. Second, I argue that early childhood educators have a narrow understanding of how queer parents may be similar or different from other parents. Educators’ have a limited capacity to support and engage with parents that don’t necessarily fit the dominant framework of family identity. Third, I uncover that the queer parents’ narratives consistently presented subtle and overt forms of homophobia and transphobia through the silencing of their family in their child’s early childhood program. The results of the study provide an opportunity to re-imagine the professional training of early childhood educators that embeds a much richer theoretical grounding and teaching practice of diversity and difference that includes queer parents and their children.

My research study focuses on how queer identities are explored in ECE professional education programs through text analysis, interviews and focus group discussions with educators. Through semi-structured interviews, the study also investigates the experiences of queer parents utilizing early childhood programs for their children. I elected to complete my study with parents and educators in different communities in Ontario including a large urban centre, two northern communities and two small cities in South Western and South Eastern Ontario in the context of the vast social and physical geography of province. I imagined the experiences of queer parents living in Thunder Bay would be quite different from the queer parents living in Toronto. I also wanted to explore how similarly and differently the early childhood training
programs prepared early childhood educators to work with queer families with young children, who are making their home and life in all parts of Ontario more apparent.

Demographic changes in surveys on family life are one representation of how families are defined. My interest is sharing a sampling of the data is to demonstrate that Statistics Canada acknowledges changes in family life and at the very least, educators can be informed by this understanding. According to the Vanier Institute of the Family (2013, p. 2), “data from the 2006 and 2011 censuses show that many LGBTTQ couples are raising children: the proportion of same-sex couples with children in the home rose from 9.0% in 2006 to 9.4% in 2011”. Despite the significant increase in queer parents rearing children, Ambert (2005) suggests that same-sex families have been excluded from representative surveys on family life. Within the education realm, research has focused primarily on queer identities, (Britzman and Gilbert, 2004; Butler, 1990), the experiences of queer students and teachers (Griffin, 1991; Griffin and Oullette, 2003), the underlying heteronormativity in elementary education (Letts and Sears, 1999) and to a certain extent, the experiences of lesbian and gay parents in the elementary school setting (Fryand and Capper, 2003; Silin, 1995). There have also been a restricted number of studies in Australia (Casper, 2003; Robinson and Jones-Díaz, 2007; Skattlebol and Ferfolja, 2007) that point to the experiences of queer parents with preschool aged children or the assumed absence of queer families in early childhood programs (Robinson, 2005). Although existing scholarship explores the experiences of queer parents with young children in early childhood settings, its relation to the Canadian and particularly the Ontario legal and social policy context framework is contained. I hope that my study makes a contribution to imagining professional learning programs for educators that
embed a deeper understanding of diversity and difference. Queering early childhood knowledge and practice begins that process.

The following is a summary of my study outlining how my research questions are embedded within each chapter. I am primarily interested in troubling how diversity, equity and inclusion combined with developmentally appropriate practice as dominant paradigms silence the experience of queer parents. In early childhood professional education, the normative perspective in child development excludes the complexity of sexuality and gender – both central to early childhood discourse but silenced in early childhood training. My study provides an opportunity to re-think the design of early childhood research and practice within a changing social, political and legal context for queer parents and their young children.

In the first chapter, I share my perspective on why I think it is necessary to infuse a queer lens in early childhood professional education and practice. I argue that in addition to demographic shifts in how family is defined, my study is informed by my own experiences as a queer educator and observations of how early childhood training is limited in its perspectives on how diversity and difference are defined. In chapter two, I set the context for the study, and I outline the key assumptions that frame the foundational components of early childhood education in the province of Ontario. I highlight the shift of early childhood services from private responsibility to public policy. I explore professional education requirements in early childhood education and argue that notions of diversity, equity and inclusion and developmentally appropriate practice play a significant role in the professional education of early childhood educators. This in turn limits the educators’ understanding of queer parents and queer identity.
In chapter three, I outline significant achievements in queer rights and how that legislation is transported into early childhood training. I argue that despite these changes granting parenting rights to a complex group of parents recognizing that parenting goes far beyond biological relations, early childhood training continues to lean toward a heteronormative understanding of family. In chapter four, I review key debates in existing literature, outlining again the propensity to pay attention to the principles of developmentally appropriate practice despite overwhelming critique of the limitations of this paradigm. I argue that child development knowledge is far too consumed with traditional ideas of physical and cognitive development, and that research in early childhood continues to explore what I see as a gendered approach to development. I posit that although parent engagement practice is more prevalent in early childhood education than it is in elementary education, queer parents are not accounted for in the professional preparation of educators.

In chapter five, I review key components of queer theory and explore how this lens enables me to question, shift and move along a continuum of understanding. I want to position early childhood knowledge as a place that can move away from a dominant discourse of heterosexuality to one where the queer experience is spoken, where all children and families, queer or not, are represented. In the sixth chapter on methodology, I explain methodological challenges when dealing with the tenuous nature of data in a research study that explores undefined ideas on sexuality, child development and professional practice. I argue that queer research is not invited and in the early childhood context it raises discomfort, complicating the process further.
In the seventh chapter on research design, I describe my research process, the participant population and how I build connections between text analysis and data that I collected in interviews with parents and early childhood educators. In chapter eight, I share my research findings, making connections between what educators learn and what is demanded of their professional practice. My study demonstrates that the focus on ideas of equity and inclusion and the principles of developmentally appropriate practice do not recognize the socially constructed nature of childhood and tends to reinforce a heteronormative institutionalized rhetoric. The educators in my study are curious about children’s sexuality and keen to understand the dynamics of queer parenting. However, the current professional training program for early childhood educators is absent on both areas of knowledge. In chapter nine I share the experiences of queer parents in early childhood programs and argue that like other parents, queer parents want healthy child outcomes for their children. However, they also fear for their children’s safety and are very attuned to interactions that presume heterosexuality. In my study, I find that queer parents are seemingly open to their children’s gender exploration, posing challenges for some educators. I discuss the relationship between the professional training that early childhood educators receive, the standards of practice that they are required to follow, and the perspectives of queer parents and their children.

In the tenth and final chapter, I argue that early childhood education is in the midst of significant policy changes and transition that provides the perfect impetus to reimagine the professional training of educators. I argue that early childhood education can integrate queer perspectives, shifting the balance away from the preferred positivist approach to research and practice, toward one that is reflective of a deeper understanding
of the child and parenting experience. I trouble traditional norms of child development, suggesting instead that queering early childhood enables the flexibility and respect so often desired for young children and their families. I close with recommendations for future research considerations.

In next chapter, I set the context for my study providing an overview of the influences in early childhood professional education including the shift from private family responsibility to a publicly accountable system of care and education. I argue notions of diversity, equity and inclusion and the paradigm of developmentally appropriate practice are deeply infused in early childhood policy and practice. I maintain that these ideas function to limit the knowledge that early childhood educators need in an environment that is complex with child development and parent engagement as a core practice.
Chapter 2

Setting the Context: Frameworks in Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education in Canada is situated within a provincial and territorial jurisdictional policy framework. As a result, each province is responsible for managing and delivering early childhood services including establishing legislative and professional requirements for educators, standards for quality assurance and funding resources. In this chapter, I outline the key assumptions that frame the foundational components of early childhood education in the province of Ontario.

First, I highlight the shift of early childhood services from private responsibility to public policy through the application of relevant legislation, including the Day Nurseries Act, the Amended Education Act and the fairly recent Early Childhood Educator Act.

Second, I address how assumed principles of diversity, equity and inclusion have become a core expectation of early childhood standards of practice. I explain what these ideas mean and how central they are to early childhood training and practice, demonstrating their application into core documents, such as the Standards of Practice for early childhood educators and the provincial curriculum framework. In my study, I demonstrate that despite the embracement of diversity, equity and inclusion, queer parents are excluded from understandings related to parent engagement.

Third, in spite of widespread critique, I uncover the ongoing dominance of developmentally appropriate practice, within ECE standards and textbook resources central to ECE training throughout the province. I reveal the infusion of the notion of developmentally appropriate practice into these legislative requirements in turn,
demonstrating how strongly embedded these notions are in the foundation of early childhood education. I show how strongly early childhood education is influenced by developmentally appropriate practice represented by both meaning and expectations of appropriate behaviour on the part of educators and young children.

**From Private Family Responsibility to Public Policy Discourse**

Early childhood education in Ontario has a long history grounded in a social welfare approach that supports the idea that if children cannot be taken care of by their own parents, the public has some responsibility to ensure that the care of children is reasonable and meets minimal standards to enable parents to work. There has been an increased investment in early childhood education in several Canadian jurisdictions including Quebec, British Columbia and Prince Edward Island. In my study, I focus on the integration of early childhood into education, and the recent transition in Ontario of early childhood from the Ministry of Children and Youth into the Ministry of Education. This provides an opportunity to evaluate if and how the professional training of early childhood educators and the families they serve are linked into the education infrastructure and pedagogical approach more commonly found in the realm of public education.

In this section, I argue that licensed child care, as one component of early education, needs to make some significant policy and practice changes to ensure that obligations under a public policy framework are met integrating a more progressive framework found in the Education Act. The decision to move the responsibility of child care, including the funding distribution, the professional responsibility of early childhood educators and the related legislative requirements from the Ministry of Children and
Youth into the Ministry of Education, has been a complex undertaking. However, unlike public education, which officially begins in junior kindergarten, access to licensed early childhood programs is still primarily dependent on parents’ ability to pay for programs or availability of fee assistance. Despite the move into the Ministry of Education, licensed child care programs in Ontario are still governed by the existing Day Nurseries Act (DNA) which regulates all aspects of licensed child care, including professional requirements, health and safety, curriculum standards and reporting requirements. The Act was introduced during the Second World War in response to the need for child care for women who were rapidly joining the work force (Friendly, 1994). It was revised in the 1990’s; however, the core expectations remain the same. Despite the significant change in the demographic constitution of Ontario’s children and their families, the Act makes no reference to diversity, equity and inclusion, let alone queer identity.

The Ministry of Education now holds jurisdictional responsibility for early childhood and is considering revisions to the Act, including operational issues such as group sizes, health and safety, planning and implementation of child care services. One of the guiding principles in the discussion paper called Modernizing Child Care (Ministry of Education, Ontario, 2012) is that “programs should respect diversity, equity and inclusion and should value the language and cultural needs of different communities” (p. 5). In light of the fact that the current DNA makes no reference to issues of diversity, there is the possibility that the principle outlined in the discussion paper moves the discussion in a positive albeit limited direction.

At the same time, early childhood education in Ontario is undergoing significant

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1 At this point of writing (2013), the DNA is under review by the Ministry of Education.
changes with the introduction of full day early learning programs offered by school boards across the province. In Ontario, the new legislation that enables the implementation of full day early learning programs in schools also creates a new tier of early childhood educators. Employed by the public and Catholic school boards governed by the Ministry of Education, these educators are responsible for implementing early learning programs under the Education Act, and also governed by the College of Early Childhood Educators, Ontario. The report *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning In Ontario* (Pascal, 2009) establishes a policy framework that integrates early learning programs and recommends the consolidation of early learning services into a comprehensive approach to serve more families with young children.

In addition to an integrated approach to early learning that brings pre-natal through early child development into community-based schools, the policy framework also recognizes that parent involvement is critical to optimal child development. I will explore these issues in depth further in the study, but it is worth noting that Pascal agrees that the experiences of parents should include measures of inclusion, respect and recognition for the knowledge they have of their own children. Pascal (2009) asks:

> If the goal is to increase parent engagement, we need to be thoughtful about who is included in the process. Are we truly involving parents if some educators and school leaders avoid the Muslim mother because she wears a hijab or are confused about how to approach same-sex families or the many configurations of blended families? (p. 31)
Parent engagement has traditionally included policies and practices that recognize the linguistic diversity of school communities. A commitment to parent engagement that goes beyond suggests a view point that reflects on which group of parents are engaged and which ones are not, and why. The inclusion of reference to Muslim parents and same-sex couples moves the inclusion agenda slowly forward to recognize our differences go beyond linguistic diversity. Principles of diversity, equity and inclusion are important, but there is value in exploring if these principles are limited to multicultural practice and the inclusion of some but the exclusion of others. In my study, I uncover a pattern of heteronormativity that is deconstructed to investigate how queer identity is silenced; how gender-identity in children is placed in a male/female binary and how the potential exclusion of queer families may impact on optimal child development opportunities. By including a public policy lens in this research study, I emphasize the value of professional training in early childhood, lending more credibility to currency in knowledge reflecting the present shifts in public policy.

**Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**

The provision of equity is desired across the research, policy and practice spectrum in early childhood; although, I question principles that allude to inclusion, in relation to my study that uncovers a practice of exclusion. In her book *Quality in Early Childhood Services*, Penn (2011) argues that researchers and advocates suggest that diversity and inclusion are core aspects of quality. However, she rightly argues that a generalist understanding of equity does not take into account the complexity of difference amongst diverse families. For example, she argues that in some British schools, White working class boys fare poorly in comparison to boys in immigrant families. Yet, early
childhood professionals tend to focus on the learning needs of children in immigrant families, making the common mistake of not paying attention to the strengths that these families bring. In my study, I argue that notions of diversity, equity and inclusion are taken at face value without engaging in a deeper conversation about how these principles are actually put into early childhood practice. There is a sense that if ideas that promote respect for diversity are combined with a commitment to include all children, the outcome will bring equity to children’s learning experience. However, this taken for granted approach to diversity and difference reinforces a perspective that equity is possible through the professional commitment of educators. Instead, my study demonstrates that a desire for inclusion is complicated by the values and pedagogical approaches of educators. It is also complicated by the extent of difference amongst the educators’ own social, cultural, sexual and educational difference. Parents also come with their own individual differences – none of which are explored at great depth in early childhood professional training.

For example, there are two documents worth noting in early childhood training practice that are significant and influence the professional training of educators. First, in 2007, the government of Ontario released a curriculum framework for early learning programs called *Early Learning for Every Child Today: A Framework for Ontario Early Childhood Settings* (ELECT). Based on recommendations from an expert panel that included researchers, educators and field experts, ELECT lays out six principles to guide and support curriculum and pedagogy in early childhood settings including family support programs, child care centres, nursery schools and kindergarten classrooms. Langford (2010) argues that curriculum frameworks released by the government are not
neutral documents but carry significant weight in how they are posited. Although ELECT was designed as a supplement to existing pedagogical approaches, it has found its way into professional training programs, numerous training sessions and is being implemented throughout the province.

The development of curriculum frameworks such as ELECT, often issue directives that enshrine ideas of diversity, equity and inclusion. For example in ELECT, principle number three states “Respect for diversity, equity and inclusion are prerequisites for honoring children’s rights, optimal development and learning” (Ministry of Education, Ontario, 2007, p. 5). It explains that early childhood settings can provide opportunities that recognize “the differences each child and family brings to an early childhood setting including appearance, age, culture, ethnicity, race, language, gender, sexual orientation, religion, family environment and developmental abilities” (p. 14) clearly positioning difference from an inclusion lens. However, my study demonstrates that early childhood educators continue to focus more on differences based on culture, language and to a certain extent race and gender. They are certainly not grounded in knowledge related to children’s sexuality or how queer families in particular experience parent engagement in early childhood programs.

Similarly, as the government of Ontario was getting ready to implement full day kindergarten the Ministry of Education released a new curriculum framework called *Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program* (FDELK) in 2010. Utilizing the research that drove the development of ELECT, the FDELK Program offered a modified principle on embedding principles of equity stating that the FDELK “program aims to provide every child with the kind of support he or she needs in order to develop respect for
diversity of his or her peers” (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Secondly, in 2011, the College of Early Childhood Educators released the Code of Ethics and six new Standards of Practice that “prescribe the basis on which professional practice is conducted” (College of ECE, 2011, p. 11). The standards lay out an expectation that educators will recognize the uniqueness of the child while respecting the diversity and uniqueness of the family they are being raised in. At the core of the College’s mandate is to ensure that early childhood educators will “plan and deliver inclusive play-based learning and care programs for both pre-school and school aged children” (College of ECE, 2011, p. 11). This mandate is unclear on what inclusion actually means. One can assume it takes a developmental perspective into consideration, building on the individual learning needs of children. It may be used to describe the inclusion of children with different abilities and or used to describe the inclusion of different cultural practices. As Robinson and Jones Diaz suggest (2007), some social justice issues require more work, especially when issues such as sexuality are excluded, and in some contexts, “as unworthy of the same respect and democratic principles as other equity issues” (p. 9). The use of language is a powerful tool in communicating core beliefs. The use of a term such as “inclusive” does not begin to address or respect the myriad of discourses as struggles with injustice, oppression and exclusion.

The College’s Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice is designed to define the professional knowledge and expertise required to function as an early childhood educator. The standards seem well intentioned and provide a framework to keep educators accountable for their practice, and some would argue, to regulate and control early childhood practice. The code of ethics defines a set of beliefs and values that frame the
standards of practice for early childhood educators. Responsibilities of early childhood educators as defined by the College of Early Childhood Educators include respecting the uniqueness of the child and the family. In fact it names the need to “recognize and respect the diversity of families” (College of ECE, Code of Ethics, 2011, p. 11). The Code of Ethics mentions notions of diversity, equity or inclusion, but does not specify what that means with respect to families. It may have been a more useful exercise to embed language from the Ontario Human Rights Code that more explicitly lays the grounds for forms of discrimination. However, I can see from my professional experience an evolution in the application of the Standards to become more inclusive, including ongoing discussions on what each standard actually means – assuming there is consideration for how meaning varies depending on one’s social position.

Borrowing a colloquial phrase, “diversity, equity and inclusion” form a happy marriage, albeit a three party contract, that is often found in policy documents, curriculum frameworks and practice manuals. In exploring the framework of diversity, equity and inclusion, I am interested in understanding how this framework influences what educators know and how they experience issues of diversity and difference. I am also interested in learning if queer is included in how diversity, equity and inclusion are understood in early childhood training and practice. In a challenge to educators, Robinson (2008) argues:

Through an awareness of the complexities and contradictions that operate for early childhood educators around diversity and difference, as a community of educators, we can collectively begin to deconstruct the barriers that currently exist
and that prevent the full inclusion of socio-cultural Others. (p. 169)

In early childhood education, a framework based on diversity, equity and inclusion is more common than a deeper analysis of diversity and difference that challenge understandings of power relations, exclusion in social relationships, or the inadequacies of standards that are dominated by a unitary vision of equity. This approach is situated within a new legislative and policy context. As the mandate of early childhood education unfolds within the larger institution of formal and publicly managed education, it will be interesting to analyze if any of the more progressive influences, at least in principle from the formal education sector, make an impact on early childhood policy and practice. For example, the Ministry of Education in Ontario recently amended the Education Act to ensure that public schools offer a safe space for all children and that schools are devoid of homophobic discrimination. The policy assumes that educators have the knowledge to ensure that children do not experience discrimination, which is not necessarily true. However the intent of the policy is worth considering. The *Accepting Schools Act (2012)* recognizes that:

Students need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills, attitude and values to engage the world and others critically, which means developing a critical consciousness that allows them to take action on making their schools and communities more equitable and inclusive for all people, including LGBTTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirited, intersex, queer and questioning) people.
Compared to any legislation that governs early childhood programs, taken on its own, this bill in particular stands out against a more complacent position so often taken in early childhood policy, where the tendency is to focus on a more positive spin of equity and inclusion rather than acknowledge the façade of a non-offensive approach, the lived real world discrimination that students, parents and young children face. Early childhood directives need to move toward a deeper and more complex understanding of how difference can affect learning, and how exclusion may affect child outcomes and parental efficacy. It is with this lens that I explore how influential notions of diversity, equity and inclusion alongside the dominant role of developmentally appropriate practice impact the knowledge of early childhood educators, particularly in relation to queer parents and their young children. I am interested in exploring how the institutionalized nature of the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion establishes a structural foundation that is resistant to the fluid and ambiguous nature of queering early childhood knowledge and practice. Standards of practice or curriculum frameworks that espouse inclusion sustain an assimilating discourse that prevents the further examination or deconstruction of these ideas when essentialized by institutions where practitioners become mired in ensuring the implementation of dominant notions of standards. This is antithetical to the complex nature of childhood, and family and my study explores the hidden assumptions in the knowledge that early childhood educators bring to their professional practice.

**Early Childhood Professional Education**

My specific research interests are clearly tied to my professional role as a faculty member in an early childhood training program and they are also closely linked to my
desire to reimagine early childhood teacher training to include a stronger infusion of
criticality and engagement with respect to knowledge production. My interest in bringing
a queer lens to child development and parent engagement is connected to my desire to
challenge ongoing stereotypes and recognize the growing number of queer families
utilizing licensed early childhood programs. I am interested in the currency of early
childhood professional training and bring both my personal and professional experience
as a queer educator and researcher to this study.

Early Childhood Education professional training has been offered for over twenty
years in Ontario. The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) is
responsible for ensuring all ECE programs meet the Program Standards and Vocational
Learning Outcomes for educators. In 2011, MTCU undertook a review of the vocational
standards for the Early Childhood Education Program being offered at all twenty-four
community colleges. The new standards released in 2012 following a public consultation
process with faculty, administrators, educators and external stakeholders, summarize a
graduate’s responsibility in early childhood practice. The revised standard states that the
graduate will “establish and maintain inclusive early learning environments that support
diverse and equitable and accessible developmental and learning opportunities for all
children and their families” (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities 2012). How
theses particular expectations evolve in the professional education of early childhood
educators in mixed.

In the introduction of my study, I note that the Ontario College of Early
Childhood Educators, a self-regulatory body for early childhood educators is authorized
through the Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007 to set the requirements for qualification
of early childhood educators in Ontario. It has a membership of over 45,000 early childhood educators and places professional responsibility on educators under the relatively new Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice approved in 2011. In regulated early childhood programs, including licensed child care and school board operated early learning programs, provincial legislation requires that early childhood educators have a minimum of a two year ECE diploma from one of the twenty four publicly operated colleges in Ontario. The College of Early Childhood Educators is developing a Continuous Professional Learning program that may necessitate ongoing learning activities to maintain registration with the College. These policy and jurisdictional shifts in early childhood education provide an opportunity to explore the currency of early childhood training and its links to the broader demographic changes in the province of Ontario.

The Early Childhood Education training program offered within the college sector consists of foundational courses in early childhood development with a focus on program skills and practices that are considered to be “developmentally appropriate”. Curriculum courses are available to understand and apply principles of developmentally appropriate practice. Policy documents make reference to this paradigm. Standards of practice embed principles that evaluate in early childhood practice; field placement expectations are designed with a developmentally appropriate lens and if that isn’t enough, materials for infant/toddler teachers are now available to ensure early childhood practice is appropriate for babies.

In my study, I demonstrate how principles of developmentally appropriate practice dominate much of the early childhood discourse and how the dominance of a
universal approach focuses on assumptions of child development and effective teaching strategies. The principles of developmentally appropriate practice are designed to provide an uncritical application of suggested early childhood practice based on normative patterns of child development, grounded in a common understanding of what is deemed to be significant. Developmentally appropriate discourse assumes a logical and linear process of development, situated in relation to expected patterns of development, void of a framework that questions expectations. For example, cognitive and language development and social and emotional skills receive extensive attention, but gender is discussed superficially and sexuality is silenced. I use a queer lens to highlight heteronormative perceptions of family and the perpetual struggle with gender stereotypes. My research interests are grounded in a polemical process that questions existing knowledge but also posits possible solutions on how to shift knowledge from a dominant framework to one that is more reflexive and engaging.

In the next section, I lay out the recent legislative and jurisdictional changes in early childhood, shifting it from a private family responsibility to a policy direction that is grounded in a public entitlement framework. I also summarize recent legal challenges that bring queer rights to the forefront, again having significant impact and demonstrating the need for early childhood training and practice to undergo a transformational change.
Chapter 3

Queer Rights in Canada

In early childhood education there is a potential to connect current policy and research knowledge to changes in professional education and practice. Contributions from understanding family law can strengthen educator knowledge. Another dimension to the “context” is the increasing attention being paid to the children’s rights perspective taken up to monitor the implementation of the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by Canada in 1991 (UNICEF, 2013). First introduced in 1989 by the United Nations, the CRC was established to ensure the protection of children. Queer parents and their children are also particularly affected by legislation and debate on the rights of queer citizens whether in their geographic context or in a more global context. In this chapter, I argue that it is necessary for educators to become aware of and to remain current in their knowledge of any legislation or policy direction that impacts on parents and their children to ensure that educators have some foundational knowledge in how legal challenges impact on professional practice. Strengthening connections between the changing legislative framework, policy direction and early childhood research ensures that early childhood practice is built on a foundation that remains current with changes in knowledge. In this chapter, I provide an overview of queer rights within the Canadian legislative context and specifically make reference to the Ontario Human Rights Code in relation to the early childhood policy framework.

According to Ettlebrick (2006), lesbian and gay relationships have been gaining recognition across the globe; opening civil marriage to same-sex couples, allowing them equal economic benefits, legal rights and social status as families. Same-sex marriages
are legally recognized in a number of countries including Spain, Canada, Belgium, South Africa, Israel, Norway and Portugal amongst others. However, homosexual acts are still illegal in countries such as Iran, India, Uganda and Jamaica. Despite an active transnational gay rights movement, the United Nations recently opposed the inclusion of “sexual orientation” from a resolution allowing arbitrary executions in criminal matters related to “homosexual” sexual acts without legal protections. Although Canada and the US supported the amendment to prevent execution based on sexual acts, the majority of the member states opposed the resolution. This enables a horrific practice to continue, putting at risk individuals who do not fit the dominant sexuality norm to face state sanctioned executions (Malone, 2011). On the other hand, international support for queer rights is also exemplified by Obama’s more recent support of gay marriage which made headlines everywhere, ensuring very public support by a very public face, including one that is recognized by young children.

In a global and migrant world, where children and families take up residence in different communities, it is important and relevant to analyze how individuals who do not fit the dominant sexuality construct are regularly targeted for harassment and the denial of their human rights. As my analysis in chapter eight will show, this dialogue is absent from the professional training of early childhood educators. Emphasis on the inclusion of all children and their families is limited to including immigrants and refugees but also lacks a critical deconstruction of the differences between the variety of immigrants and their birth land or both the challenges and resilience that refugees come with. I am not suggesting that the needs of immigrant families are consistently well served within early childhood programs (Bernhard 2013). Although issues of language disparity, racism and
poverty amongst some immigrants continue to remain prevalent, there is a recognition in early childhood education that immigration is part of the Canadian fabric and early childhood settings should be designed as social and physical spaces that are inclusive. This tends to get translated into welcome signs in a variety of languages symbolic of multiculturalism, creating that welcoming space for families that are immigrants. On the other hand, rainbow stickers representative of LGBTQ communities are not that common in early childhood programs.

An interesting twist to the Canadian immigration story brings together the experience of immigrants and refugees who happen to be both parents and queer. Canada is viewed as a safe country for queer individuals and there are an increasing number of immigrants and refugees who identify as queer coming to Canada. Some of them have young children and will access early childhood education programs as part of their settlement and integration process in Canada. The presence of immigrants and refugees in early childhood programs, some of whom come from communities where queer rights are not recognized, requires more than the simple understanding of inclusion to ensure a deeper conceptualization of diversity and difference and all its multifaceted influences.

Rethinking how families are defined whether through biological or social ties, in trans families or hetero families, where English or Spanish is spoken at home, where family stress is an active ingredient and not just limited to low income families, re-defines how educators relate to families – beyond normative assumptions of what may seem like healthy families to what may in fact be families at risk. Queering the family tree (Epstein, 2009) takes some imagination of who counts as legitimate family. Early childhood knowledge and practice can shape those possibilities.
How families are defined has been transformed from a private entity to one where the state has both direct and indirect involvement. The patriarchal and private historical narrative of the family has shifted to one where “the family comes to appear not as a special zone isolated from the rest of society, but as an integral part of it, and possibly a microcosm of its inequities and injustices” (Minot, 2000, p. 24). The state, in some shape or form, defines marriage and divorce laws, adoption rights, custody arrangements, financial obligation of parents and obviously connected to this research, what counts as “family” within a family law and rights framework.

Canadians have a long history of challenging the government for additional rights using the legal systems in place, particularly the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to ensure a fair and just society for all. The debate on the right to marriage between individuals of the same-sex, access to spousal benefits, the right to partake in health care decisions and the right to parent children within relationships outside the heteronormative construct of family has involved challenging discriminatory practices in existing laws. The former Prime Minister of Canada, Pierre Trudeau, lead the early inclusion of partial rights for people that identified as lesbian and gay, by decriminalizing homosexual activity in 1969 (Rayside, 2008). The persistent advocacy work of gay rights activists, combined with legal challenges throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s, resulted in the granting of a number of significant policy changes including recognizing same-sex couples within Census Canada, the right to marry granted in 2003, and consequently, the right to claim survivor pension benefits and the right to claim parental leave under Canada’s employment insurance program in 2007.

Until very recently it was not only against the law to marry within same-sex
relationships in the United States and United Kingdom, it was punishable by law to engage in what is considered sodomy. It wasn’t until 2003, that Texas struck down laws against homosexuality. In many ways, Canada’s record on rights for lesbians and gays surpasses other democratic nations. Yet, the current federal conservative government has attempted to open up the debate on same-sex marriage to no avail and continues to challenge the inclusion of gender identity and gender expression in the *Canadian Human Rights Act* (Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere, 2010). A private member’s bill submitted to the House of Commons to offer full protection for transgender and transsexual Canadians passed with the majority of the members of Parliament voting in favour of the bill. However, without approval in the Senate, the bill dies. It is worth noting that trans rights gaining support from all parties at the federal level was an important step forward only to be held back in a Senate backed by Conservative members.

In a recent development at the federal level, *Bill C-279*, an Act to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code passed which recommended that the *Canadian Human Rights Act* include gender identity and gender expression as prohibited grounds of discrimination. The issue of including gender identity in human rights legislation continues to be considered at multiple levels – a debate only possible because of the existence of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* that is enshrined in the constitution and the need to have fundamental rights recognized.

In another positive outcome, Ontario became the first province in Canada (and the second jurisdiction, after the Northwest Territories) to accept ‘gender identity’ and ‘gender expression’ as protected grounds in its *Human Rights Code* (2012). Supported by MPPs from all three parties, this law demonstrates that when human rights are enshrined
in legislation, it ensures the protection of marginalized communities; something not
guaranteed without legislation. Translating new legislation into early childhood
professional training and practice requires deconstructing the existing standards of
practice and what knowledge is valued in shared reflective practice. Without engaging in
this process that currently reinforces only principles of developmentally appropriate
practice, educators are out of touch with new legislation, policy and research that has
direct implications on the standards of practice.

The legal context is relevant in early childhood professional training and practice
because so much of the work is tied not only to children’s development and family
relations but also to the broader issues of social inclusion. Ideas bound by diversity,
equity and inclusion are not to be discounted but could be deconstructed to ensure that
they are current and relevant in a changing family and legal context in Canada. The
practice of early childhood education is very much influenced by broader contexts. This
is particularly significant in relation to the well being of children and their families.

The Myth of the Hetero Nuclear Family

Within the Canadian legal and policy context, the modern myth of the hetero-
nuclear family has undergone significant reframing, recognizing that the new diverse
constitution of parents and parenting allows a more complex re-envisioning of the family
that distinguishes the multiple social and legal family and parent child relationships that a
child may encounter in transformative contemporary families (Gananathan 2008).
According to Gavigan (1995), “the terrain of family is a site of struggle and challenge
that tests the universality of family form, rejects its naturalized quality and the
denigration of other forms of relationships…for defenders of the traditional family, the
stakes are high” (p. 104). Whether sanctioned by the state or opposed by religious organizations, queer families and their children are making their presence known in all their complexity in early childhood and school programs, demanding the attention of educators, policy makers and legal experts. Queer families and their children, push the boundaries of what are traditional understandings of diversity and difference – they are an illustration of what is possible.

The past decade has seen Canadians continue to grapple with gay marriage, as it remains a socially and politically contentious issue. According to Statistics Canada there has been a surge in the number of same-sex couples in Canada tripling between 2006 and 2011, reflecting the first full five-year period for which same-sex marriage has been legal across the country (Statistics Canada, 2012). Although same sex families are becoming more socially acceptable, with a majority of Canadians supporting gay marriage (Angus Reid, 2010), it remains unclear if these statistics accurately reflect the complexity and difference identified in queer communities. For example, a trans man living with his female partner would likely not identify as “same sex” in the Census, discounting his presence. Although an argument that advocates for inclusion of difference based on demographics is limited in scope, it is important to recognize that the numbers indicate a shift away from traditional hetero assumptions about who is having children and how. By the same token, the inclusion of the term same-sex is limited but also indicative of where government opinion and therefore potential social policy lies. The proponents of same-sex marriage rights have often positioned themselves as normative, committed couples desiring only the same rights that other non-queer couples enjoy, in the process reducing the sexualized nature often assumed in queer relationships. In my opinion, this
sanitized perception of queer makes it more accepting to engage in a coupling ensuring that queers can also form family.

For example, in her analysis of photo depictions of marriage, Valverde (2012) argues that during debates in favour of same-sex marriage in Canada, there was an “array of perfect same-sex couples”…at odds with representation of the classic homosexual” (p. 362). She found that lesbian couples had a tendency toward conservative office attire, and depictions of gay men were dominated by middle-class, middle aged white men. There were few representations of men in dresses or women dressed as butch. However, more recently, with the advent of changes to the Ontario human rights legislation that includes gender identity, the general public is exposed to the realities of trans women and men facing discrimination often in its most brutal form. Similarly, a decision to raise a child without reference to their gender raises the public profile of gender stereotyping and the extent to which it gets reified in the pre-natal term and immediately as soon as the baby is born. The story of baby Storm, took most people by surprise when her/his parents made a conscious decision not to divulge the child’s gender (Poisson, 2011). Aside from the attention the family received in the global media, they also opened possibilities for conversation and learning about how we raise children, and the possibilities of raising them in a much more fluid way rather, than through the binaries that parents and educators often impose on children, including babies like Storm.

The development of new medical and scientific reproductive technologies has ruptured the dominant biological process and eroded the familiar social arrangements that relied on the traditional biological order. Although “jurisprudence and legislation regulating the family status of gay and lesbian people, and their children is a relatively
new phenomenon in Canada” (Cameron, 2008 p. 103), increasing numbers of lesbian mothers are choosing to give birth and co-parent with partners with the assistance of known or unknown sperm donors. Gay fathers are entering into surrogacy agreements with women in order to have and raise children outside the typical hetero family construct. Trans men are pregnant and creating family in seemingly unsurprising ways given the advance of science and its large-scale modifications of what we once felt were immutable elements of biology (Crosbie, 2008). Sexuality and procreation have become uncoupled and making babies has increasingly occurred outside the heterosexual marriage (Cossman and Ryder, 2001).

Queer families and their children are a part of the Canadian landscape and although early childhood educators do not need to become family law experts they do need to be attuned to the myriad of legal challenges that re-define family and parental rights policy which in turn influences professional practice. Knowledge currency in education is particularly important to ensure that curriculum and pedagogy supports the variety of differences educators experience with children. Similar to understanding the issues that some immigrant families face, educators should also be aware of challenges that some queer families’ experience. Goldberg and Blushwood Rose (2009) argue that diversity in queer families is perhaps more complex than in other families ranging from known to unknown donors, multiple parents, trans parents, gay dads, lesbian mothers, gender queer parents – having a deeper understanding of the biological and social constructs of parenting would strengthen early childhood practice.

As part of professional practice, maintaining knowledge of new research and information that affects early childhood programs is significant, particularly since parent
engagement is such a critical component of establishing high quality early childhood professional practice. Penn (2012) suggests that early learning professionals often have a narrow view of parent involvement, expecting contributions to raise funds or participate in field trips. In some jurisdictions, parents are viewed as “rightful partners in the enterprise of care and education” (p. 60). Given the challenges of parenting in queer families where their legitimacy is questioned, where their identity is silenced (Robinson and Diaz, 2007), it becomes particularly difficult to engage with parents as “rightful partners” if educators are unable to recognize the increasing visibility of queer families in all of its complex forms. I argue that educators have a responsibility to understand more clearly the evolution of family law and how it influences policies that are developed in early learning programs, removing potential barriers that queer parents may experience. For example, two significant cases contribute to how the legal context has changed with potential impact on the professional training program of early childhood educators’ understanding of queer family composition.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (2007) describes the complex nature of queer families when faced with social backlash while dealing with legal challenges. Until very recently, only heterosexual parents were able to register both their names on their child’s birth registration because the form required a mother and father, necessitating same-sex couples to go a step further and undergo a legal “step parent” adoption by the non-birth mother. In the case of M.D.R. v. Ontario Deputy Registrar General, four lesbian families gained the legal right to register their children’s birth registrations under the Vital Statistics Act (VSA) in Ontario. Initially, the Ontario government contested the recognition of lesbian co-mothers, claiming that the VSA birth
registration document was meant to capture biological particulars. However, it became evident during these proceedings that in practice, an overwhelming number of straight families using donor sperm or eggs register the particulars of the intended parents without any connection to biology. This victory allowed both mothers in a same-sex relationship to be listed in the statement of live birth gaining a presumptive proof of parentage for both, regardless of their biological ties. This ruling was clearly a positive step towards recognizing the rights of diverse family forms that are outside the natural and biological order. These cases and others support my argument for a deeper understanding of diversity and difference and challenge the typical understanding of families that confront queer families in ECE settings.

In another interesting case that challenges the normative understanding of family known as AA v. BB, enabled the right of the biological father, the biological mother and the non-biological mother to register their names on the registration of their child (Ontario Human Rights Commission 2007). Beyond the biological nature of parenting, the courts also validated the more often social nature of parenting by extending rights to the non-biological parent to ensure the “best interests” of the child. By extension, the legal rights granted to this queer family needs proper consideration in the complex nature of parent-child relationship, something that is absent from early childhood development texts. The incremental rights gained by queer parents and their children continue to challenge us when we first meet them. At the same time, if in fact educators proclaim to build partnerships with parents in order to build trust with their child and to ensure an optimal learning experience, than one must ask how prepared are educators to deal with these queer combinations of family? If Canada seemingly has progressive and inclusive
laws that support the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans parents, why is early childhood so heteronormative in its ideology? Legal rights don’t necessarily translate to social rights – sometimes the law is positioned in place of social reform. However, I believe educators have an ethical responsibility to challenge policies and practices that are exclusionary – ensuring that social reform advocacy is very much a part of professional practice.

The absence of discourse that engages early childhood educators to consider the intersections of race, gender, citizenship and sexuality continues to maintain professional expectations based on educators that are caring, empathetic, fair and act with integrity (College of ECE, 2011) rather than critical thinkers who understand that characteristics that promote fairness do not guarantee rights for all children and their parents. This approach reinforces an assimilationist approach. There is interest in equality in policy and practice but equality for one group of citizens does not necessarily mean equality for another group. The diversity of family now includes trans parents and often more than three parents. It includes a birth registry for lesbians and gay. This policy and legal change forces educators to move into a zone that challenges our typical understanding of family and does play a significant role in early childhood knowledge and practice.

In this chapter, I laid the context for early childhood education in Ontario, noting the transfer of early childhood from the welfare oriented Ministry of Children and Youth Services to the publicly oriented Ministry of Education. I explained the significant influence of the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion arguing that these institutional ideas limit opportunities to deconstruct their significance for a deeper understanding of diversity and difference. I explained new developments in queer rights
and their application to early childhood practice. In the next chapter, I build the foundation of my study through a review of literature focusing on developmentally appropriate practice and elucidate the limited discussion on sexuality and gender development in early childhood professional training. I continue to build connections between the influence of philosophical paradigms and the experiences of queer parents in early childhood programs.
Chapter 4

Key Debates in Early Childhood Education: A Review of the Literature²

In this chapter, I discuss three areas of literature to explore the interconnectedness between ideas about diversity and equity, developmentally appropriate practice and the absence of sexuality in child development discourse. I analyze how a limited view of diversity and difference contributes to the silence of sexuality in the child development and parent engagement discourse. Two common threads of developmentally appropriate text include the importance of parent engagement and the absence of sexuality – seen potentially as dangerous and not developmentally appropriate. I will discuss both in detail in the following sections.

I begin by providing an overview of how diversity, equity and developmentally appropriate practice are defined and articulated in the legal and policy context and in documents related to early childhood training and professional learning in Ontario. I follow with the existing critiques of this paradigm and show how my study fills a gap in relation to sexuality and queer parents. I also analyze literature related to child development discourse and the absence of sexual and gender development in children. I close with how parent engagement is situated in early childhood practice as indicative of high quality programming but argue that engagement with queer parents is not well

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understood by early childhood educators. The analysis of the existing literature on developmentally appropriate practice demonstrates the dominance of a heteronormative understanding of child development and family engagement and as a result, queer parents are not represented in expectations for partnerships with parents.

Early childhood researchers approach the study of children and their families in a myriad of complex and diverse methods. Like in other disciplines, early childhood research may be explored in a linear and logical way, using collections of data gathered over time or using approaches that are more relational and fluid through qualitative designs, avoiding assumptions about what will be found. MacNaughton and Rolfe (2010) suggest that researchers are inquisitive and interested in exploring issues that are puzzling. I became interested in exploring queer perspectives in early childhood professional education as a result of a personal experience. About 10 years ago, close friends of mine approached me to discuss a homophobic experience they had in their child care centre. We discussed options on how to resolve this, and they told two friends, who told two friends – I soon became the local help line for queer parents with young children in child care.

I was somewhat confused by the number of parents who had reasonable concerns, especially since early childhood practitioners easily espouse the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion. With those principles in place, those educators were remiss in understanding that they were dealing with a new crop of parents – sprouting all over the place. This led me to explore in depth the knowledge that early childhood educators were receiving in their pre-service training programs about queer parents and their children.
As I explored literature on queer theory, queering fiction, queering politics in Mexico, queering education, queering art, queering geography, queering midwifery, queering performance, etc., I began to think of how regularized my thesis title was. On the other hand, I realized that exploring ideas of queer in early childhood was limited in some jurisdictions and silent in others. In reviewing more commonly known early childhood research, I found that there is a myriad of empirical research that is grounded in valuable quantitative methodology. Government policy and spending on early learning is frequently based on target communities, child outcomes and the impact of low socio-economic status on school success. Working with ideas that challenge and deconstruct existing mainstream scholarship signified coming out as a researcher who is more grounded in the atypical, shifting away from measurements and outcomes based evidence, choosing instead to explore scholarship that may be perceived as queer, and perhaps undesirable. Empirical early childhood researchers prefer to work with large data sets and evidence based research that helps to inform intervention programs. Although there is a growing body of scholarship that counters the traditional approach to research and evaluation, I would argue, in the early childhood research world, queer functions as subaltern (Spivak, 1994) and does not lie comfortably within what is popular.

In my research study exploring the links between the experiences of queer parents and early childhood knowledge, the term queer created a burst of reaction, and a little exploration of its meaning is warranted to understand why I faced so much resistance in my choice of words. At the same time, what is at the core of queer is the very nature of its fluidity and possibility to enable an evolving questioning which makes defining queer an impossible undertaking. However, I do believe that in order to interrogate the
experiences of queer parents and their children in early childhood programs, understanding how queer identity is situated in early learning is valid.

**Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**

In the Canadian context, there is an interesting history of the terminology that has infused itself over time into early childhood research, policy and practice. In many ways there are clear links between demographic shifts and the questions that are taken up by researchers. There are also interesting connections between those demographic shifts and how public policy is influenced. The formal acknowledgement of issues of diversity in Canada was established through the Federal government’s *Multiculturalism Act of 1988* as a response to the growing demographic diversity. It also established a new policy framework that would support a growing awareness of multiculturalism with a hope of reducing discrimination. Issues of diversity are more complex than the variety of cultural backgrounds that Canadians come with, infusing aspects of language, income, citizenship, sexuality, ability and so forth. However, I suggest that a combination of a focus on multiculturalism and scholarship from the United States brought ideas of diversity, equity and inclusion to the forefront.

The work of Louise Derman-Sparks (1989), in particular her book *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*, was influential in the Ontario context. I recall teaching in an early childhood program in the mid 1990’s and being strongly encouraged to ensure that I implemented her ideas into my course work. Derman-Sparks paid attention to issues of race in relation to development acknowledging that children as young as two years understood racial differences and would often opt to not play with dark skinned children, because they thought they were dirty. The idea that
young innocent children could incite these feelings through a developmental process was both provocative and true. Her position challenged educators who were interested in looking more deeply into how race and, to a certain point, social class played out in early learning environments. More than ten years later, Derman-Sparks and her colleague Patricia Ramsey (2011) released *What if All the Kids are White?* This book was written in response to ongoing questions about the irrelevance of bringing issues of racism to the forefront when everyone in the classroom is White. Again, Derman-Sparks and Ramsey take on White identity head on, challenging educators to support children’s ability to resist racism and to be more attuned to the extent of diversity outside the obvious marker of race through skin colour.

Interestingly, policy focus in Canada was drawn to legislative markers such as the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1985) established to provide equality and legal rights and freedom of expression and religion. The Charter is often upheld as a marker of civil society and utilized on a regular basis to challenge existing policy that is deemed to be discriminatory. At the provincial level, each jurisdiction has its own version of the *Human Rights Code*. In Ontario, the specific reference to include everyone for protection against discrimination based on age, race, disability, sexual orientation, and most recently gender identity and gender expression makes it more progressive than others (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2013).

In the Ontario early childhood context, notions of diversity, equity and inclusion became more apparent across the professional education of educators in government policy documents and in tools that measured quality. At the forefront, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities established ECE training standards for
colleges offering professional training. In relation to diversity and equity, the preamble (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2011) states:

Graduates create safe, healthy and inclusive early learning environments that support equitable and accessible learning opportunities for children with diverse abilities, interests and ideas, and their families. Early childhood educators work collaboratively with colleagues, children and families from diverse cultures, experiences and backgrounds. Early childhood educators form partnerships with families, and support their parenting through ongoing communication, guidance and education. Graduates form collaborative relationships with professionals from other disciplines to support holistic development of all children. (p. 4)

The expectation set out by the government ensures, at least in principle, that all early childhood educators in the province of Ontario will demonstrate the ability to create safe learning environments while promoting equitable opportunities in partnership with families. Based on this premise, each college is evaluated based on six standards including one that specifically relates to issues of diversity and equity. Each graduate is measured against these very specific standards and is expected “to establish and maintain inclusive early learning environments that support diverse, equitable and accessible developmental and learning opportunities for all children and their families” (p. 6). Each of the standards is transferred into course outcomes, field practicum evaluations and best practice documents through discourse that supports principles of diversity and equity
with a strong affiliation toward inclusion of all children, including those that have identified learning needs.

The College of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario’s Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (2011) advances the focus on diversity and equity and stipulates that in order to establish caring relationships with children and their families, “early childhood educators establish professional and caring relationships with children and families. They engage both children and their families by being sensitive and respectful of diversity, equity and inclusion” (p. 13). Similarly, the provincial curriculum framework, ELECT (2007) suggests that demonstrating respect for diversity is important to learning but goes a step further to explicate what this means in practice. ELECT states that educators demonstrate this respect in the following manner, “They can take into account the differences each child and family brings to an early childhood setting including appearance, age, culture, ethnicity, race, language, gender, sexual orientation, religion, family environment and developmental abilities” (p. 11). Promoting issues of diversity and difference and adding a social justice lens to the discourse pushes the agenda beyond a soft yet often popular approach in early learning. Goals to ensure equity in learning environments or in relationships with children and their families are laudable, however, can be simplistic in nature. The tendency to speak of diversity and not speak of racism, or discrimination based on social class or homophobia, is an attempt to silence the difficult and problematic issues that face educators at all levels of teaching and learning. The preference to focus on diversity, equity and inclusion drives early childhood toward a path that is silent on queer issues, silent on children who experience gender differently from their birth identity, mute on the intersection of how this silence
impacts on the desired optimal learning or the desired partnership with parents. This
intersection becomes more apparent as I uncover queer silence in my research findings.
Foucault’s analysis of universities as places of normalizing knowledge has relevance to
early childhood studies. He suggests, “a university’s primary function is of selection, not
so much of people as of knowledges. It can play this selective role because it has a sort
of de-facto- and dejure – monopoly” (Foucault, 1993, p. 183).

Similar ideas of developmentally appropriate practice are commonly framed in early childhood training without a deeper analysis of research that challenges the
dominant nature of this idea. This is particularly troubling in the Ontario context when there is such significant diversity in demographics, relatively progressive family policy and an increasing pool of qualified educators.

**Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

Another paradigm central to the early childhood teacher-training program are core ideas that include understanding broadly typical and atypical child development patterns, creating programs that are developmentally enriched that include the interests of children and working closely with families to ensure a partnership that is mutually beneficial. These expectations are situated within a broader knowledge expectation laid out by standards established by the government and endorsed by the regulatory body that also governs early childhood educators. In the following discussion, I present a summary of principles of developmentally appropriate practice and a counter view to the dominance of these principles. I demonstrate that despite opportunities to bring a different viewpoint to early childhood knowledge, the principles of developmentally appropriate practice remains central in professional education, research, policy and practice.
Current early childhood professional training in Ontario offers a pedagogical framework that is dominated by Anglo-American approaches to plurality and inclusion of all children and families. Developmentally appropriate practice is a teaching approach grounded in research on how children learn and what is known about effective early education (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009). The seminal text often used in early childhood training was developed initially by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) based in Washington D.C. but is now extensively embedded in curriculum material, field placement expectations and course readings. I argue that this text is entangled extensively in early childhood studies, professional learning and practice. Despite significant scholarly work that challenges the principles of developmentally appropriate practice, it continues to grow in its influence across different cultural contexts. Developed initially by the North American Association for the Education of Young Children, the principles of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) are now in their third iteration.

The influence of DAP is far and wide, reaching global discussions on early child development (Shallwani, 2010). The principles of developmentally appropriate practice have been critiqued at length for its prescriptive message on what is deemed to be “appropriate”. Penn (2010) argues that “DAP was created for an American early childhood policy context where many of the early childhood staff are poorly trained” (p.152). However, in the Canadian context, early childhood educators are required to have formal early childhood training in post secondary institutions. DAP offers a handbook of practical suggestions for activities with young children – something to support the knowledge base of a low-skilled group of staff that may provide very basic
quality standards. For example, developmentally appropriate practice recognizes the individual differences of children’s development and learning style. It also suggests that educators be attuned to the various social and cultural contexts in which children are raised. However, as noted earlier, in the American context, this tends to focus on migration and language issues – particularly in relation to children of Latino background. It makes no reference to other social, language or cultural contexts. In Ontario, and more specifically Toronto, the majority of non-English speakers include Chinese, Tamil, and Urdu speakers who come with their own individualized family and cultural context. Canada’s historical framework context also includes a significant history of First Nations Peoples – meaningful dialogue that is absent in the developmentally appropriate practice discourse. For the purpose of my study, I analyze the related literature with a focus on sexuality and gender, which takes on relevance within the Canadian legal context and provincial policy framework.

**Critiques of Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

Despite a wide ranging critique of the principles of developmentally appropriate practice, my focus in challenging these principles is to question its limitation, to rupture the dominant discourse of heteronormativity and the propensity to silence the existence of queer families in early childhood settings. As a result, it becomes necessary to move “queer” from a position of “other” to one that is more apparent in early childhood practice in order to affect both parents and children. Although there are twelve general principles of child development that inform developmentally appropriate practice, I chose not to focus on any specific points – instead fixing my gaze on how the general idea of developmentally appropriate practice promotes a narrow perspective of development. I
see an opportunity to de-stabilize the comfort sought in the embrace of what is understood as developmentally appropriate practice within the broader diversity and equity lens to reconceptualize research and practice in early childhood education. Early childhood pedagogy is a complex undertaking and I see the principles of developmentally appropriate practice as far too simple within the context of family relationships, children’s individual genetic patterns, cultural and language variation, citizenship, socio economic status and of course sexuality. A limited understanding of what is deemed appropriate, limits opportunities to relate to children in the complex beings that they are.

The principles of developmentally appropriate practice contribute to the problem of a hegemonic approach to child development. An early childhood educator’s pedagogical practice is grounded in individual developmental differences yet there is a sense of universality of development through the application of developmentally appropriate principles. A contradiction challenged by both developmentalists and post-modern researchers.

The principles of developmentally appropriate practice are often broadly linked to developmental science. However, in the field of developmental science, researchers such as Patterson and her colleagues (2009, 2011) have utilized traditional modes of gathering data to study the impact of living in LGBTQ families. Patterson has found children living in LGBTQ families are fully engaged and fitting into healthy developmental patterns. Despite the controversial treatment programs associated with gender identity issues in young children, the Canadian Psychological Association (2010), indicated their support for adolescents and adults having a right to define their own gender. Although developmental child psychology can be attributed to a narrow understanding of child
development, there are aspects of progressive research that present a broader understanding of child development and professional practice. My position attempts to offer a balance between science and criticality. Some examples of developmental science offer evidence that supports effective teaching practice and policy development. This kind of research does not get translated into developmentally appropriate discourse, which is central to early childhood training. In the following discussion, I present a counter view to the dominance of developmentally appropriate practice and demonstrate that despite opportunities to bring a different viewpoint to early childhood knowledge, it remains central in research, policy and practice.

Walkerdine (1981) set an early course in challenging the assumptions behind the notion of developmentally appropriate norms. By using Foucault’s analysis of how societies create notions of truth, she questioned the production of truth in child development. Despite these early challenges to ideas of appropriateness and truth in development, early childhood training programs continue to espouse a construction of childhood based on Western hegemonic assumptions. Western truths about child development dominated by the gendering of children, the denial of sexuality and a sanitized understanding of difference are reinforced amongst discourses that “transmit and produce power and as such are an important instrument of power” (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 2007, p. 31). The work of Foucault provides a method with which to examine the regimes of power organizing normative discourses and categories of human development. I use aspects of post-structural thinking to consider the impact of heteronormativity on parent engagement.
According to MacNaughton (2005):

Despite Foucault’s deep and continuing influence in diverse fields of study, early childhood students (and instructors) rarely meet Foucault’s work or the work of post-structuralist thinkers. It’s hard to find, for example, Foucault’s ideas of disciplinary power, docile bodies and power and knowledge in mainstream early childhood texts. (pp. 3-4)

Notwithstanding the significant influence of parent engagement in early childhood learning, there is some suggestion that containing the discussion of sexual diversity to a family descriptive is limiting, and an attempt to “normalize” and perhaps sanitize queer family relations. Robinson (2005) argues that the legitimation of queer individuals within the context of the family merely contributes to a process of normalization through which sexual differences are deemed to be more acceptable discourses of family diversity (p. 428). I believe there is room for discourse that critically evaluates the relations between early childhood educators and families, as well as the desire to contain gender and sexual identification in children. In this study, I build connections between the narratives of queer parents and the dominant discourse of developmentally appropriate practice that embeds heteronormativity in early childhood education professional preparation and practice. By extension, child development theory by and large is grounded in a gender binary of male and female children, perpetuating traditional and limited understandings of childhood.

In their analysis of public and political response to a television show called
Playschool, aired in Australia, Taylor and Richardson (2005) demonstrate how a segment that showed a young girl visiting a park with her moms “caused moral panic at the mere suggestion of associating young children with homosexuality, and how public debate ensued about what is and what is not appropriate for young children and who might decide this” (p. 165). They further argue that:

Hegemonic discourses of childhood innocence and ‘compulsory heterosexuality are consistently displayed in the metaphor of natural childhood innocence that has been subsumed within the educational science of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) and reconfigured as a foundational premise of age-appropriate – and hence protective, nurturing and enabling – sequence and order. (p. 165)

Early childhood educators make decisions on a daily basis on what information to share and what information to withhold. This is driven by ideas that young children are only capable of dealing with information that maintains a level of neutrality – perhaps to protect young minds from being bombarded with issues that may challenge and are not developmentally appropriate. However, Donelson and Rogers (2004) argued against developmentally appropriate curriculum suggesting that such pedagogical practice was built on a psychological rather than an educational paradigm, that has enabled curricula that allow teachers to view themselves as non-coercive, un-prejudiced practitioners committed to keeping politics out of the schools.

Yet, there is nothing a-political about education or educators. Teaching is a passionate, engaging livelihood that can enable or disable a child’s learning. Being
attuned to the individual learning needs that respects a child’s family context is critical to successful teaching. And despite the growing debate and critique amongst some early childhood researchers who challenge the principles of developmentally appropriate practice as a single universally accepted, normalizing approach to early childhood development (Bernhard, 2002; MacNaughton, 2005; Pence and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2008; Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2006; Taylor and Richardson, 2005), the principles of developmentally appropriate practice continue to be prevalent in course texts, program curriculum, parent engagement strategies and professional practice playing a significant role in early childhood training and practice. In challenging the early childhood profession, Canella (1997) argues:

When any teaching method is marketed as the best or most appropriate for a particular group of people, the assumption is that there is [are] universal truths that are discoverable concerning teaching and that the “right” method predetermines outcomes. This pedagogical determinism is consistent with a positivist view that would scientifically reveal human truth. (pp. 130-131)

This inherent desire to deny difference beyond superficial definitions are documented by Robinson (2012) who argues that early childhood practice genders children as heterosexual beings through children’s narratives of “mock weddings, mothers and fathers, boyfriends and girlfriends. Such experiences are not linked to children’s own understanding of sexuality but are seen as children being children” (p. 6). Yet, play based learning provides opportunities to engage children beyond the dominant
heteronormative discourse. How would early childhood educators respond if two boys were taking care of their babies in the drama centre? The limited constructions of gender identity and sexuality consistently dominate early childhood discourse making anything remotely different that may inherently be tied to sex to be considered non-normative (Scattlebol and Ferfolja 2007). Borrowing a driving analogy, early childhood educators have a ‘blind spot” when examining the dominant assumption shaping their pedagogic practice and curricular choices in the classroom. This is not to simply critique early childhood practice but to explore “what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking, the accepted practices are based” (Fenech, 2011, p. 102).

Early childhood education’s propensity to normatively privilege heterosexuality is reflected in the image of the early childhood educator, relationships between parents and educators and the selection of children’s literature in early years settings. The privileging of a developmental perspective is still prominent (Gestwicki, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2012; College of Early Childhood Educators, 2011), without much consideration of individual history (Ryan and Grieshaber, 2005). In fact what we need is “frank discussion on the subject of sexual and gender identity and the issues facing those who do not conform to traditionally recognized cultural norms” (Queen, Farrell and Gupta, 2007, p. iv). Instead, what we have in early childhood curriculum and practice are superficial attempts to embed notions of diversity and equity, and a refusal to acknowledge how significantly different family composition is in the current social and political context. This is of particular significance in the Canadian context as queer rights are guaranteed in several provincial jurisdictions through iterations of human rights legislation, including
the Ontario Human Rights Code.

In my study, I demonstrate that developmentally appropriate practice within a context of diversity, equity and inclusion, continues to exacerbate the dominance of a unilateral view of childhood development and family. The prevalence of silence around sexuality and development, gender identity and the interests of queer parents is constructed within a hegemonic heteronormative pedagogical approach limiting possibilities for children and excluding some parents from the key role they play in the development of their children.

The further discouragement of non-normative expressions of gender in an attempt to challenge dominant power relations is limited in early childhood practice (Walkerdine, 1985; Yelland, 1998; Blaise, 2005). The ultimate silence around children’s relationships with queer identifications, explorations and performances and the failure of some early childhood educators to challenge the use of heterosexist and/or homophobic language in the classroom are further examples of heteronormativity (Robinson, 2005; Janmohamed and Campbell, 2009). Developmentally appropriate practice has been central to the educational aims of defining practice, measuring quality and universalizing childhood, the extent that it establishes a discourse of one way of knowing, that normalizes developmentally appropriate practice as the underlying truth. These normalized forms, as suggested by Sumara and Davis (1999), can be interrupted, challenging dominant forms of gender identity, sexuality and what constitutes development. However, in early childhood studies, notions of developmentally appropriate practice have become completely entangled and familiar in research and policy, as well as in practice. The term is almost intrinsic to early childhood programs but significantly problematic to the
complexity of diversity and difference and how queer identity is silenced.

In addition to the more commonly understood identities, children with queer parents may be adopted or may have been created with a known or unknown donor. Children may be born through surrogacy or may be part of a previous heterosexual relationship. These queer variations on conventional notions of “family” demand consideration by early childhood educators, again challenging the discourse of normative human development. The silence of queering identities invokes a pathologization as Butler (1993) has suggested. I am arguing that the term developmentally appropriate practice plays a significant role in relationships between early childhood educators and parents and by extension establishes a discourse that is dominated by heteronormativity in early learning and care programs. Viruru (2005) demonstrates that despite important scholarly work on the limitations and colonial assumptions underlying developmentally appropriate practice, dominant discourse of childhood continues to dominate and pervade not only Euro-western practice but also early childhood development in the majority of the world. Warner argued that heteronormativity is reified and embedded in things, as observed—in ordinary, everyday activities and played out in the daily interactions and activities in early childhood settings (as cited in Adams, 2004, p. 16). Examples include lining children up by gender, ignoring boys engaged in aggressive behaviour, suggesting instead “the boys are just being boys” and selecting children’s books that depict only the heterosexual family make up. The application of a queer analysis in early childhood studies provides an opportunity to unpack a schooling discourse still tied to Anglo-American and normatively determined standards of developmentally appropriate practice. A critical reading of developmentally appropriate practice problematizes a hegemonic
perspective but also considers the potential movement of perspectives that are radically different from a universalizing discourse.

During a recent visit to an early childhood program, the educator asked the girls to find a boy partner to line up to go outside. I was surprised by the blatant heteronormative set up, but I was simply an observer. There were exactly sixteen children in the room with seven girls and nine boys. As I observed this transition, I wondered how the ECE would handle the last pair of two boys – as the children were lining up girl/boy, girl/boy etc., she quietly paired up the two boys that were not chosen by the girl children – one had Down Syndrome and the other was a child of Chinese background. As I think back to the incident, I am not entirely surprised – dominated by a unilateral construct of appropriate behavior, the educator engages in practice that continues to exacerbate the dominant nature of gendered behavior. This of course is counter-intuitive to how gender is perceived by theorists like Butler (1993) who argues:

The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production but not for that reason fully determining. To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment that is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate. (p. 230)

Yet, children as active social agents do not always follow the rules established by adults and will challenge the normative behaviour expected of them. For example, boys who enjoy quiet art activities and girls who are rambunctious or choose to urinate
standing up puzzle educators. Renold (2005) has posited if children do not conform to
dominant gendered practices, there is a higher risk of name calling and bullying that can
lead to potentially harmful consequences. In MacNaughton’s view (1998), “this
theoretical failure to understand the reasons why girls and women make the choices that
they do has been allied with the failure of many early childhood staff to create a desire
for greater gender equity amongst the children in their centres” (p. 156).

The gendering of children is a process that unfolds depending on family
expectations, learning opportunities and access to different and diverse experiences; but
mostly it depends on the child’s active participation in the roles they want to play. Blaise
(2005) has argued that feminist post structuralism and queer theory enable new ways of
listening to, observing and interpreting children. In early childhood practice, observing
and interpreting children’s behaviour is key to understanding and evaluating development.
Disrupting normative gender discourses among children may not be typical practice in
early childhood work, but it is possible through the awareness of how adult expectations
of children play out in the daily interactions we have with them. The notion that children
play with gender differences through dressing up and role play is challenged by Butler
who suggests, gender performativity is not a matter of choosing which gender one will be
today. Performativity, as Butler (1993) states, “is a matter of reiterating or repeating the
norms by which one is constituted” (p. 22). Pursuing a research agenda that continues to
reinforce dominant ideas of gender in early childhood only serves to maintain a binary
approach to understanding childhood development, complicating the lives of children that
do not fit the norm. The gulf between a post-structural view of gender development and a
positivist view continues to be divided. The issue of challenging normative expectations
moves early childhood discourse away from the dominant developmental perspective into one that is more grounded in a social and contextual paradigm.

Gender is often used as a point of comparison in studying aggression, attention span, self-regulation and academic achievement without serious consideration to external factors that may in fact affect levels of aggression, attention span, self-regulation and academic achievement. Factors such as teacher expectations, the child’s own intrinsic desires and interests, nutrition, adequate rest, and the time or lack of time to play outdoors can and do have an impact on children’s behaviour. For example, research on childhood aggression, particularly amongst boy children has been receiving attention pointing to the development of aggression during the early childhood years implicitly suggesting that girls do not experience aggressive behaviours, again reinforcing ideas that boys are more aggressive than girls simply because they exhibit it in an outward manner (Tremblay, 2000). At a recent symposium (2012) on the New Science of Child Development, researchers suggested again that boys were more aggressive, citing a number of factors including maternal stress and depression, low education and low income, combined with marital stress as early indicators. Sitting in the audience, I was slightly dumbfounded but not entirely surprised at an obviously sexist and limited perspective on family trauma.

Uncovering dominant discourses in early childhood research does not have a long arm and is in fact limited to very few scholars. For example in a study on self-regulation by Matthews, Ponitz and Morrison (2009), with a sample size of 268 children, the researchers suggest that although the gap in scholastic achievement between boys and girls is closing, boys tend to experience more expulsion. In exploring the reasons for this
unevenness, Matthews et al propose that the differences in the ability to self-regulate
behaviour and concentrate in the classroom is worth considering. At the same time, they
acknowledge, “the research literature in general remains unclear about the direct
significance of gender on self-regulation and academic achievement” (p. 700). If that is
the case, it is valuable to explore factors that influence the behavior of boys (and girls), to
understand more clearly how interrupting those behaviours with more responsive
teaching practice could lead to a shift away from the typical expectations of children
based on gender. Gendering of children build upon developmentally appropriate
discourse that encourages the boundaries established within a paradigm that limits
children to a male/female binary. Asserting a different perspective on childhood
development functions as an intervention to limit the unilateral pedagogical approach or
discourse that often surrounds early learning.

In an effort to carry out critical research, Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemony
provides a relevant framework to question how dominant forms of knowledge are
transferred through institutions like schools. Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) argue that
“…educators are hegemonized as our field of knowledge and understanding is structured
by a limited exposure to competing definitions” (p. 283). The ideological nature of
developmentally appropriate practice ensures a status quo approach to professional
preparation without an in-depth and critical reflection of the missing dialogue on how
social, familial, economic, and citizenship differences challenge a uniformed approach to
teaching and learning. Further, it certainly does not mark the dominance of a
heteronormative approach to childhood and family discourse nor does it enable an early
childhood educator’s knowledge and capacity to work with a growing diversity of families, including queer parents.

**Unveiling the Silence: Child Development and Sexuality**

It is rare to find a child development text that includes an understanding of children’s sexuality, often because children are seemingly protected through an imagery of innocence (Taylor and Richardson, 2005). The very idea that children may experience sexual pleasure raises warning signs and a threat to that paradigm of innocence that is so deeply instilled in society. But if in fact educators and parents are aware of children’s sexual experiences, doesn’t it simply make logical sense to explain it in the same way educators are so comfortable discussing cognitive development or language skills? However, there exists an undeniable discomfort around children’s sexuality, and it remains predominantly silent, extending the regulation around sexuality to children as well. Sexuality is seen as functional and reproductive, not as an evolving process in children’s development, creating fear of an image of children being sexual. On the other hand, children’s exposure to sexual relations in their own family, the media, and school playgrounds warrants a recognition that sexuality, like other areas of development, is a natural and expected process of human identity. Sears observes (1999), “childhood innocence is a veneer that we adults impress onto children, enabling us to deny desire comfortably and to silence sexuality” (p. 9). That is certainly more evident around queer sexuality because there is prevalence of practices that promotes heterosexuality – from seemingly innocent references of young children coupled as boyfriend/girlfriend, to a hetero focused sex education program for children in elementary school learning about puberty in health class.
Bickmore (1999) suggests that schools play a critical role in the formation of children’s identities arguing “gender role socialization, including the accompanying (de) valuation of (homo) sexual identities, is an inevitable element of the ways children are guided to behave by the hidden curriculum of peer interaction and school activities” (p. 16). The nature of institutionalized knowledge that focuses on homogenizing version inclusion rather than exclusion ensures that a limited standpoint is reiterated. As a result, the complex character of issues related to sexuality and gender identity and their impact on learning are not fully explored. By not addressing issues of gender and sexuality, early childhood discourse implicitly normalizes development through a heteronormative lens. The relationship between optimal development and the influences of the social environment is well understood; however, the focus tends to be on the relationship between adult and child, rather than on the impact of interactions between children.

On a recent dinner outing with friends, their daughter told the following story about her personal experience in a grade three classroom. She is a child born through donor insemination and lives only with her two mothers. I have to admit, I use every opportunity I can to talk with children about their experiences in school as it relates to teaching and learning but also as it relates to their budding social skills. Although not an official part of my study, I asked her mothers for permission to share this story to illustrate a repeated scenario amongst a number of families in my study. We were discussing another family that is considering having children and I asked her what it was like to have two mums.

It’s fine. Sometimes it gets a little weird. Like this boy asked me about my
parents and I told him I had two mums. Then he said “I don’t get it. Did one of your mums give birth to half of you and the other one, the other half”. The daughter responded to him by saying, “what do you think? No that’s not how it happened”. (Personal Communication, November 2012)

What I found really fascinating in this narrative was her complete disdain for the other child’s lack of knowledge, and certainly, this child wasn’t going to educate him about the truth. In the moment, she was upset about the situation, but after talking with her parents, she explained that he “didn’t get it,” showing that when educators do not discuss the diversity and difference in families, in communities and in the very schools where children spend hours every day, it then becomes incumbent on children to teach others. This of course can be positioned positively, but a child should not have to provide peers with, what I would argue, foundational knowledge of children. Although this represents a story of a child who is eight years old, there are similar stories with younger aged children in preschool and kindergarten programs that I explore in relation to parents’ experiences in early childhood programs.

In early childhood education, not surprisingly, very little research is explored in children’s understanding of sexuality or sexual orientation. The desire to present developmentally appropriate practice drives home the message that there are five areas of development that educators need to pay attention to including cognitive and language development, social and emotional development and physical development. The hegemony of child development knowledge does not pay enough attention to how childhood is socially and culturally constructed. Although children’s sexual development
may make some educators uncomfortable, it is very much the reality of being. The notion of sexuality and sexual orientation is completely absent from the discourse of developmentally appropriate practice, silencing one core aspect of children’s development. It’s very possible that although it is not spoken, it is considered developmentally inappropriate to experience sexuality and desire at an early age amongst children. Thakaray and Readdick (2003) demonstrate that preschool age children know some of the salient sexual body parts when asked to describe an anatomically correct doll. Previously, Lively and Lively (1991) showed that young children are not particularly knowledgeable about sexuality. These findings help to inform educators that preschool aged children are not disinterested – they simply do not know the anatomical parts, likely because far too many adults around them misuse language as it relates to sexual parts. Notions of developmentally appropriate practice could include sharing knowledge with children not just about their body parts but go one step further and recognize the critical role they play as the child’s educator in supporting a positive perspective on sexuality.

In a popular early childhood textbook utilized in many pre-service training programs, Pimento and Kernested (2010), offer a unit on sexuality interestingly under a section titled “Supporting Children’s Development”. They suggest, “Parents are the primary sexual health educators in children’s lives. But educators too have a significant role to play as sex educators” (p. 523). This is to be done through communicating positive body image, responding to children’s questions and being knowledgeable about sexuality. One of the goals of my study is to uncover early childhood educators’ knowledge about sexuality and all of its complexities, especially if understood in the fluid way some children and many adults engage with it.
Although knowledge about children’s sexuality is available and accessible to early childhood practitioners, albeit with a hetero lens, the uneasiness it creates is constant. In her essay, Phelan (1997) argues that touch and physical proximity cause anxiety, and both children and teachers are discouraged from close contact, putting into question the principle that close interactions and physical proximity in fact lead to a sense of security. Similar avoidance to understanding gender development beyond the heteronormative construct is also commonly reinforced in early childhood practice.

Sciarrafa and Randolph (2011) argue that educators’ response to children’s sexual curiosity and behavior signifies societal attitudes. Within the construct of developmentally appropriate practice and using the commonly understood developmental lens, the researchers suggest that infants and toddlers begin to understand what it is to be a girl or a boy based on observing the behaviours of same gendered adults around them.

Developmentally appropriate discourse is used to normalize the nature of same sex friendships common in the preschool years and exploration of bodies in play situation. However, it misses the opportunity to explain that like adults, children may experience attractions to children of a variety of genders, and the presumption of interest only in hetero relations is confining. Challenging the norm can be facilitated through children’s literature. For example, a popular children’s book offers a progressive narrative on childhood gender experiences. Karleen Pendleton Jimenez’s (2000) book, “Are you a boy or are you a girl?” tells the story of a child thinking about who they are and what kind of things they like to play with, giving voice to those children who do not fit the dominant gendered norm. Although under pressure by some of her peers who challenge her choices, the main character has a formidable mother who tells her, “You’ll never be a
girl like other girls and you’ll never want to. Ever since there were girls and boys, there have been girls who like to do boy things and boys who like to do girl things”. A children’s book with a queer lens opening possibilities for children is perfectly situated for an early childhood program, particularly when according to the variety of developmental scientists, a sense of personal identity is unfolding.

Chrisman and Couchenor (2002) explain that adult discomfort with sexuality makes it more difficult to know how to respond to children’s interests. MacGillviray, I. T. and Jennings, T, (2008) argue that early childhood educators make some choices in how and when sexuality is infused. Instead of knowing how to disrupt gender binaries, there is a heavier reliance on the dominant lens that promotes heteronormative discourse. Foucault (1978) contends that sexuality is a matter of discipline and surveillance. The notion of public v. private, hetero v. homo that needs a watchful eye to ensure that one form maintains dominance over the other, ensuring that children will understand based on interactions with adults, that hetero is acceptable and queer is not. This is evidenced by the silence on sexuality and as Blaise (2009) argues, “universalizing childhood reinforces the concept of the naturally developing child” (p. 451). This image of childhood is found within developmentally appropriate practice, and fails to recognize the importance of sex, gender, and sexuality as having an impact on children’s life experiences, learning, or development. However, understanding sexuality and keeping it at the forefront completes an understanding of child development. Sears proposes (1999), “Teaching queerly is not teaching sex. It embodies educators who model honestly, civility, authenticity, integrity, fairness and respect” (p. 4). Sears’ position is relevant to both the discussion on child development and family support – partnerships with parents are
viewed as central to optimal development and deemed to be necessary to ensure that there is a seamless integration between family and educators. At the core of early childhood practice is the expectation that educators will have knowledge about child development and function within the principles of developmentally appropriate practice. These principles are closely tied with the idea that in order to support optimal development, it is necessary to ensure that parents of young children are supported and respected – both for their knowledge and in their role as their child’s first teacher. In the next section, I argue that despite the desire to establish seemingly equitable partnerships with parents of young children, queer families are often absent from early childhood practice discourse.

**Early Childhood Education and Parent Engagement**

The most common textbook associated with the course on families in early childhood training is called *Partnerships: Families and Communities in Early Childhood* (2010), authored by educator Lynn Wilson. Embedded in thirteen of the twenty-four ECE college programs in Ontario, the book was “developed as a resource for students and faculty to encourage the development of positive, respectful relationships with parents” (p. xiii). It covers a multitude of topical discussions including diversity in families, supports for parents, child and family poverty, how to build effective partnerships, communication styles and advice on how to plan parent-teacher conferences. It also provides an environmental scan of families that use early childhood programs including teen parents, Aboriginal families, multiracial and older families, foster and adoptive families, divorced families and LGBTQ families. For the purpose of this study, I focus on the potential learning about working with families that ECE students experience through the use of this text.
In her introduction to a chapter titled *Families we shall meet*, Wilson (2010) states, “there is always a danger of organizing information in a way that leads to the assumption that families can be grouped together on the basis of similar characteristics and issues” (p. 304). In an attempt to recognize the diversity in LGBTQ families, Wilson uses the full definition of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender and queer to describe the spectrum of sexuality that individuals may experience. She goes further to include “questioning, intersex and Two-Spirited” (p. 340) to ensure that readers have a basic understanding of these identities. Without delving into the possible sexual identities that individuals may experience, by naming the possibility, Wilson creates a space to discuss what it means within a family context and provides the many ways in which sexuality is experienced. For example, Wilson describes transgendered as “anyone whose gender identity falls outside of the stereotypical expected behaviours of men and women” (p. 340). By describing a variety of sexual identities, Wilson creates knowledge not often found in early childhood training, raising awareness amongst early childhood education students. Wilson also describes demographic information extrapolated from Statistics Canada about the living arrangements of families that identify as same-sex. She could go further by describing the limitations of how the government of Canada collects data through the exclusion of other sexual identities; however, the inclusion of this information may trigger an awareness of the growing presence of LGBTQ individuals within early childhood programs. It is interesting to note that despite Wilson’s effort to reiterate family diversity beyond the typical immigrant, poor and same sex, ideas grounded in what is normative remain prevalent.
Parent engagement is at the core of preferred early childhood practice in the Western world and unlike teacher education, there is a requirement in Ontario for a separate course in the professional preparation program on how to involve parents. The focus on building partnerships is central to early childhood training and practice because young children live in a world that is focused on their primary family unit and their early learning environment. As a child develops, there tends to be less parent engagement; although, there is growing support that the relationship between parents and elementary and secondary school teachers need to be harnessed. The principles of parent involvement are grounded in a long history and tradition that active parent involvement in a child’s educational experience harnesses improved child outcomes and establishes a pattern of mutual reciprocity between parents and educators. The nature of parent involvement is often exemplified by invitations to participate in program activities, volunteer in the classroom, assist on field trips and to a certain extent, given the right kind of skills, that a parent may be invited to participate in the governance of a program. In a study of how “minority” parents engage with child care teachers, Bernhard (1998) and her colleagues found differing views between parents and educators. Although the minority parents would like to have been more involved in their children’s program, they perceived their child’s educator to be busy and unwilling to volunteer information to support their engagement. The study also found that racial and discriminatory events are not uncommon. Queer parents interested in participating in their child’s program also raise similar points of concern. These findings are troubling and more attention is being paid in early childhood parent engagement practice.
Patel, Corter and Pelletier (2008) have argued that a different focus for parent engagement should give families “real voice about what their goals are both for their children and for themselves, and ways to meet their diverse needs” (p. 104). There is a strong resurgence of a parent based advocacy movement that has led to parents being given a voice on everything from how decisions are made on school closures to funding of extra curricular activities and what issues are of most importance to parents. Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) propose that to support children making the transition from home to school or from preschool to formal school, educators should be more aware of how the child relates to their immediate environment including parents and to ensure a full understanding of that important early connection. In a study of pre kindergarten readiness centres, Corter and Pelletier (2005) suggest that the issue is not whether parents are involved in their children’s educational experience but how they are involved. Parents’ goals also differ based on whether the family spoke English as a first or second language that necessitated an evolution of the teachers’ goals to build in a more collaborative partnership model. Vanderbroek (2007, p. 25) argues that a multicultural approach to difference put “the focus on minority groups ignoring that diversity is also a majority issue”. Families living in poverty, experiencing stress and settlement issues do cross racial and cultural boundaries. Paying attention to the complexity of family intersection could deepen early childhood and teacher education policy and practice. In addition, recognizing the common misuse of authority amongst educators with parents is also problematic.

In Ontario, there is a significant variation in the type of early childhood service that parents can access for their young children. The perception of who counts as an
educator varies depending on professional training and status, employment in the public or private sector and in the case of early childhood programs, based on the application of appropriate legislation (Bryson, Purdon, Sibieta and Butt 2012). On the other hand, the minimum requirement in Ontario for certified teachers is a four-year undergraduate degree. To a certain extent all educators/caregivers have some semblance of authority with parents as it relates to their area of expertise. I would argue that qualified educators, in early childhood offer their “expert” advice to parents regularly – discussing children’s socio-emotional needs, explaining cognitive development and addressing issues of resiliency and learning. Pushor (2007) suggests that despite a historical pattern where educators held authority through their professional knowledge, it is possible to move toward a shared terrain where parent engagement enables exploration of a relationship that is based on shared knowledge and respect that both parents and educators bring to the table. Paying attention to these attributes is critical to moving toward a connectedness between child, parent and educator. There is a growing scholarship on the engagement of parents from diverse backgrounds that challenges the presumptions behind why some “minority” parents do not get involved in early childhood programs (Bernhard, Lefebvre, Kilbride, Chud and Fahlman, 1998; Patel, Corter and Pelletier, 2008). Like educators, parents have diverse expectations of early childhood programs. Some parents have time and interest to engage and others do not. However, although developmentally appropriate practice may suggest a desire to engage with all parents to establish common goals for learning, there are some groups of parents that tend to have more social capital and are in a position of authority to engage in a partnership process that may benefit their children.
A recent report by People for Education (2013) on publicly funded schools identifies a gap in resources for children depending on the status of their family income, often driving the type of school they have access to. It also notes unsurprisingly that new immigrants tend to have a lower family income and access to fewer resources. A comparison based on income and immigrant status for queer parents in early childhood programs is beyond the scope of this study. However, a consideration of the connection between social capital and parent engagement is worth noting. In the case of my study, parents who identified as gay dads seemed to have less acceptance than those parents that identified as lesbian mothers. Although all of the parents in my study were English speaking, there was variation in their gender, cultural, and socio-economic history. The parents identified multiple perspectives on what they deemed to be effective parent engagement strategies in education settings. However, they also noted that how their family was situated in their own family and community either gave them the support or often hindered their ability to be effective in their own parenting role.

In an interesting case of parents engaging but challenging the notion of what is acceptable parent involvement, one group of parents formed a strong intervention in a school activity that proposed a day to celebrate inclusion. Recently, children from an elementary school just north of Toronto, organized an “opposite gender day” to boost school spirit and to offer students from kindergarten to grade 8 (ages 4-13) an opportunity to understand what it felt like to be the opposite gender. However, opposition from parents concerned about the idea “of kids experiencing being people of the opposite gender has offended some people in the community and the school does not want that”. The reaction of the parents resulted in the cancellation of the event. In fact, members of the media headlined the
story as “York Region School Cancels Cross-Dressing Day”, (Davidson, January 20, 2011), negating the students’ interest to build gender awareness into a derogatory and discriminatory event. In the same way that parents advocated against the inclusion of sex education moving to grade three in Ontario (Hammer and Howlett, 2010), these examples of parent involvement, demonstrates the risky nature of how parents can either help or hinder the discussion of sexuality and queer issues in education. The nature of this intervention by parents reinforces the idea that gender is produced and determined by others.

I share this narrative as a way to demonstrate that parent engagement goes far beyond activities to boost literacy rates or how to create welcoming environments in school settings. Parents can determine a climate of progressive education as much as educators can. In this particular case, the parents in that community contradict educators’ attempts at critical education practice – voiding what could have been a very useful life and learning experience for those children. In this particular context, parent involvement challenges the notion that all parents can be equally engaged. In light of power differentials between a dominant framework of parenting and those that challenge the norm, the hegemony of a heteronormative identity for children continues. As much as there is a desire to engage parents in a learning partnership, it obviously poses significant challenges – especially where social norms are concerned.

There are some potential parallels between parents with children who have identified special needs and queer parents with children in the school system in that they share common concerns about how their children will adjust to new situations, deal with new teachers, and experience acceptance in their peer group. In many ways, early
childhood environments are often viewed as more friendly to families (Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron and Hughes, 2008) whilst schools tend to be more formal in their communication strategies. However, for parents in special circumstances, their experiences in both early childhood and school programs are hesitant. Like parents with children who have special needs, parents with precarious legal status, and parents who do not speak English as a first language, queer parents worry not only about the transition from preschool to school, but also about transitions from one room/grade to the next. This is an area of study that needs further exploration. Unfortunately, queer parents often lack the support of a family infrastructure to help navigate the changes that come as you make decisions to become parents, bring children into your home, take children into childcare programs and then later to school. It is this lack of a support system that can cause more stress on queer parents (Epstein, 2009). In an ethnographic study that examined the relationships of parents with social class differences and their schools, Horwat, Weininger and Laraue (2003) argue, “parental interventions in schooling represent, in effect, an assertion of power in an institutional arena where parents are formally endowed with only a restricted authority” (p. 346). For queer parents, bridges into parent networks are often precarious, and establishing those community connections comes with a great amount of risk.

In the early childhood context, existing research is unclear if queer parents’ involvement includes commonly known meaningful practices such as enhanced and purposeful communication, invitations to participate in program activities, and governance structures including advisory committees as proposed by Epstein and Sheldon (2006). However, existing research on the relationships between queer parents
and school settings demonstrate that queer identification challenge the normative policies and practice in educational settings. Baker (2002) found that the perception of school experiences is predominantly negative because children are outside the protection of their parents for extended periods of time that generally results in a propensity for bullying. According to Fryand and Capper (2003) and Silin (1993), schools are generally hostile environments for lesbian, gay, and queer parents. One Australian study of experiences of lesbian mothers in preschool settings in an urban community indicates a sense of vulnerability and fear for their children’s safety, especially if they choose to disclose their sexuality (Scattlebol and Ferfolia, 2007). The findings from these studies demonstrate that before early childhood educators are able to establish meaningful partnerships with queer parents, knowledge and a desire to “interrupt heteronormative thinking” (Sumara and Davis, 1999, p. 192) are necessary. The legal context and early childhood teacher training focus on parent engagement within a framework of developmentally appropriate practice do have implications for the experiences of queer parents with young children. The issue to explore further is how these contextual issues make a difference to queer parents.

Parent engagement builds a trusting relationship between parent and educator, in turn creating a safe and trustworthy environment for children. A directive or scripted approach to parent involvement limits possibility of a genuine working relationship with parents that takes both the educator’s and parent’s family, cultural and historical context into consideration. In addition, research confirms that parent engagement is important to child development but that it needs to extend to parents who may be situated outside the dominant framework of what is typically known as a parent. With queer parents in
particular, the combinations of family structures go beyond most people’s imagination and are more complex than even a decade ago. In the research process, I often needed clarification to understand more clearly the relationships in a queer family unit to ensure I gathered accurate information for the parent narrative. The parents that participated in this study were particularly attuned to the heavy emphasis placed on child development and often asked me how early childhood educators come to understand the fluidity of gender identity and sexual orientation.

In this chapter, I have argued that the assumed superiority of the two entangled paradigms of diversity, equity and inclusion and developmentally appropriate practice serve to limit child development knowledge within an institutionalized body of knowledge. The propensity to silence sexuality and the fluidity of gender development is exacerbated by the hegemonic desire to focus on children’s cognitive and physical development that limits the discourse of development to that which is typical. Although the integration of parent engagement is grounded in evidence that promotes partnerships with parents, some parents are excluded from this process, especially those with more social capital. The contradictions between parent engagement and developmentally appropriate are left unresolved. Some parents may be uncomfortable with discussion of queer issues amongst children. As a result of this conflict, I argue, that queer parents are not actively sought as equal partners with early childhood educators, putting into question the desire for ongoing partnerships with all parents.

In the next chapter, I demonstrate how early childhood knowledge is constructed through a heteronormative lens that privileges normative gender development and heterosexuality in relations with parents. I highlight why and how queer theory is useful
as an attempt to bridge the divide between traditional science and a discourse that challenges typical understandings of childhood and development. Research and practice that blends the two worlds may in fact be more useful to improve the learning environment for children based on knowledge that is respectful of children’s participatory practice and goals that support development. The exploration of how early childhood research can be grounded in a different pedagogical framework follows.


Chapter 5

Contributions Of Queer Theory: Reimagining Early Childhood Studies

The dominance of a singular construct in early childhood can be challenged through queer theory. As Jagose (1996) suggests, queer theory enables us to understand “how gender operates as a regulatory construct of heterosexuality” (p. 83). By extension, Robinson (2005) describes queer pedagogy as enabling educators to “critically examine the natural order of things” (p. 7). I am interested in proposing a view of early childhood study and practice that challenges notions of universality because, as Battiste (2005) has suggested, “universality underpins cultural and cognitive imperialism, which establishes a dominant group’s knowledge, experience, culture and language as the dominant form (p. 124). With a growing diversity of family composition, it is now more critical than ever, that early childhood training programs move away from a “single way of knowing, in this case developmentalism, and make room for multiple perspectives, which in turn influence innovative kinds of teaching decisions and practices” (Blaise 2005, p. 184).

Kumashiro (2002) has argued that the norms of schooling and its manifestations can be perceived as oppressive, arguing, “changing oppression then requires constantly working against this norm” (p. 11). The propensity to focus on developmentally appropriate practice seems overbearing and indeed, oppressive. Children’s identities would be better understood through a critical deconstruction of Western theories of child development and of the normative pedagogical frameworks that dominate early childhood research and practice. Early childhood studies are based on the hegemony of what is scientifically known about children’s development without adequate attention being paid to how childhood is socially and culturally constructed. I am not undermining the significance of
brain development in the early years. In fact, as an educator myself, I am actively involved in supporting professional learning related to the intricate links between brain development and self-regulation, language acquisition and learning. I am, however, suggesting that the relationships amongst children, their families and educators also play a significant role in children’s healthy social and emotional development. Early childhood educators need to be more cognizant of how these relationships influence development, particularly when they do not fit the normative expectations that we may have of children. How we understand a child’s social world is critical to supporting optimal development. I see the possibility and necessity to infuse queer perspectives into traditional child development to bridge a gap that could lead to a deeper understanding of inclusion instead of perpetuating research and practice that I believe continues to be responsible for a traditional and monolithic view of childhood development.

Ideas from queer theory inform my work and operate as recurring and interconnected themes in my research findings. The first theme is the prevalence of heteronormativity in early childhood education knowledge in reference to children’s development and to notions of parent engagement. The second theme is the tendency to silence queer identity in early childhood training and practice, especially in relation to children’s sexuality. The central role that institutions of higher education in early childhood studies play in the construction of knowledge is grounded in a singular developmental perspective. As I will demonstrate in the sections to follow, early childhood education’s desire to normatively privilege heterosexuality is reflected in relationships between parents and educators, the selection of children’s literature in early
childhood settings, the enrolment forms that families complete and ultimately in the silence around children’s gender and queer identifications and explorations of the self.

Nikki Sullivan (2003) writes, “queer theory as a deconstructive strategy, aims to denaturalize heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, sociality and the relations between them” (p. 81). She further explains that the notion of deconstruction is historically found in French philosopher Derrida’s response that challenge ideas of the absolute nature of heterosexuality as naturally occurring phenomena present in normative relations. Cahill and Theilheimer (1999) argue that children develop ideas of their own identity based on messages they receive from adults and other children around them. Often “the materials teachers select and the words they use may actively communicate a norm of heterosexuality” (p. 43). Surprisingly, the presence of critical queer research in development is ignored in the Canadian context. In my study, I argue the absence of queer presence dominates a heteronormative world in early childhood – where children and adults are assumed heterosexual until proven otherwise is driven by a construct entirely focused on developmentally appropriate practice. By extension principles that promote diversity, equity and inclusion add to the lack of criticality in early childhood knowledge that is infused with a desire to avoid conflict and debate. It is this universal knowledge in early childhood education that needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed to reveal how heteronormative values frame queer identified families or children and to provide infrastructures that will support these families and children in early childhood settings.

For close to two decades, the use of a queer lens in early childhood education has made issues of identity, of gender and of sexuality more prevalent (Canella, 1997;
Janmohamed, 2010; MacNaughton, 1998; Silin, 1995; Spodek 2005; Taylor and Blaise, 2012; Tobin, 1997). Queer theory is not new to early childhood but continues to offer possibilities to challenge what is normative practice and it continues to create discomfort in how queer theory is integrated into notions of sexuality in childhood development. Despite these contributions, early childhood education in the Canadian context and particularly across colleges in Ontario continues to be dominated by a universal and essentialist lens of developmentally appropriate practice. On the other hand, queer theory is slippery because it enables educators to think in the most fluid and unidentifiable way possible, where identity and developmental discourse is secondary. This is of course challenging particularly when early childhood professionals are becoming more accustomed to working within the demands of provincial curriculum requirements and standards of practice for educators.

Historically, queer theory was used to complicate relations, challenge notions of power, and give voice to heteronormative dominance – but like other ideas that provide an intellectual framework, queer theory has evolved; now used to complicate art, space, schooling, and more recently, homonormative dominance. My interest lies in utilizing a queer theoretical lens to question the common discourse of developmentally appropriate practice and its singular perspective of childhood development, parental relations and the role of educators that supports an overriding hetero script for all the actors, including the children. Queer theory enables me to disrupt what is known and unknown about childhood. Michael Warner (2004) argues, “queer theory as I construe it, marks the other side of politics: the side where narrative realization and derealization overlap” (p. 21).

Queer studies has a strong commitment to ideas that challenge normativity and its
unwavering refusal to define itself to “any fixed content” (Hall and Jagose, 2013, p. xvi). Thinking queerly is oppositional to anything remotely familiar to traditional approaches in early childhood research – where there is much stronger desire to pay attention to measurable outcomes. Yet, the notion of what defines childhood and what does not is what remains attractive to me in queer theory. Sedgwick (1993) presents a fascinating and ever so accurate list of elements that define one’s sexual identity (if one follows expectations). Her list includes biological sex (male or female), gender assignment (same as biological sex), biological sex of partner (should be opposite to own) etc. Of course, any attempt to organize your life outside these elements lands in the queer world which “can refer to the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonance and resonances….when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender or sexuality aren’t made to signify monolithically” (p. 8).

Children’s gendered identities are managed by how the feminine and masculine are constructed, demanded by hegemonic discourses of what is celebrated and what is silenced. Butler (1990) argues that gender is performed and repeated through boundaries established within a cultural context. In the early childhood context, the notion that boys don’t cry or that girls know how to play well and share toys, are examples of gender performance. Taylor and Blaise (2012) suggest that feminist post structural ideas applied to early childhood has enabled a move away from the typical nature v. nurture debate on gender to one that is more nuanced. Butler (1990) referred to this as the naturalization of gender – to normalize expectations. Yet, the popular frame of reference that contextualizes early childhood research continues to be defined by what girls and boys need in their early childhood experience to optimize their learning. Despite a multitude
of research that goes beyond traditional ideas of childhood development, early childhood training and practice in Ontario remains relatively mainstream.

Early childhood studies are dominated by paradigms grounded in a developmental and biological progression of how children learn and grow. To present ideas that steps back from this and proposes instead a desire to extend and expand understanding of child development to include sexuality and to demand a review of early childhood practice away from standards of practice causes a discombobulating of what is known and what is comfortable. In her essay, *Queer Feelings*, Sara Ahmed (2013) argues “regulative norms function in a way as ‘repetitive strain injuries.’” Through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being oriented in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted” (p. 422). As a queer educator, I have from time to time experienced an internal debate – do I come out, do I have to, do I need to, how much do I share – so much of which is tied to the moment in time decision of where it feels safe and where it can pose danger. In my own work, outside the Canadian context and in the majority world, I choose not to share – I choose to orient myself into a contorted shape, sharing only what ensures my safety. Sedgwick (1990) argues that “queer is the unstable solvent that dissolves all stable identities” (p. 85). There are moments in my work when my sexual orientation does not take precedence and defining myself only through my sexuality and not through my race, my culture, my language does not make sense. Queer theory enables me to question the typical conversations that occur in early childhood research, teaching and practice. As Leavitt and Power (1997) ask, “what is the child’s experience when the teacher turns her gaze on the child-body?” (p. 41). Queer theory enables me to pay attention to the relational aspects of child development, to explore how
gender unfolds, how sexuality is frequently played out and how educators respond to orientations that trouble the normative stance of learning and development. As Will Letts (2002) suggests;

> Queer is relational in reference to the normative rather than a fixed positivity, and in this way works to resist rampant essentializing discourses. To queer is to denaturalize coherent selves, to resist the narrow logic of binaries, and to dislodge the sense of safety that comes with really knowing. (p. 123)

In Tobin’s *Making a Place for Pleasure in Early Childhood Education* (1997), he reminds educators of a time not too long ago when early childhood studies was dominated by psychoanalytic theorists who included a discussion on the developmental stages of sexuality in children. I remember in my own early childhood training in the early 1980’s learning about “psychoanalytic notions of oral, anal and genital sexuality and the inevitability of sexual curiosity” (p. 5). I also remember teaching about it in the school of early childhood where I am employed in the late 1990’s into the 2000’s. Like Tobin, I agree that we may not want to return to these traditional theoretical underpinnings of development, but we ought to at least introduce post-structural and queer thinkers of sexuality and gender such as Foucault (1978), Sedwick (1990) and Butler (1993) “who have all focused on disturbing and de-centering heteronormativity” (Birden, 2005, p. 127). In his famous *Sex, Death and the Education of Children*, Silin (1995) reminds us that:
Sexuality, once confined to our reading of individual Oedipal dramas, now enters the early childhood classroom embedded in our basic epistemological assumptions, tainting subjects that once seemed far from its touch. Like gender, race and class, sexual orientation can no longer be ignored as one of the critical tools for unpacking the meanings transmitted in the pedagogical encounter, and the closet itself must be considered with regard to our assumptions about differences between adult and child. (p. 169)

In describing how sexuality is “embedded in our epistemological assumptions,” Silin (1995) highlights what Sedgwick asks us to consider:

To think of the closet as more than the hiding place from which some may emerge. For her it is a set of unspoken compacts informing every aspect of our society that may be opened through a discursive deconstruction of its narrative sources. (p. 169)

I see queer theory as a conversation starter to raise issues that remain “unspoken” and to unpack the meaning of a very limited perspective of early childhood development. This is not new work, but it is somewhat different in the Canadian context where we have a legislative framework that has unpacked traditional ideas of childhood, family and education. Cahill and Theilheimer (1995) suggest that “research on children’s early concepts of race, gender and physical difference indicates that by age four, most children are aware of color, racial and gender differences,” and by extension, they argue that
“children have the cognitive capacity to understand difference in family composition and affectional preferences” (p. 40); yet, we wait until middle childhood or high school to introduce it through what tend to be very traditional ideas in sex education. Even in adolescent education, Fine and McClelland (2006) argue that conversations about desire remain missing.

What is it about the dominant framework in early childhood that has been so challenging to undo? Foucault (1974) argued that “for those who speak it, a discourse is a given” (p. 49). When spoken on a regular basis and with the authority of an educational institution or a dominant developmental framework, the discourse becomes the “truth” and socially sanctioned. I use aspects of post structural theory to uncover the dominant nature of how particular knowledge is constituted and reinforced in early childhood programs. hooks (1994) argues:

If we examine critically the traditional role of the university (or college) in the pursuit of truth and the sharing of knowledge and information, it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom. (p. 29)

Anything outside the normative discourse becomes questionable (Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2007) – too complex to comprehend and institute. Ahmed (2000) suggests, “the stranger is not any-body that we have failed to recognize, but some-body that we have already recognized as a stranger, as a ‘body out of place’” (p. 55). This experience of
strangeness comes to life when thinking about children’s sexuality. Tobin (1997) proposes, “children’s sexuality has the power to produce these uncanny feelings in us because it leads to a collapsing of the past and the present, childhood and adulthood, us and them” (p. 10). The very idea that children may experience sexuality and that adults contribute to this development based on how they interact with the children under their care, raises the rankles of educators and researchers concerned only with children’s language, cognitive and social development ensuring the limited yet dominating discourse on what is deemed appropriate considerations in child development.

Take, for example, the discourse of sexuality as it relates to children. In History of Sexuality (1978), Foucault argued that although children’s sexuality was not discussed overtly, its presence permeated the halls of schools, the organization of health activities and the division of sexual education. Although, nothing so obvious happens in early childhood settings – we commonly practice the division of children based on gender in using the washroom, lining up to go outside and preparing for transitions. One could argue this is to ensure simplicity in how children get organized, but in fact, is there an underlying heteronormative concern that when girls and boys intermingle, it makes more apparent the sexual and gendered nature of children – and this raises discomfort amongst the educators. Although early childhood educators do not overtly sexualize children, there is a common desire to interject sexuality through the language used, the division of children by gender, the comments on boy/girl relations – consistently demonstrating a heteronormative discourse.

This form of teaching practice is complicated but recognizes that children are physical beings, engage in social and emotional relations and also play with gender
construction and sexuality. The very idea that children are completely innocent in early childhood of any sexuality contradicts a common practice that assumes heterosexuality “oh look, your boyfriend is here”, until proven otherwise (Cahill and Theilheimer, 1999). The presumed innocence of children is often guarded through principles of developmentally appropriate practice and an avoidance of sexuality and queer relationships because they are considered too young to understand. Sedgwick (2008) suggests that “the essentialist understanding of sexual identity accrue a certain gravity” (p. 42). This is certainly true when educators become concerned with children’s sexuality that orients toward queer. Similar limitations arise when educators build their teaching practice based on a hegemonic notion that teaching signifies the transfer of information and knowledge to children through concepts like literacy and numeracy skills, which assumes a normative goal toward child development. In fact, teaching in early childhood is significantly more complex and relational. Moss (2010) argues for a different pedagogy that engages with children as active knowledge creators to create a space to challenge the way we teach. Children are very much attuned to how they relate to others and their exploration of gender roles. Many of them are being raised in families that are very much part of a growing demographic and a social justice pedagogy that introduces topics such as prejudice, homophobic bullying and difference that create a climate of safety and protection, not harm for the children and their families.

In Deborah Britzman’s essay, Is there a queer pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight (1995), she argues:

Queer Theory’s insistence upon three methods: the study of limits, the study of
ignorance, and the study of reading practices. Each method requires an impertinent performance: an interest in thinking against the thought of one’s conceptual foundations; an interest in studying the skeletons of learning and teaching that haunt one’s responses, anxieties, and categorical imperatives; and a persistent concern with whether pedagogical relations can allow more room to maneuver in thinking the unthought of education. (p. 155)

Britzman, like others (Pinar, 1998; Sears, 1999), provide a critical space to think about how children and families are constituted. In Ruffolo’s (2009) critique on Canadian early childhood policy development, he argues:

Queer theory…offers tools to disturb normative practices and binary ideologies by exposing how there are no fixed and stable bodies that are essentially normal. It specifically focuses on the way that children become intelligible through the reiteration of identity norms that are often upheld in fixed and stable binary categories: able/disabled, male/female, masculine/feminine, gay/straight. (p. 295)

I would add additional categories including adult/child, challenged/cooperative, immigrant/Canadian. In the Canadian context, there is a growing scholarship that moves beyond a superficial understanding of diversity and inclusion; however, in early childhood teacher education and in teaching practice, although a broader understanding of equity issues is more apparent, generalizations continue. For example, educators receive lessons on how to deal with families that are immigrants and refugees to Canada.
However, limited distinction is made between the different experiences of families who are immigrants from Mexico compared to families that immigrate from Western Europe or a family that has lived in an area of civil conflict in Afghanistan. In the context of the early childhood professional preparation program, there tends to be an environmental scan on diversity and difference so that one lecture is focused on immigrants and refugees, and the next on children being raised by grandparents and the next on the needs of English language learners. Although the provincial program standards lay out an expectation that early childhood educators will graduate with knowledge about diversity and equity, the approach is focused more on how to assist the families with transitions rather than dwelling more deeply into the social and pedagogical differences of the individual family construct. This approach assumes commonality in the traditional conceptual framework of family and is in fact extended to “same-sex” families. And if that same-sex coupling is married, it is given more legitimacy – somehow, the symbolic nature of marriage and its heteronormative promise, softens the image that queers don’t just have sex all the time. They also raise children, spend time at the grocery store, negotiate drop offs and pick-ups and generally operate in the heteronormative framework of a nuclear family unit. This approach also perpetuates a newly created normative framework of lesbian or gay parents without recognizing the growing population of trans people having children in seemingly heterosexual relationships that go far beyond the commonly understood family construct.

Although achieving the right to marry in same-sex relationships is a civil right accomplishment, gay marriage reveals within it a normative construct that feeds monogamy, mortgages and retirement planning. Queer theory is again instituted to
challenge mainstream lesbian and gay relationships, that enable the conservative faction to see that lesbians and gay men do not threaten the moral social order – especially if they live by normative community standards where their lawns are kept trimmed and their design sense adds to the property values on the street. Perhaps I am being facetious but there is advantage in ensuring the sustenance of the economic engine – through the monetary contributions that two professionals can make. These ideas about how families operate are infused throughout early childhood training programs, and as a result, educational institutions can implicitly and explicitly foster foundational knowledge that promotes a hegemonic or dominant perspective.

Apple (1975) argues that it is the hidden curriculum or what is not discussed that maintains the status quo. In elementary classrooms Jackson (1968), makes reference to rules of conduct – expectations that tend not to be openly explained yet children quickly learn to understand and follow the rules. In deconstructing the influence of a positivist approach to early childhood studies, I choose to use the term “queer” especially in the education context. As Sears (1999) so aptly describes in Queering Elementary Education, “queering education happens when we look at schooling upside down and view childhood from the inside out. Teaching queerly demands we explore taken-for-granted assumptions about diversity, identities, childhood and prejudice” (p 4). I am not interested in an antagonistic approach, but I do believe that queer theory offers a new frame to understand and analyze the traditional approaches in early childhood education. My research interests are driven by a desire to raise the salience of perspectives outside the normative approaches to child development. The work of Judith Butler creates a space to challenge, shift, create discomfort, and make noise about the gendering of
children in early childhood programs. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler (1993) suggests:

To what extent, then, has the performative “queer” operated alongside, as the sanction that performs the heterosexualization of the social bond, perhaps it also comes into play precisely as the shaming taboo which “queers” those who resist or opposed that social form as well as those who occupy it without hegemonic social sanction. (p. 226)

In essence, we do (perform) gender whether we want to or not and implicate children who may not fit normative expectations of what we expect as acceptable behaviour. Sedgwick (1997) suggests, “In the final influential pages of *Gender Trouble*, Butler offers a programmatic argument in favour of demystification as “the normative focus for gay and lesbian practice” (p. 17). Sedgwick’s perspective raises the salience of engaging in discussions that move beyond the dominant heteronormative framework so common in early childhood education. Combined with the silence on discourse related to sexuality, early childhood training and practice continues to be shaped by a limited view on what are developmentally appropriate childhood experiences. I have argued for a vision that challenges normative assumptions of childhood and a shift away from the truth of developmentally appropriate practice so often proselytized in early childhood research, training and practice. The traditional exclusion of non-conforming behavior ensures that children and educators learn and practice what is acceptable behavior; simplifying childhood and parenting to what is commonly known.
Starting with my decision to use the term queer, in the next chapter I present methodological challenges that stem from pursuing an area of research grounded in a queer theory paradigm. I outline the process of collecting data that was not linear or orderly, requiring me to reflect on what data to include. Key to my research process was dealing with the responses I received when recruiting participants.
Chapter 6

Towards a Queer Methodology

In this chapter, I draw on queer methodology to explain how it enabled me to blur the boundaries between traditional forms of data collection and my interest in exploring the connections between early childhood knowledge, childhood development and parents’ experiences. I explain the dilemmas and issues I experienced throughout my study.

Queer engagement in early childhood studies has not been an easy task. From the very beginning of my study, I recognized that this project was as much an exploration of the early childhood education world around me as it was my presence in the early childhood education world. Reading early childhood texts with a queer lens or meeting with queer parents pushed me to realize that my very own assumptions about queer sexuality were limited. I had not anticipated the fluid temperament of queer parents nor the shockingly limited understanding that early childhood educators would express in my study. I was not expecting to experience the number of questions I received about why I chose to use queer instead of lesbian and gay, nor did I expect to see that my area of research was already having an impact on early childhood practice. The opportunity to participate in a focus group in my study led a number of educators to state, “this is the first time I have talked about queer issues and I’m so glad I came”. As the study evolved, I realized that queering early childhood is not just about what queer parents experienced. It is also about how children’s sexuality is positioned or silenced and it is very much about raising awareness about possibilities outside the norm. I chose to share my standpoint position as a queer educator and was clear in why my study was important. I explained that I had become the 1-800 help line for queer friends with young children leading me to question
why early childhood educators were seemingly so unprepared for the queer parents that entered their early childhood doors with their infants and toddlers. My reading of these initial experiences led me to question what is it that early childhood educators learn in their professional training. As Canella (1998) argues:

> Western thought and developmental psychology have so grounded the field of early childhood education that we have most often accepted childhood as “truth”. We have not questioned the social and political belief structures underlying “truth” as subjective created by human beings. Do these beliefs lead to equity and social justice for all children? Are some children (and their families and communities) disenfranchised by the values promoted in the field? (p.157-158).

As a researcher, an educator and a parent, I struggle with feeling pressure to choose between the world of science and critical theory. I function across both parallels and believe strongly that it is just as important to understand the scientific nature of child development, as it is to question a singular vision of child development. In my academic undertaking and in my professional practice, I constantly view research with a critical perspective. However, I also believe that science offers an improved understanding of child development that has changed early childhood practice. What I find most problematic is the ongoing dominance of a developmental approach that discounts the valuable contributions that a critical social framework offers.

Cannella’s critique of essentialism in early childhood is useful in deconstructing where these ideas of childhood stem from. My interest in the professional learning of
educators plays a central role in my research study. I agree with hooks (1994) who clearly articulates the challenges experienced by educators when faced with diversity of culture and ethnicity in classrooms. She states:

> It is difficult for many educators in the United States to conceptualize how the classroom will look when they are confronted with the demographics which indicate that ‘whiteness’ may cease to be the norm ethnicity in the classroom settings at all levels. Hence, educators are poorly prepared when we actually confront diversity. This is why so many of us stubbornly cling to old patterns (p. 41).

In early childhood studies, the fundamental infusion of principles of developmentally appropriate practice and a “respect” for diversity and inclusion, acts to privilege a re-production of dominant forms of knowledge without engaging in critical reflective practice. In my study, I am interested in how educators interpret early childhood knowledge and whether one type of knowledge takes precedence over perspectives that offer more complexity. A healthy respect for principles of diversity and equity is commonly found in early childhood text and recommendations for practice – yet, the construction of diversity and equity seemingly silences the perspective of a construction of childhood that is not fixed. Thinkers such as Foucault (1980) offer perspectives that challenge the power of what is considered truth and what is given privilege. In sites of knowledge production including where information is developed and how it is shared, Foucault (1980) argues that some knowledge is disqualified and
others given a higher priority. In early childhood research, significant attention and resources are placed on measurable outcomes. Yet, much of childhood development is fluid and reflective of the complexity of family life, educational experiences and interactions with the adults around them.

With this in mind, a queer methodology rejects the idea that evidence can be gathered objectively and suggests that it is more about examining social relations (Jin, 2008). Halberstam (1998) suggests her approach to a queer methodology includes using “textual criticism, ethnography, historical survey, archival research…because it attempts to remain supple enough to respond to various locations of information on female masculinity” (p. 10). She further argues that a queer methodology offers the possibility that pushing the boundaries of normative research practice enables gathering stories from people who have often been excluded from traditional studies. I used queer methodology because I was interested in telling the stories of queer parents with young children in early childhood settings. The narratives of bilingual parents, families living in poverty, and lone parents have been told extensively. However, the stories of queer parents need to be told, especially since more explicitly queer families are entering early childhood programs and understanding their experience is an important component of parent engagement with all families, particularly those who have historically been marginalized.

In the initial development of the College of Early Childhood Educators, I was involved in a working group that informed the establishment of the College Council. During the early discussions, I made a concerted effort to assert the significance of including recognition of family diversity in the practice of early childhood education, despite opposition from a majority of committee members including college and
university ECE faculty. I share this experience because it speaks of the fear of the “other” that shaped my interest in pursuing research on the absence of queer identities in early childhood training. However, I do see an attempt, albeit in a limited form to be more reflective of diversity and difference in early childhood practice. The Standards of Practice (2011) will have some influence on early childhood training programs; however, it is too soon to evaluate how this may proceed and is an undertaking beyond the scope of this study. The construction of sexual and gender identity may be at the core of queer methodology but it also provides an opportunity to review assumptions behind standards of practice in early childhood and how family is represented.

Browne and Nash (2010) question whether it is possible to conduct social science research with a queer method. They ask how researchers can draw meaning from traditional forms of data collection including interviews and questionnaires when the basic premise of queer thinking is in constant flux; yet, data is viewed as fixed knowledge. This of course poses significant challenge to researchers who are bound by meeting the research design expectations of a doctoral dissertation. Brown and Nash (2010) argue, “what meanings can we draw from, and what use can we make of, such data when it is only momentarily fixed and certain? (p. 1).” Given the complexity of early childhood development and family life, the intersection of social science with queer methodology makes sense to me. It enables me to follow a research design process that contains the study toward an end goal; yet, I am able to intertwine the relationships between the written word, the spoken word and observations I make. I became comfortable with the messiness of my study, as I understood more deeply the unsettling and fluid nature of queer theory. My technique may be set in a traditional context of text
analysis, interviews and focus groups, but the unfolding of stories from parents and educators, and the opportunity to question normative patterns of development, the silence about sexuality and the demand for meeting standards of practice that are dominated by simplistic definitions of diversity and equity are made possible through the use of queering traditional methods of social science research. Although there is validity in questioning whether queer methodology is even possible, I use queer as a strategy to present a new way of thinking about early childhood where the voices of children and their families are at the forefront of professional practice and speaking queer functions as an intervention to traditional and monolithic approaches to child development.

At the same time, queer thinking is relatively new to early childhood, and researchers engaged in queer scholarship will tend to be questioned and potentially sidelined. When I first began recruiting parents for the study, I had a few immediate responses from parents in large urban areas and in small rural communities across Ontario. Parents were open to participating in the study through personal or telephone interviews. A diverse range of parents who identified as lesbian, queer, gay, transgender and bisexual, contacted me. As I discussed my study through various ECE related professional networks, I did receive two responses from early childhood supervisors that concerned me. What happened almost immediately when I distributed the information flyer to recruit participants from two communities outside Toronto was a suggestion that I change the term “queer” to same-sex. One of the individuals suggested I use the term “homosexual” bringing to mind an antiquated time associated with the pathologization of sexuality in medicine. Jagose (1996) describes homosexuality as a term that is used rarely and signifies a time when sexuality was dominated by a limited definition of
heterosexuality. I was concerned that this initial response to my study would taint the results and be limited by the educator sampling of participants. However, although those two educators communicated their viewpoint, with some hostility I might add, they did not participate in the study. As a result of this initial experience, I questioned what kind of response I would get from the educators who did agree to participate. I assumed that I would experience similar challenges with educators in relation to my commitment to uncover understandings about queer sexuality. However, the educator participants who did agree to participate were eager to share their knowledge, despite their reticence to use the term queer in their exchanges during the research process.

In the early interviews and latter focus groups with early childhood educators, more often than not, they used the term same-sex or gay even after a lengthy conversation on how the use of that term connotes a traditional view of sexual identities beyond heterosexuality, reifying again the legitimacy of relationships that are traditional, whilst excluding trans, intersex and bisexual. The reclamation of queer opens these possibilities. In the data collection phase, I found the early participants to be similar to the latter participants. Keen to share their experiences and eager to learn more about this seemingly strange discussion about queer families who many claimed was an eye-opener. In my initial ethics application to the university, I indicated that I would offer support and external resources if any of the participants (educators and parents) experienced any negative impact. However, despite the potentially explosive nature of the topical discussion, there was no follow up from either the educators nor the parents. Only one educator followed up to discuss other policy issues related to early childhood in Ontario. Researchers and educators, assume that issues of sexuality are deemed sensitive and
should not be discussed without putting safeguards into place. However, my study indicates that not only are educators keen to share their expertise, this area of research is in its early stages and there is widespread interest in learning more, despite the challenge of resorting back to language that feels more comfortable. My interest in raising awareness of sexuality beyond heterosexuality and same sex relations was met with ongoing defiance – in the most polite way possible.

What room does the term same-sex create for parents who identify as bisexual, transgender, and intersex or simply choose to have and raise a child independently of a coupling relationship? Bain and Nash (2007) argue that not only is there discomfort with queer theory, there is a prevalence of discomfort with all things queer. Britzman (2005) takes up the debate in how queer is perceived in education, arguing that queer “has to do with thinking through structures of disavowal within education, or the refusals—whether curricular, social, or pedagogical - to engage a traumatic perception that produces the subject of difference as a disruption, as the outside to normalcy” (p. 152). There is growing scholarship in queer qualitative methods as researchers increasingly identify as “queer” to include a variety of sexual orientations that are fluid but also use a term that once offended. I realized that by using the term queer I would create discomfort, but I had not expected the messiness that was created in looking for participants, completing the data collection and analyzing the research findings. I deliberately used queer in my research to confront the very discomfort and silence that surrounds issues of sexuality in early childhood. Introducing the term queer has complicated conversations about exactly what diversity and equity mean – and as I have said earlier, challenges who exactly is “included” in inclusion practice. How was I to give voice in my research to the unstable,
curious nature of childhood if I responded to a desire for comfort in how this research would be conducted? On the one hand, I needed to meet the requirements of a university’s very clear expectations on how to conduct social science research despite working with a subject area that is not clear and in fact evolving, undefined and destabilizing. Although I was prepared to proceed in an organized way, as I had been trained as a researcher, I was not prepared for how potential participants would react to my request to access their understanding of queer families. Once again, I had to consider where did their ideas and reactions come from and what role did schooling play. I also questioned my own use of queer. These objections from educators, agencies and college faculty only reinforced for me the need to inject criticality to how early childhood educators understand diversity and difference.

In my study, there were two cycles of recruiting educators to participate in my research. Initially, the resistance I faced by my use of the term queer set me back and required negotiations with early childhood agency staff about how to proceed. After significant discussion, my decision to retain the original flyer could have affected my educators sample, which came from a pool of participants who were either comfortable with the term queer or may have been encouraged by their supervisors to participate in the study. I did not explore this in my follow up focus groups and recognize now that the methodological process of beginning research is as challenging as the analysis. However, the experience reinforced for me that normalizing discourses of childhood function to regulate sexuality and gender within a perpetuating cycle of heteronormativity. The acceptance of the term same-sex lends itself to the normalizing of sexuality between partners of the same sex but also acts to silence those that do not fit this idea of partnered
relations. It also negates the possibilities that queer offers for early child development. Troubling same sex objects pushes the boundaries to ensure that non-normative ideas of gender and sexuality have a place in early childhood.

None of the parents who agreed to be interviewed were concerned with my choice of words to describe my research interests. Queer parents go through great lengths to create family that include children in them and I suspect that as a queer researcher, the parents’ recognition of my identity may have created a sense of shared meaning (Kong, Mahoney, and Plummer, 2003).

Rooke (2010) argues, “one of the challenges and possibilities of engaging with queer theory is the ways in which it challenges epistemological and ontological comfort in and coherence of identity categories” (p. 37). I was initially taken aback by the lack of ability to use what I believed to be perfectly common language but in fact quickly realized that many colleagues in early childhood are uncomfortable with language connected to sexual orientation or sexuality, particularly if I connected it to children’s development. Early childhood as a sector perceives itself to be quite inclusive, more recently promoting cohesion through plurality without recognizing the limitations of categories, identities and suppositions of diversity. If nothing else, my use of the term queer opened up a can of worms and proved to be successful in my unintentional plan to push people to think outside a very small box. My choice of terminology also elicited a bit of anger from people who wanted to know how I could possibly be interested in doing research in an area that was so offensive because they thought calling “same-sex” parents queer was offensive – something I never anticipated but that too added to the depth of my new learning.
When I first explored the question of how queer is embedded in early childhood training, I was faced with an array of discomfort and confusion about why I use the term queer. I was asked countless times, “isn’t that a derogatory term?” And told just as many times, “I prefer to use same-sex”. I had numerous conversations with individuals about the topic without them once mentioning the terms queer, lesbian, gay or even same-sex. In response to my search for participants in the study, I received this personal communication from an educator who declined to participate:

I was taken aback by the title of your study. I have a difficult time understanding that in this day and age that the word "queer" is still being used to label same-sex relationships. As an educator I find the terminology being used actually offensive. This is just my point of view and I would have a difficult time believing that the University of Toronto allowed this terminology to be used.

My initial response to this inquiry led me to explore the history of the term queer. The desire to sanitize the language because it happens to be offensive can limit debate but also contains it to a time when the term queer was used in a derogatory manner. Tom Warner’s book, Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada (2002) provides a historical review of lesbian, gay and bisexual activism in Canada. His extensive narrative shares the religious influences that prevailed and continue to influence both the political and legal systems, often positioning homosexuality as a predatory practice. He analyzes the emergence of lesbian and gay rights, including the significance of changes to the Criminal Code, the introduction of protections under the
Charter of Rights and Freedoms – all within the context of lesbian and gay activism. Warner deliberately uses the term lesbian and gay to ground the historical progress of queer activism – one that would not have been made possible without the intervention of lesbians and gay men.

Deconstructing the use of queer, I reflected on how infrequently dominant terms are challenged in traditional early childhood education discourse. As a matter of fact, the focus on what is considered developmentally appropriate is closely connected to what is considered appropriate use of language. An educator participant suggested that queer was not a politically correct term – again giving credibility to one form of discourse, suggesting that queer is incorrect – in its description and its meaning. I found myself giving early childhood educator participants permission to use the word queer, yet they continued to return to the “safer” gay and lesbian or same sex.

Queer theory stems from lesbian and gay studies where there has been a heavy emphasis on identity issues, integration of LGBTQ curriculum and developing teaching strategies appropriate for lesbian and gay students (Tierney and Dilley, 1998). More recently, “queer studies is the institutionalization of a new – or at least newly visible paradigm for thinking about sexuality across contexts” (Hall and Jagose, 2013, p. xvi). There is no singular definition of queer theory, or queer methodology – by the very nature of queer, it remains ambiguous refraining from definition. However, queer methodology enables imagination in the complexity of how gender, sexuality, identity, family, professional practice are defined – it provides a framing for illustrating the institutional nature of normative understandings of child development. Queer methodology enables deconstruction not just for the sake of critique, but with the
intention of questioning and raising possibilities. Teresa de Lauretis (1991) is often credited with coining the term queer theory, offering new perspectives on lesbian and gay studies and enabling the development of queer theory into a new discipline.

In Northern Ontario, I sought the assistance of a large early learning multi service agency to recruit participants for the study. The agency agreed to circulate the flyer (see Appendix) to parents via childcare programs in the community and received this response from a centre supervisor:

For an agency who promotes an inclusion policy I would have thought that the terminology "queer" would have flagged you from not forwarding it to us. I find this truly offensive and discriminatory to single out sexual preference for the purpose of a study to enhance early childhood education. The word "queer" is from another century and moving forward in this day and age other non-offensive and non-discriminatory wording should have been appropriate.

In the world-view of this particular early childhood educator, queer conjured negative notions of sexual preference rather than an opportunity to challenge the assumptions of heterosexuality in early childhood education. She may have based her understanding on the historical nature of “queer” as a derogatory term but her reaction also solidified for me the dominant nature of heteronormativity in early childhood studies. This response provoked a debate with senior management staff at the agency on whether I should alter the language of the recruitment notice to attract more involvement from the community. However, I believed it was necessary to remain true to my intentionality to
recruit a variety of parents, and I was not interested in limiting participants to only “same-sex” parents. My final decision was to leave the recruitment flyer as it was, despite one suggestion that I change from using “queer” to “homosexual” as a term the agency perceived to be more inclusive. I didn’t change the flyer and kept my interest in reaching out to queer parents.

As a researcher engaged in queer identified research, I experienced a significant amount of tension and discomfort and still continue to experience resistance from mainstream early childhood researchers and practitioners. However, the research project has also created new opportunities for negotiating knowledge and expertise, recognizing that dealing with difficult questions makes the research process very much an activist process. Negotiating new ways of knowing remains central to broadening an understanding of how questioning dominant and conventional knowledge is important to how research is conducted, how training is developed and how practice is implemented. Engaging in dialogue about the dominance of a singular vision of early childhood means being prepared to change, and there is evidence that change is afoot.

There has been recent debate amongst some early childhood researchers that questions the principle of developmentally appropriate practice as a universally accepted, normalizing approach to early childhood development (Bernhard, 2002; Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007; MacNaughton, 2005; Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2007). My study challenges dominant notions of developmentally appropriate practice and offers perspectives on how to embed a feminist post-structural paradigm to include queer perspectives in early childhood education shifting the lens away from a dominant and hetero normative construct.
I come from a research standpoint position of questioning what is being taught in early childhood training programs, what is learned by educators and what is experienced by queer parents. I imagine that my reading of early childhood texts explicates a dominant framework – one that assumes most families live in heterosexual relationships. My work is informed by queer theory in questioning and counteracting against heteronormative knowledge of families and early childhood development (Sullivan 2003). I am not interested in a narrow focus on sexuality but more curious about normative ways of knowing and exploring how the knowledge of early childhood education is transposed into relations with queer parents. Robinson and Jones Diaz argue, (2007) “many educators do not see the relevance or significance of relating individual discrimination to broader social, economic and political inequalities” (p. 171). Yet, fundamental to my practice as an educator is to embed strategies of activism in my teaching and in my own learning, ensuring that difference is considered in every possible early childhood interaction. Likewise, in my research process, I recognized the value of insider knowledge as a queer researcher but also reflected on moments when I stood outside as a woman of colour. Haritaworn (2008) suggests that connections to sexuality and gender are also racial in experience. In her use of queer theory, Rooke (2010) suggests “an intellectual commitment to queer theory which employs a methodology characterized by epistemological openness and attention to one’s own subjectivity, positionality and embodiment” (p. 35). Queer research demands attention is paid to when I feel comfortable and when I experience dissonance. My position as a queer educator comes with a certain amount of risk – every time I come out, every time I use queer, every time I raise sexuality in relation to child development. Queer methodology unhinges the
traditional interview and leaves open possibilities of debate, questions and conversation that don’t follow standardized questions and procedures.

In the early childhood education context, I use the term queer to challenge the typical heteronormative imagery of families and the extension of binaries in how queer families are described, constituting primarily of same-sex couples with no regard for the broader queer family that may include three or more primary parents who may identify as trans, bisexual, queer or gay. I also utilize queer theory to explore how early childhood programs construct gender and the expectations on children based on the gender that is assigned to them. Queer theory has been particularly useful as a methodology to deconstruct how developmentally appropriate curriculum continues to be encouraged, promoted and advanced in early childhood training, research, policy and practice. The use of queer theory challenges widespread perspectives that suggest developmentally appropriate practice is a product of a different era and social conditions and pays attention to the essentialist understanding of sexuality and normative child development. “It is now necessary to consider new ways for understanding gender, children, learning and teaching” (Blaise, p. 33, 2005). Yet, in Ontario, the textbook, the material, the concept is reified in program expectations and standards of practice despite a significantly changed understanding of early childhood development, research and practice in other democratic societies. I use the word queer to unsettle how heteronormativity grounds much of the early learning research, policy and practice in the Canadian context. Children that are raised in queer families “bring a new identity to the diversity equation. Their presence challenges teachers and administrators to rethink traditional assumptions about family and community…and at the deepest level, confront
their own homophobia” (Kissen, 2002, p. 165). In order to investigate the experiences of queer families utilizing early childhood programs, the training, knowledge and practice of early childhood educators with respect to diverse family compositions is of critical importance.

In my research I use a feminist post-structural and queer theory lens to deliberately make room for queer perspectives in early childhood education. In trying to make sense about how certain positions and images take dominance, I have encountered the need to trouble the power of heteronormative discourse in early childhood education. To explore these ideas, I have reviewed texts that are commonly used in early childhood training programs and have analyzed how dominant forms of educational practice are perpetuated through the normative assignment of roles for children and families. A queer methodology highlights the conspicuous absence of queered gender and sexuality and the over simplification of how differences are described. The silence often found in early childhood training material is then linked to the inadequate professional preparation to respond to “other” identities. By extension, this silencing is then experienced by queer families in their daily interactions with the early childhood educator. This is not to suggest that all early childhood educators are homophobic and unaware of issues related to queer identified families or the processes of gender identification in young children, but rather that this vacuum does exist at an institutional level. I am however arguing that heteronormativity is implicit in early childhood studies though the texts that are selected for study, the focus on developmentalism and the lack of critical analyses amongst educators involved in early childhood education. I demonstrate how dominant assumptions of universality in early childhood training in turn limits and controls
program curriculum, professional learning and practice. I also discuss the challenges of embedding a feminist post-structural analysis in early childhood studies and the implications of the dominance of developmentally appropriate practice in child development discourse.

Qualitative research is frequently employed as the approach of choice in the pursuit of early childhood educators’ attitudes toward the inclusion of queer issues in the classroom (Robinson, 2002; Robinson, 2005; Sumara and Davis, 1999; Taylor and Richardson, 2005). I used a combination of both discourse analysis and semi-structured interviews to explore how early childhood educators understand the concept of queer and to explore the experiences of queer parents in early childhood programs. I undertook a textual analysis approach within a larger discourse analysis framework. Fairclough (2003) suggests there are “two causal ‘powers’ which shape texts: on the one hand, social structures and social practices; on the other hand, social agents, the people involved in social events” (p. 21). In early childhood studies, this notion of the relationship between text and the influences of social structures and social agents has resonance. In my exploration of the notion of developmentally appropriate practice, this was particularly valid – placing the text as a powerful antidote to any early childhood practice. As I collected textual data, I continued to study methodologies further and focused primarily on discourse analysis that is borrowed from the work of Fairclough (2003) who argues that:

Discourses are ways of representing aspects of the world – the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the ‘mental world’ of thoughts, feelings,
beliefs and so forth, and the social world. Discourses constitute part of the resources which people deploy in relating to one another – keeping separate from one another, cooperating, competing, dominating – and in seeking to change the ways in which they relate to one another. (p. 124)

In the process of taking apart the normative discourse of developmentally appropriate practice, and the propensity to embed heteronormative perspectives in the schooling of early childhood educators, I took direction from MacNaughton (1998) who suggests that “discourse analysis is critically reflecting on our social beliefs and practices and the contributions of social institutions to beliefs, practices and emotions” (p. 158). I grounded my work in this methodology as I completed a textual analysis of core early childhood textbooks, course outlines and readings to make connections between the principles of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood training and its significance in teachers’ capacity to encounter and relate to families defined as different from the dominant definition of what constitutes a family. Discourse analysis enables a process that conveys meanings through words and provides opportunities to analyze how some words have more authority and legitimized as “truth” (van Dijk, 1993). I was interested in a reading of texts to explicate the dominant discourse in early childhood professional training with a particular interest in how developmentally appropriate practice translates into a heteronormative construct of parent engagement repeated in the schooling of early childhood educators. The process of critically reflecting on ordinary texts and interviews meant uncovering through questioning the dominant meaning and developing over time a different narrative that encompasses a more critical and reflexive
approach to early childhood studies. Queer methodology includes accepting the tensions it introduces to research, moving knowledge away from what is known (Plummer, 2010). To a certain extent, queer theory is engaged fully with text analysis – and how it embeds points of sexuality or turns entirely away from it. In my data collection, I explored how multiple identities were formulated, paying close attention to what was spoken and what was not heard. In the next chapter, I describe the research design.
Chapter 7

Research Design

In an attempt to add rigor and depth to the study, I made an early decision that I would undertake what is commonly known in research as triangulation, which is to “identify different ways the phenomenon is being seen (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 444). My study uncovered the dominance of heteronormativity that was apparent in all three sources of data collection but I also discovered that queer scholarship is messy work. There is no defined process of how to collect data or what data has more legitimacy. It remains open to possibilities and potentially complicates how research is presented. I was not interested in emphasizing neutrality in the research process, but I was committed to ensuring that the processes that I undertook to create knowledge illuminated an interconnection between data sources. This felt like a particularly important process since I was exploring issues of sexuality, and I was interested to know and understand how different methods of data collection could strengthen validity in this research study.

I proceeded to explore data collection in three stages, each of which is described in detail. Whilst I collected and later analyzed data, I considered how to plan for cross-referencing the validation through triangulation. I undertook a combination of data collection processes that included text analysis of core learning materials in early childhood training programs: 10 in-depth interviews with educators, 3 focus groups with 14 educators and 17 interviews with queer parents with children in licensed early childhood programs. This combination of data sources enabled me to highlight emerging themes that I analyzed further to get a more complete picture of the complexity of queering early childhood
education. In the following section, I discuss the phases of data collection and the challenges I experienced in each phase.

**Phase 1: Text Analysis**

In the first phase, I completed a document analysis of materials including textbooks and core curriculum documents utilized in early childhood education diploma programs at community colleges in Ontario. I selected the colleges after I received responses from parents who were willing to participate in my study. I was able to cluster the parents within four areas in Ontario and validated that their children were either currently enrolled or had recent experiences in licensed early childhood programs. I gathered material from four colleges in different parts of Ontario because I was specifically interested in the connections between the training early childhood educators received and how queer families experience early childhood programs in different communities. I studied material from one college in Toronto, one college outside the greater Toronto area, one college in eastern Ontario and one college in Northern Ontario.

I accessed these documents through a combination of the colleges’ program descriptions, the respective college bookstore list of program texts and where necessary, through professional contacts that I have within the college system. I completed a close review of two textbooks (Gestwicki, 2011; Wilson, 2010). I also analyzed the College of Early Childhood Educators, Ontario Standards of Practice (2011) and the curriculum framework utilized across Ontario, called Early Learning for Every Child Today (ELECT) (2011) to explore how notions of diversity, equity and inclusion and developmentally appropriate practice were positioned in reference to queer parents and their children. All of the texts I analyzed for this research project are accessible through
public websites and program information documents. The information I accessed through one of the program coordinators was necessary because the college in question had not updated its program website. I informed all the program coordinators that I was conducting a text analysis of ECE training materials as part of my doctoral research, and that my study had been approved by the University of Toronto’s ethics review department. I clarified that if necessary, I would be willing to undergo any research protocols established at the individual colleges but was informed that this was not necessary.

My study was informed by my knowledge of the early childhood curriculum and the provincial program outcomes for ECE graduates grounded in my 15 years of teaching early childhood education in a community college, and my own training and experience as an early childhood educator. In Ontario, all 24 publicly funded community college programs offer the standard two-year diploma in early childhood education. Like other college programs, the ECE diploma program meets the expectations for program outcomes established in the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act. Revisions to the program outcomes have recently been approved (Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities, 2012).

I was specifically interested in textbooks and core curriculum documents utilized in courses on child development and on working with families. I selected these two courses to analyze for my study because they function as foundational courses, enabling early childhood educators to gain critical knowledge in child development and important skills on how to support families with young children. My final decision was to focus on two commonly used texts including Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Curriculum
and Development in Education, 4th edition (Gestwicki, 2011) and Partnerships: Families and Communities in Early Childhood (Wilson, 2010) since both appeared on mandatory and supplementary course readings at the college programs I chose for my study. I was interested in how ideas about diversity and equity were transferred onto early childhood practices that are considered developmentally appropriate. In turn, my intention was to explore how these ideas informed early childhood educators’ understanding of the fluid nature of queer parents and gender development in young children. The choice of analyzing content in the Wilson text posed a professional challenge since the author is a former colleague. However, I informed her of my plan of study and she understood the logic of why I selected that book to review. In fact, she informed me that her textbook was utilized in early childhood training programs across Canada. Wilson stated that she made an effort to include LGBTQ content but that she was also interested in what I found through my study. My interest in the Standards and Practice and ELECT evolved from a recognition that both documents were becoming central to a number of early childhood training programs across the province.

Yelland (1998) argues, “learning how to learn and understand both people and the elements in the world around them is an important knowledge base that children need to develop” (p. 44). I was also curious about what, if any, knowledge were the early childhood educators receiving in the ECE training program about queer parents and their children. In trying to create parameters of what information I was seeking, I started searching for queer related terms in the subject index, chapter outlines, course descriptions and course outlines. I looked for queer, same sex, LGBT, sexual orientation, lesbian and gay. In addition, I also completed a search on gender identity and sexual
identity, revealing what seemed a disappointing absence of relevant content on queer issues or queer identity in the teaching material.

**Ethical Issues**

Although the field of early childhood is growing rapidly across Canada, in many ways, it is also a very small professional world interwoven either directly or through next of kin relations. As I indicated earlier, I know the author of the Partnership textbook (Wilson, 2010), as we are former colleagues at the college where I am employed. Having a close working relationship with one of the authors caused me some anxiety immediately after I made a decision to deconstruct material from that text, worrying that I would be seen as challenging the life work of a colleague – something that doesn’t create the best working environment. I was also interested in knowing how the book was being utilized across course material and how it addressed the particular interests of queer parents – again creating some angst for me both personally and professionally. The reality of doing research in early childhood is that it forces researchers to negotiate relations within a fairly limited web of experts – this includes practitioners, researchers and authors of textbooks. On the other hand, this experience also represented how I work to integrate links between research, policy and practice; in early childhood, these are not discrete areas of work.

**Phase 2: Interviews and Focus Groups with Early Childhood Educators**

Initially, my plan was to conduct interviews with a variety of queer parents before I interviewed educators. However, in the practical interest of time and limiting travel, I did attempt to carry out both simultaneously, creating challenges in terms of documenting and analyzing data. I did discover that it was more effective to focus on the knowledge
and professional preparation of the educators within a particular college community
before I met parents within that same community. That pattern enabled me to understand
the content of early childhood training, followed by understanding the rationale behind
the parents’ experience of inclusion or exclusion.

In this phase of my study, I conducted 10 (Toronto – 6, Hamilton – 2, Kingston –
1, Thunder Bay -1) semi structured interviews and an additional three focus groups
(Hamilton, twice in Sudbury) with early childhood educators between February 2010 and
January 2011. All of the participants had completed their early childhood training in
Ontario in the last 10 years. I knew 3 out of 10 participants who participated in the
interviews from previous professional connections and didn’t know any of the focus
group participants. I initially aimed to interview 20 early childhood educators but found
the response from potential participants to my study extremely low. I thought this
seeming lack of interest spoke to the tension in early childhood with respect to sexuality
and the sexual orientation of parents. Although I felt somewhat discouraged I wasn’t
entirely surprised. As I set up interviews with the few educators that agreed to participate
initially, I was tense, worrying about the impact of my choice of language and concerned
that as a result I had imposed limits on my study. However, what I did come to
understand is the educators who agreed to participate in my study early on, were likely
more willing to engage in knowledge sharing about queer issues. In comparison, it is
possible that non-participant educators could not understand the importance of
acknowledging that queer families went beyond same-sex families, or simply did not
want to participate in a study that is commonplace across all areas of research.
I followed the advice of a committee member and shifted my attention to arranging focus groups. The focus group conversations were supported by agencies providing both time to the staff and space for me to organize the focus group. In fact, one agency provided dinner for all the participants contributing to a shared investment in learning more about queer families. I realized that this process of participating in focus groups enabled a conversation that was more relaxed as I investigated what educators know and understand about queer families and the relationships they establish with queer parents. The increased level of participation in focus groups was surprising since I had anticipated that participants would prefer to discuss what are seemingly sensitive issues of sexuality and queer in a more private setting. However, this approach turned out to be more successful, and I managed to meet a total of 24 early childhood educators in five communities in Ontario including Sudbury, Kingston, Hamilton, Toronto and Thunder Bay. In Sudbury, the majority of the educators had completed one course in anti bias early childhood education, which obviously influenced their thinking. Those particular educators were more engaged in the conversation and were more open to challenging each other. They lamented the lack of resources in their community and recognized that despite their training in anti bias education, they were missing a knowledge base in how to support queer families. I realized that the sampling process was not as structured as I expected and had to give consideration to how this would affect my conclusions that I explore later in my study.

The majority of the educators were in their early 20’s and 30’s with a sprinkling of educators who had joined the early childhood profession as a second career. The majority of educators had only worked in licensed early childhood programs, starting
their career immediately after the completion of a diploma in early childhood education. Most of the participants had worked in their current place of employment for more than three years and three educators had completed university degrees. One educator from a large city had completed previous training in child and youth work, and had previous experience working in a women’s shelter. Out of a total of 24 early childhood educators, only 4 came from non-White racial backgrounds. The dominance of the racial background of the research participants in my study, could potentially inform this area of research. However, I did not explore this in my study – except that I was very aware of often being the only woman of colour in the room, bringing a multitude of questions to the forefront of my own experience about what role does race play in the knowledge of educators. Although I did not explore their socio-economic status, I assumed that the participants lived a relatively lower middle-class life since most educators earn an average $14 – 17 per hour (Government of Canada, 2013), with higher than average salaries in the non-profit or publicly operated organizations. I assume that if they were sharing their home with others that would contribute to a higher household income.

My initial contact with potential early childhood educator participants in the study was via a posting through the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario list serve that is accessed by 2500 members. Since so few educators contacted me, it was not difficult to arrange the interviews. I conducted nine of ten interviews in person and one was carried out by phone. I was extremely careful not to make any connections between the educators and the parents in the study to ensure confidentiality of data. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and they all signed a consent form prior to the interview. They were told that they were being approached for their
expert knowledge as an early childhood educator working in early childhood programs for children who are between the ages of 0-8 years.

I was approached by two other early childhood educators, but I did not interview them since they had graduated from an early childhood training program prior to 2000, and I had chosen to limit participants to graduates within the last ten-years. During the initial telephone recruitment, I asked the participants for their assistance in seeking other participants. Through one participant’s contacts in their community, I was able to organize one focus group taking advantage of a snowballing effect. The other focus groups were organized via the local contacts of the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario. All of the interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participants. I agreed to forward a summary of my findings to them if they indicated interest.

All of the early childhood education graduates had completed their diploma training from a community college in Ontario within the last ten years. All except one had started and completed the program at the same college. All of the early childhood educators were employed in licensed early childhood programs and held full time positions as early childhood educators. One participant was the centre supervisor and one participant was a centre assistant supervisor. The interviews and focus group discussions produced significant data, and I was able to answer one key question; how does the training provided in early childhood programs impact on the knowledge and capacity of early childhood educators to support queer families or to support children exploring gender identification? Since most of the study participants had been working as early childhood educators for a number of years, their professional experience and additional
professional development provided a different perspective. However, their responses with respect to their professional preparation program had clear connections to the data I was collecting.

Interviews were scheduled when it was convenient for the early childhood educator to meet, and most of them were held either over lunch or at the end of their work schedule during the week. Although I offered to meet on weekends, all the educators preferred to meet during the week, either at a local coffee shop or at the centre where they worked. Most of the interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, and the discussion was as relaxed as possible within the context of a semi-structured interview. I initiated the interview by asking the educator to describe their training background including any additional professional development they had participated in. We talked generally about the changes in the early childhood sector since all educators are keen to know how recent policy changes could potentially affect their work. I used open-ended questions to create a sense of comfort and made no attempt to influence their response. Once I provided an overview of my research questions, the participants were thoughtful and were able to provide examples from their training experience without being prompted. I found that although I used the word queer to describe my research study, they used same-sex or lesbian and gay. On occasion, I was asked why I use a term they thought was insulting but upon providing an explanation, they accepted my use of the word queer. I found that many of the participants were able to associate the discussion to a friend that is gay, or a child that operates in the opposite gender. All of the participants either personally knew of someone who identified as queer and I noticed they shared this information early in the interview with me. Some of the participants
rationalized their inability to include more queer representation in the program because of how other parents would react, but I will explore this issue further in the next chapter.

The following list of questions was utilized for the early childhood educators’ interviews and focus groups:

1. Would you please provide your background in early childhood education and explain how long you have been working in ECE settings?

2. Could you describe how issues of diversity were discussed in your ECE training program including what courses addressed these topics?

3. Did your training program discuss the interests of queer parents or queer issues in general?

4. How did your ECE training prepare you to work in early childhood programs to deal with queer parents or queer identified children?

5. What recommendations would you make to ECE training programs to ensure that it includes all the perspectives on queer family and a broader understanding of child development?

6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Each of the ECE interviews and focus groups unfolded individually depending on the location, the time of day or if I had previously met any of the participants. I was concerned about my position as an insider to the early childhood training world, entering as a faculty member in another institution but also tied closely to early childhood policy development work. I was told more than once, “I have seen your name all over the place.” I was not interested in taking up a position as an early childhood influencer, but I did
recognize the implications my professional work could have on my research process. I was concerned that some of the participants would be hesitant to share their experience in early childhood. But I maintained an open and relaxed demeanor. Food always helps to calm nervous and tired energy. In response to their queries about recent updates on the early childhood profession, I answered their questions briefly and offered to talk again at a later date about policy issues, in particular as they related to new directions in full day kindergarten. Only one participant contacted me after the interview to discuss her interests further.

The focus group discussions proved to be more challenging since there were between 6-8 participants in each one. Like any group discussion, some individuals were more vocal participants, and I had to ensure everyone’s voice was heard. The dynamic of the focus group was unusual since all the participants were known to each other through their professional life. In the original arrangement with the ECE organizations that assisted in organizing the discussions, I had expected 4-5 participants in each focus group, but some of the participants had told other colleagues and more joined the group. Although this outcome was positive, I was concerned about my ability to avoid a fragmented conversation. However, when I informed the group that the meeting would last for 90 minutes and described the purpose of the research study, I found the participants eager to get started. I asked open-ended questions to start the conversation and found during the introductions, the participants began to discuss their training and the inclusion or exclusion of queer families and their children. I kept a close eye on the questions I wanted to cover (see interview questions above). The discussion was purposeful, and what was most interesting is the ability of the participants to challenge...
each other. This was likely more possible since they knew each other as colleagues. The fact that they knew each other and their communities relatively well, meant they were able to relate to the stories they told. I acted as a facilitator and maintained a relaxed questioning approach whilst ensuring all my questions were answered.

**Ethical issues**

Although unintended, one focus group led to a tense debate about one participant’s opposition to same-sex marriage legislation in Canada. She was forthright and forceful in her position and did not waver despite a significant amount of pressure from her colleagues. I did not anticipate such clear honesty but also was not sure how to deal with the animosity that was building in the focus group as a result of her position. I was also shocked at how traditional her views were and needed to keep my own emotions in check. Research that explores interpersonal relations, knowledge and personal experiences are entangled with the emotional process. In that particular moment, I struggled with maintaining a somewhat neutral position although I experienced her position as a personal attack to a certain extent. On the other hand, I also experienced a sense of protection based on how the other participants responded to her very strident position on sexuality. In this research undertaking, there were many moments where it was not possible to remain objective. I recalled my own experiences of coming out personally and professionally, and the challenges I experienced during these moments. Butler (1993) argues, “let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something” (p. 172). I wasn’t prepared for engaging in a research process that would bring my feelings into play, but I suppose in hindsight, the discussions were rich in the knowledge I gained from the educators.
My professional role as a faculty member also raised ethical issues for me. As the educators were discussing their early childhood training, they inadvertently made reference to course instructors – many to whom I had some professional connection. This posed a challenge for me to ensure that I maintained full confidentiality of the information the participants shared with me, but it also posed potential challenges to my professional working relationship with colleagues. This of course is a requirement of the institutional research department at my university. However, although I had never met many of the participants prior to the study, I certainly had either met or had heard of many of their instructors. I had to be careful in my analysis not to be unduly influenced by knowing some of the instructors and focus instead on reflecting on the discussion with the participants.

Unsurprisingly, the educator participants responded in greater numbers when invited to participate in focus groups whereas parents responded to interviews. In early childhood professional training, students are accustomed to working in groups learning about collaboration and cooperative work strategies in the process. Unlike teacher education, the legislation that governs early childhood educators ensures that they will work alongside with a team partner – rarely is an early childhood educator alone with children – this ensures the safety of young children, although it suggests a surveillance program. The practice of working in a team environment was clearly transferred into the focus group where all the educator participants were engaged in knowledge sharing and in working through issues, raising examples of children and families they worked with or from their own personal life. The focus groups for educators were extremely useful in this kind of design study reinforcing for me that early childhood spaces are educative and
participatory. Early childhood educators engage in collective learning demonstrating comfort in talking, sharing and challenging each other. This methodology indicates a striking difference between parents and educators.

**Phase 3: Interviews with parents**

I was initially ambivalent about interviewing parents about their experience in early childhood programs because I was concerned about their willingness to share stories about their children and their families in what could be construed as personal information. However, I was pleasantly surprised that I was able to arrange meetings with parents in quick succession in various parts of the province. In order to recruit parents for the research study, I requested the assistance of the Parenting Network for queer parents organized by the Sherbourne Health Centre in Toronto. Although the “network” office is located in Toronto, hundreds of queer parents and others interested in parenting across Ontario access the resources and website. The program coordinator agreed to circulate a flyer for my study (See Appendix).

In the next stage of recruitment, I participated in the Rainbow Health Network provincial conference held in March 2010 in Toronto. At this conference, I met numerous health and community service professionals and researchers who were able to give me contact information for various Rainbow Health Agencies across Ontario working on queer related health issues. I contacted agencies in communities that I was interested in exploring and was able to recruit 17 sets of parents in Kingston, Ottawa, Toronto, Hamilton, Waterloo, Sudbury and Thunder Bay. Although more parents did send me initial communication indicating their interest, I was unable to meet with four of them due to the typical business of family life when you have young children. The semi-
structured interviews with the 17 families were conducted between April 2010 and February 2011. I sought and was successful in interviewing a diverse representation of sexual identity in the parent sample including lesbian mothers, gay fathers, bisexual parents and transgender parents. The following provides a profile summary of the families that participate in the study:

- One queer couple with trans identified man: Professionals based in a rural community outside a small city
- One Bisexual mother: Professional based in large urban community
- Two Gay fathers: Professionals based in large urban communities
- Eight Lesbian mothers: Professional and working class based in northern, rural and urban Ontario
- Four Queer parents: Professionals based in rural and urban communities

Although I did not ask about their profession in any of my research questions, all the parents mentioned their area of work including the health profession, university and primary school teaching, researchers, an artist and a writer. Only one parent identified as working class, in reference to wanting to apply for a child care subsidy, noting the complicated nature of the requirements. Similar to the educators, the majority of parents presented as racially White – again, raising interesting questions about how different the experiences of queer parents of colour may be.

I met most of the parents in their own home, giving me the extraordinary opportunity to observe interactions with their children and other members of their families. Although this was extremely valuable and interesting, I have not included any
of these observations in my analysis. I can only say that queer parents, like other parents, are busy juggling family and work responsibilities. I met a few parents at local coffee shops mostly because as they said “it was a good reason” to go to Tim Horton’s or Starbucks! One couple met me at OISE, and I conducted one interview over the phone.

Some of the interviews with parents were conducted simultaneously as I was conducting interviews with early childhood educators. For example, when I was in Sudbury, I met with educators one evening and followed with interviews with parents during the next day or evening. All the parents were informed in advance that the interview would be approximately one hour in duration. I offered to cover child care costs but none of the parents responded. They were also told that they were being approached for their expert knowledge as a queer parent utilizing early childhood programs for their child/children who are between the ages of 0-8 years. I was informed in advance if only one or more parent would meet me. I asked openly when I had the opportunity if the parent had any preference in how they identified their sexuality. All but one parent was quick to respond. However, the one parent who chose not to label herself described her sexuality very much as an evolving process and it depended entirely on whom she happened to be attracted to in the moment. Often she was lovers with both women and men and finally settled on “I guess I’m bisexual but I prefer to leave it open”.

As Jagose (1996) reiterates, sexuality can be deconstructed, and labels and identities based on norms have no place in queer theory. Although I attempted to seek a diverse group of interview participants who also varied in racial background, I did not make this an explicit part of my recruitment strategy and as a result, the parents I interviewed would be described as predominantly White. In the process of interviewing
queer parents, I recognized that I was given access to their personal life including how and when they decided to have children, sometimes with great detail but with the provision that I do not disclose the particular details of their personal life. In some situations, I found myself reflecting on my personal life and my personal experiences both in my relationship with my partner and with my own children – and of course with their schools and child care programs. Bourdieu (1992) suggests that, (as cited in Hong, Mahoney and Plummer, 2003) “reflexivity provides a much greater awareness of the entire intellectual process. We need to look at a much fuller sense of the spaces – personal, cultural, academic, intellectual, historical that the researcher occupies in building that knowledge” (p. 101). I came to quickly recognize that my expertise in early childhood teacher training came with a particular knowledge that queer identity was generally absent from the program. I had hoped that the parents would reiterate what I knew – but I had to be careful not to lead them toward this finding. I did however, share with all the participants that I was a queer educator and a parent – as a way to share my social location but also to acknowledge that I came to this research project with experience in parenting and in education.

Since the focus of the interview was to deepen my understanding of the experiences of queer parents in early childhood programs, I remained focused on how the voices of queer parents were situated in child development and in parent engagement strategies. Early childhood programs have a typical and heavy emphasis on the importance of understanding child development from a cognitive, language, physical and socio-emotional perspective. They also have an understandably strong emphasis on parent engagement. I was interested in knowing if early childhood educators engaged
with the parents in my study about these issues and if there was a sense of partnership between early childhood educators and parents in promoting learning. The notion of establishing a positive working relationship is central to early childhood training, and I wanted to explore how active this relationship was between early childhood educators and queer parents. The interviews were semi-structured in format, but I maintained a flexible approach, ensuring the dialogue was open ended. When the interviews took place in the parents’ home, I did have to pause during interviews during the recordings so they could deal with their child’s needs. I was not concerned about these interruptions because I understood the parents were juggling multiple responsibilities, and I appreciated their time with me. During one interview, my tape recorder malfunctioned, and that was a lesson to always carry two recorders with me. I never experienced this problem again.

Since more than half the interviews were held outside Toronto, I had planned the interviews carefully to avoid multiple trips to one location. As a result, I scheduled multiple interviews on the same day with the participants and found that process personally taxing. However, I ensured that the interviews were scheduled for approximately one hour and ensured I had enough time in between interviews to get to my next destination and also review my questions. I conducted a preliminary interview with one parent whilst I was on a work related assignment and then followed up with her on the phone since my time was limited. In the final part of the interview, I asked each parent to share their advice on how early childhood training could be adapted to address queer identity and the needs of queer parents with young children. Their reflections
ensured an opportunity for the parents to share their lived experience that is grounded in a desire for equity and justice not just for their children but for all children.

According to Vasconcelos’ (2010) understanding of triangulation, “by triangulating information, the researcher is trying to clarify the meaning of the information gathered by reinforcing or questioning it” (p. 338). Collecting data in this study through text analysis, interviews with parents and educators, and focus groups, enabled me to establish connections between three sources of information. The evidence I gathered by analyzing the text emerged in interviews with educators and was reinforced in discussions with parent participants. The integration of knowledge gained through a variety of sources, provided a rich narrative of how queer is named or silenced – it enabled the exploration of issues that are not extensively addressed, and it created opportunities for new conversations and new learning.

**Ethical issues**

Meeting with parents in their homes provided an opportunity to observe how the family members interact with each other and how the children respond to their parents. As expected, parents that are queer are primarily interested in the well-being of their children and like most other parents are quick to respond to their children’s needs. Very early on in my research study, I met a couple that was raising their child in northern Ontario. Like many parents, their parenting experiences were filled with both joy and pain, however in the case of many queer parents, their pain was often related to their connection or lack thereof to their immediate family and community. This, combined with difficult experiences in the health care system and early childhood programs, often led to conversations that were emotional. I made an early decision to leave out data that I
considered to be personal in nature because although I believe in sharing parents’ narratives fully, I wanted to respect stories that were charged due to their personal and sometimes painful experiences. I did choose to include data that I believe can help to inform improved professional practice in early childhood education.

I experienced a moment of disequilibrium when I met a family in a rural community outside Toronto. I had communicated with one of the parents through email only, and their name did not represent a particular gender norm – here I was wondering if the parent was male or female, falling right into the heteronormative trap! As I walked through the house, I recognized it as a place where children belonged – toys everywhere, untidy with breakfast dishes laying aside. I also noticed complete chaos in the kitchen where the interview was conducted. With two young children in the family, wondering who this stranger was, I tried to build connection with the children to ensure they were comfortable with my presence – I did this after a few minutes of casual conversation with the parents. As we started the interview, the children stayed in the kitchen but were either hungry or needing their parents’ attention – one of them climbed up on the kitchen counter, to access jam sitting on the very top shelf and proceeded to eat it straight from the jar. I paused, expecting one the parents to bring their child down – to set some reasonable boundaries and to feed their child a proper meal. But the parents stayed in their chairs and directed the child to stop and continued the interview – of course, the child simply walked across the counters, creating a fairly unsafe scene, but the parents seemed unconcerned. On the other hand, all of my early childhood training was frozen on the tip of my tongue – unable to speak about climbing counters, eating far too much jam very early in the day. I had to remind myself they were not parenting badly – they
were just parenting in the way some parents do…queer or not. I did however realize that in a qualitative study, my standpoint position as an educator, a researcher, an activist influences how I view research participants and although I did not intend to engage in a process where I was analyzing parents capacity to be effective, my history and knowledge led me to this ethical dilemma. I had to shift my focus away from the children back to the parents I wanted to hear from.

Data Analysis

The research design of my study was evolutionary and the structure of interviews and focus groups with educators somewhat methodologically different than the interviews with parents. I found the discussions with parents more focused and they were able to cite examples that were problematic in early childhood practice. To a certain extent, they were more structured than the discussions with educators who proved to be more fluid, answering my questions and engaging with others about their statements. The methodology of my study unfolded based on the participants. My process for making meaning from the variety of data sources was not systematic. I did not follow a standard process, and as Kvale (2007) argues, there is no such process “to arrive at essential meanings and deeper implications of what is said in an interview” (p. 103). I moved back and forth from text analysis to coding interviews with educators. I re-played audio recordings to remember the family context of parent interviews. I returned to texts again and read more on queer theory. I used some of my research findings to publish a paper and to teach. I presented at conferences and was interviewed myself for another study – all of these experiences and more formed the essence of my work. This approach enabled me to uncover commonalities in the research data, use a theoretical framework to
frame the analysis and ask more questions. I focused my attention on the relationship between how queer issues are addressed in early childhood professional education with the knowledge that early childhood educators have of queer identity and queer parents. I also explored how the experiences of queer parents in early childhood programs could be linked to the professional education of early childhood educators. In the next chapter, I share my findings and build a relationship between the three sets of data to create a new understanding of early childhood development and family relations.
Chapter 8

What is Missing from Early Childhood Professional Education?

When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you ... when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard. (Adrienne Rich, 1986)

In this chapter, I propose a new way to understand the complicated connection between what queer parents experience in early childhood programs and what early childhood educators learn about children and parents. Through a queer lens, I begin by describing how ideas of what is developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood limit educators’ capacity to think outside the heteronormative box of how family and childhood is defined. I make connections between the educators’ contradictory expertise of what is normative exploration of children’s sexuality and gender development and the silence commonly found in child development texts. An analysis of the educators’ knowledge provides insight into the experiences of queer parents in early childhood suggesting that although the goal is to build strong partnerships with parents, the absence of queer from early childhood knowledge renders queer parents invisible.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the relationship between the professional preparation of early childhood educators with the new standards of practice for early
childhood educators, and the experience of queer parents using early childhood programs for their children. These families’ newly defined family units include single or multiple parents of varying sexual identity that may consist of but is not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender and transsexual parents. The use of queer theory enables the deconstruction of how educators understand child development patterns and the obvious absence of sexuality discourse, constituting children as physical but not sexual; social and emotional but not pleasure oriented, in effect essentializing children to what is developmentally appropriate. Using qualitative methods, the research is grounded in data sources including text analysis of key early childhood texts, focus groups with early childhood educators who have graduated from ECE training programs in Ontario in the last decade and interviews with queer parents with young children enrolled in early childhood programs.

In this chapter, I divide the results of my study into two distinct sections where I describe the findings of the study. However, I will say at the onset, the connections between each of the sections are dynamic and fluid because of my queer methodological approach. I pay attention to the nature of intersections between the varied data sources; however, I do think there is some value in framing the findings in a larger context to fully understand the significant influence of the curriculum on educator knowledge and the important lessons queer parents share with us. In this way, the process of queering education is in fact illustrated by the lack of structure, of categories and identities but at the core, brings sexuality to the forefront.

In my study, I found that despite a legislative and policy framework that recognizes the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer people, early childhood
professional education and practice has not kept pace with these advancements. In the first section, I document the implicit heteronormative discourse of family composition and the silencing of queer identity in early childhood training embedded in foundational course material including standards of practice, textbooks, course outlines and readings. Although Canadian demographics indicate a growing number of queer families with children, the gap in addressing the interests of queer identified parents and their children continues to exacerbate the dominance of a heteronormative lens in early childhood theory and practice.

In the second section, I argue that early childhood educators have a narrow understanding of how queer parents may be similar or different from other parents. Based on the interviews, I found that educators have a limited capacity to support and engage with parents that do not necessarily fit the dominant framework of family identity. All the educators described that learning about queer identity came from their life experience and was not discussed as part of their professional practice. Educators were often doubtful of their capacity to respond to parents’ individual needs and this was certainly exemplified by a number of queer parents responses about their interactions in early childhood programs.

**Re-reading Text with a Queer Lens: Uncovering the Standardized Approach to Childhood and Family**

In this section, I argue that early childhood education training is infused with a heteronormative discourse on family and silence on queer identity. The commonly read texts are prominent with a singular vision of how childhood is defined. Locating early childhood studies within a queer perspective is not without its challenges. Utilizing queer
theory in early childhood studies is to a certain extent hedging a bet against being seen as a scholar interested only in issues of sexuality that can be easily marginalized. However, I use queer theory to bring to the forefront the pre-disposition to heteronormativity in early childhood studies combined with the heavy burden that silence can cause when one does not speak of queer. In my analysis of professional learning and professional identity, I argue that institutions of higher learning can play a significant role in shifting a paradigm from a unilateral pedagogy to one that is more comprehensive and encompasses a queer lens. I am of course interested in issues of sexuality, particularly in how they link to a holistic approach to understanding child development. I am equally interested in creating knowledge in early childhood training and practice to enable children to explore the variety of opportunities beyond the gendered approach that tends to be the norm— from birth and in some cases, during pregnancy when the shape of the belly pre-announces the gender of the child. Judith Halberstam’s (1998) work to complicate gender rightfully troubles presumptions about childhood behaviours. The heavy focus on principles of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood prevents the entry of ideas that challenge the desire to normalize childhood. However, a queer lens enables both a questioning and an aspiration to provide a new way of thinking about childhood, reducing the volume on the desire to silence queer. The following section outlines the desire to embody a limited perspective on diversity and equity in early childhood training outcomes grounded in principles of developmentally appropriate practice.

In a close reading of the commonly used textbook titled *Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Curriculum and Development in Early Education*, references related to the development of sexuality are non-existent; the silence deafening. Gestwicki
(2011) provides no explanation of any term that is connected to children’s sexuality, and the single reference to gender identity is defined in the glossary of terms as “awareness developed in early childhood that an individual is male or female” (p. 425). Interestingly, the description on gender identity is placed in the section on the “Social/Emotional Issues of the Preschool Years;” yet, the potential emotional turbulence experienced by children exploring gender is not addressed. Instead, gender development is described as a compilation of “sexual identity determined by biology and sex-role behavior determined by culture” (p. 258).

Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford (2000) argue, “Even where sexuality is permitted, the form of sexuality allowed is the straightest of straight versions. At the same time, sexualities of all kinds pervade schools, with their effects unrecognized, because their very existence is denied” (p. 130). Blaise (2009) suggests that early childhood classrooms locate heterosexuality in how children express their stereotypical understanding of gender roles by “constituting what it means to be ‘girl’ or ‘boy’ in that particular place. Sometimes, their talk and actions about what it means to be pretty and sexy reinforce gender stereotypes” (p. 455).

The lack of critical and meaningful discourse in foundational early childhood texts, whether in representation of family difference, the development of gender identity, the implications of children’s stereotypical play or the socio-political framing of queer rights, unrereservedly silences queer identity and promotes the notion that children and families do not exist beyond the commonly understood heteronormative framework. Gestwicki (2011) suggests that preschool children typically develop ideas about gender roles, and educators should avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes. However, she also
proposes that children’s experience of sexual identity is determined by biology, reinforcing the very stereotype she asks educators to avoid. In this particular foundational textbook, no reference is made to same-sex, let alone queer families, clearly silencing ideas about sexuality as they relate to children and families. The only reference made to differences in families is in relation to cultural and language diversity. Similar discourses of equity and inclusion limit the opportunity to challenge racism through the promotion of artifacts that simplify the complex nature of difference and the desire to downplay the challenges this may cause. Bernhard et al. (1998) research study on interactions between parents and teachers in early childhood settings found that parents experienced race discrimination based on assumptions about differing child rearing practices. Educators were sometimes unaware of the unintended consequences of their behavior, although the parents were attuned to both overt and subtle forms of judgment.

My reading of early childhood texts demonstrates that a positivist and developmental perspective continues to be pervasive in early childhood studies. In early childhood training programs, one of the key vocational learning outcomes for an early childhood educator is the ability of a graduate to “establish and maintain inclusive* early learning environments* that support diverse*, equitable and accessible developmental and learning opportunities for all children* and their families*.” (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2012). This learning outcome is informed by the College of ECE Code of Ethics (2011) that defines responsibilities to families as the following:

Early Childhood Educators value the centrality of the family to the health and well-being of children. They recognize and respect the uniqueness and diversity
of families. Early Childhood Educators strive to establish and maintain reciprocal relationships with family members of children under their professional supervision. These relationships are based on trust, openness and respect for confidentiality. Early Childhood Educators collaborate with families by exchanging knowledge and sharing practices and resources. (p. 1)

The concept of diversity takes on different meanings in different contexts. In early childhood context, it is situated in the need to be aware of different families, without naming what that difference looks like. The Standards of Practice reinforce the uniqueness of families without describing the social, cultural, race and class variations that may exist. Early childhood courses teach concepts of child development and focus on the physical, cognitive, social-emotional and language differences amongst children, rarely noting any reference to differences in gender development and certainly not sexuality. Likewise the notion of developmentally appropriate practice promotes a responsiveness and respect to linguistic and cultural diversity, absenting early childhood discourse from sexuality. Rather it reinforces stereotypical understanding of preschool girl and boy play differences that generate an unspoken preference for heterosexual relations and gender stereotypes. Borrowing from ELECT (2007), the College of Early Childhood Educators (2011, p. 29) defines family units as a “group of children and adults who are related by affection, kinship, dependency or trust, such as single-parent families, same-sex families, multi-generational families and foster families”. This seemingly all encompassing definition could be read to include anybody that claims to be family, however, as I will describe later in my study, the perception of inclusion tends to
exclude some families, ensuring that queer remains missing.

The role of the family plays a significant role in early childhood studies, particularly as it relates to the importance of establishing collaborative relations with family members to ensure optimal child development opportunities. Without describing the changing and complex nature of what constitutes family, the assumed nature of family includes biological parents and siblings. To a certain extent, same-sex parents receive acknowledgement in early childhood research and training. However, Robinson and Diaz (2007) argue that “families are discursively constructed” (p. 85), suggesting that the meaning of family varies by cultural context, by biology, by kinship and ultimately by our own experience of what is family. The tendency toward a normalizing discourse of family excludes families that have trans parents, multiple parents, parents that are not related through intimacy and the multitude of others that make up family. The acceptance of same-sex relationships through the Civil Marriage Act (2005) adds legitimacy but only to certain relationships. It has also complicated which relationships are deemed acceptable. Butler (2002) suggests:

We ask for intervention by the state in one domain (marriage), only to suffer excessive regulation in another domain (kinship). Does the turn to marriage thus make it more difficult to argue in favor of the viability of alternative kinship arrangements for the well-being of the “child” in any number of social forms? (p. 17).
The focus tends to be on standardized notions of “best practice” within a presumed context of commonality amongst family. ECE training programs are required to follow both the vocational outcomes outlined by the Government of Ontario and the College of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. Within the college system where the majority of professional training occurs, the outcomes and the standards are broad enough to enable each program to specifically define how to integrate these into the curriculum. The autonomy within each program is grounded in another piece of legislation referred to as the Colleges Act (Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act, 2002) that allows each publicly funded college in Ontario to define how they will apply vocational standards established by the Ministry. As a result, each of the twenty-four ECE programs in Ontario approach the design of their programs independently with limited discussion about how effective the implementation process is. There is no methodological consideration of how early childhood training curriculum can be delivered within a universal approach to curriculum standards that also embed ideas from post structural and queer theory.

In my study, I found that although there was an opportunity to re-imagine early childhood practice with a more critical lens, the establishment of the College of Early Childhood Educators Standards of Practice, produced more of the same institutional and hegemonic approach to knowledge. When the College was first established in 2007, it gave early childhood educators the ability to self-regulate the profession. A new Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice were established creating a similar framework to teachers for early childhood educators around expectations of standards of practice. Bourdieu (1974) suggests that teachers often put standards into practice without asking
who created the standards and for what purpose. He argues that standards are seen as a way to implement a fair process without acknowledging that in fact standards often privilege the dominant cultural group. Standards of practice are not new to early childhood. However, the governance of these standards is new and dominated by a limited view of what standards are deemed appropriate.

In my study, I was curious about how the new code of ethics and standards of practice in early childhood education influence early childhood educators’ ability to engage in a conversation about how standards impact practice. When an early childhood educator graduates with a credential in early childhood education, they are expected to meet the vocational outcomes and are now expected to adhere to the College of Early Childhood regulations. How the Code of Ethics and the Standards of Practice is explored in ECE training and practice is left to individual instructors. The individual ECE program and the related course instructor decide whether the course content explores a more complex understanding of diversity and difference or whether a universalized approach to diversity and equity continues.

The Ontario Ministry of Colleges, Training and University expects that College ECE programs will ensure that their graduates will be prepared for entry to practice; yet, how each college does this is an autonomous decision laid out in the Ministry’s Community College Act of 2002. All twenty-four publicly funded colleges offer at least one course that specializes in supporting families. It is within this context, that I explore what educators learn about queer issues to understand if families or children who experience a fluid sense of their gender and sexuality are included in early childhood discourse. In Ontario, early childhood educators function within the interconnectedness
between notions of diversity, equity and inclusion and the principles of developmentally appropriate practice. Both paradigms play a significant role in how foundational text is developed and delivered in the professional training of educators, and both are identified in several textbooks, course readings and field practice requirements.

I chose to focus on two books in particular because they figure centrally in a number of early childhood programs across Ontario. Both Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Gestwicki, 2011) and Partnerships with Families (Wilson, 2010) are utilized in ECE training programs and interestingly take different approaches to explain the differences in family. The intent of this part of the study is to examine how foundational texts in early childhood training address issues related to queer families, queer identity and gender development. Gestwicki chooses to remain silent, and Wilson explores the existence of LGBTQ parents. Although both textbooks are read together and used in tandem, there is an underlying dominance on the integration of principles of developmentally appropriate practice and a resulting void in the capacity of early childhood educators to integrate knowledge about LGBTQ families in their practice.

The Developmentally Appropriate Practice textbook is used in a number of early childhood training programs in the communities explored in this study as the primary essence of good professional practice. The same principles also function as one of the six standards of practice defining early childhood educators’ responsibility for providing “developmentally appropriate care and education” (College of ECE, 2011, p. 9). In this section of textual analysis, the ongoing dominance of these principles is uncovered as are the implications on queer parents in early childhood programs.

The Gestwicki text book borrows from the position statement called
Developmentally Appropriate Practice published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) based in Washington D.C. The authors of the position statement Bredekamp and Copple (1997) write, “reciprocal relationships between teachers and families require mutual respect, cooperation, shared responsibility and negotiation of conflicts toward achievement of shared goals” (p. 22). This positioning of relationships between teachers and families is based on the premise that parents’ goals and desires for their children are paramount and that an appropriate mutual understanding is expected by parents and teachers to achieve optimal learning opportunities.

The most recent iteration of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Gestwicki, 2011) recognizes the variance in child outcomes success is based on social and economic indicators, the inadequate supply of high quality care and the implications of the unevenness of care available across the United States. It recognizes the lack of adequate teacher training for early childhood professionals, an issue that is also of concern in the Canadian context. The revised position statement from NAEYC on developmentally appropriate practice offers a more progressive understanding by reinforcing “even a child in a loving, supportive family within a strong, healthy community is affected by the biases of the larger society, such as racism or sexism, and may show some effects of its negative stereotyping and discrimination (p. 13). However, it says nothing about the complexity of living in a family where the parents may be queer or being a child engaging in gender exploration. It also remains silent on the fact that some families may not want their children engaging with children who are constructed as being culturally different. In fact, it continues to promote an understanding of gender through a binary
lens of what it is to be female and what it is to be male. This seeming lack of criticality is
typical of positivist approaches in early childhood that focus on dominant frameworks
and deny the imposition of power through privileging normative expectations of sexuality,
gender, race and class.

In the early childhood context, children who may speak English as a second
language are often emphasized in the discourse of diversity and inclusion and in
reference to the large number of immigrants amongst the Canadian population. The
growing number of children living in poverty is also cited as an issue to consider in terms
of equitable outcomes for children. However, a more critical review of diversity and
difference is not consistently taken up in the professional training of educators.

A similar neutralized approach to understanding the impact of racism is taken up
by Gestwicki (2011). She suggests that children understand their racial identity by age
four and educators have a responsibility to build a curriculum that enacts experiences that
enable children to explore differences. In early childhood studies, race is discussed in the
context of child development, suggesting that children recognize skin colour differences
around age two. I recall in my own early childhood training being advised to always
include dolls with different skin tones in the drama centre to ensure fair representation of
different racial backgrounds. This practice remains prevalent without a discussion on the
complex nature of race and racism. Although some educators may prefer to remain silent
on issues of racism, children are processing these experiences in an effort to make sense
of the world around them. In the same way that children explore ideas of weight, depth,
empathy and sympathy, they also explore ideas of race, sexuality and gender roles.
Children in their infinite wisdom show tremendous capacity to see the facts that appear
before them. They can see that people around them are different colours and that they come in different shades as well. However, what they do not hear are conversations that are factual about these differences. Similar to the silence experienced about sexuality, racism is for the most part unnamed in early childhood practice. However, Armstrong de Almeida, Pacini-Ketchabaw, and White (2006) offer a critical perspective of race and racism that goes beyond practices that aim to be inclusive. The authors utilize "a critical literacy of 'race,' racisms, anti-racisms and racialization", involving "critical 'readings' of how power operates and how it transforms, and reforms, social relations, through racial categories and consciousness" (p. 95 – 114), again blurring the boundaries of comfortable conversations about inclusion and acceptance.

I am interested in analyzing how race and queer intersect in early childhood studies. Both ideas do not have an active presence. As a queer woman of colour, I present differently than the homonormative representation that gives privilege to white affluent and often gay men in a partnered relationship. This is not to suggest that queer and racialized offer the same experience, but crossing those boundaries adds to the messiness of being a woman of colour. Anzaldúa (1999) argues in Latino culture, queer is rendered invisible. Kumashiro (2003) suggests that in order to understand the needs of queer students of colour, educators must engage with race and queer simultaneously, complicating issues of identity further. In discussing race with early childhood students, I often ask what they see first when they see me – their most common response is woman. But my identity as a woman, and as a brown woman is inseparable. When I add that I am queer I am at first met with silence, and then often with questions from a couple of brave students who want to know more. I do this to raise issues of race, sexuality and identity
and to discuss how the varied aspects of my life intersect and their relationship with me changes when they know more about their teacher.

In a recent initiative at the University of Prince Edward Island, the teacher education program has intentionally infused a stronger queer perspective in the program. Partially in response to the growing number of teens experiencing homophobia in Canadian schools and partially out of a desire to infuse a stronger transformative pedagogical framework (Turnbull and Hilton, 2010). My decision to name my queer identity in my teaching stems from a desire to go beyond typical notions of diversity, equity and inclusion and to establish an opening to discuss the silence enacted in developmentally appropriate practice. The nature of coming out as queer, as poor, as Aboriginal is risky but I think a necessary evocation of queering early childhood education. MacNaughton (2005) argues that adding a post structural lens disrupts regimes of truth and encourages the use of a tactical approach to knowledge production. Unknowingly, as I undertook my research project, I began to infuse ideas that challenge the normative approach to understanding child development and began to take more risk in my own teaching.

The hegemonic nature of racial privilege is not commonly discussed in early childhood studies in Ontario, as evidenced by foundational learning materials. Ryan and Grieshaber (2004) argue that children do understand that race and gender are closely connected to who has power and privilege, so why not explore deeper understandings of race with young children? Connolly (1998) argues that race and the experience of racism needs to be in the foreground of teaching practice and that children are active agents in the development of their racial and gender identity. The limitation of neutralizing
children’s development, proposing that “it is essential that teachers have an attitude of respect and recognize the diverse backgrounds from which children come from and the contributions of their families” (p. 10) to gain a richer understanding of the child and their family. The purpose of attending a professional training program is to get grounded in knowledge that supports professional practice and to challenge assumptions about educators’ attitudes – a more purposeful engagement to support knowledge about the challenges that race, gender and class present would support a critical analysis in teacher education.

Gestwicki (2011) further suggests that gender development and “sex-role behavior is defined by the culture” (p. 258). This limited view curbs educators’ capacity to challenge stereotypes and the power imbalances often tied to gendered behavior. Blaise (2010) argues that teachers have to be prepared to challenge children’s ideas for masculinity and femininity. However, educators function within those similar understandings unless there is a concerted effort to challenge the norms in relations. Taking up the challenge, Kincheloe and MacLaren (2000) argue that schools can be places of thinking about power and change, a position juxtaposed against schooling in developmentally appropriate practice that standardizes development and learning. Over twenty years ago, Lisa Delpit (1988) proposed, “Those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with least power are most aware of its existence” (p. 283). Teacher and early childhood training programs are spaces where a critical and transformative pedagogical framework can come alive – with a purposeful and intentional goal to infuse ideas that challenge the hegemonic discourse of developmentally appropriate practice.
According to Gestwicki, the Developmentally Appropriate Practice textbook “is designed to help teachers and students try to implement the (DAP) philosophy daily”. The book recognizes early on that a “critical component of the developmentally appropriate philosophy is the idea of individual appropriateness; that is, that no absolute standard can be set” (p. 2011, ix). This early acknowledgement relates to how the field of early childhood recognizes that standards of practice or age-related child development outcomes should be problematized and deconstructed to embed a social, cultural and family context. As a result, there is a strong emphasis on developing programs that meet the individual needs of children; yet, there is significant scholarship that challenges the developmental approach as flawed and limited in early childhood. Children do not exist within an individual bubble – their context includes their family, their community, their teachers and their peers. These may be representative of ideas that do not fit the developmentally appropriate framework, and may in fact challenge Western traditions of child development. Coming to terms with the focus on individual children whilst recognizing the broader context of how and where children live and learn poses significant and often contradictory challenges for educators. Although not universal by any definition, there is a presumption that queer parents tend to be more open with their children about exploring their sexuality. In a similar context where queer parents tend to explain their particular family construct to their children openly, there may also be a tendency to discuss issues of sexuality – in a sense because queering is exploratory and boundless, it is possible that queer parents are more comfortable discussing their children’s sexuality – which challenges but necessitates that early childhood educators be open to this possibility.
The principles of developmentally appropriate practice assumes a positivist approach that simplifies the complexity of children’s learning and being (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007) rather than critical reflective practice that takes on challenging norms. Woodhead (2005) provides insight on how a standardized approach to childhood development contrasts against a perspective that embeds a social constructivist approach in his analysis of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which describes development as a right. He draws “attention to the tension between universalistic theories and the plurality of pathways through childhood, the aspects in which development is a natural versus socio-cultural process, and the implications of recognizing children as active participants” in their own development (p. 82). However, I question whether it is even possible to posit a universal definition of childhood when so much of childhood is situated in family, language, social class and gender contexts.

Reading principles of developmentally appropriate practice through a queer perspective brings the idea that in addition to normative understandings of child development that include physical, social-emotional, and cognitive learning, gender development and sexuality have a valid place in early childhood. The most significant conflict within the paradigm of universality is what or who defines healthy and normal development. Woodhead (2005) argues that using universal notions of childhood and applying traditional methods of scientific measures is not necessarily the most effective. Childhood is impacted by the family and cultural context and deserves attention. In reading developmentally appropriate text, one expects that it may shift direction from a more typical approach to understanding child development. However, a detailed reading of the text, demonstrates otherwise.
At first glance, the DAP book (Gestwicki, 2011) has a number of photo depictions of children from various racial backgrounds (p. 10, 11, 18, 20), suggesting to the reader that difference will be acknowledged. However, the two references to racial identity are couched in how children recognize racial differences by age four and that it is important for programs to respond to cultural and linguistic diversity. Gestwicki remains committed to a construct of cultural diversity representing all aspects of diversity in one umbrella term. This approach eliminates any possibility to think about diversity and difference in a critical and reflective manner and to engage educators in a discourse that challenges the hegemonic nature of race and gender. In her review of social justice research in early childhood education, Hyland (2010) suggests that, “teachers examine the value-laden messages in every day practices in order to create more just learning environments” (p. 82). She suggests that bringing issues of poverty, race, gender, sexuality and class to the forefront can transform curriculum rather than teaching from a position that engenders power and privilege. However, instead of extending a more complex understanding of the social influences on child development, Gestwicki continues to suggest it is important to teach children about racial difference without creating a feeling of superiority or inferiority. This is good advice however, excluding a discussion of power and privilege assumes that race does not play a role in how power and privilege are understood sanitizing the discourse further.

Within the early childhood professional preparation program, students develop a strong expertise in principles of child development (except gender and sexual development, which I discuss later), health and safety and curriculum design for young children. In terms of learning about families, gender development and difference, the
formal training program only offers a cursory glance at these issues. In some teacher education programs (Grace and Benson, 2000; Kumashiro 2002), there is an increasing movement to address queer issues in relation to queer youth experiencing homophobia and the experiences of queer identified teachers. In the school system, there is a common myth that sexuality emerges during adolescence but no recognition that young children are often attuned to their sexuality, including their queer preferences (Birden, 2005; Blaise, 2010; Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2007; Tobin 1997). Similarly in early childhood, the desire to ignore the presence of queer continues to protect the dominant assumption of heterosexuality. In the core texts, the College of ECE Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics and in the course outlines I reviewed, there was not a single mention of the term queer, homophobia or sexuality. There were repetitive suggestions about educators being respectful of families recognizing the diversity of different families, but there was no explicit recognition of the queer nature of childhood, nor any direct reference to gender identity and sexuality. Again, this limited perspective of diversity and difference continues to espouse an essentialist understanding of early childhood development.

The possibility of engaging with ideas outside the hegemonic principles of normative child development discourse is far from common in early childhood practice. The more recent focus on brain development and the economic benefits of early childhood investment has further shifted away from questioning and critiquing the limitations for traditional understanding of early childhood development.

Blaise (2005) argues that a singular perspective in child development maintains a unilateral power in how and what knowledge is shared with educators. In Foucault’s (1980) examination of power, he suggests that knowledge functions as a regime of truth,
particularly when posited through university education. I am not suggesting that by simply naming the existence of queer parents using early childhood programs, we resolve a lack of criticality toward principles of developmentally appropriate practice. However, the absence of any referral to queer demands a questioning of the hegemonic stance and acts as an impetus, as de Lauretis (1991) suggests, to deconstruct the silence in early childhood development discourse.

The Developmentally Appropriate Practice document (NAEYC, 2011) insulates early childhood educators from critical reflective practice and instead lays out the expectations of how to understand difference, albeit in a limited capacity. How appropriateness is defined is questionable particularly in the context of the wide range of difference found in children and their families in the Ontario context. The principles establish expectations that are used across the early childhood spectrum where ideas of what is appropriate become second nature. I argue although the principles are grounded in a child-centred and play-based approach to learning, the absence of a critical discourse on how family, citizenship, income and social context influences relationships among children, families and educators is problematic. The lack of discussion related to queer families is further extended to children’s gender development or children’s exploration of sexuality. For example, in an attempt to understand gender identity, Gestwicki (2011) suggests, “issues of gender identity, gender roles and gender exploration vary from culture to culture. Teachers will encounter many parents who are simply uncomfortable with or strongly oppose children’s exploration of this topic through play” (p. 273). In fact, a number of educators in the study discussed their desire for strategies to deal with the questions of parents. Gestwicki suggests a book as an example of what she considers
to be helpful in explaining gender differences to children called What is a girl? What is a boy? (Waxman, 1976). “Roberto stands up to use the toilet because he is a boy. Boys’ and girls’ bodies are made differently. It’s more convenient for girls to sit on the toilet seat” (p. 272). Yet, when I first started exploring issues of queer families and gender identity, it didn’t take very long for an early childhood educator to tell me about a young girl who prefers to stand up while she uses the toilet. Gestwicki’s text offers no advice for this educator, perpetrating the idea that all children will engage in behaviour expected of their biological gender. However, queer pedagogy would propose a challenge to constructed ideas of what is acceptable gendered behaviour and that representations by children who oppose norms are simply exploring beyond the boundaries of what they imagine to be their norm.

The absence of discourse that creates an understanding of young children’s engagement in sexuality speaks to the power of how knowledge is developed and by whom. Although there is no overt negation of sexuality in principles of developmentally appropriate practice, the very absence of any reference functions to regulate and perpetuate a particular understanding of children’s development and educator’s perceptions. In deconstructing Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power and its application in early childhood settings, Robinson and Diaz (2007) argue that “power does not always use force or aggression and that it can be self-regulating through its potentiality…or the perception that one is being watched can result in individuals regulating or normalizing their own behavior” (p. 37). For example, early childhood classrooms typically have washroom areas that are open to the playroom space. This is positioned to ensure the safety of children under the supervision of adults. However, it also ensures the safety of
children with adults under the supervision of other adults. I am not suggesting that children should not be ensured safety. However, there is an air of surveillance in early childhood programs that limits children’s natural exploration of their body and the resulting pleasure. Blaise (2010) suggests that children show a basic understanding of sexual concepts and educators need to understand how to respond to their curiosity. Yet, the essential text utilized in early childhood training says absolutely nothing about children’s sexuality, suggesting that within a paradigm of appropriateness, children are not capable of understanding healthy sexual development. However, it does suggest that, “in developmentally appropriate classrooms, teachers recognize that forming a healthy gender identity is a developmental task of preschool children (Gestwicki, 2011, p. 272), yet the complex nature of gendering is not taken up. Instead, developmentally appropriate discourse has a tendency to normalize a dominant heteronormative perspective infused through the suggestions of books such as *What is a girl? What is a boy?*

What then do we make of this child that does not fit the normative expression of gender that Gestwicki espouses? Through a queer lens, developmentally appropriate practice simply reinforces the dominance of a singular heteronormative assumption of children's gender development, reinforcing the power and inequality that text often produces. This leads to questions about what is the significant meaning about the absence of particular discourse in child development texts.

In my perspective, queer offers early childhood education an opportunity to disentangle gender development with sexuality. Queer offers us the promise to free ourselves from limitations and the binaries we often impose on young children. Queer
creates risk and confusion but also hope and possibility to see the world through the eyes of a child. Queer provides exploration in the richest way possible as Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) argues in her book “Queer children: Growing up sideways” on how she sees children’s developmental progress. “Their supposed gradual growth, their suggested slow unfolding, which unhelpfully, has been relentlessly figured as a vertical movement upward toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness” (p. 4).

The tension of speaking out on behalf of a different way of doing early childhood is often met with silence. However, as I progress through this study, I am getting more comfortable with that silence – giving time for thinking it through. Bringing a queer lens to early childhood studies in Ontario is linked to possibilities of doing early childhood policy, research and practice differently. It opens the possibility to view childhood development as evolving, physical, sexual, emotional and supported by knowledgeable educators. Examining binary approaches to early childhood puts into question the idea that the child who loves rough and tumble does not have the capacity to play quietly with dolls and vice versa. Or for that matter, the girl child who prefers to be called Jack instead of Jacquie may or may not be queer. My interest in raising the salience of children as active agents in their own development is shared by others. My commitment to adding a queer lens to childhood development is based on my study that clearly demonstrates a dominance of a narrow definition of childhood.

This learning, as expected, has not been a straight and narrow path. Amos Hatch (2002) argues that qualitative researchers don’t necessarily fit into a tidy paradigm of research models. In fact, the process of analyzing text in early childhood in the context
of developmentally appropriate practice has been messy. I have deconstructed the influence of this particular principle, followed with meaning making of what this dominant framework means to queer identity. What I do understand more clearly is that the dominating nature of developmentally appropriate practice leads to a deafening silence on deeper engagement with how gender and sexuality is key to child development. In the next section, I share findings of how early childhood educators perceive their understanding of child development and its relationship to sexuality and gender identity.

**What is it that early childhood educators learn about Queer?**

In the previous section, I provided an analysis of how principles of developmentally appropriate practice play a dominant role in early childhood training. Disrupting normalizing discourses that challenge a narrow understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion frame new possibilities of understanding childhood and family. In this next section, I outline the responses of early childhood educators in my study. Like the parents I interviewed, the educators also come from a variety of backgrounds, and live in both urban and rural communities. They received their training in one of the areas where the parents lived and all of them had completed at least an early childhood diploma program. All but one of the educators identified as a woman. Although I did not explore their sexuality directly, some of the educators disclosed that they identified as queer whilst others identified as married or coupled with a boyfriend. In this section I provide a brief analysis of how the educators’ understanding of sexuality impacts on their knowledge about queer parents, children’s sexuality and its link to professional practice. Factors related to educators’ sexuality require further study to elicit how these factors influence educator professional practice.
All of the educators in my study completed their early childhood training in Ontario in the last decade, during a time when significant legal and policy change reconstituting the definition of family were taking place. As I describe in this section, some of the educators completed one course on anti-bias curriculum, which of course is connected to how this knowledge impacts their understanding of diversity and difference. Despite the progressive changes to statutes in Ontario, I argue that early childhood studies have not kept pace with these changes. In my analysis, I focus on educators’ particular understanding of queer in relation to childhood development and in relation to families.

In this section, I argue that the focus on diversity, equity and inclusion and developmentally appropriate practice within early childhood education training in Ontario does not engage educators with pedagogical principles that conceptualize early childhood development in the complexity of a socially constructed role of children and educators. The interviews I conducted with early childhood educators demonstrated a desire to understand early childhood practice beyond the rhetoric that is institutionalized. They described a more dynamic reality of how their work with children is based on the fundamental theoretical concepts they learned about in their professional training and their professional practice that brings them closer to the children and families they worked with. I recognize that many of the educators that participated in my study engage in critical pedagogical practice that is shaped by professional knowledge, relationships with children and families, access to media and the new social-political context of early childhood. Yet, too often early childhood education is grounded in one kind of positivist and developmental approach to childhood and families, rendering queer silent.
At the core of early childhood professional education and practice is the ability to engage with all families in a respectful and reciprocal manner ensuring the best possible environment for children to visibly experience the partnership between their educators and their parents. Similar to expectations for developmentally appropriate practice, there are central principles outlined in both ECE program outcomes and the College of ECE Standards of Practice that stipulate working partnerships with parents is at the core of effective early childhood practice.

In this section, I argue that despite an interest to know more, early childhood educators have a limited understanding of queer families and how queer parents may be similar or different from other parents, due in part to the developmentally appropriate perspective offered in early childhood training. The existing professional training program for early childhood educators is designed to meet provincial standards through the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and the Standards of Practice set by the College of ECE. These standards do not challenge normative assumptions about childhood or family. They do not, as Sears suggests (1999) provide an environment where “allowing children freedom to develop their sexual identities as an important attribute of queer households and (classrooms). He further argues “erasing queer families from the curriculum for the “sake of the child” does not remove them from day-to-day realities of school life and children’s worlds” (p. 11). Although educators seemingly don’t deliberately “erase” queer families, the propensity to silence queer identity is symbolic of erasure. I argue that although educators have restricted knowledge on what the needs and interests of queer parents are, they demonstrate a strong capacity to support and engage with parents that don’t necessarily fit the dominant framework of family
identity. I discuss possibilities that may contribute to a broader understanding of family relations in early childhood.

ECE programs in Ontario’s twenty-four publicly funded community colleges offer at least one course that builds specialized knowledge in working with families. In addition, other courses create opportunities for the integration of this knowledge in how to build partnerships with families such as child development, sociology and working with children with special needs. At the core of most ECE programs is to ensure a working partnership with families. This is driven by the notion that shared knowledge about a child between parents and educators will improve program practice and child outcomes. As a result, professional relationships with parents are encouraged both in course work and professional practice. The College of Early Childhood Educators (2011) expects early childhood educators to “strive to establish and maintain reciprocal relationships with family members of children under their supervision” (p. 11). This desire to partner with families is very much grounded in the assumption that parents want to share knowledge and that educators are open receptacles of that knowledge. The required outcome that ensures all ECE graduates are well versed in working with families is grounded in academic expectations and field placement outcomes. ECE students are expected to practice communication strategies with parents, and often the field practicum provides the richest foundation in family diversity.

This of course poses a challenge in early childhood practice, particularly since there is an absence of a theoretical framework that goes beyond what is developmentally appropriate and what fits normative standards. As a participant in my study reiterated, “although we are expected to work closely with children and families, we certainly don’t
talk about all the different type[s] of families there are and sometimes those families go through some pretty significant changes”. Early childhood educators are expected to build partnerships with families, but how are partnerships possible with all families when discussion on the complex nature of childhood and family is limited? Similar to the notion there is no one universal definition of what constitutes childhood, there is no one universal definition of what constitutes parents, parenting or parental engagement.

Recently, there has been more progress made in how diversity is understood in the context of childhood development and family issues. For example, there has been substantial research in understanding the language needs of children growing up in immigrant families (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2008; Geva and Zadeh, 2006), and more attention has been paid to the varying developmental trajectories of children experiencing family poverty. In her recent publication Bernhard (2013) challenges educators to embed a pedagogical practice that recognizes the knowledge that immigrant families may share rather than focusing on a deficit model that questions their ability. Delpit (1996) argues against an assimilationist perspective pushing instead the discomfort often associated with working against the culture of power commonly found in educational settings. New early childhood research in the re-conceptualist movement does ask “if race itself is not a thing, but an event, researching race entails not only asking people about their experiences or just understanding how racialization is mediated in various social fields” (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo and Rowan, 2011, p. 24), but rather the experiences of race and how these affect practices. Within the commonly used diversity and equity paradigm, inclusion is at the forefront with very little acknowledgement of racism and other forms of discrimination. Assumptions about inclusion dilute the impact of artifacts that
similarly result in a narrow understanding of racialized groups or the influence of the dominating nature of heteronormativity. Often the differences that are named are integrated into an “anti-bias” cultural context.

As I listened to the participants in interviews and focus groups, themes began to emerge that enabled me to understand that although educators understood that families and children are seemingly more complex, the professional preparation program was not addressing these complexities in depth. I recognized the prominence given to a developmental perspective in how educators shared their knowledge about children but I also heard them discuss children that did not fit the normative construct of childhood development. My study brings forward two ideas that are prominent from interviews with educators; the first is despite a wish to inculcate early childhood with notions of diversity, equity and inclusion, some educators’ knowledge and practice is troubling. My offer to ensure complete confidentiality, led to frank discussions about what diversity meant to them, causing me both personal and professional angst. Secondly, although the infusion of developmentally appropriate practice is prevalent, early childhood educators also articulate that this foundation does not adequately prepare them to work with a paradigm that is more complex than the assumed simplicity of appropriate practices for educators. The participants demonstrate a desire to know more about children’s race, gender and sexual identity – and also a desire to know more about the complex nature of families in early childhood settings, inadequately supported with notions of diversity and equity.

I start with an example of a focus group that I conducted in a small Ontario town early in my study that was both troubling and enlightening. I turn back a lens on what
exactly do ideas about diversity, equity and inclusion mean to educators in practice, keeping in mind that I only interviewed educators that had received their professional training in the last decade. One educator had this to say about diversity and difference:

When I came back three years ago, it’s way more diverse now than when I left. Well with the ethnic people that are living here, there are more different cultures because I had never seen a coloured person in this town. I used to live just outside Toronto and saw coloured people all the time. When I moved here, I didn’t see one for years and then I came back and it was like oooh.

During the discussion and upon further reflection, it was challenging for me to stay focused on the question, while experiencing shock at the language utilized. However, I was interested in what the educator perceived in her experience of how the community had changed and continued the discussion with her. Finding my focus, I continued to pursue additional information about the other educators’ understanding of difference; I asked about what kind of courses she has in their training program where they may discuss different issues of diversity. I discovered that in fact, they have an entire course on anti-bias education where they do explore racism and same-sex families; yet, they struggle with how to integrate that knowledge into their practice. Canella (1997) was an early proponent of deconstructing child development within a limited social and political context. Using her argument that “child development has been the foundation of child education and child welfare…we must recognize that this foundation has feet of clay” (p. 63). Similarly, diversity, equity and inclusion serve as a foundation in early childhood
research, policy and assumed appropriate practice. However, this dominant ideology serves the purpose of suggesting inclusion, yet in practice educators are more likely driven by their own history, learning and value system. Inclusion in principle can mean exclusion in practice, as so clearly demonstrated by this particular educator.

Like me, the other participants remained silent although visibly surprised by the use of language that was so antiquated – except that it isn’t. This kind of racism can be perceived as a positioning of power over the other making it difficult to imagine another way of being. In a moment of disequilibrium I wondered if she ever refers to children and their families as “coloured” only to realize how incredibly powerful language can be – particularly when it is used to further marginalize groups of people. Maintaining momentum was daunting given the shift in tides during this particular focus group. Continuing the discussion and perhaps noticing the reaction of others, the educator continued and said, “I know some people find it hard but I think the diversity is good – things are changing and this is good”. I didn’t want to ignore overt racism but I wanted to understand how her position on race intersected with her understanding of sexuality. Steeped in my identity as a researcher, I asked her to explain what she meant in her reference to coloured people and further stated that it is more common to refer to people of colour. She went on to explain that she noticed a change in the small town community that she worked in now had shifted from “mostly white people”.

We’ve got people from the Hispanic community; we have people from the African community, the Iranian community. It’s like, where did all these people come from because they weren’t here 10 years ago? And it has changed in that
respect but its still mostly white Anglo-Saxon.

The use of language is powerful, and in this case indicative of oppression and racism. This particular perspective was not aired again in this focus group or any other interviews, but it stood out for me as indicative of the inadequate nature of how diversity and equity are positioned in early childhood professional training and practice. In identifying issues of racism, I am also interested in continuing to see how that intersects with issues of sexuality and issues of gender development. In my study, I was curious to understand how educators were able to articulate what they understood about diversity – in a critical, pedagogical approach that was reflective of the intersections between different areas of oppression. My focus is on sexuality and the absence of queer identity – but my conclusions are based on evidence presented by the text, the educators and the parents. Despite a new wealth of knowledge in how race, sexuality, and gender impact on the learning experience, early childhood students in Ontario continue to be exposed to cultural awareness and “receive training in a limited form of anti bias education, which prepares them for establishing a program rich in cultural tourism” (Janmohamed, 2005, p. 162).

For example I discovered that in a northern Ontario community college, early childhood students are required to enroll in a course titled *Advocacy and Bias Free Practice*. In my perspective, there was a difference in how these participants engaged in my study, seemingly more invested in developing programs and making connections between course knowledge and professional practice that was more attuned to diversity and difference. Eight out of twenty-four early childhood educator participants in my
study had completed the course. The graduates from this program are expected to “demonstrate an acceptance and understanding of diversity of children, their families and the community, including consideration of social, economic, cultural, religious, ethno-racial, gender, age and special needs issues” (Personal Communication, March, 2012). Although the analysis of sexuality and sexual orientation is not fully included in course material, the students are introduced to the importance of including same-sex families in their curriculum. Laudable as it may be, the college that offers this particular course in the ECE program, attempts to embed all things diverse into one course, potentially risking a limited overview of diversity and difference, making it challenging to provide the depth of study necessary when engaging with issues of difference. The students engage with ideas of diversity and equity using an anti-bias paradigm promoting notions of inclusion rather than considering the full implications of practices and ideas that exclude and silent. There is a focus on learning how to develop “bias free” curriculum ideas promoting an understanding of one’s own bias and values and how they relate to the care of children. Although somewhat superficial in design, the participants that completed the course were more aware of the stigma that queer (or same sex as they preferred) parents experience and were able to compare how their community had changed on lines of racial and socio-economic difference. They were also able to recall their class discussions as supplementing knowledge they extrapolated from the media and their own social and professional circle.

Clark (1995) argues that there is a significant divide between superficial cultural icons such as music and costume and a deeper exploration of how families interact and the philosophical underpinnings of cultural practice. The theoretical understanding of
difference offered in an anti-bias course translates basic knowledge of diversity and difference into practice but does not offer the depth of knowledge and ability to challenge universal truths possible. It allows for the framing of diversity within a construct that desires all children and families are treated equally. As Canella (1997) observes, “this perspective disavows political knowledge, the reality of power issues within society and the construction of schooling, and the group histories and diverse knowledges within which individuals are embedded” (p. 39). Although reconceptualist scholars challenge positivist early childhood research and practice, the disjuncture between course work and professional practice continue. The following narrative exemplifies the possibility that understanding difference needs to be embedded within a more complex pedagogy of diversity and equity:

I think if we are going to represent everybody, then we should be depicting everybody, not just what’s in our books….I wonder what did we learn from our class and what are some of the practices we are doing – as far as I can see…none. But I remember taking it all and being excited and coming back to work but there weren’t any resources for me to get my hands on unless I sort of went out and bought them myself. I have been to Scholars Press and to Chapters to get books – and they have nothing.

The issue of lack of resources is typical in early childhood and teaching practice bringing to the forefront the need for toys and materials to enable creativity in curriculum implementation. Similarly, another participant had this to say.
I think when you look at anti bias resources it’s a lot easier to find things that are multi-cultural – stereotypically multicultural. Because it’s the visual you’re looking for. You can’t look at someone and know their sexual orientation for the most part. I know you can have a book about a lesbian family but where is that book? That’s the question.

The safety of focusing the discussion on lack of resources provides a safety net rather than engaging in a deeper conversation about how values are embedded in pedagogical practice. How educators embed knowledge about hegemony, power relations and marginalization could be more effectively integrated in course work, practicum experiences, the Standards of Practice and ECE Program Outcomes. A more thorough examination of how issues of difference are addressed is valid and possible through reflective practice.

The educators indicated that in addition to an epistemological process that enables them to consider their pedagogical approach, they also need practical resources and access to material to support that teaching and learning. The comment on stereotypical multicultural was notable, suggesting that although materials are available they come in typical collections of “multicultural babies – they are just a different race. We call them “little Asian packs”. She continued to explain, “they all look the same just different hair colour. So that sort of stuff is bizarre.” Moving away from a traditional approach in early childhood requires a different teaching technique that enables educators to see beyond the text and engage in a learning process that deconstructs traditional ideals often found in
education. In active engagement with social change, early childhood educators need to think outside the traditional social-emotional, cognitive and physical development box that children are often put into. The anti-bias course offers ideas that suggest materials that represent different families and encourages an analysis of the relationship between the students’ own values and professional practice. However, educators must also be given the intellectual tools to ask why there is an absence of knowledge capacity building in gender development and sexuality of children despite knowing in practice children are actively engaged in both. In the same focus group, an educator who had also completed the anti-bias education course comments:

I think it’s hard. You have to please everyone, right? You have to please these people and those people and you don’t have the resources or the materials to put stuff on the walls of different families. I think as long as you are treating everyone equally and you still love every child equally and you don’t treat anyone differently, that’s basically what I think is important.

Certainly, educators that participated in the anti-bias education course had more foundational knowledge about the sexual orientation of adults. However, their understanding of sexuality amongst children was limited. As Canella (1997) argues, treating everyone equitably erases the social context of children and families. I know my experience as an English-speaking woman of colour has more power and position than a woman of colour who does not speak English.
When I asked the educators about their interest in knowing more about the family’s background in relation to the family’s sexual identity, the educators were silent for about a minute. The first response was a mix of curiosity and a desire to respect the family’s privacy:

On the one hand, absolutely yes, you are taking care of their child and you would want to know how to better serve them, but on the other hand it’s really not our business at the same time. You never want a parent to feel like they can’t be open with you just because of their sexuality. But regardless they might have feelings inside that you are not comfortable. There might just be a little barrier there.

In the interviews with parents, a number of them alluded that simple gestures like the symbolic rainbow flag or a pink triangle would go a long way to support a perception of acceptance. Parents explained that they had experienced homophobia and reservation in early childhood settings that puts into question the premise of the notion of diversity and equity, especially in a community where students are completing course work to support anti-bias perspectives.

When I raise the parents’ concerns with the focus group, one educator had this to say:

Not everyone is though? As comfortable as everyone say they are, I don’t think everyone is…they are uncomfortable with it or aren’t sure, when they thought they would have been. In the course I took we invited one of our teachers to come – he is gay and with his husband. They talked about getting married and
rights….we didn’t talk about it in depth. It was more about biases than specific – the queer family. It was about you don’t treat other people differently just because they are different.

I asked her if that was enough knowledge to prepare her for professional practice in a climate where some gay dads are having children. She said you need additional support and resources similar to resource consultants that play an advisory role for early childhood educators working with children who have special identified needs. The educators shared that their professional training gave them a basic understanding of issues of diversity as it relates to family but as one educator put it:

Although the course work used inclusive language, it would have been helpful to know more about family backgrounds. I learned about a child with two mums in my placement and I focused on gaining this knowledge from the child that I was working with.

When she had started working as an early childhood educator, she met her first family with four mothers – pushing her understanding of family composition to a new level in her professional experience. In her place of work, they make an effort to use things like a positive space sticker and they have a strong commitment to acknowledging the process of gender development. As she suggested, “you see gender at such a young age and the ECEs here deal with it during circle and let the children know boys and girls can do anything they want.” This educator acts as a mentor to students who question things like
the sticker – sometimes because “they just don’t know about it”. My study demonstrates that the emphasis on developmentally appropriate practice shuns discussion on gender exploration and sexuality. In its absence, the professional practitioner fills the void in knowledge where it is possible and where the educator is engaged in reflective practice.

One educator that had previously worked in a women’s shelter shared this insight when asked about children’s sexuality:

Of course they have questions about their bodies. The research shows that at a very young age, children can tell how they feel, but we never talked about that in ECE training. We talked about gender but in a very general way; I don’t think it’s a very important part of the curriculum.

She further explained what she thought about how sexuality is discussed,

If we covered it [sexuality] in child development, then people would understand. Some people think that people just wake up one day and choose something, right? I woke up choosing that. I’m going to be with another woman. People just don’t see the scientific part of it…of just being born that way.

During the discussion I had to clarify what she meant in reference to “people.” She explained that both parents and educators did not understand that sexuality isn’t something you choose. “It’s something you are born with”. The debate between the immutable and constructivist debate on sexuality is not as deeply ingrained as it once was.
Unlike the charged discourse on how children who express a desire to be recognized opposite to their biological gender, issues of sexuality are gaining a wider breadth of understanding. Gender identity support services can sometimes pursue an angle that leans more toward reparative therapy than coping mechanisms for a time when gender identity is being explored and may cause some struggle. As the educator names above, the more accepting position on sexuality is simply based on your biological make up – that can include queer, heterosexual, bisexual. How you engage with your sexuality is of course dependent on the social context of rights, privilege and citizenship.

In a recent essay *In the name of childhood innocence*, Robinson (2008) argues, “The notion of childhood innocence has been inherently enshrined within traditional theories of human development, which have also constituted understandings of sexuality. Thus, sexual immaturity is equated with ‘innocence’—considered inherent in the child” (p. 116). When asked about the sexual development of children, a number of educators turned the conversation toward gender development. One educator said, “they’re just children. I don’t think they know anything about sex” – which explicates Robinson (2008) who suggests, “children’s sexuality within this discourse is read as nonexistent or immature at the most” (p. 116). When I asked if they believe children can be sexual, one respondent said, “Well, sometimes when they are going down for a nap, they touch themselves, and I have heard other adults tell them to stop”.

In an example of how gender was discussed in early childhood training, one educator suggested that gender development was addressed in a very cursory way with a focus on supporting both boys and girls to engage in a variety of play opportunities. However, she did not recall any discussion on how to respond to children and parents
who were so focused on gendered approaches with parents. In reference to the resistance she experiences from parents, she says, “I am surprised in this community, parents have such traditional values.” When asked to expand, she explains, “Most of the families are professionals; yet, they tend to gender their children”. She adds, “When some staff have children, they tend to shift to conservative dressing etc. It’s an interesting shift from the role of an ECE to one of parent.” She becomes quiet for a moment and then says “I guess they get a lot of pressure from their families to dress the girls in pink.” The reproduction of gender and these moments of gender performance are expressive of a dominant binary gendered approach to child development and reinforced by society at large. Like most parents, early childhood educators are inundated with blue toys and pink toys when their children are born. Although I do not explore this in detail, in the next section my interviews with parents who were also teachers, demonstrated a clear preference for a critical pedagogical approach – one they also applied in their life as a family with young children.

At a large urban-based ECE program, one educator stated that her ECE program shared some cursory information on gendered play and how to support children through questioning. She further explained, “How ECE students dealt with it depended on their background. Although you see gender identity at such a young age, there isn’t enough knowledge on how to respond to different children”. The program instructors apparently encouraged students to be more open to different play opportunities but did not “challenge students who had traditional ideas of how girls and boys should behave,” commenting on how boys sometimes misbehave because, “they are just being boys.” The educator rightly wondered, what exactly does it mean to just be a boy?
Another educator interviewed described the inclusion of same sex parents in course content but she found that approach limited. As she herself was undergoing a transformation in her own identity, she felt excluded from the same sex descriptive. She recalled her childhood experiences, remembering very early memories of feeling confused about her body. As she described her knowledge development, it was not her formal training but her professional practice that was more influential. She said:

My lived experience helps to inform my ECE practice – it can be a tough and harsh world out there and kids can change things….it is important to instill values, strengths and a sense of right and wrong – I want them to have a sense of self – they should have a voice to be advocates.

In further explanation, she shared practical suggestions for instilling these values including an expansion of Black History month beyond February of every year. She also explained that she challenges children when they are being sexist – suggesting that girls can’t be firefighters or boys can’t be mommies. For this educator, a more purposeful integration of gender identity and sexuality is relevant throughout the ECE program. She stated that to a certain extent “gender was a political term, challenging the standard and normative expectation of male/female attributes particularly amongst children”. As someone who wanted to maintain privacy about her own life, she found the instructors “tip toeing around her, alluding to her identity but never actually naming it.” Although she now identifies as a queer woman, this process evolved over a period of 3-4 years as she became more aware of other identities beyond lesbian and gay. I acknowledged a
similar experience and we agreed that queer is a highly charged term but necessary as a political and education voice. Although the participants varied in their understanding of how children’s sexuality evolves, in my sample of educators, I found a deeper understanding of gender identity and sexuality amongst the educators who identified as queer. For example, an educator that identifies as a trans male explains how his childhood experiences enables him to be more sensitive and attuned to children experiencing a fluid childhood. He shares his early memory of wanting to change his body and states,

As a child I remember bathing with my brother and of course very young children are interested in other’s bodies and I was fascinated by his penis and thought I should have one. I remember trying to stand up to pee. I went to the bathroom and of course it didn’t work very well for me.

He recognizes that he did not fit into the normative expectations of the female child and uses his personal experience to question early childhood professional practice, especially if they impose hetero normative rules on others. He questions ideas about compulsory heterosexuality and claims, “I have the sense to tell other staff about children that have two mums and a dad just to be aware that the child does in fact have a dad on the scene – just to avoid the staff room chatter”. He noted that in the early childhood training program he attended, the faculty were open to children exploring their sexuality and gender identity but found the discussion on families limited. He states,
I would definitely add some stuff around trans parenting and maybe issues that are faced by trans parents. I look at some of the students and they have none of this knowledge and I think maybe challenge some of those cultural ideas – some people thought some of the things we learned about were ridiculous or off the wall and they weren’t going to incorporate it.

Despite one program’s efforts to integrate knowledge about differences in sexuality and gender development, theoretical foundations often hit the moral wall – pitting educator professional practice against the individual beliefs and I would argue against the individual fears of educators. In my study, I found there were three essential themes in early childhood training programs. The first was silence on issues of sexuality and gender identity. The second, an integration (with mixed approaches) of knowledge about sexuality and gender development discourse within a variety of courses and the third avenue is a specific course with a title somehow related to multiculturalism or anti bias education.

Kumashiro (2009) argues that teacher education training can play a much more significant role in social justice education. The provision of a course in anti bias discourse is a start but in this particular community not adequate in preparing educators to engage critically in how they practice early childhood education. The educator above suggests that diversity issues were addressed in the course, but there is disconnect between theory and practice. To a certain extent, a reticence to fully grasp the value of building knowledge from theory, interrogating how educators of teachers ensure an integration of issues of difference into teaching practice, is a necessary process of
reflexive practice. An urban-based early childhood educator suggests that, “early childhood training provides a good foundation in diversity and in discussion about same sex parents.” However, it does not prepare educators to challenge children, colleagues and parents who lean toward a conservative and normative perspective on childhood. Her most challenging experience dealt with a child with 5 parents: including one trans parent, one bio dad and 3 lesbian mothers. She found relating to this family initially challenging because she was confused and needed more information on the different players and their role. She used the opportunity to discuss more directly with the family about the different relationships with the child, learning that the birth mothers had separated and one was in a new relationship. She also learned the donor and his partner played an active role in the child’s life. This family construct is not that unusual and “early childhood training really needs to be updated.” As an educator, she had the communication tools, a sense of respect and knowledge about the possible construction of family to engage in a conversation about who counts in a family. To a certain extent, it is the combination of pre-service training and professional practice that brings a more comprehensive understanding of children and their families.

The question that MacNaughton (2005) raises for activist educators is “to what extent do multiple readings highlight the voices of those groups who have traditionally been marginalized?” (p. 36). Would the dominance of what is appropriate in childhood development also be authoritative in how family engagement is situated? Would the voices of others be heard in a dialogue regarding parents in early childhood programs? I began to explore how voices of the other would be presented in readings related to
families. A review of a foundational textbook on working with families provides the context.

In my study, when I introduced the change in demographics that Statistics Canada provides and explained that queer parents in their community had been in touch with me, one educator in the study explained, “I had no idea there were so many gay people in my town.” One interpretation is the ongoing desire to simplify the lives of children and families into a construct that limits the complexity that exists within early childhood development. Whether it is the child’s developmental trajectory, the family unit, the relationship between educator and parent or between educator and child, there are numerous possibilities and contradictions that are not explored in early childhood pre-service training programs. In the case of the educator who learned about queer parents in her child care program, she was surprised because it had never been raised as a possibility in her professional preparation program. Although the educator may have been exposed to the idea that families are multidimensional, she was not given the opportunity to explore how her own childhood and family experience may impact her professional practice – to help her understand that the dominant heterosexual matrix that families are so often represented in is in fact limiting. In addition, the idea that gay and lesbian is also framed within a same-sex construct is limited. When she meets a queer child or a trans parent, she believes she knows nothing about it.

In my study, the trans educator stands out in particular providing a more complex analysis of what knowledge receives attention. He identified at the onset as a trans male and explained how and why he came out when he was an ECE student. The heterosexual paramount dominates post secondary early childhood education and for this participant
coming out as a trans man was risky. However, he found two members of the faculty team to be particularly helpful and saw them both as allies – based on class discussions where they outline that discrimination is not acceptable at the college and certainly not in class discussions. He faced a practical issue wanting credit for previous course work completed when he identified as female with a female name but he did not want to “educate the office staff on what trans means and why I had a legal name change. You know at some point in your life you get tired of doing that and you just want to be part of the crowd”. Interestingly, as a male ECE student, he has been given plaudits for entering a field so distinctly dominated by women. What he experienced was a faculty member who was seemingly unaffected by his trans identity and simply agreed to validate whatever administrative forms he needed. He stated, “I was surprised by their lack of surprise. I felt they were respectful teachers in that I could tell them and be safe with that”. On the other hand, he explained that the some of the instructors and many of the students are limited in their understanding of sexuality and gender identity, and he was careful with whom he shared his personal life experience with.

His identity is relevant because of his analysis of how gender is represented in ECE training. He describes his experience as an ECE student during a professional practice seminar where another student reports she has two gay mothers in her classroom and is wondering how to be more responsive to the family. The instructor encouraged a discussion about how to represent diversity and they agree to post a photo of two mothers as a way of embracing diversity. However, he challenged this process suggesting,
Photo depictions of gay people, or a Black father or a child with Down’s syndrome is just tokenism. It’s more meaningful if you can develop a program or talk these ideas through with children. For example, a group of children were arguing in the drama centre about who could be the mum. I told them they could have two mothers or three mothers and a father – you can pick whatever type of family you want. For me that is more important than putting up a picture of a lesbian family.

As a female to male trans identified man, he was perceived as a male educator bringing attention to his maleness rather than as a trans man. He claimed this surprised him; although, he acknowledged he did not share his identity as a trans man to protect his own privacy and to ensure safety. Some may argue that a photo depiction of same-sex families is a valuable contribution to understanding diversity. However, this reflection also suggests that given the tools to integrate critical pedagogy into early childhood practice, educators can have a different conversation about diversity and difference. In the same way early childhood educators are skilled at understanding variation in child development and how to respond to individual children, they can develop skills in understanding how to respond to or create opportunities to learn about difference in families. Early childhood studies are grounded in the idea that theoretical understanding of child development needs to be translated into practice. Developing a foundation in family studies is also translated into practice. How then can queer theory be translated into practice? The process of questioning the ongoing dominant ideas of sexuality, gender and child development serve as a possibility, encouraging critical reflective teaching
practice. This approach moves away from a binary approach that early childhood studies
takes, which gives more prominence to the universal notion of child development,
silencing discussion on children’s sexuality and enabling homophobia as described by a participant in the study:

I think it was in a communications class…I can’t remember the details but he said something about ‘that’s so gay’ – something along those lines and I called him out on it. I said there are many people who are gay and we have gay families in our programs. For me, I knew we had gay people in the class, but I was more disappointed in the fact that the course teacher didn’t say anything about it until I brought it up – then she said, ‘yes, that is not acceptable’ and moved on.

This example is reflective of troubling the unknown nature of education. The teacher’s silence spoke volumes to this queer student and to others that identified as lesbian or gay, and it wasn’t until the student challenged the inappropriateness of this remark, resisting the desire to remain silent, instead disrupting homophobia. On the one hand, early childhood training programs espouse the virtues of diversity and equity; on the other hand, they permit overt discrimination. The course instructor, in a position of power, enabled a value system represented by practices that are ideologically opposed to the context of inclusion. She permitted strategies that not only maintain a hegemonic hetero discourse, but also blatantly permits pedagogy that is dangerous. The introduction of queer theory into early childhood studies shifts away from the complacency of understanding children and their families between a normative and non-normative lens,
suggesting instead as Halperin argues (2005), “it has supported non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, encouraging both theoretical and political resistance to normalization; it has underwritten critiques of homophobia and heterosexism” (p. 341).

In the Partnerships text, Wilson’s (2010) introduction of queer identity in families is an important start in how early childhood studies can make the shift from typical understanding of lesbian and gay parents that includes same-sex couples but excludes all other possibilities. Queering families, disputes traditional understandings of who constitutes a family and a normalizing of same-sex led families. Wilson’s text enables a conversation starter to deal with the complexity of queer families and their children. Teresa de Lauretis’ (1991) disruption of gay and lesbian studies by positing the term queer theory provides lessons to early childhood studies to engage in a more critical manner the validity of a variety of sexual and gender possibilities that both children and adults explore. To develop a more solid grounding in these areas of development in the same way that language and social skills are considered could move early childhood studies away from a “homogenizing discourse” (Halperin, 2003, p. 341).

A number of researchers have studied the inclusion of queer in education (Britzman, 1995; Gilbert, 2006; Kumashiro, 2002; Letts and Sears, 1999; Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006) and Taylor and Blaise (2012) have likewise argued the need for re-shaping early childhood curriculum to include queer theory, and some progress has been made. Despite the availability of this knowledge, it has not been transferred into the Ontario context and as a result, there is a wide gap between research and teaching practice in this area. I see this is as more problematic when human rights legislation guarantees protection on grounds of sexuality. As one research participant stated, “this is
the first time I have ever talked about this.” As a new graduate from an early childhood program, she should have at least been exposed to some of the legislative changes that impact education. How can early childhood educators be expected to know how to respond when they have experienced silence on queer issues in their studies? There is some value to learning through osmosis – seeing popular gay characters on television and exposure to hip media stars that support queer rights. However, popular media depictions of queer families still portray stereotypical views, and ECEs who learn this way are not going to be fully equipped to work with the complex array of LGBTQ families. Early childhood teacher training can offer the opportunity to understand the multifaceted aspects of raising children in families that don’t fit the normative definition of family – one that includes either opposite sex parents or same sex parents. However, the fundamental shift in knowledge in what it means to be queer, to understand the life of a queer child, the life of a trans parent, the desire of children to be playful and curious not just about language but also about sexuality, suggests that early childhood studies needs to make a deliberate move away from essentialist assumptions of child, parent, gender, sexuality into one that questions and confuses through a queer lens.

The voice and power of early childhood educators has been relatively absent in analyzing the impact of a dominant discourse in developmentally appropriate practice and how this paradigm influences early childhood professional practice. In my study, I offer a variety of perspectives from a diverse group of educators grounded in both provincial early childhood program outcomes and the standards of practice that regulate educators. Despite a legislative requirement that standardizes expectations, personal agency plays a crucial role. Some of the participants have clearly reflected on their
understanding of sexuality and gender identity, garnering knowledge from formal education, the media and personal experiences. Other participants who identify as queer are informed by their own childhood and early adolescence, embedding their own experience of coming out, not just once but regularly in their own personal and professional life, negotiating safety and security along the way. My study demonstrates that geographic location of professional training does have some impact on professional practice, particularly when educators are located in somewhat homogenous communities. Although sexual orientation is as diverse in the northern and rural parts of the province as it is in the southern urban communities, it is not as commonly experienced – primarily due to population size. For example, the Pride Parade in one of the communities where I completed my study has grown to several hundred marchers – in Toronto it has grown to over one million. Family Pride brings together hundreds of families. It also makes a difference how early childhood faculty raise issues of sexuality and gender identity – or choose not to. A combination of these factors clearly reflects the diversity of perspectives on queer issues. It also indicates a reproduction of structures of exclusion, evoking multiculturalism in the name of inclusion instead of rendering sexuality as relevant in the lives of families with young children.

In the next chapter, the results of the study uncover queer parents’ narratives that consistently present subtle forms of homophobia and transphobia through the silencing of their family in their child’s early childhood program. I demonstrate a strong connection between the experiences of queer parents and the lack of knowledge translation in early childhood professional education about queer issues.
Chapter 9

What do queer parents in early childhood programs have to say?

The first set of parents I met for my study was a couple that lived in a rural community outside a small town – both were in professional jobs and for the moment identified as a trans couple. The second parent I met lived in northern Ontario and had recently ended a relationship – and was left with sole custody of the child because the parents had not made prior legal arrangements in case of a separation. The third set of parents I met were two queer mothers raising their daughter and a brand new baby in an urban community. The fourth set identified as gay dads with sole and permanent custody of four children under the age of 10 years. The fifth parent I met identified as lesbian but had given birth in a relationship with the father of her biological children and was also negotiating custody arrangements for another child she had shared with her former lesbian partner….the tenth parent I met told me that her sexuality was fluid – at the moment she lived with her male lover and her daughter, but that relationship did not define her. Every family I met was unusual and also usual – most families have some complexity that goes with being a family. The parents in my study, had given birth using a known or unknown donor, adopted, used a known surrogate, experienced separation, negotiated custody and access, while dealing with the daily business of relationships and child rearing like doctor’s appointments, choosing early childhood programs and juggling work responsibilities. I met some of their children who were curious about the stranger in their home but quickly learned to ignore me when they noticed their parents were comfortable talking with me. Some of the children wanted to play, and others gave me
that infamous stare children are so well known for – the one that says, “Why are you taking my precious time away from my daddy?”

Although I did not directly explore the socio-economic status of the families that participated in my study, as a result of meeting the majority of them in their homes and the evolving conversations about how they balance work and family life, their socio-economic status became apparent. The families ranged from working class to upper middle class – some lived in their own homes and others in rental properties. None of the participants indicated they received social assistance – although some indicated they only worked part time. I make the assumption that the participants’ family income would have impact on their family life, their access to resources and their ability to enroll their children in a high quality program. However, I did not explore this at length in my study. What I did come to understand is that queer families are just as diverse as non-queer families. How they relate to their children and their learning is very much related to how they understand their children’s educational and care experiences.

If queer parents seem so “normal”, what makes them different? Queer parents stand out in the constant negotiating of rights for their children and protection of their children from any shaming or silencing of their family – a recurring theme amongst all the parents that participated in this study. Parents were consistently fearful of their children’s emotional safety and worried about how the centre staff would respond once the parents squashed their assumptions that the parents were “straight”. As one parent said, “educators should have a critical awareness to demystify queer families”. Another said, “I don’t want to do the education – the educators should be equipped”. Every single parent shared an example where their child was left to answer questions that other
children were asking, “How come you have two mums?” or “You have to have a mum.” These parents rightly asked, if the intent is to include all families, how come our family is excluded from the knowledge that educators have about families?

In my study, queer parents that live in rural like communities had access to fewer resources and a limited support system. Making a decision to have a child in a queer family comes with more risk particularly if you are not completely out, dealing with constant tension of being uncovered. This requires more sophisticated interactions to ensure that the parent’s coming out process does not put the child at any more risk. As one mother said, “I asked the donor to come to the parent teacher interview with me because I needed back up”. She was slowly becoming comfortable with her sexuality and “was not ready to be completely out. You know there are a lot of conservative parents and teachers where I live”. Queer families also face unique challenges under the gaze of legislation that is challenged, social policy that is discriminatory and until quite recently, access to reproductive services that were heteronormative in nature. Certainly, the schooling experiences of queer youth, is rampant with bullying and harassment. My study demonstrates that queer parents with children in early childhood programs experienced a range of challenges – from overt homophobia to a silencing effect of their family.

I also heard from a few parents that early childhood educators were skilled and supportive of their family unit. One lesbian couple with two children found their child care program “really helpful when we were trying to figure out the terrible twos! It’s not like we could talk to our families about this stuff”. In urban communities, queer parents had easier geographic access to programs at local organizations that work with the queer
community at large. However, whether the parent lived in a rural, northern or urban community they expected early childhood educators to have foundational knowledge about their family and be aware of some of the issues their children’ may experience.

Parents suggest that early childhood educators need to know how to address kids’ questions about families and relationships. Although some of the questions posed by children are difficult, that should not lead to a shut down of conversation. The parents that participated in the study indicated that there is a need to be a willing to understand that families look very different today and educators need to be prepared to share this knowledge with young children. Some of the parents were looking for both symbols which may be considered in line with a multicultural context that reflected their family and advice from educators about their own parenting challenges, which goes much deeper than a cursory view of diversity and difference. The parents noted that the child care centre often functioned as an extended family – particularly for those parents that did not get support from their own families for living queerly. All the parents in this study had to make conscious choices about their family and whether to come out as queer – “sometimes letting people assume the heterosexual default position was just easier.”

Many of the parents explained they had never experienced overt homophobia in their child’s early childhood program. However, all of them provided at least one example of subtle discrimination that challenged their position as legitimate parents which they found exhausting, putting to question that standard of practice that requires educators to engage with all parents regardless of the family background. Early childhood professional education holds a strong commitment to the importance of parent involvement and puts into place numerous opportunities to strengthen the skills of
educators in engaging parents. Queer parents in early childhood programs challenge the truth of parenting roles and, by their mere presence, provoke educators to open themselves up to multiple perspectives (MacNaughton, 2005). In response to criticism of the guidelines’ definition of cultural difference, NAEYC recently (2009) adopted revisions to their position statement on developmentally appropriate practice. However, they again remain silent on lesbian, gay and queer identity or difference in family composition. There is not a single word on same-sex families, let alone queer families. The limited definition of diversity represents difference in culture and immigrant status but is absent of difference in gender identity, sexuality and family composition. This is reflective of the desire to ensure that children’s learning and the knowledge that informs this practice is sanitized and dominated by a heterosexual matrix of relations. As I have demonstrated in my study, there is an absence of knowledge amongst educators to understand the interests of queer parents. In this chapter, I discuss the responses of queer parents and build connections between early childhood curriculum, knowledge and practice. I demonstrate that queer parents identities are absent in early childhood discourse including core textbooks, Standards of Practice and ideas related to diversity, equity and inclusion. Queer parents are a small community, but a growing presence in early childhood programs, seeking services through pre-natal programs, family resource programs and licensed early childhood programs. Like the majority of other parents with young children, queer parents with young children work, study and need access to early childhood programs as well.

The role of parenting is infused with a desire for a caring and loving environment for young children in the home and in the places where children spend many hours being
cared for and educated by others. Parents share common expectations that their children will be safe, nurtured and given learning opportunities that support their development. However, unlike many parents, queer parents deliberately plan their pregnancies, at great emotional and often monetary cost with a single desire to be parents. Similar to non-queer parents who experience fertility issues, queer parents experience an added layer of complexity to family planning. For example, the LGBTQ Parenting Network (http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca/programs.cfm) in Toronto provides programs to deal with questions related to fertility, home and clinic insemination, sperm banks, adoption, co-parenting, single parenting, non-biological and social (non-biological) parenting, surrogacy and family recognition. These intricate relations are mired in additional legal precedents and issues of social belonging adding to the stress that queer parents may experience.

In my study, two questions were addressed in interviews with parents: What are your experiences as a queer parent with young children in an early childhood program? How do your goals for your children relate to the goals that early childhood educators have? A central theme that emerged in my study is the disconnect between the expectation that early childhood educators will establish strong partnerships with parents and the exclusion that the queer parents in my study experienced. To a certain extent, they are surprised by the lack of knowledge about queer families and their children. Some were willing to provide this education and others clearly believed that it was the education system and the educator’s professional responsibility to learn more about queer parents. I argue that the desire to partner with parents is grounded in relationships that are inequitable - where some educators hold the power – to be inclusive or exclusive; to
be welcoming or unfriendly; to be the holders of curriculum expertise – that either represents queer subjectivity or is silent on this. My study demonstrates that although queer parents go to great lengths to form their family, early childhood educators are unaware of the challenges that some of these families experience, asking multiple contacts for “sperm donation” or navigating the complex process of adopting through a child welfare agency, constantly worried about “rejection because we are gay”. I also recognize that through the process of planning families, queer parents are seemingly more attuned to what early childhood practices represent – in terms of the dominance of a heteronormative lens that gives preferential treatment to values that espouse diversity and inclusion, at the expense of queer families and their children. Finally, through the interviews with parents, I discovered that queer parents, like all parents, have some fundamental needs when it comes to selecting an early childhood program for their children. They want convenience of location, an expectation of quality standards and a sense of safety for their children. As one parent indicated, “we wanted to choose a program close to our home so that our child could make friends in the neighbourhood”. Like other parents, queer parents juggle the responsibility of family/life/work balance – their needs are very much logistical as they are philosophical. I paid attention to both.

What became apparent was a very clear vision articulated by the parents that included not only educational goals but also a strong desire to ensure that the safety of their children was paramount, particularly against any possibility of homophobia and bullying. Ryan and Martin (2000) suggest that many queer parents fear rejection and discrimination by education personnel and intentionally select if and when they are open about their family composition. Educators in turn experience concern about how non-
queer parents will react to curriculum that includes sexual diversity. However, despite well meaning policies that are supposed to ensure an anti-discriminatory environment, participants in this study shared numerous examples of behaviours that indicated a continuum of experiences including unspoken discomfort with queer parents to outright discrimination. In a small town in Ontario, two gay fathers made a decision to become parents after six years in their relationship. They began to explore options including adoption, surrogacy and shared parenting. After a five-year cycle of checking possibilities they were approved for adoption by the local child welfare agency. Despite agency policies that stipulate freedom from discrimination, they were always careful how they disclosed their personal information, knowing “they would likely face discrimination and there are a lot of homophobic people around. We enjoy our privacy but are always aware of the gay factor”. Having a child pushes parents to come out even at some risk of experiencing emotional distress particularly if they have already experienced difficulty when they have come out in other contexts. I asked one father to explain further and he stated,

When we enrolled our son in the child care centre, the supervisor seemed surprised and said this was new to her. The enrolment forms were traditional but she said she would change them. But I thought why should my son have to deal with discrimination, just because his parents are gay? As a parent, I don’t want to do the education – the educators should be equipped. But we notice messages of discomfort through body language and comments about how their son is
dressed…like a built in ‘bitchiness’ related to gay families – you know the message that we should know better. Why is he still wetting his pants?

This father’s experience is indicative of the challenges that queer people face prior to, during the process and after the coming out. Sharing information about sexuality and family status can be a positive experience, as long as the circumstances and relevant people are supportive. However, queer parents are often concerned with issues of fear of bullying and the nature of the relationship between how educators interact with children of queer parents were apparent in the majority of parent participants. The parents discussed an underlying tension in all aspects of early childhood programming from the enrolment process, to how families were presented in the curriculum, to the celebration of mother’s day and father’s day. The fear from parents is both understandable and problematic – putting into question the mismatch between professional training, professional practice and the reality of who is parenting young children. A number of the participants discussed their full commitment to parenting – from considering the options, to planning for a child, to bringing a child home. Central to queer parenting is “being on hyper alert and worrying about our children adapting. Sometimes day care and schools feel like exclusionary environments and I wonder what it must be like for my son everyday”.

Educators have an expertise at providing learning opportunities that support the healthy development of young children. Queer parents with young children are legitimately questioning the currency of the expertise that early childhood educators bring to their profession. Educators tend to be knowledgeable about the social and
physical influences on child development, understand the need to support children’s ability to be resilient and support individual learning styles through curriculum design that takes into consideration children’s interests and abilities. In partnership with parents, this process can be enhanced. Early childhood practice is also grounded in the idea that routines create security for children and sudden changes make little bodies and minds agitated. However, sometimes routines need to be disrupted and the following example demonstrates why this is necessary.

One consistent theme throughout the parents’ interviews was the ongoing dilemma around festivities in early childhood programs. Celebrations present an opportunity to share knowledge about cultural practice; although, many early childhood educators are shifting away from this practice, recognizing that Valentine’s Day and Halloween are based on Western traditions that don’t resonate with many people. The iconic Mother’s Day and Father’s Day provide a focus on traditions often played out as part of a programming routine without consideration for how individuals function in parenting roles.

As a queer identified parent, I recall countless events as a parent where I had to explain my children lived with two mothers; that even though the children did not share my last name, they were still my children. And of course the perennial, missed opportunity to provide two presents on Mother’s Day – forgetting yet one more time, that some children had two mothers at home with them and no father. However, when the activity challenges normative practice, it can create different levels of unknowing. For example, in circumstances which fall outside the typical understanding of parenting, as is the case with children with lesbian mothers, how do educators respond to celebratory
events such as mother’s day or father’s day? Many of the parent participants described educators encouraging the children to celebrate another male figure if there was no “father” in the child’s life. MacNaughton (2005) argues, “in these circumstances finding spaces in which to speak the truth as a parent can be a struggle” (p. 34). In my study, a number of parents made reference to their experience during mother’s day or father’s day. As one mother said:

On this day, the routine was to get a father’s day gift – this time, it was a plant. As the teacher was giving it to me, I could see her processing, right? And she said, “This is for father’s day.” So I said to O (her child), “We better look for your daddy.” She [the educator] was so embarrassed and mortified because she didn’t want it to happen like that, but it was just a routine thing for them to give presents on father’s day. The thing is, it also happened last year, and I was ticked.

In this particular example, the educator’s desire to create normalcy superseded the truth that this family consisted of two committed mothers and no father. This narrative can be explained by a heteronormative curricular representation that does not take into account the changed nature of family. In the text Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Gestwicki, 2011) suggests “parents feel more confident leaving their infants with someone who has become close to the family…consistent responsiveness are facilitated by regular communication between caregivers, including staff members and parents” (p. 129). A habitual approach to cursory parent interaction limits the ability to take the issue of difference seriously disrupting the nature of what is familiar. The apparent struggle by
the teacher was not addressed, but the narrative exemplifies that difference is panned over rather than exploring more deeply how racism, sexism, homophobia may affect the educator’s capacity to engage with a range of complex family configurations.

The following example demonstrates the difficulty of an overarching expectation that all educators will support parent engagement practice as outlined in the ECE Standards of Practice (2011). In this particular urban program, two lesbian mothers had to talk with the centre on two occasions challenging observations they deemed to be inappropriate. In the first incident, the parents cited a limited perspective on diversity represented through pictorial depictions of children and parents around the world. She described the centre as being too focused on multiculturalism that she believed to be problematic. “They have pictures of people from various parts of the world and how they did their everyday chores. They had somebody carrying a bucket of water, etc.” When I asked her what she found problematic, she said:

There are more serious issues to deal with. In our family we are really concerned with the language that some kids use - I just feel like sometimes you know - You can talk the talk but you have to walk the walk, right. When kids are using the word gay on a daily basis in the schoolyard and you are telling them not to, tell them why they are not to, show them why.

In the interest of ensuring a representation of diversity, some early childhood programs turn to examples that represent a tourist view of difference through the translation of the word hello into several different languages or as this parent described through pictorial
representations of rural work in another continent. The parent also shared another discussion she had with the director about their family’s desire to have Pride Day celebrated in the centre. The director was open to the parents’ ideas but had no idea how to access resources. As a result, the parent brought in books related to queer families, and the poster developed that celebrates everyone in a family in addition to other material, which she was pleased to see displayed. However, she did observe that the books were put away on the “teacher” shelf, rather than being accessible to the children directly. A number of the parents were open to having Pride celebrations in their child’s program; however, not all of them were willing to provide the background material. As one parent said, “shouldn’t early childhood teachers learn about this in their program?” A fair question especially since other festivities do get more attention. The principle of parent engagement tends to be more complicated when dealing with parents who question typical ideas in early childhood programs.

In my study, when questioned about why a family chose a particular program, a mother in an urban community said this:

We chose the program because we heard it had diversity in the centre. But what I realized was it was still very traditional. During father’s day, they said they would exclude my child – but that wasn’t the point. They would ask us and other families with different family make-ups about what to do. Shouldn’t they know that from training?
The notion of parent engagement is fundamental to early childhood practice and one desired outcome is to see parents as playing a key role in education, a perspective that parents are co-trainers or co-educators. Although, mother’s day and father’s day is not named in the developmentally appropriate curriculum practice, how to celebrate or not celebrate each day became a common issue that was raised by both educators and parents in my study. From two gay fathers’ perspectives, the traditional experience related to celebrations had some common elements as well. During Mother’s Day celebrations, their children were invited to make cards for their biological mother but during Father’s Day, the staff was confused on how to deal with the celebration, despite both fathers having full custody. This family in particular was concerned with the heavy emphasis on many different celebrations but nothing about celebrating gay pride. One of the fathers explains:

They celebrate religion week at school where they discuss all the religions. They do Black history month. There are so many other events that go on. They should have pride week and they should discuss famous gay people in the world. There are a lot of them, and they should discuss contributions that gay people have made in the world. There are famous painters and writers. They don’t discuss that. It’s dirty. It’s behind the scenes; it’s kept quiet.

The father in this narrative is suggesting that Pride is a cultural event that should be celebrated with children. Others would argue that it was established as a political statement to push queer rights. Pride in Toronto draws over one million people and the
weekend of festivities is both political and cultural in nature. Beginning with the Trans
march, leading into the Dyke march that takes us into the Pride Parade – a celebration
like no other, bringing the nudists, bears and mammas and papas with and without
children. Cultural or rights based, this dad was looking for acknowledgement of what is
important to his family.

At the core of this parent’s argument is that the negative effect of silencing queer
identity and the underlying desire to deny the existence of knowledge. On the other hand,
critical reflective practice can move early childhood practice from a traditional approach
to one that brings questions and new learning for children and families. Whether shaping
curriculum expectations or developing standards of practice, the early childhood
profession seems to prefer the neutrality of silence.

I return again to fundamental documents that name diversity and equity as core to
early childhood training and practice, yet short on an accountability mechanism of
whether these ideas are instituted. The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities
(2012) has eleven vocational standards that apply to early childhood training programs to
ensure commonality across twenty-four colleges in Ontario including a responsibility to
work with children and their family.

Family is defined as:

A group of persons who are bound together over time by ties of mutual consent,
birth and/or adoption/placement and/or legal guardianship who, together, assume
responsibilities for physical, social, spiritual and emotional care of one another,
addition of new members through procreation/adoption, socialization of children, and nurturance/love of one another. (p. 20)

How family is defined in the standards is open to interpretation. It provides no boundaries on who counts as families, nor are the standards explicit on the inclusion of some families that do tend to be marginalized. This became apparent to me when parents explained how they experienced encounters with educators and with other parents. The standards are designed to assume a partnership between parents and educators yet that relationship brings the presence of some parents to the forefront whilst others are ignored or neutralized. One parent recalled that upon enrolling her child in the centre, it would have been so helpful to meet other parents with young children – as someone who was relatively new to the community, she expected that the centre would facilitate this. Instead she found herself, being left out of conversations at pick up and drop off – not knowing how to enter conversations with other parents. I do believe that educators can be very attuned to parents’ social connections and partnerships with parents are strengthened when these relationships are supported. In another example of exclusion, queer dads attended an evening event to “meet and greet the teachers. We both felt awkward and other parents were watching us wondering who these two men are. It felt like an exclusionary environment since some of the parents already knew each other”.

It occurs to me that queer parents’ initial interactions with other parents are akin to going to a party where you don’t know anyone but the host. It makes such a difference when the host has the social graces to introduce you to other people and stay for a few minutes until you are engaged in a comfortable conversation. The focus of early
childhood training is on building relationships with children – perhaps more attention needs to be paid to building connections with adults and between adults. Similar to a child that needs extra attention when they enter a new environment, clearly some queer parents need that support as well. Analyzing the vocational outcome that relates to working with families leads one to expect that educators are well versed in the complexity and varied dynamics of how family is formed. It doesn’t name any particular identity and does not seem to give priority to the heterosexual family composition, yet my study demonstrates that educators’ capacity to understand queer families remains limited. Their professional training is indicative of a normative framework evidenced further by the narratives of queer parents, who transgress traditional boundaries of family definition on a continuum that varies significantly in how a family is formed.

According to one parent in the study:

There was a lot of planning involved. We didn’t have access to sperm and we didn’t have a lot of money. It involved a lot of negotiating, and we approached friends and found out that donations of sperm are much different than sheets filled with sperm. The sperm banks were really expensive – so it took a lot of planning.

She explains further, “I don’t think we need to explain how our son was born, but it would help if the teachers at least showed us that they are aware of how hard it is sometimes to live as a queer family”. This particular parent shared the story as an attempt to help me understand that it’s not always easy to have children as queer parents. I would garner a guess that it is more about wanting the early childhood sector to
understand that when a queer coupling decides to have children, there is a significant amount of planning involved. However, many people who do not identify as queer also experience extensive planning and significant challenges – whether you choose to birth a child, adopt a child, raise a child alone or with a partner, with a friend or with a relative. Faced with an abundance of adversity that is not limited to their rights being challenged, family acceptance and societal pressure to conform, the queer parents that participated in this study were single minded in their commitment to social justice and recognized the important contribution their story would make to the professional learning needs of early childhood educators. The parents that participated in this study had planned their pregnancies during a time when they identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer.

It should be noted, however, that many children raised in queer families, were born through traditional heterosexual relationships – with one or both parents opting out of those initial relationships and then living in queer identified relationships.

When enrolling her child in a child care program, for one parent participant, her sexuality was a non-issue because the family looks “heterosexual, although I identify as bisexual”. The issue for this parent was a contradictory feeling between seeming heterosexual but identifying with the queer community and debating the ongoing question of how does one ‘come out’. She was comfortable disclosing her sexuality as a bisexual woman but needed to share her experience not simply for the purpose of coming out but in order to boost the level of knowledge within the childcare program. She suggests that there is a desire to be accepting, but in practice “researchers and practitioners, aren’t really thinking about bisexual people’s experiences; but experiences of homophobia and heterosexism affect me too”. Similarly, one trans identified family
was seemingly living as a heterosexual couple in a small town in Ontario, yet identified with the queer community and did not see themselves fit into a ‘same sex’ identity. These differences and more necessitate a change in language to describe families and in practice to engage with all parents, beyond the traditional same-sex identity more commonly used.

Despite the challenging nature of parenting, the participants in this study are engaged with their children’s educational experience, whether the educator realizes it or not. For the parents that participated in this study, logistics played an important role in how they selected a program for their child. However, all the parents also explored the level of quality in the program and suggested that it was a very important factor in the decisions they made. Three of the families deliberately selected early childhood programs operated by the local university or college, anticipating that the level of quality in programming would be higher. In fact, the parents that participated in this study demonstrate a high level of commitment to ensuring their child has the best experience possible in an inclusive early learning environment, and they also consistently question where heteronormative practice stems from in early childhood programs. One parent with a background in health care explained:

In nursing training, sexuality is addressed from an inclusion health perspective, but in ECE, different is limited to interracial couples and religious acceptance. There is no queer representation at the child care – no books, no symbols, no posters – but symbols would help especially those that are out for the first time.
Queer parents undergo a complex set of planning for parenting taking into consideration the varying medical and social interventions needed to bring a child into a queer family. Whether through adoption, artificial insemination, surrogacy in same sex, multi parent, co parent households, sexuality is at the forefront of the planning process. Although I did not explore the particular early experiences of the parents in my study, certainly there was an underlying expectation that sexuality issues are discussed in early childhood environments. The parents were comfortable discussing their own relationships and were surprised by the discomfort that sexuality created in early childhood programs. For example, one parent said, “it’s not like we are having sex in front of the kids but if they have questions, we are okay to answering them”. During Pride week the celebration of sexuality is often overt and can challenge conservative perspectives. Children are exposed to “trans people, nude men, lots of people kissing and we let the kids know what they are seeing – after a couple of stares, they don’t even notice”.

In a few interviews, parents asked me what early childhood educators learn about queer parents. Early childhood educators were seemingly comfortable inviting parents to participate in field trips and were encouraged to spend time in the program with their children, especially when they first enrolled their child. At the same time, queer parents explained that their presence also seemed to create discomfort amongst some early childhood educators. As one parent explained, “every classroom has a child that will identify as being queer. Act as if there is always a child that is LGBTQ”. This statement brings to the forefront the need to build knowledge not just about queer parents but queer children. In early childhood training, there is a heavy importance placed on parent involvement or parent engagement in the care and learning of young children. The ECE
training program in Ontario requires a full course in working with families with similar content infused through other courses as well. One of the fathers explained his experiences with a positive spin stating:

The ECEs found our family interesting – it was exciting for them to have us there because it gave them an opportunity to educate their other students – to show that there are different families out there. He also described the need to challenge practitioners who were not entirely comfortable dealing with two dads.

Their early childhood experience was relatively positive in one setting and very difficult in the next program, making a move necessary when their children had outgrown their program. He describes a number of situations that ranged from forms that were not inclusive of their family description to staff that avoided communication with the fathers, to conversations about their son that often started with a difficult experience. He explained that he often felt “targeted” as a gay dad and would have appreciated a direct approach if the educators had questions about their family. He was also concerned that heteronormative depictions of families were common despite the fact that there were a number of queer families in the program. He said,

Every time I went in, I felt tension and worried that someone would have a negative thing to say about my son. Don’t they realize there is nothing easy about being a gay dad and they don’t help with their approach.
Since the family’s first experience with an early childhood setting was positive, they were surprised and disappointed with this experience. As with other parents of school entry children, they were worried about how their son would function in a school setting particularly concerned about homophobic bullying.

Queer parents with kindergarten-aged children are interested in how to plan for transitions into school, which can be challenging for most children under the best circumstances. However, there are examples of promising practices that can improve the process for children and families. For children in queer families, transitions from an early childhood program into school is challenging – they have to “come out” all over again, worrying about judgment and concerned about how other children and families will react. One parent suggested, “When my son moved to a new room, I wondered if I would have to explain our family situation again”. In some ways, this experience is similar to children with special needs. Their parents are concerned with the skills the educators have to cope with the new child who has different needs from the large group of kids and how will they be judged and accepted by others. Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron and Hughes (2008) suggest that the transition from pre-school to kindergarten is an important and complicated event in any child’s life. When the child in question is affected by a disability, this transition becomes even more complex and challenging. Lessons on how to support all children through transitions but particularly those children who may face additional barriers are important components for consideration by educators. A practical suggestion put forward by a parent, included a transition plan with the new team of educators to ensure all their questions were handled directly by the parents.
In another situation, a family with a five-year old daughter arrived for morning kindergarten ready to share the photo of her family – with two dads. This time, she tells her friends about her weekend activity with her parents and another boy in the circle says, “You can’t have two dads. What about your mum?” She responds in circle that she lives with her two dads and does not have a mother. A perfect teachable moment to intervene, but her teacher remains silent – perpetuating the little boy’s misunderstanding about the dominance of hetero nuclear families, underlying the hidden curriculum in education that continues to promote a hetero perspective of family (Bickmore, 1999).

In many aspects, queer parents with children take on an activist role, wanting to ensure their children are safeguarded against discrimination and bullying. For example, for one father in an urban program, he was primarily concerned with the safety his child’s program offered, insisting that representation of queer families in the program was indicative not only of acceptance but a layer of protection offered outside the immediate family unit. In his experience, when there was no acknowledgement of their special family composition, he was not surprised. However, he was troubled and angered by the response he received from the child’s teacher when asked about why their family was not included in the myriad of representation in the program curriculum. He explained his family’s story like this:

We noticed there was no material or pictures that represented us on the wall of families so we brought some in. They had everything except two mums and two dads. When I asked the teacher why didn’t he include our family, the response I got was “why would we?” I said, because you have all the other families
represented and he said, “Well, you are protected by the Human Rights Act.” I was floored. I told him we are not here all the time to protect our child so when we drop off our children, we expect you to protect them from bullies. And if you aren’t reinforcing her and someone makes fun of her, then basically, what I am doing is bringing my child in and leaving them with the wolves and you are not protecting them.

This father had experienced a number of uphill battles as he negotiated a new blended family unit that included his partner and their children. They were managing custody issues and typical stresses that arise during family transitions. In addition, they had to deal with a new challenge, responding to their child’s teacher. Instead of getting support as a family during some challenging times, their stress level was increased as a result of potential ignorance on the part of the teacher, but more likely both homophobia and sexism. He believed that as a father, he was “challenged, questioned and not given the same level of courtesy” extended to the child’s birth mother. He believed that different parent relationships with teachers were often based on the sexuality and the gender of the parent. And that was troubling for them. Like other queer parents, this father asked me why early childhood teachers seemed to have a hard time with gay families? Unlike other parents who were encouraged to visit the programs and help out with special events, he was never asked. This father’s experience is supported by a notion that Foucault (1978) argues, suggesting that heterosexuality is given the perceived privilege of normalcy. Anything situated outside this norm challenges a binary perception of how family relationship constructions may be embedded in early childhood
training. This parent’s experience points to the fact that not all queer families are treated the same. Queer parents that present within the safe confines of a same-sex couple (lesbian) and preferably married are likely to have a different experience than a queer family that presents as trans. The trans family that participated in my study were careful about who they shared their family history with. Although they “passed” as a heterosexual couple, they used their status in the community to challenge educators’ knowledge and practice as giving preference to heteronormative relationships. As one parent said, “I spent a lot of time correcting misconceptions about families. The teachers always assumed that everyone is het – even in a university child care where you expect them to be more progressive, that was not the case”.

I have not explored the intersection between race and sexuality at great length in this study, but I expect that like many other issues experienced by racialized communities, differences in sexuality complicate relationships with educators further. Likewise, queer parents with professional status may experience early childhood education differently than queer parents on social assistance. The terminology utilized in my study brings to the forefront language that is somewhat more provocative than what is developmentally appropriate. However, the knowledge and experience attributed to the meaning of queer is significant, both from the experience of the child and from the perspective of the queer parent.

**Why does the Sexuality of Parents Matter in Early Childhood Programs?**

Parents in this study indicated clearly that they have all experienced challenges in early childhood programs based on their sexual identity or on their family composition. Not a single parent suggested that their experience was entirely welcoming and
unobtrusive. Since early childhood educators are trained to partner with parents to achieve optimal child outcomes, this issue needs to be addressed, through a combination of professional preparation programs and ongoing professional development.

The educators I interviewed acknowledged that the sexual identity of parents is important because understanding how a family functions, is closely tied to establishing a working partnership. A few educators argue the sexual identity of parents is irrelevant because educators’ primary responsibility is to the child’s well being, and they do that through offering a caring and enriched play-based environment. There is general agreement that providing a well-rounded program with opportunities for parent engagement supports high quality experiences and well being for children. However, when some groups of parents are marginalized through silencing, it reflects the program staff’s inability to engage with some family members – putting at risk the child’s well being.

The silencing of queer identity in education is juxtaposed against the positive spin media stories have recently taken to explain the benefits of same-sex parenting. Despite a growing number of media stories representing same sex couples in a more positive light, queer parents and their children continue to experience significant challenges in the education system, and it is important for educators to understand the contradiction between policy and practice.

In Ontario, although government policy and legislation through Bill 13 is designed to be somewhat progressive by aiming to help gay students, there continues to be a faction of educators and parents that push the heteronormative definition of parents and children to the forefront. Different political standpoints of both parents and
educators implicate how education is designed from infancy into the school years. However, with early childhood education now situated in the Ministry of Education, it is necessary to pay attention to education policy and its implications for early childhood professional practice. For example, the *Accepting Schools Act* (2012) was introduced in recognition that schools play a critical role in creating environments that are safe for children regardless of their status or their background. Despite a heavy backlash, the government of Ontario is to be applauded for engaging in debate that ensured at least in the law that schools would take responsibility for ensuring inclusion and safety from bullying for all children, including those that identify as LGBTTIQ.

The participants in my study questioned how they could contribute to early childhood environments where parents could challenge policies and practices that support queer families. This has certainly played out in Ontario’s education system through a number of recent examples including the Toronto Catholic School Board’s decision to refuse Gay Straight Alliance Clubs for students. In response to the introduction of anti-bullying legislation in Ontario, a number of Catholic boards have refused to change school board policy, suggesting instead bullying incidents will continue to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis (CBC, 2011).

Kumashiro (2003) argues:

> Conservative groups are gaining more and more influence over education, helping to develop and impose “standards” that prescribe what students are to learn and even how teachers are to teach. They reinforce only certain ways of making sense of ourselves and the world in which we live, especially ways that ignore or even
Challenges to the implementation of progressive policy and practice have not been limited to the Catholic School Boards. Following a three year trial, a man charged with assault against two lesbian mothers in a public school yard in front of a gathering of kindergarten aged children was found guilty. Shouting profanities and punching the women as they picked up their son, this blatant form of gay bashing happened in a public school space in the presence of young children.

Although not as blatant, the Toronto District School Board’s Market Lane Public School was under scrutiny as one group of parents argued against anti-homophobia education, as it did not agree with their religious values. However, the Toronto District School Board ensured that the training was widely available to students and educators. As a result of this situation, the former Premier of Ontario, Dalton McGuinty added:

I think the kind of society that we should all aspire to is where we respect each other's difference. That's fundamentally what this is all about, and I think our children should be taught to respect the differences that we manifest. (November 2004)

I share stories from the policy context and the public education domain through media depictions because of the heavy influence of these stories on children and their families. I had the surprising privilege to interview queer parents who were the first to adopt their children through CAS. They were both frustrated and enlightened by the
process but they always remained concerned about “how their family would be perceived in the media. We worried about what our boys would think”. The whole process “was pretty radical and we lived in the middle of homophobia central. The reality was we were going to have to face that anywhere”. The debate on same sex marriage brought more attention to queer parents – sometimes causing more anxiety than comfort. One mother said, “both of us were unsure how to explain it to our son, his teachers and their colleagues. We were constantly worried about threat and harassment – our town is very conservative”. In the last decade, the presentation of queer rights has been for the most part presented positively by the media. However, the publicity that media can bring can alter queer parents experiences, especially if they are attempting to live a life in relative privacy, primarily due to concerns about homophobia and bullying. This was more common amongst the parents that lived in smaller communities across the Province.

It has been close to ten years since the enactment of the civil marriage act in Canada. However, in the last 10 years, there have been a number of situations that bring to the forefront the question of how society deals with difference. The federal conservative government’s attempt to re-open the discussion was quickly silenced. Moving from the formal education system into an informal education process, a children’s story based on a true story in the Central Park Zoo, called *And Tango Makes Three*, depicts the life of Roy and Silo who are two male penguins that live as a couple. When they demonstrate a desire to care for a baby penguin, the zookeepers give them an orphaned baby to care for. A new penguin family is born with two dads and a very supportive extended family of progressive zookeepers. This story could have been written based on a male coupling of penguins at the Toronto zoo. However, in the
interest of supporting a breeding program, they have been recently separated and paired with female penguins to ensure re-production. Is this an example of a pragmatic need to support the survival of a particular breed of penguins or is this an example of a conservative faction of zoo managers separating a coupling that does not fit the hetero norm?

I share this story as an example of how children’s access to media stories and life circumstances ought to push educators to understand more broadly the surprising number of combinations and permutations in how communities are having children. Instead of silencing these stories, schooling can raise the capacity of educators to expand their understanding of diversity and difference. It can put into question typical norms and expectations. After conception and birthing, parents enter organized early childhood programs through child care and family resource programs. This is followed by the formal education system. It is quite possible that after dealing with the health care system, parents’ entry into education is through early childhood services. What then needs to be changed so that no parent, queer or not, ever feels marginalized or silenced?

The way that childhood evolves is shaped by different family contexts. Early childhood educators play a critical role in shaping the early years of a child’s development, and it is imperative that we address the challenge that queer parents and their children pose to us.

In this chapter, I argue that the absence of queer identity in the early childhood discourse is impacting negatively on the experiences of queer parents with young children. Despite a desire to build working partnerships between educators and parents, my study demonstrate that queer parents are left outside this partnership. I also argue that queer parents are as diverse as other identities within social class, gender, sexuality and
race. I demonstrate that the participants in my study are mixed in their representation of sexuality, social class and gender. The fathers that participated in my study indicate that they faced more challenges – based on their queerness and their maleness representative of the gendered assumptions about parenting. Additionally, parents that live in urban communities seem to have access to more resources and more safety due to their geographic location. My study also demonstrates that queer parents are activist parents. This was abundantly clear to me as all the parents in my study had to challenge policies, practices, relationships, and sometimes legislation in the formation of their family. I have demonstrated that queer parents are committed to creating early childhood experiences that stick closely to the developmentally appropriate script of meeting the needs of individual children and their families. They want early childhood educators to be more aware of differing sexualities and desire more flexibility and fluidity for their children’s experience of gender exploration. The parents I interviewed recognize that childhood is a socially constructed experience – their goals for their children are tied to the pragmatic nature of parenting. However, they are also open to queering their family unit and queering their children. There is openness to enabling their children to explore all the various aspects of being a child – without limitations and within the safety of caring and nurturing educators.
Chapter 10

If not Diversity and Equity, then what? Troubling Early Childhood Education

Writing this thesis has challenged me both personally and professionally. Finding a balance between legitimate critiques of early childhood studies and offering a different way of thinking about issues of diversity has come with its moments of disequilibrium. There is nothing easy about rocking the boat – especially because when you challenge the norm, the waters become very rough. However, this research study has been an enormously important learning experience for me. I have had the privilege to read and reflect, engage in debate, listen to parents, and be questioned by educators about what exactly “queer” means. At the onset of my study, I wasn’t entirely clear what queer meant either, which of course relates well to how queer is undefined and relational. But the stories that come from parents, the questions that come from educators, the traditions enshrined in early childhood texts and my secondary observations of children present an opportunity to think queerly in early childhood education.

There are three primary areas I wanted to explore in my study. I was curious about how the notion of developmentally appropriate practice influences the dominant and heteronormative discourse in early childhood studies. In addition, I wanted to know what kind of impact the diversity, equity and inclusion paradigm has on early childhood knowledge and family centred practice as it relates to queer parents. And finally, I explored how the voices of queer parents are represented in parent engagement strategies. My study analyzed commonly used texts in early childhood studies and uncovered the deeply ingrained notion that developmentally appropriate practice is the most effective
measure of standards of practice and drives a unitary vision of what early childhood is about. Secondly, early childhood educators revealed that their knowledge about queer was either absent or limited; although, many hold a strong desire to understand how to teach differently and have an underlying commitment to social justice. And finally, but most importantly, queer parents unsurprisingly questioned why educators in early learning environments and education settings were not prepared for their family.

In this study, I draw upon queer theory to question and disrupt traditional views in early childhood studies. Queer theory provides a space to move away from essential categories of childhood development into possibilities that understand childhood to be fluid and open. Queer theory illuminates the tendency toward binary expressions of gender development, of family construct and of what is appropriate practice – it offers a methodology that is characterized by a desire to see early childhood as a dynamic and changing field of practice and to bring sexuality to the forefront, erasing the silence that is inadvertently noisy.

Given the context of queer legal rights extended in Ontario that includes same-sex marriage, multiple parent registration on children’s birth documents and the inclusion of trans identities in human rights legislation, ideas from queer and post structural theory become particularly relevant to the professional practice of educators. However, my study uncovers that early childhood training programs do not prepare educators for the changes that impact queer families in particular. Instead, the professional education program continues to focus on practice that is grounded in a pedagogical framework that promotes an essentialist approach – instead of recognizing the ambiguous nature of family, childhood and human development. In the following section, I offer a summary
of my research findings, including a discussion on developmentally appropriate practice, parent engagement, educator knowledge and queer parents’ narratives. I conclude with recommendations for further research.

The Limitations of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

An emphasis on what is called developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood is infused in course texts, program outcomes, standards of practice for educators and field practicum expectations. It is evidenced in job postings, philosophy statements and curriculum documents. It drives how early childhood educators understand child development, parent engagement and what is defined as acceptable professional practice. Since its introduction as a principle statement by the North American Association for the Education of Young Children in 1987 (NAEYC, 2009), it has played a dominant role in how early childhood education is explained. Despite significant scholarly work that challenges the institutional nature of developmentally appropriate practice, it continues to have a strong hold in early childhood. As a matter of fact, the influence of this particular early childhood principle has found its way into education policy and practice in Ontario (Ministry of Education, 2011).

In my analysis of developmentally appropriate discourse, I have come to understand that the various aspects of queer identities raise difficult questions and challenges educators to think outside the essentialism of what is defined as good practice. Queer scholarship creates discomfort but offers a possibility to change how educators, researchers and policy makers understand early childhood development. However, Kumashiro (2009) warns us that change is difficult, especially when change is required of people who prefer the comfort of the status quo. Developmentally appropriate practice is
comfortable – it offers security about how educators understand childhood and parent engagement. However, developmentally appropriate practice is limited and offers a false sense of security. Children live in a multifaceted world of family, culture, education, citizenship, social class and development. Their experiences with educators cannot be absent of these messy social contexts that understand childhood to be complex. Although there is significant pressure to embed standards in all aspects of early childhood education, queering these standards also illuminates ideas that don’t fit into a normative understanding of childhood development. The findings from this study demonstrate that principles of developmentally appropriate practice do not embody the complexity that children and families live in, and in turn, limit educators’ understanding of what is possible.

Early childhood educators benefit from a foundation in the science of early child development, and recognize the value of positive interactions between children and adults to support brain development, language acquisition and social skills that enable children to focus and learn in early childhood environments. Educators’ understanding of the cultural contexts with respect to child rearing, parents’ goals for their children and family relations establishes important insights into a child’s experience. However, intentionally challenging essentialist notions of childhood development and family experience destabilizes normative assumptions and demonstrates a more complex understanding that is not defined by hegemonic ideas of what is appropriate and what is not. My study reveals that questioning, analyzing and fundamentally evolving our understanding of childhood development and family relations is a necessary component of early childhood practice and deserves more attention. In early childhood studies, there is an opportunity
to rethink the way we do diversity and difference and to have more frank conversations about the power differentials that are played out by children and acted out by educators in how they engage with children, parents and each other.

Ideas about diversity, equity and inclusion diminish activist intentions that bring attention to issues of racism and homophobia. Early childhood policies and practice are documented to be inclusive of children with special needs, to respect the child rearing practices of parents, and to bring some awareness to differences experienced by immigrant families. But they do not place issues such as sexual diversity at the forefront. In early childhood education a movement away from diversity, equity and inclusion with remnants of multiculturalism in place is a perilous endeavor. However, it could serve to respond to questions about how gender identity develops, about who counts as parents in a queer family that may for example have five parents that I uncovered in my study. My goal is to add complexity to the diversity, equity and inclusion paradigm. Early childhood professional education could also benefit from recognizing the intersectional nature of racism and homophobia when you are both racialized and queer, and the potential risk of experiencing both racism and homophobia as a parent and as a child. The desire to ensure equity in an inequitable world softens the often-brutal experiences of queer parents and their children. As long as queer parents do not feel entirely safe and need to rationalize their family to early childhood educators, then I would argue that the essentialist notions of developmentally appropriate practice and diversity, equity and inclusion are not effective and in fact problematic.
“This is the first time I have talked about this”

Early childhood studies could use an infusion of the theories of Butler (1990), Sedgwick (1993) and Taylor and Blaise (2012) whose framing of gender provides an important analysis beyond the biological assignment of gender and traditional assumptions of how girls and boys play and learn. It could also use a Foucauldian (1978) lens to question why there is such an overt absence of all reference to sexuality, when it is at the core of childhood and human development existence. Early childhood educators would benefit from Sarah Ahmed’s “orientation” to understand what the experience of not belonging (2006). In my study, I saw queer theory as a conversation starter, and if nothing else, participating in the study certainly enabled educators to pay attention to what was missing from early childhood discourse. Educators understand that children learn about social cues very early on – from the first moment they are told to “shhh” in a public space to the first time a boy is told not to cry because boys don’t cry, to the first time they are told not to touch their “privates,” to the first time they are told to join the line of girls and boys, and sometimes shamed if they join the wrong line. They quickly understand the nature of needing to get along with others and to learn how to manage social rules to avoid being ostracized. Children also learn from adults what events are celebrated and what events are not acknowledged. Children learn, very early on, that certain sexualities are acknowledged and encouraged whilst others are not.

None of the early childhood texts or standards of practice provide any guidance of childhood development that include an understanding of complexity of gender and sexuality where children have the freedom to explore their identity (Sears, 1999). Educators that participated in this study understood the multiplicity of factors that impact
development and family relations but indicated that this knowledge is not discussed deeply in their professional training. Their understanding of childhood development was limited to social-emotional, cognitive and language, and physical development. If gender was discussed, it too was limited to acknowledging that some girls like to engage in active play and some boys enjoy dressing up. The early childhood professional training program remains silent on divergent gender development that could be framed as an evolving process of development - and certainly entirely silent on children’s relationship with sexuality. The common refrain that “this is the first time I’ve talked about this,” ought to be a conversation starter – to think about childhood development that is based on knowledge that may challenge educators but extends knowledge beyond the comfort of what is deemed to be normative.

Early childhood education is in a time of transition in Ontario and across Canada. The jurisdictional shift from children’s services into education, the establishment of a regulatory college that supervises standards of practice and the advancement of research that questions a positivist approach to education practice is the perfect opportunity to critically evaluate whether the existing design of the professional training program is meeting the needs of educators and families in the current social-political context. Britzman and Gilbert (2004, p. 88) argue, “conceptualization of knowledge and subjectivity—how it is made, how it works, where it fails, where it deflects or reverses its intentions—needs to be rethought. This theory of ignorance cannot reside in the consolation that ignorance is bliss”. I am more interested in a reflection of how the existing dominant discourse in early childhood studies requires attention and reconceptualizing knowledge to bring queer to the forefront so that it is no longer strange.
Not just for the sake of knowing how to respond to homophobia but to build capacity and understand a richer pedagogy that goes beyond developmentally appropriate practice or the safety of diversity, equity and inclusion. The early childhood profession could move far beyond “this is the first time I have talked about this”. The early childhood curriculum has been revised at institutions where courses on social justice have been introduced. An evaluation of how successful this approach is to early childhood practice would be valuable knowledge. Particularly, in comparison to an integrated approach of queer studies that links knowledge about child development, family engagement, and healthy sexuality moving it from the margins of professional education. Sexuality issues bring history, values, judgment, fear, culture and family to the forefront. Queering early childhood education is complex and requires an analysis of the language we use, the teachings we encourage and a questioning of existing course outcomes, standards of practice and what is deemed to be appropriate. My goal is not simply to critique. It is to complicate and to build connections between the knowledge that early childhood educators have and what they identify as gaps in their learning.

Parent engagement is central to early childhood professional training. Educators are often fearful of how they imagine conservative families might react to the integration of a queer lens in early childhood practice. Whether it is about posting a rainbow sticker, adding children’s books with titles such as *Asha Has Two Moms* or explaining what is healthy sexuality, educators are concerned about other parents’ reactions. This of course gives credibility to a perspective that continues to ensure compulsory heterosexuality. In the same way that educators would not tolerate families’ requests that books with children with disabilities be removed from the bookshelf, educators need to understand
that the perspective of removing books that depict queer families is also discriminatory. Families exist in combinations and permutations that are unfamiliar to most educators but not unfamiliar to the children that live in them. Language is powerful. The use of queer in early childhood research, policy and practice instead of same-sex recognizes the complexity and the fluid nature of families, giving credibility to all families no matter what their sexual, social and political identities. Essentialist ideas of gender and sexuality limit the scope of what is possible. The evidence in my research study clearly points to a desire for a different way of doing early childhood – I am interested in bridging the science of early childhood with the practice of early childhood. I trouble early childhood from the traditional developmental approach to one that includes all children and their families, including the ones that continue to surprise even those of us that think queerly. I do this by challenging the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion within a script of developmentally appropriate practice and argue that all children and their families deserve a deeper understanding of their complexity and their desire to exist in an early childhood world that keeps social justice at its core.

**Future Considerations**

Two areas of study could not be addressed within this study. The first is an exploration of how early childhood education faculty understands what queer theory brings to education practice. Resisting normalization of a developmental approach in early childhood requires teacher educators to critically engage in the difficult conversations that I expect early childhood educators to consider. This would be a complex undertaking across a significant post-secondary system that spans a massive geographic and social space – and of course challenges the knowledge base of experts.
The second area of study is also complicated and deserves attention. The queer community like other communities is diverse not just in sexuality but also in social class, citizenship and race. Queer scholarship has liberated gender and sexuality in early childhood studies but it has not actively pursued an intersection of multiple oppressions that takes into account the experiences of racialized families with young children, or families that come from communities where queer is not only ostracized, it is dangerous. Rupturing assumptions and complicating conversations continue to challenge early childhood educators beyond the normative understanding of challenges that are addressed in early childhood practice including children with special needs and English language learners. There is significant ground to explore and queering early childhood opens up those possibilities.
Shifting the gaze: Concluding remarks

The principles of developmentally appropriate discourse continue to play a significant role in how early childhood development; parent engagement and pedagogical practice are understood. My study uncovers that this discourse overtly silences sexuality, makes no reference to queer parents and offers a limited binary approach to understanding gender. The ideas put forth by the principles of developmentally appropriate practice and the silence on sexuality get in the way and contribute to a limited knowledge of the continuum of child development, which is narrowly understood by early childhood educators to include physical, social-emotional, language, and cognitive development. In my study, I make the link between existing critiques of the principles of developmentally appropriate practice and their ongoing presence in early childhood education discourse in professional education programs in Ontario. I add complexity to diversity by challenging equity frameworks to bring a critical lens that provides consideration of the intersection of sexuality and race, gender and social class. Combined with the popular diversity, equity and inclusion paradigm so often found in early childhood research, policy and practice, the principles of parent engagement are silent in relation to queer parents. In undertaking my research, my goal was to increase the visibility of queer parents and their children in early childhood programs. In that process I present perspectives that are risky as I raise the salience of seeing children not just as physical and social beings, but also as exploring sexuality and gender, much earlier than is commonly acknowledged. The practice of early childhood education comes with new responsibilities and expectations for meeting standards of practice that embody the early childhood professional. I argue that those standards should include
perspectives that recognize the evolving nature of childhood development and the changed landscape of families in the broader Canadian context and specifically in Ontario. The principles of developmentally appropriate practice serve as a traditional enemy but ideas behind diversity, equity and inclusion and parent engagement also need to be challenged.

I am interested in proposing a view that early childhood education has not completed its work in understanding how race, social class and citizenship impacts on children and family life. In a parallel lens, I argue that an understanding of queer families and their children can only strengthen knowledge in early childhood development. Although I believe that the principles of developmentally appropriate practice and ideas from diversity, equity and inclusion are problematic, I believe that both paradigms can be reconfigured to include moving toward an understanding sexuality and gender development. It is possible to think deeply about new theoretical tools in early childhood that bring new lenses to the child development and parent engagement discourse. I also believe that early childhood educators have the capacity to understand the interests of queer families, but need the appropriate tools and resources to inform their practice. My goal is not to simply critique. I am more interested in offering perspectives that reimagine the professional training of early childhood educators, grounded in a much richer theoretical understanding of getting beyond equity and inclusion toward a path of queering early childhood education.
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OISE Research Study on Queer Parents with Children in Early Childhood Programs

Are you a queer parent with young children?

Is your child enrolled in an early childhood program?

Participants are needed for a research study by a doctoral student to explore queer parents’ experiences in ECE programs

Participants will be asked to commit 90 minutes of their time for an interview with the researcher

If you have at least one child under the age of 6 years and you are interested in participating, please contact

Zeenat Janmohamed at zjanmohamed@oise.utoronto.ca or by phone at (416) 978 0940
Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form for Parents

Title of Study: Queering Early Childhood Education

Person conducting the study: Zeenat Janmohamed, PhD Candidate, Department of Adult Education and Counseling Psychology, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

You are being asked to participate in a research project conducted by Zeenat Janmohamed because you are a queer parent with one or more children enrolled in an early childhood program in Ontario.

In order to decide whether or not you want to be a part of this research study, you should understand what is involved and the potential risks and benefits. This form gives you detailed information about the research project, which will be discussed with you. Once you understand the project, you will be asked to sign this form if you wish to participate. Please take your time to make your decision. Feel free to discuss it with others.

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH BEING DONE?

This research is being done to develop a better understanding of the experiences queer parents with young children in early childhood programs. The goal will be to include up to 20 parents from three communities in Ontario that represent a large urban city, a small city and a northern/rural community.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?
This study has several purposes, which are as follows:

a. To improve early childhood education training programs’ capacity to include queer identity in early childhood practice

b. To help early childhood educators develop a stronger understanding of the interests and needs of queer parents with young children

c. To contribute to research and practice in early childhood education by challenging a very narrow definition of equity and inclusion that excludes queer parents and their children

d. To provide knowledge and data to the researcher for the development of a doctoral thesis.
WHAT ARE PARTICIPANTS EXPECTED TO DO IN THIS STUDY?

If you volunteer to take part in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

• You will be asked to participate in a 90 minute semi structure interview to discuss your experiences as a queer parent with a young child enrolled in an early childhood program in Ontario. The interview will be held in a location that is convenient to the participant. In Toronto, space is available at OISE at the University of Toronto. In Hamilton, space is available at the office of the Association of Early Childhood Educators. In Thunder Bay, space is available at Play House Daycare. All interviews will be recorded unless a participant chooses not be recorded. In that case, the researcher will only take notes.

• The aim of the study is to focus on your particular experiences when you enrolled your child in an ECE program and how the early childhood educators relate to you. You will also be asked to comment on your view of the knowledge and training that early childhood educators have to support queer parents with young children.

• This research study has no budget for compensation. Where appropriate, I will provide refreshments for the participants in the study. I am able to cover any costs related to child care, and local transportation to enable the participation in the study for the duration of the meeting time with the researcher.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

I do not anticipate there being any physical or psychological risk or discomfort related to you participating in this study; however, for some people, talking about their family life can be difficult. If you feel concerned due to taking part in this study, please inform me and know you can withdraw from the study at any time without adverse consequences. I can also provide information for support services for families with young children.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FOR ME AND/OR FOR SOCIETY?

I cannot promise any personal benefits to you from your participation in this study; however, possible benefits include your contributions will improve understanding of the needs and interests of queer parents with young children. Your participation will strengthen early childhood educators’ knowledge to support queer parents and
will also have an impact on early childhood training programs. I hope this study helps to inform educators that queer parents are complex, diverse, and have a commitment to the well being of their children.
COMPENSATION AND COSTS

Unfortunately, I am unable to compensate you for your participation. There are no costs associated with participation but I will cover any child care expenses and local travel such as public transit or parking for the duration of the meeting time with the researcher.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Your personal information will not be shared with anyone except with your consent. Your personal information will not be attached to any of the data gathered. The data will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s office. The audiotape your interview will be transcribed. *All audio recordings will be destroyed after transcription.* The only people who will have access to the audio recording and transcribed notes are the researcher and thesis supervisor. All of your data will be destroyed 5 years after the last report has been made of the results of the study.

The results of the study may be published in scholarly publications or may be presented at academic conferences. If this is the case, your name will not be used and no information that discloses your identity will be released or published without your specific consent to the disclosure.

IF I HAVE ANY QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS, WHOM CAN I CALL?

The University of Toronto Research Ethics Board has approved this project. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office Research Ethics Board, University of Toronto at 416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact
Zeenat Janmohamed at zjanmohamed@oise.utoronto.ca or by phone at (416) 978-0940 or
Kiran Mirchandani (Thesis Supervisor) at kmirchandani@oise.utoronto.ca or by phone at (416) 978-0884.

☐ I have read this form and my questions, if any, have been addressed. I have also been given a copy of this form.

☐ I would like a summary of the research data.

________________________________________________________   __________________________
Participant signature                                 Date

________________________________________________________   __________________________
Researcher signature                                   Date
Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form for ECE’s Queering Early Childhood Education

Are you an early childhood educator who wants to explore issues of diversity and equity? Would you be interested in participating in a research project that will help to improve early childhood experiences for queer parents and their children?

Did you graduate from an ECE training program after the year 2000?

The goal of this research is to develop a better understanding of the experiences queer parents with young children in early childhood programs and how early childhood training programs are addressing questions of diversity. There are a growing number of LGTBQ parents having young children and research on queer parents’ experiences in early childhood programs is limited in Canada. This research project will focus on the following issues:

How to improve early childhood education training programs’ for educators to include queer identity in early childhood practice?

Contribute to research and practice in early childhood education by challenging a very narrow definition of equity and inclusion that excludes queer parents and their children.

Your participation would involve a 60-minute semi-structured interview or participation in a focus group to discuss your early childhood training. The interview will be held at a location that is convenient to the participant or by phone if distance is an issue. Childcare expenses will be covered.

If you are a recent early childhood education graduate from an Ontario ECE training program and would like to participate please contact, Zeenat Janmohamed, PhD Candidate, Department of Adult Education and Counseling Psychology, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto at zeenat.janmohamed@utoronto.ca or by phone at (647) 981-5217.

All the information you provide will be kept confidential. The University of Toronto Research Ethics Board has approved this project.
Title of Study: Queering Early Childhood Education

Person conducting the study Zeenat Janmohamed, PhD Candidate, Department of Adult Education and Counseling Psychology, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

You are being asked to participate in a research project conducted by Zeenat Janmohamed because you are an early childhood educator who graduated from an Ontario ECE training program after the year 2000.

In order to decide whether or not you want to be a part of this research study, you should understand what is involved and the potential risks and benefits. This form gives you detailed information about the research project, which will be discussed with you. Once you understand the project, you will be asked to sign this form if you wish to participate.

Please take your time to make your decision. Feel free to discuss it with others.

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH BEING DONE?

This research is being done to develop a better understanding of the experiences queer parents with young children in early childhood programs and explore how early childhood training programs are preparing educators to work with this growing group of families in Ontario. The goal will be to conduct focus groups with 6-8 early childhood educators in three communities in Ontario that represent a large urban city, a small city and a northern/rural community.
WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

This study has several purposes, which are as follows:

- e. To improve early childhood education training programs’ capacity to include queer identity in early childhood practice
- f. To help early childhood educators develop a stronger understanding of the interests and needs of queer parents with young children
- g. To contribute to research and practice in early childhood education by challenging a very narrow definition of equity and inclusion that excludes queer parents and their children
- h. To provide knowledge and data to the researcher for the development of a doctoral thesis.

WHAT ARE PARTICIPANTS EXPECTED TO DO IN THIS STUDY?

If you volunteer to take part in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

- You will be asked to participate in a two hour semi structured focus group with other early childhood educators to discuss your knowledge and experience working with queer parents and their children in early childhood programs in Ontario
- The aim of the study is to focus on your particular knowledge and experience as an early childhood educator working diverse types of families. You will also be asked to comment on the knowledge and training that you received in your ECE training program to support queer parents with young children
- This research study has no budget for compensation. Where appropriate, I will provide refreshments for the participants in the study. I am able to cover any costs related to child care, and local transportation to enable the participation in the study.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

I do not anticipate there being any physical or psychological risk or discomfort related to you participating in this study; however, for some people, talking about their professional experience and knowledge can be difficult. If you feel distressed due to taking part in this study, please inform me and know you can withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.
WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FOR ME AND/OR FOR SOCIETY?

I cannot promise any personal benefits to you from your participation in this study; however, possible benefits include your contributions will improve and strengthen early childhood educators’ knowledge to support queer parents and will also have an impact on early childhood training programs. I hope this study helps to inform educators that queer parents are complex, diverse, and have a commitment to the well being of their children.

COMPENSATION AND COSTS

Unfortunately, I am unable to compensate you for your participation. There are no costs associated with participation but I will cover any child care expenses and local travel such as public transit or parking for the duration of the meeting time with the researcher.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

During the focus group discussion, participants will be asked to share experiences without naming the early childhood program where they work, the families that they work with, nor the share the name of their colleagues. During the focus group, in order to ensure confidentiality, participants will be asked not to discuss the information shared by other participants outside the focus group.

Your personal information will not be shared with anyone except with your consent. Your personal information will not be attached to any of the data gathered. The data will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s office. The audiotape your interview will be transcribed. All audio recordings will be destroyed after transcription. The only people who will have access to the audio recording and
transcribed notes are the researcher and the thesis supervisor. All of your data will be destroyed 5 years after the last report has been made of the results of the study.

The results of the study may be published in scholarly publications or may be presented at academic conferences. If this is the case, your name will not be used and no information that discloses your identity will be released or published without your specific consent to the disclosure. Any risk of harm to the participant or others will be reported to the law or other proper authority.

**IF I HAVE ANY QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS, WHOM CAN I CALL?**

The University of Toronto Research Ethics Board has approved this project. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office Research Ethics Board, University of Toronto at 416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Zeenat Janmohamed at zjanmohamed@oise.utoronto.ca or by phone at (416) 978-0940 or Kiran Mirchandani (Thesis Supervisor) at kmirchandani@oise.utoronto.ca or by phone at (416) 978-0884.

☐ I have read this form and my questions, if any, have been addressed. I have also been given a copy of this form.

☐ I would like a summary of the research data.

_________________________________  ____________________
Participant signature  Date

_________________________________  ____________________
Researcher signature  Date