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# How educators define their role: building 'professional' relationships with children and parents during transition to childcare: a case study

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## Introduction

The transition to out-of-home care is a significant time of change for the whole family with a widespread impact. Although the importance of transitions has been acknowledged and transitions from early childhood programmes to elementary school have been well researched (i.e. Margetts and Kienig 2013; Perry, Dockett, and Petriwskyi 2014), transitions from home to centre-based care have received less research emphasis. Canada offers parents 12 months of maternity/parental leave, after which almost 70% of women with children under age 3 rely on some sort of childcare (data from 2011; as quoted in Vanier Institute 2013). Due to the current parental leave policy childcare attendance after age 12 months is assumed to be a common cultural trend in Canada. Children attending licenced childcare centres in Canada encounter educators with basic certificates (e.g. 477 hours course work, 425 hours practicum, and 500 hours supervised workplace experience in British Columbia). In addition, educators of children younger than 3 years old hold Infant/Toddler certifications (250 hours course work and 200 hours practicum) (Early Childhood Educator Registry of British Columbia 2015).

The purpose of my main study is to provide an in-depth understanding of how parents and childcare educators experience infants' transitions to childcare and how relationships are built during the settling-in process and beyond it. The question posed for the sub-study discussed here is how educators view their role in these transitions and what they do to build relationships with parents and children.

Theoretically, my study is based on a cultural-historical perspective (Bodrova and Leong 2007; Vygotsky 1978). From this perspective, to understand the role of dyadic relationships in the child's development, the larger social structures in which those relationships occur must also be considered. When analysing individual relationships in the social context of starting childcare I take the social structure of the childcare (shifts, schedules, policies, staff absences), as well as the cultural level (Canadian parental leave policy) into account. Further, I use attachment theory (Bowlby 1969) as an investigative lens, to deepen my understandings of the transition to childcare.

### *Relationships in the social context of starting childcare*

In infant and toddler care and education relationships are the heart of best practices (McMullen and Dixon 2009). A relationship-based approach is one in which relationship partners respect and value each other within their multiple spheres of interaction. Transitions to childcare are typically about building relationships among children, parents, and childcare educators (Brooker 2008; Goldschmied and Jackson 2004; Lieberman 1993). Attachment theory posits that all children need a stable and secure relationship with at least one caregiver for healthy socioemotional development to occur (Bowlby 1969). Such relationships develop and thrive when a caregiver is perceptive of a child's signals and responds promptly and appropriately to them. Both caregivers as well as children need opportunities and time to understand each other's behaviours and cues so that secure, stable relationships can develop (Barnas and Cummings 1994; Goldschmied and Jackson 2004; Howes and Hamilton 1992a, 1992b).

Attention to children's emotions has been widely emphasized in early care and education research and policy and enabling such attention has been achieved through attachment interactions with staff. However, facilitating such interactions in an optimal way for children depends on educators' critical professional reflection (reasoning to make meaning) about how these interactions are managed with children, families, and between educators; and such reflections need to include attention to emotional experience of educators and children (Elfer 2012), as starting childcare affects children, parents, and educators. During the child's transition the needs, fears, and expectations of all three parties come together. For educators, welcoming a

child is a regular although unpredictable occurrence as each child reacts differently to transitions, and has different caretaking needs. My paper examines how educators experience and navigate this very important transition.

## Methodology

The intent of my inquiry is to explore children's transitions to a childcare centre (the case) using detailed, in-depth data collection from multiple sources (educators, parents, childcare documents) over a sustained period of time (Creswell 2012). I purposefully selected a typical case to address my research questions through an inductive qualitative approach: collecting data through emerging methods and open-ended questions in interviews, observations, and documents in order to analyse, interpret, and search for themes and patterns (Creswell 2009). This paper concentrates on educators, and the research question considered is:

(1) What are the educators' perspectives on transitioning children to childcare?

Participants include the four educators on staff at an infant/toddler centre with 12 children, which is part of a childcare society with 7 infant/toddler, and 5 preschool centres. Educators participated in 16 months of first weekly (later bi-weekly) inquiry meetings, as well as an individual interview and a group video-discussion of one child recorded during her transition to childcare. Over this extended time period and through in-depth relationships I was able to verify my findings with participants at critical points in the investigation.

In inquiry meetings I examined teachers' understandings and practices through discussing theory and practice, and I was able to draw out educators' perspectives on attachment models of care. These inquiries helped me to develop a semi-structured interview guide for parents. The interview guide for educators was developed after coding all parental data and entailed detailed inquiries on educators' perspectives and experiences orienting children to care, and on building relationships with children and parents. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Analysing data I followed Creswell (2014), reading interview transcripts as whole, making margin notes, before forming provisional codes according to questions asked. Radnor (2002) called this *topic ordering* as the questions formed the framework from which my analysis was generated. As first coding cycle I used *in-vivo coding*, where a code refers to a word or short phrase in the transcript, to honour participants' voices (Saldaña 2013). In a second cycle I used *pattern coding* to develop major categories from the data (Saldaña 2013). In a further step, I chose categorical aggregation (Creswell 2012, 2014; Stake 1995) and reduced pattern codes to *themes* (Stake 1995), for a better understanding of the case. I added educator information to themes derived from parents. I further took Stake's (1995) advice that case studies need both categorical aggregation and direct interpretation of individual instances in that I pulled data apart and put them back together in more meaningful ways, in an effort to make sense of things. Through this process, I ended up with nine categories falling under three themes that allowed me to make generalizations about the case as I could compare and contrast them with published literature (Creswell 2014). Transcripts from inquiry meetings were thematically coded at phrase level, as they related to my research questions, and information was mainly used to compare theoretical concepts explained in my study with daily practices of educators. I am aware that studying people in their work environment can create ethical challenges that might not be present in another kind of investigation. The presence of the childcare manager in inquiry meetings (as educators' boss), for example, might have influenced educators' contributions to the discussions. In order to acknowledge anticipated ethical issues (i.e. confidentiality of children or incidents discussed) arising through this study, I informed participants about the purpose of the investigation. All involved parties signed informed consent forms prior to participation, and were instructed that they are free to withdraw permission to participate at any time without any consequences. Interviews were conducted individually and took place at times and places convenient to the interviewees. Participants' names as well as the name of the centre are disguised through pseudonyms. Because of the limited number of participants, my study offers limited generalizability, but an in-

depth view into perspectives and experiences of educators during the event of transitioning children to care. The researcher in an inductive inquiry is considered the primary data collection instrument (Creswell 2009). As such, it was necessary for me to identify and interrogate my personal values, assumptions, and biases. I am aware that the data I collected and the interpretations I make are influenced by my previous experiences, are greatly subjective (Stake 1995), and I acknowledge that multiple interpretations exist (Creswell 2012), such as those of readers and participants in the study. What I present is my interpretation and pursuit as a researcher to make sense of certain observations by watching as closely and thinking as deeply as possible.

## **Finding and discussion**

Three main themes crystallized in inquiry meetings and educators interviews: professionalism, childcare structures, and relationships.

Professionalism is the most dominant theme as it influences social childcare structures (as educators choose to apply a concept of fairness to all staff and change their shifts, working hours, and responsibilities weekly), as well as relationships. Professional relationships for educators mean ones that are not too close. Educators try to avoid attachment relationships and argue against primary caregiving, but instead choose a more flexible model of care where educators can easily replace one another. Therefore, when transitioning children into the centre and building relationships educators make themselves available to children in a model that I called 'child-selected care', before gradually introducing the child to the care of others. This unique style of care is different from primary caregiving in that it lets children pick their preferred caregiver to build a relationship, before introducing the child to care by other educators.

In my discussion, I first present findings according to the most prominent themes before discussing educators' arguments against primary caregiving, as well as comparing and contrasting primary caregiving with their chosen model of child-selected care.

### *Professionalism*

Acting professional and being acknowledged by parents as professionals is what educators are most concerned with. They want parents to respect, trust, and value them, and feel that this is not always the case:

This has probably a lot to do with academic learning versus child minding. It's nothing that I care about. But sometimes, the way that we are spoken to by parents in regards to their child sometimes feels like they are kind of, staging us as: you are just watching my child. You have to take my kid because, you know, that's your job. (Emma, December 11, 2012)

Educators emphasize professionalism in relation to distinguishing their personal from their professional self, and relationships with children in childcare from relationships with their families. Manning-Morton (2006) in her study on personal and professional awareness of educators concluded it being a major professional challenge for early childhood practitioners to engage closely with young children, as it touches deeply held personal values and often deeply buried personal experiences. The level of emotional demand in responsive relationships can lead educators to take on a defensive position, often expressed through the view that getting too close to children is not professional (Manning-Morton 2006). This is exactly what educators in my study express when emphasizing their professionalism in relation to distinguishing their personal from their professional self. This identity in favour of professionalism was also found in other research studies. Harwood et al. (2013) reported findings where educators narrated stories that juxtaposed different versions of professional self versus personal self. These authors concluded that educators appreciated the plurality of roles as educators and individuals illustrated in these oscillating identities.

Interestingly, even though our inquiry meetings met the criteria for meaningful professional development in that they included (a) educators working on pedagogical frameworks built upon theory, (b) active involvement in the process of improving practice, (c) focussing on practice-

based learning in dialogue with colleagues, and (d) mentoring to facilitate reflections (Vandenbroek et al. 2016), educators in this study did not consider them as professional development, nor did they mention any need for on-going professional development. Their professional understanding also influences their decisions and behaviour concerning childcare structures.

### *Structures*

While educators talk about childcare philosophy, policies, and regulations as given elements, it soon became apparent that many of these structures are actually chosen by themselves (as a group), and in the interest of fairness to all staff. Taking turns orienting families to childcare, weekly changing shifts and working hours, and their adherence to ratio when asked about parent-child visits before the transition to childcare are examples of how they interpret structures however it fits their understanding, and more in a one-fits-all than a family-oriented approach to childcare. Individual interpretations promote their understanding of relationships too. Their weekly changing shifts and accompanying schedules (food, bathroom, nap duties), for example, make it hard for educators to make themselves available as attachment figures for children and contact person for parents.

### *Building relationships with families*

Educators feel that building relationships with parents is easier with some and harder with others, and that certain educators are better able to build such relationships with parents than others. Throughout our discussions as well as in interviews educators kept on referring to their open-door policy, and how they are open and willing to discuss any problem families might have. When one mother however, took them by their word, educators were taken by surprise:

... you know, we always say: call if you want or email if you want, but we never actually think that they are gonna do it (laughs) ... so when she started doing that we were like: oh my god, why is she calling so much! He is fine! But I guess cause we offered it, so ... I mean we have to take it, right?  
(Andrea, June 5, 2013)

Educators found the mother's calls and emails interrupted their workday and had to find a solution that worked for both sides. This educator's honest response underlines that there is some ambivalence about really being in a partnership with parents because of the demands the relationship places on educators' time, and educators stated that they see themselves as experts and not as partners of parents. Even though educators continuously highlighted their availability for parental requests and concerns, they also feel there is limited time to actually enter into such conversations.

### *Relationships with children*

Surprisingly, educators' opinions about attachment with children as well as their professional roles and relationships vary a great deal from conventional understandings of attachment theory and relational approaches to teaching. Most interestingly, in their quest to be professionals educators are concerned that close attachment relationships with children (from children to them, as well as from themselves to children) are unhealthy, and that children could potentially be 'over-attached' to a caregiver, meaning they would be dependent on the care of one particular educator. Noddings's (1984) concept of mutuality upholds that caring teaching-learning relationships are reciprocal between educators and children. This mutuality, also a tenet of attachment theory (Bowlby 1951), would be an example of why educators feel they could potentially be overattached to a child, even though they are resisting calling this relationship an attachment. Even so, they are convinced that over-attachment can happen if an educator starts to neglect the needs of other children in favour of one child. Even though they do not call their relationship towards children attachments, they call it instead 'over-attachment of educators' or 'favouritism', and consider these relationships 'unhealthy'. Elfer (2012) reported historical evidence that educators avoid warm and responsive relationships with children because of their anxiety that

feelings of attachment result in painful emotions when inevitable separations occur; even in centres committed to primary caregiving. This could be the case for these educators, as they prefer a distributed approach to attachment relationships, with harmony across all members as opposed to one-on-one attachment relationships. Findings of Ahnert, Pinguart, and Lamb (2006) support harmony within the group, as they found group-related sensitivity to be an important predictor for educators who were secure attachment figures for children. This, however, stands in contrast to relational pedagogy promoting sensitive responsive one-on-one caregiving to optimize development by relying on attunement and intersubjectivity (Dalli 2014; Lally 2010, 2013). Other authors further emphasized frequent positive interactions (De Shipper, Tavecchio, and Van IJzendoorn 2008) with a stable caregiver (Barnas and Cummings 1994; Howes and Hamilton 1992a, 1992b) as necessary factors for secure caregiver–child relationships. In a distributed approach to attachment relationships where it is not clear who is in charge of the needs of whom, regular one-on-one interactions (Mahn 2003) and finely tuned guidance (Dalli 2014; Rogoff, Malkin, and Gilbride 1984) are not assured for all children. Another emerging aspect of professionalism in early childhood education is ‘professional love’ as discussed by Dalli (2006) and Page (2011). These authors see professional love as a pedagogical tool; something educators can consciously use as pedagogical strategy (Dalli 2006) and in no way diminishes children’s love for parents (Goldschmied and Jackson 2004). The concept of professional love or primary caregiving, however, stands in contrast to what educators described as too close and therefore unprofessional relationships.

### *Arguments against primary caregiving*

While discussing the care model these educators use and their attachment assumptions, we also discussed primary caregiving. However, as educators are concerned that close attachment relationships with children are unhealthy, primary caregiving is rejected and educators listed several factors as working against this model. They are instead in favour of child-selected care, in which attachments are first supported, but then care is distributed between educators.

On a structural level educators are concerned with frequent absences (i.e. overtime compensation, sickness, practicums, etc.), as well as with weekly rotation of shifts and schedules. Frequent absences make it hard to provide regular occasions of attention for each child, and they would need to have a second-choice attachment figure for each child (Dalli et al. 2009).

Depending on the shift educators work, their schedules include food preparation, diapering, nap room duties, etc. If primary caregiving were to be implemented educators would need to do most of these tasks for the children in their care.

Educator absences are a reality and make it hard to assure regular one-on-one attention and intimate care, which would enable educators to read a child’s cue. From an attachment perspective frequent absences confound the educator’s ability to read infants’ or toddlers’ cues and respond accordingly (Lally 2010, 2013). In this case, Theilheimer (2006) argued for adopting a primary caregiving model with two preferred caregivers (primary and secondary) that might help to moderate some of the negative implications of frequent absences: a child’s second-choice person would care for the child in the absence of the primary caregiver.

On a relational level educators are concerned with over-attachment of children, as well as favouritism on their part.

At some points, sometimes I had the impression that the child is so attached for example to me, (inaudible) to myself, that it is almost like mother-son or mother-daughter relationship. It shouldn’t be. So it’s also important for the team members, like co-workers to point it out too. Because sometimes we do not know. (Jamie, November 13, 2012)

Educators feel that over-attachment can happen to educators, if they become too involved with a child and this begins to influence their professional judgment and subsequent relationships with other children and educators. First, educators used the term ‘over-attachment of educators’ and later changed it to ‘favouritism’. What further indicated their fear of favouritism is that for these educators a primary caregiver only cares for the children in her group. In their research report, Dalli et al. (2009) explain a primary caregiving approach that requires sensitive responsiveness to colleagues and builds a respectful and supportive team structure, contradicting the prevailing

assumption that primary caregivers work in isolation.

A further barrier to close attachment relationships is the fact that educators do not always feel strongly connected to children who become attached to them. This creates a difficulty in reciprocity between caregiver and child. Educators see it as their professional responsibility to make themselves available as attachment figures. When it does not happen naturally, educators approach relationships from a professional stance, take their time to work on their emotions and try to offer themselves as attachment figures even though it takes more conscious effort to do so.

I really dislike that feeling. I feel guilt and so when it happened a few times, in all the years, so I just ask my colleagues, like I need a little bit of a break from this child, to work on my feelings. Because it is not fair. Slowly, in small steps, I involve this child with little things. Not maybe jump over this child because he or she chose me. But for me I think like separate myself, calm down, it's so not fair, because they can read us. (Jamie, October 2, 2012)

Indeed Goosens and IJzendoorn (1990) mentioned that the same caregiver can have children in her care that are securely attached to her, as well as children insecurely attached to her. In general, attachment theory does not take up feelings on part of educators, as the focus is the child's attachment to the caregiver. Goldschmied and Jackson (2004) propose that structural as well as personal support should be given to caregivers in a situation like this to enhance relationships with children, or the primary caregiver might be changed for a child. However, as stated in the quote above the problem of missing reciprocity also arose in their child-selected care model.

Two further arguments against primary caregiving have to do with parents. The first obstacle is that the educator parents might choose to communicate with might not be the one working most closely with their child; many parents choose the lead educator as their contact person. This creates problems of communication and affects the educators' ability to enter and sustain a relationship with parents. It is true that parents might choose an educator to build a relationship with if they are not aware who the primary caregiver for their child is. It might be overcome if it is made clear from the beginning which educator the family is working with most closely.

Second, educators feel some parents do not appreciate close relationships between educators and children. They noted that some parents comment on educator-child relationships in ways that make educators feel parents are not welcoming of close relationships.

You can sense that, when parents come in, you know, the little sly comments about: 'Oh yeah, he was talking about you all weekend!' Or: 'I think maybe he should be your baby'. (Emma, October 2, 2012)

These educators are not alone with such feelings; Elfer (2012) also found that educators showed anxiety about the appropriateness of attachments in professional work with young children, as well as anxiety about parents' reactions to close relationships between educators and children. However, if parents show difficulties accepting attachment relationships between their child and his/her educators it might be helpful to explain to parents that it is beneficial for their child to have a special person to turn to during the long hours they spend in childcare (Goldschmied and Jackson 2004). Ebbeck and Yim (2009) argued that a primary caregiver enhances professionalism of the early childhood field, but they also highlighted that there is a need to further refine primary caregiving to better help children's first transition from home to childcare, as well as to encourage more centres to adopt a primary caregiving approach.

### *Child-selected care model versus primary caregiving*

When comparing child-selected care and primary caregiving, in theory, the child-selected care model chosen by these educators might be considered more favourably, as the child can pick a caregiver to attach to, and does not need to attach to a caregiver based on availability in her group. However, if educators perceive this first attachment as too close or taking the form of 'over-attachment' the child is directed toward other caregivers. This is done to avoid an attachment between the caregiver and the child that is too dependent on care by one specific caregiver only, and might help educators to guard their emotions as separation will inevitably

occur (Elfer 2012). Educators have to balance their attention between the new child and children attending for longer, and are in constant ambiguity between the needs of the individual and the needs of the group. If educators need to consider the perspective of the group interest over individual needs, distributing relationships seems to be in the interest of a harmonious approach across caregivers and children. On the other hand, parents do not know who is mainly responsible for their child when settling-in starts, educator-perceived unhealthy relationship (over-attachment) leads to handing-over the child to other educators (not when the child is ready, but in crisis mode), which is hard on educator and child.

Many researchers agree that primary caregiving is beneficial to foster relationships and a smooth transition to childcare (Brooker 2008; Daniel and Shapiro 1996; Ebbeck and Yim 2009; Goldschmied and Jackson 2004; Lally 2010, 2013). Primary caregiving assures regular occasions when a particular caregiver's attention is given to a particular child for a stable relationship to occur. These relationships enhance the child's sense of security, and enable the educator to read the child's cues and respond accordingly (Lally 2010, 2013). Primary caregivers are generally responsible for the intimate care of infants and toddlers, like feeding and changing routines, and offer regular individual attention to the children in their care (Goldschmied and Jackson 2004; Mahn 2003). Ebbeck and Yim (2009) found a positive influence of primary caregiving on children, parents, and educators, and in their study on the implementation of primary caregiving both parents and educators were in favour of the system. They agreed that this system enhances not only infants' and toddlers' well-being and their establishment of secure attachment with adults, but also strengthens parents' trust in educators.

Taken together, educator absences cannot be avoided in childcare. However, a relationship-based approach where educators and parents respect and value each other (McMullen and Dixon 2009) and the implementation of primary caregiving in this infant/toddler centre might lessen negative influences related to frequent educator absences for children. In a team of three full-time and one part-time educators each child will have his or her hierarchy of attachment figures (Bowlby 2005). If educators take a child-directed focus on care and show some flexibility, it should be possible that one of the two most favoured educators could be available for the child throughout the day. Educators would need to critically reflect their practice of managing interactions with children and families and to pay special attention to their emotions, as well as those of children (Elfer 2012), instead of referring to policies and regulations. For educators primary caregiving offers new possibilities to build relationships with parents, which might help those educators who feel left out by parents. Lastly, educators' perception of primary caregiving might change once they investigate its application to their everyday practice. Further, if educators would consider the concept of professional love this might change their perception on professionalism in relationships with children.

## **Conclusion**

This research shed light on four educators' perspectives on their role as professionals, their attachment assumptions, and highlighted the complexity of relationships happening in their centre. Regarding professionalism, results of this study show that these educators wish to be respected, valued, and appreciated as professionals and continuously adapt their practice to fit their understanding. Educators clearly distinguish their professional from their personal self, a finding that is congruent with what Harwood et al. (2013) found: that educators had different versions of professional and personal selves. As educators' strive towards professionalism they seek harmony across the whole group and balance the tension between the needs of an individual and the needs of the group. To be professional in their relationships with children, these educators practice a child-selected care model, where relationships that are too individually focussed (i.e. between the educator and the child) are actively avoided or re-routed toward whole group involvement. Regarding relationships with parents, there seems to be ambivalence towards a true parent-educator partnership. Educators see themselves as experts and not partners of parents, and view themselves as possessing expertise, emphasizing the need to teach parents the appropriate way to interact with their children. Under such circumstances it is not surprising that some parents resist close relationships in childcare (Clark 2010). Taken together, I agree with Ebbeck and Yim (2009) that there needs to be more research into the practical application of how



primary caregiving can change roles and relationships in childcare. It would be interesting to research these educators' emotional experiences in more detail, and to discuss concepts of professional love as well as a detailed account of primary caregiving with them, to investigate how a different view on professional relationships with families might change their perspectives regarding their role, as well as their transition practices in this centre. I agree with Elfer (2012) that there is a need for professional reflections in early childhood education including critical attention to the influence of personal emotion in professional practice. Educators need to acknowledge continuous professional development and reflective practice as an entitlement, as it is legitimate and necessary if change in professional practice should be facilitated and sustained (Elfer and Dearnley 2007). As this is a case study, I cannot draw conclusions to educators or practices in other centres. My findings, however, provide a basis for discussion about how educators can be professionals while working with a pedagogical approach that puts relationships first.

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