

Congratulations to all the graduates for achieving a major accomplishment by completing your programs in early childhood education. To all the practitioners in the room, I am pleased you are engaged in ongoing professional development. These opportunities give you a chance to reflect on your practice and to think about how you want to move forward in this important sector.

I was asked to provide reflect on my role in early childhood education. I must admit, this was challenging for me, but the invitation forced me to engage in a process that is not the norm for me. As I started to think about my personal and career trajectory as an early childhood educator, I started to consider decisions I have made that led me to you today.

I started my career in early childhood by accident. I was an undergraduate student at York University plodding along in courses in history, English, psychology, statistics and trying to figure out what university was all about. All my close friends landed at universities outside Toronto, but I was the first in my family to go to university and my parents refused for me to join my friends. This notion of living away from home was completely foreign to them.

As I walked into the Psych building, I saw a poster for a joint ECE program with Seneca College. I thought to myself, I like kids so off I went to an information session.

There were 12 of us enrolled in the program. We were a close-knit group, taught by faculty who were well respected and who challenged us. Of the 12, I only remember the names of my closest friends. Three of us came out to each other.

As I think back to my start in early childhood, I am very glad I landed in this sector. It has given me the opportunity to meet a variety of people and provided me with a career that has satisfied my need to change things up. Let me explain.

At Seneca, I completed a placement in a nursery school and a placement at Bloorview. I had an amazing opportunity to work with kids who had severe health and developmental challenges – that led to my first part time job as an ECE followed by a full-time role an ECE in downtown Toronto. I met some amazing families and staff who were both marginalized and privileged. My first role in ECE established core values that remain with me including practicing principles of anti-racism and anti-oppression.

Today's families are more complex dealing with complicated lives. Early childhood educators engage with that complexity daily with respect to race, citizenship, social class, and sexuality. I was asked to comment on sexual and gender identity in young children today. It makes sense that I share some of my history. In thinking back to when I was a young child, I realize I had special feelings for kids of my gender. I wouldn't refer to them as crushes, but I do recognize these were moments of celebration for me.

I moved to Canada when I was 9 to live with extended family. My parents joined me three years later – I experienced settlement twice – not an easy time but families do what they

need to do to survive. I experienced challenges like most young kids do but I acknowledge that my role in the early childhood sector provided a home base for me.

I moved to a supervisor role at a centre in North York and I volunteered at the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care. I sat through many meetings discussing political and advocacy strategy – not making one contribution but learning more than I imagined.

This led to opportunities to learn about early childhood policy and political strategy. I worked at the Coalition and in my early 30's I started teaching at a college.

At the same time, I became involved with a group of South Asian queers as a volunteer. We created a film called *Rewriting the Script: A love letter to our families*. Available on YouTube. In that film, I met Rupert...he is a trans man. He talks about knowing he was meant to be a boy but born a girl. As he transitioned in his early adult years, he recognized very early on in his life that he wanted to be a boy.

This made me think back to all the kids I worked with and how many felt like they were not meant to live a life in the body they were born with.

My question to you is how do you respond when you come across families who may be lesbian, gay, trans, two spirited, pansexual – and how do you feel when you work with kids who may in fact identify differently from how they appear to you?

Without a doubt, the area of gender and sexuality remains the most challenging aspect of development we face as educators. We bump up against our faith, our understanding of child development, our family values, our confusion – almost a bit of discombobulation. If you google gender and sexuality in young children, there is no shortage of information. However, you must come to terms with how you feel about it as you integrate knowledge about this topic.

When I was teaching in the School of ECE, I would meet students who would say “I can't accept this because it is against my religion”. This was always a difficult moment. By this time, I was out, queer, and not very loud but good with Pride marches, living with my new partner and sharing children with her.

Inevitably, I would describe how Human Rights legislation protects us all, gives us the right to access child care, and requires educators to maintain a non-discriminatory practice. If that wasn't possible, then ECE is not the best career option. Policies that recognize human rights legislation, anti-racism and anti-homophobia practice are fundamental protections for you and the families you work with.

I had the opportunity to start a research position at the Atkinson Centre, while teaching. I also pursued my doctoral work. I went to OISE and read material I would never have considered. I remember taking a course with George Dei – he is an anti-racism educator and discussing Brittany Spears in class – at that time, she was being attacked by the media when in fact she was experiencing a mental health crisis. This was the intellectual space

that led me to the work I did in my PhD program. I published my first article on anti-racism in early childhood education training.

My first inclination was to research the experience of immigrant early childhood educators. I knew from my own professional experience and from my personal life, racism was ever present. However, during this time I also became the 1-800 helpline for queer parents with young children in ECE settings...this led me to explore what was happening in child care that so many parents were having such a difficult time. Ryan and I developed the Building Bridges Resource.

In my PhD study, I interviewed parents, met with educators, and completed an analysis of the teaching materials. At the time, this was the first study in Canada – the title of my thesis is *Getting Beyond Equity and Inclusion: Queering Early Childhood Education*. The inherent heteronormative discourse of developmentally appropriate practice silences queer in early childhood training remains an issue although I think we are making progress.

My question to you is this. Are you now capable of having conversations with children, their families, and your colleagues about recognizing that difference goes beyond the food we eat and the language we speak?

Race, ability, gender, and sexuality have a continuum of development and identity – as educators of the youngest children, you hold an important responsibility.

I transitioned back to the college, and became more knowledgeable about race, ability, social class, addictions, mental health in my role as an Associate Dean. However, ECE was calling me again.

In my new research role at the Atkinson Centre, I was asked to write a commentary on the impact of conflict and war on young children. This experience was challenging in a climate that is highly politicized. However, I also see the important role that early childhood educators play in the lives of children and families and opportunities to share knowledge is critical for the advancement of good practice.

We are mid-way through the Canada Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreements. There are thousands of ECE jobs available across Canada and more to come for those of you with qualifications. Your role is critical to building and sustaining a high level of quality for young children and their families. Early childhood education is the first tier of education. You have the responsibility to recognize differences, know when to intervene and be well versed in knowledge to support children and their families.

The children in your program are your primary responsibility as you navigate relationships with families, colleagues, and the systems around you.

I hope you will take the time to learn more and wish you well in your career trajectories.

Thank you again for the opportunity and for encouraging me to engage in a process that makes me just a little uncomfortable.

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