Abstract

In this project I examine the importance and value of secure attachment relationships nurtured between an educator and the children in their care. With increasing numbers of infants and toddlers in large group childcare classrooms, the exploration of “how to be with” young children is essential to ensure quality. The classroom environment is a unique context for fostering connection between educator and child, as these relationships lay the foundation for lifelong development. I frame my project in the sociocultural, ecological systems, and attachment theories, and draw from the psychosocial theory and functional emotional developmental levels of the mind theory. I present literature supportive of primary caregiving practices in childcare settings to illustrate how daily care routines afford moments for interactions, where educators can increase children’s engagement and contributions within the classroom. I offer scenarios drawn from my own experiences and practice that reflect relationships happening in the classroom. I conclude that when educators listen intentionally and respond ethically to a child, they are able to honour the child’s uniqueness, opening a space for the child to participate actively in shaping their own care. In addition, reflective and collaborative relations among educators expand their caring repertoire, and that this, in turn, enriches the relationships between educator and children. I recommend to educators that more emphasis be placed on creating moments throughout the day for interaction and connection with children. I also recommend that increased training be available for educators to enhance their practices and promote quality care.
Table of Contents

Abstract ...................................................................................................................................................... i

Table of Contents ........................................................................................................................................ ii

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................................... iv

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................................................... 1

Key Terms ..................................................................................................................................................... 2

Context and Personal Background .................................................................................................................. 6

Overview: Theoretical Framework ................................................................................................................ 7

Introduction to the Literature Review ........................................................................................................... 9

Rationale and Importance ............................................................................................................................... 9

Purpose and Guiding Questions ..................................................................................................................... 10

Summary of Capstone Project ....................................................................................................................... 10

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................................................................................. 12

Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................................................. 12

Sociocultural Theory ..................................................................................................................................... 12

Ecological Systems Theory ........................................................................................................................... 13

Attachment Theory ....................................................................................................................................... 14

Psychosocial Stages of Development Theory ............................................................................................... 16

Functional Emotional Developmental Levels of the Mind Theory ............................................................... 16

Frameworks and Approaches ......................................................................................................................... 17

Review of the Literature ................................................................................................................................. 18

Primary Caregiving Practices Supported in Small and Large Group Classrooms .................. 18
Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere appreciation to Dr. Mari Pighini for all your continued support, guidance and recommendations that helped nurture my project from its beginning to end. I would also like to express my gratitude to the other instructors and support staffs who contributed to this M.Ed. program, as each of their courses offered a new perspective that expanded my thinking both personally and professionally.

I wish to offer a huge thank you to my cohort, especially Cindy, Kathleen and Cai, for your willingness to share your expertise and experiences that inspired, enriched and broadened our discussions and projects. I want to say a special thank you to Maggie, for all your positive encouragement and motivation as we journeyed along to complete our Capstones.

Most importantly, I extend my immeasurable thanks to you, mom and dad, for your unwavering enthusiasm and faith in my ability to accomplish success. Your continued reassurance and technical support encouraged my perseverance every step on this adventure.

Finally, I would like to thank all the children over the years who have inspired my passions and touched my heart; you taught me to listen with my eyes and appreciate all the in-between moments of every day. Thank you.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In this capstone project I explore the secure attachment relationship created and sustained between an educator and the children in their care. More specifically, I examine the practice of primary caregiving within the context of the infant and toddler classroom environment, as a means for educators to foster connection with children. I explore the impact of interactions for children and offer a justification for educators to continue to nourish their participation in continued training opportunities to enhance their practices with children.

The term “attachment” refers to the close emotional bond, between a child and their caregiver, established by their everyday shared interactions and social exchanges (Bowlby, 1958; 1988; Stern, 1977). The secure attachment relationship is well-regarded as a crucial milestone for a child, as this first caring interaction is an integral piece for the child’s future relationships (Erikson, 1950; Greenspan, 1997) as well as a contributing component to many positive outcomes, including increases in social and emotional capability (Deluis, Bovenschen, & Spangler, 2008; Raver, 2002). For the purpose of this Capstone project, the term “educator” refers to any Early Childhood Educator, with or without specific specialized infant/toddler training, working directly with either or both infant (0 to 18 months) and toddler (18 to 30 months) aged children in a group care setting or classroom (BC Ministry of Education, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). The term “child” or “children” refers to any child or group of children in the infant and/or toddler age range within a classroom setting. I chose this term because a substantial portion of the research gathered refers to infants as “babies,” and leaves out the toddler age group. Both age ranges are unique in their developmental milestones; however, their necessity for care that involves secure attachment remains the same (Bowlby, 1958; 1988; Petrie & Owen, 2005). In addition, across Canada this age range is grouped very differently
depending on the licensing requirements. For example, in the province of British Columbia, some centres group both infants and toddlers within one classroom, which is in contrast to the province of Ontario that obliges a separation once a child ages to 18 months (BC Ministry of Education, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

Investigation into this age range of children, who attend care out of the home setting is a relatively new endeavour undertaken only in the last 70 years (Elliot, 2007). With the increasing numbers of children spending extended amounts of time in large group childcare classrooms (Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, & Miller, 2006), the importance of exploring how to be with children, specifically in relationships that honour a child’s uniqueness, is imperative (Brownlee, Berthelsen, & Segaran, 2009; Shin, 2015).

In this chapter, I first define the key terms relevant to the topic of this project. I next describe the context and my personal background that led to my interest in educator and child relationships. I then introduce the theoretical frameworks that guide and inform this project. I present my rationale and discuss the importance of this topic. Lastly, I offer the purpose, guiding questions and present an overview of this capstone project.

Key Terms

The key terms, organized alphabetically, include attachment relationship, cue reading, infant/toddler educator, joint attention, primary caregiver, primary caregiving, reciprocity, reflective practices, secure attachment relationship, verbal or nonverbal cue, and zone of proximal development.

Attachment Relationship or Bond

This term refers to the emotional and physical feelings of closeness established between a primary caregiver (educator) and child that is reciprocal, respectful and founded in trust.
Attachment is nurtured when a caregiver consistently meets the needs of a child (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Stern, 1977). Attachment relationships are classified as secure or insecure. Secure attachment, defined further ahead, is regarded as an important milestone contributing to all later relationships. In contrast, insecure attachment is observed when a child displays behaviours that are avoidant, ambivalent or disorganized and is not easily comforted by their caregiver. This insecurity happens as a result of unpredictable care and inconsistent response to a need (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth et al., 1978). For the purpose of this capstone project, I focus on the secure attachment relationship between educator and child, referred to as the educator and child relationship.

**Cue Reading**

This term refers to an educator’s ability to observe or read, interpret and then respond appropriately to the cue a child offers or expresses (Colmer, Rutherford, & Murphy, 2011). The cue can be in the form of a nonverbal gesture, facial expression or verbal request (Johansson & White, 2011).

**Infant/toddler (I/T) Educator**

This term refers to any Early Childhood Educator who has been certified with or received specialized training to work with this specific age group. For example, in the province of British Columbia the government offers a licence to practice distinction for those educators who obtained particular educational proficiencies (BC Ministry of Education, 2013).

**Joint Attention**

This term refers to the shared participation in an activity, where both educator and child are focused on the same thing, in the same moment, and share in creating and understanding the meaning (Lee, 2006; Recchia & Shin, 2012).
**Primary Caregiver**

This term refers to the one individual, who consistently reads and responds to the child’s cue (Bowlby, 1958; 1988). Typically, it is a mother or father, but it can include a close relative or another adult figure. The need or cue expressed by the child is addressed by the caregiver who engages in completing a daily care routine, including a mealtime or diaper change (Stern, 1977). The term primary educator is often used to define the primary caregiver within the classroom setting.

**Primary Caregiving**

This term refers to the grouping of not more than 3 children to one educator in the classroom setting (Essa, Favre, Thweatt, & Waugh, 1999). The educator becomes responsible for taking care of the small group of children by completing the individual daily care routines (Ebbeck & Yim, 2009). The educator becomes acutely aware of, and understands the child’s specific, distinct cues to signal a need or desire (Colmer et al., 2011; Ebbeck, Phoon, Tam-Chong, Tan, & Goh, 2015), and as a result, primary caregiving practices have become the preferred method for quality care within the classroom, as this care promotes the development of mutual trust and respect over time (Ebbeck & Yim, 2009; Rockel, 2009). The recommended implementation is with no more than 6 children and 2 educators per group (Essa et al., 1999); however, the reality of large group centre based care makes this a rarity (Ebbeck et al., 2015). Furthermore, cooperation and mutual helpfulness from the whole team of educators is necessary for primary caregiving to be successful (Ebbeck et al., 2015) and affords opportunity for a relationship to be created between the triad of family, educator, and child (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1996; 2005; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014).

**Reciprocity**
This term refers to the mutual back and forth conversation, verbal or nonverbal, between educator and child, where both involved feel acknowledged and understood (Lee, 2006; Recchia & Shin, 2012). The relationship evolves by way of the mutually shared experiences (Petrie & Owen, 2005; Stern, 1977).

**Reflective Practices**

This term refers to an educator’s ability to examine and learn from their own actions and experiences (Hewett, 2001). This practice affords the educator an opportunity to continually think about what they are doing, and analyze their decisions to enhance their practice (Gable & Hansen, 2001; Hewett, 2001).

**Secure Attachment Relationship**

This term refers to the attachment bond formed between an educator and a child, where the child is able to utilize the educator as a secure base to explore their environment from (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1958; 1988). The child in a secure attachment relationship displays behaviours, including smiling and following, to promote proximity and close contact with the educator (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). The secure child trusts that the educator will read their cue, respond, and offer assistance if or when distress occurs (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Erikson, 1950). Positive interactions, consistency and predictability all contribute to the secure attachment relationship (Colmer et al., 2011).

**Verbal or Nonverbal Cue**

This term refers to the signal a child exerts to make their needs, desires, and wants known to their primary caregiver. The cue may come in the form of a spoken request of an object or need for example, “cup,” or in the form of a nonverbal gesture including, pointing, sign or facial expression (Johansson & White, 2011; Liszkowski, 2014).
Zone of Proximal Development

This term refers to the actual level of development determined by the child’s ability to problem solve successfully on their own, and their level of potential development, where the child is able to achieve a goal with assistance or guidance from an educator or more capable peer/other (MKO) (Vygotsky, 1978).

In the next section, I discuss the context and introduce my personal background for this Capstone project.

Context and Personal Background

As an educator who has worked for the past ten years in a variety of urban centre based infant/toddler classrooms, in two different provinces in Canada, I have experienced firsthand the diversity and range of quality care practices and curriculum approaches that exist. Each classroom, both large- and small- group contexts had the common thread of some educators struggling to appreciate and understand the complexities encompassed within secure attachment relationships. I began to observe how some of my colleagues became disengaged from the shared experiences of the day and simply completed daily care routines without mindfulness or connection to the children (Elliot, 2007; Rockel, 2009). During these times of interaction I realized there were few opportunities for a child to participate or share in joint attention (Rothman & Friendly, 2014; Woodrow & Busch, 2008). I also realized that the dominant discourse emitted from the educators indicated that the children were passive recipients of care (Elliot, 2007), with very little power or control over their situation or experiences (MacNaughton & Smith, 2008). These educators frequently missed or discounted a child’s cue or gesture to communicate and as a result, the child’s contributions and voice was silenced. This sparked my interest to explore how we, as educators, could better nurture relationships with each child in our
care to ensure that all children feel a place of belonging and security strong enough to allow for learning within the classroom environment (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Erikson, 1950).

Across Canada, each level of government imposes their own set of licensing requirements or structural determinants including, group size and educator ratio that are often viewed as a barrier to supporting interactions and relationships between educators and children (Doherty, Lero, Goelman, LaGrange, & Tougas, 2000; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1996; 2005; Thomason & La Paro, 2009). According to the national You Bet I Care! Report (Doherty et al., 2000), the majority of the educators surveyed felt that although they were making a positive difference in the lives of children, there was insufficient time to accomplish all the demands of the day, including the balancing of care routines with curriculum expectations. Close to half of the educators reported feelings of exhaustion, both physically and emotionally, at the end of every day (Doherty et al., 2000). This sense of fatigue contributes to the high burnout and turnover rates within Canada (Doherty et al., 2000), which is detrimental to the continuity and consistency imperative for a relationship to flourish (Bowlby, 1958; 1988; Colmer et al., 2011).

In the next section I explore the theoretical background supporting this project and introduce the extant literature supporting the formation and maintenance of a relationship within a trusting, respectful classroom environment.

**Overview: Theoretical Framework**

To establish the context for a purposeful and evocative inquiry, in terms of reflecting and examining on our own practices, thoughts, and feelings as educators related to the interconnectedness of care and education in the classroom (Hewett, 2001; MacNaughton & Smith, 2008), I draw from three seminal theories: the sociocultural theory, ecological systems
theory, and attachment theory. My examination of the relationship between educator and child is based in the social constructivist worldview, where reality is shaped by our individual perception and previous experiences (Creswell, 2009). Within the social constructivist worldview, the educator is viewed as co-constructor, where they participate and are mutually involved with a child during a learning experience (Shin, 2015). Both the educator and child interpret, understand, and collaborate to create meaning by their shared communication and connection to one another (Hewett, 2001). Co-construction recognizes children as capable participants and emphasizes educators utilize observation to assess development and nurture connection (Gonzalez-Mena, 2004; Hewett, 2001).

The first theoretical framework is the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), where learning occurs by way of active participation in reciprocal interactions across a variety of contexts. The second theory is the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) that explores the proximal and distal influences on an individual’s development and identifies the interconnectedness of their relationships. The third theory is the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958; 1988; Stern, 1977) that identifies the components necessary for the formation of secure attachment relationships and describes the importance of engaging in these types of relationships.

In addition, I draw from two other relevant theories the psychosocial stages of development (Erikson, 1950) and the functional emotional developmental levels of the mind (Greenspan, 1997). I focus on Erikson’s (1950) first two stages and Greenspan’s (1997) first four levels of their respective theories. Both theories exemplify the imperative need a child has for trusting interactions that establish the foundation for future connections and social and emotional development.
Introduction to the Literature Review

Guided by the extant research, I endeavour to illustrate the implementation and benefits of primary caregiving practices within the classroom (Ebbeck et al., 2015; Gerber, 1998; Gonzalez-Mena, 2004; Petrie & Owen, 2005). I consult Hallam, Fouts, Bargreen, and Caudle (2009), Recchia and Shin (2012), and Johansson and White (2011) regarding the quality of interactions, including the language utilized by an educator when nurturing a relationship. Finally, I examine the need for mentorship and increased educational training to support connections within the classroom (Brownlee et al., 2009; Elliot, 2007; Saracho & Spodek, 2007; Shin, 2015). In chapter 2, I expand upon this literature further ahead.

In the next section I discuss the rationale and importance for supporting the topic of connection and relationships within the classroom setting.

Rationale and Importance

In reference to my concerns about educators not connecting deeply in relationships with the children in their classroom, Elliot (2007) offered that “when caregiving is a task to be done, rather than an engagement with individual babies in unique contexts, it robs babies of their individuality and caregivers of their agency” (p. 127). The common perception is that the work of educators is easy, undemanding, and often assumed rather than named. This can reduce and remove the knowledge and expertise held and demonstrated by educators within the classroom (Doherty et al., 2000; Shin, 2015).

With the rise of private and for profit, large group childcare centres, often who operate with a prescribed, academic focused curriculum, and employ under educated staff, the need to explore and support connection in relationships is critical (Rothman & Friendly, 2014). Educators working within these settings often have little time or opportunity to engage in
reflective practices, which can result in decreased quality (Doherty et al., 2000; Elliot, 2007; Rothman & Friendly, 2014). Moreover, the caring aspect of education specifically the individual time spent with a child, for example while reading, becomes lost amid the push for academic achievement (Honig & Shin, 2001; Zeece & Churchill, 2001). The importance of this capstone project is twofold; first, the review of the literature will assist in uncovering ways to create stability and continuity of educators in the classroom (Doherty et al., 2000); second, it will make the case to increase training opportunities for educators to support the social and interactive aspects of care and education (Brownlee et al., 2009; Delius et al., 2008). In addition, this capstone project adds to the extant literature detailing and raising awareness about the complexities encompassed within relationships and the significant role connection has in encouraging educators to honour a child’s capability.

**Purpose and Guiding Questions**

The purpose of this capstone project is to articulate the value of connection between educators and infant and toddler aged children, and how that relationship can inform quality practices in early education classrooms (Shin, 2015). In addition, the knowledge and insight gained may inspire educators to participate in collaborative and reflective conversations to advance their professional practice to assist in combating their feelings of fatigue (Brownlee et al., 2009; Doherty et al., 2000; Elliot, 2007).

The guiding questions for this proposed capstone project are: “What are ways in which educators engage in and build relationships with children in the classroom?” and “In what ways can pre-service training institutions, supervisors, and fellow infant and toddler’s educators better support one another to connect deeper to the children in their classrooms?”

**Summary of Capstone Project**
In chapter 1, I introduced the capstone project, defined the key terms, discussed the context and my personal background, provided an overview of the theoretical frameworks, offered a rationale, and stated the guiding questions for this project. In chapter 2, I describe the theoretical frameworks that inform and guide this capstone project as well as review the extant literature related to this topic. In chapter 3, I illustrate how the examined research regarding relationships between educators and children connects to the current practices of primary caregiving within the infant and toddler classroom. In chapter 4, I draw conclusions and offer suggestions for additional study and research in the area of relationships and connection between educators and children.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I expand upon the theoretical frameworks introduced in chapter 1 as these theories provide a lens for the literature reviewed that examines how an educator and child establish their secure attachment relationship with one another. In order to understand the value of the educator and child relationship, I explore how children learn from their interactions situated on a foundation of trust.

Theoretical Framework

As introduced in chapter 1, my examination of the attachment relationship between educator and child is situated within the social constructivist worldview (Creswell, 2009) that provides the framework for the sociocultural, ecological systems, and attachment theories.

Sociocultural Theory

In chapter 1 I introduced Vygotsky (1978) who posits that learning and development are closely intertwined and embody the foundation of all social interactions. Vygotsky stated that “learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers” (p. 90). Children are able to imitate actions and behaviours before they are able to utilize those skills intentionally to elicit a meaningful connection. An environment supportive of a child’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) is imperative to foster opportunity for observation and experimentation with these social, cooperative, and reciprocal communication skills.

Likewise, Rogoff et al. (1993) noted that children utilize a variety of nonverbal cues to invite their caregivers into their world to share in meaningful connection; yet, these invitations require careful observation and intention from the caregiver. The daily care routines are an opening where modelling the rhythm of communication can result in respect, mutual
understanding, and honouring of a child’s voice. This notion of communication to support connection was also supported by Correa-Chavez and Rogoff’s (2009) review that examined how children learn, through their participation in cultural activities. Correa-Chavez and Rogoff posited that a child was able to actively participate in a cultural activity by means of guided participation, where a more skilled other supported the child by adjusting their assistance in accordance with the child’s increasing competence and capability during the activity. The more skilled other was able to seek information by observing for the emotional responses and cues from the child to determine when or what kind of assistance was necessary for the child to participate in the activity. Moreover, Correa-Chavez and Rogoff noted that shared meaning and a joint understanding was the goal of the interaction, and engagement in reflection strengthened the more skilled other’s own understanding, knowledge, and appreciation of the capability of the child.

The second theory that guides this capstone project is the ecological systems theory that I describe next.

**Ecological Systems Theory**

As introduced in chapter 1, Bronfenbrenner (1994) stated that “development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interactions or proximal processes between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment” (p. 38). Bronfenbrenner theorized a layered approach to interactions, which move outwards from the child in the center, to the larger global world (See Appendix A). The first level, the microsystem, encompasses the face to face patterns of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by a child, viewed as the commencement of all relationships. Moving outwards, the mesosystem, contains the
interrelations among two or more environment settings or contexts that the child is an active participant within for example, the interconnection between an educator and a child’s family. The third level, the exosystem, exemplifies the influence from a child’s neighbourhood or community, where the child may or may not always be an active participant. The macrosystem, the most distant layer from the child, provides the cultural, historical, and political influence of the other levels. Bronfenbrenner (1994) noted how these proximal processes exert their influence on the emerging relationship between an educator and child and do not occur in isolation from the other layers; for example, the classroom setting in the microsystem is affected by the governmental policies in the macrosystem, including educator-to-child ratios and group size (Goelman & Guhn, 2011). Exploring each of the interrelations of the ecological influences offers a deeper understanding of a child’s world and exemplifies the impact an educator can have on a child’s development.

In the next section I explain Bowlby's (1958; 1988) attachment theory together with Stern’s (1977) theoretical research regarding how an attachment bond is strengthened by interactions and communication.

**Attachment Theory**

As I introduced in chapter 1, Bowlby’s (1958; 1988) attachment theory is influential on the educator and child relationship, as this theory defines the feelings of closeness and trust associated with secure attachment. Bowlby stated that all children are born equipped with specific, instinctive behaviour patterns that are demonstrated for survival including, the capacity to form connection to others. Bowlby (1958) proposed three phases a child ventures through when forming their secure attachment bond. During the first pre-attachment phase, a child orients and accepts care from any caregiver present, until the child begins to distinguish others as
separate and unique from themselves. At this point, the child is then in the second phase, where they exert their preference to have their needs met by a specific caregiver for example, the child might cry until a preferred caregiver offers comfort. The third phase commences when the child actively seeks out the preferred caregiver as a secure base from which to explore for example, the child would make eye contact with the preferred caregiver during play, illustrative of the deep connective bond formed (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1958). Ainsworth and Bell (1970) joined with Bowlby (1958; 1988) in the 1950s to collaborate in research with an interest in the observable behaviours displayed by a child related to secure attachment. As defined in chapter 1, the secure attachment relationship behaviours are illustrated in the child’s desire for proximity, in contrast to an insecure attachment relationship, where the child showed behaviours of avoidance, ambivalence or disorganization (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970).

Stern (1977) extended Bowlby’s (1958; 1988) theory on attachment and noted how moments of interaction often occurred at unlikely or unexpected times in the space amongst activities for example, the transition between feeding and play. Stern (1977) stated that by six months of age a child has mastered the rhythm of communication and is able to understand and utilize nonverbal cues. These cues are what signal the caregiver of the child’s needs and as the child continues to hone their interactive skills in the moments of reciprocity, the mutual relationship is fostered.

In the next section I describe Erikson’s (1950) first two psychosocial stages of development that denotes the implications for a child to establish trust and assert their autonomy within their environment.
Psychosocial Stages of Development

In his theory of the psychosocial stages of development, Erikson (1950) described a series of conflicts a child must resolve at different stages during their life growth. The first two conflicts occur between birth and approximately three years of age; the conflict of trust versus mistrust and autonomy versus shame and doubt. Trust is established from the consistent, predictable, and continuous feelings of familiarity when a child’s needs are met. Furthermore, the quality of the encounter during that shared time when a need is met is the most important factor to nurture the trust. Autonomy is achieved from a supportive environment that allows opportunities for a child to experiment with their own abilities and where support can be relied upon when distress occurs. The child is able to develop their sense of self control without a loss of self-esteem when supported by an entrusted adult or educator (Erikson, 1950).

In a similar way Greenspan (1997) described six functional emotional developmental levels a child must achieve that illustrate the importance of interactions grounded in trust and I describe the first four next.

Functional Emotional Developmental Levels of the Mind Theory

Greenspan (1997) drew from the previously outlined theories of Bowlby (1958; 1988), Erikson (1950), and Vygotsky (1978) to identify a series of levels or capacities (also known as “stages”) that describe how a child translates sensory data and their personal emotions into thoughts representative of both the self and others. These levels characterize the internal structural components that support and contribute to all future development and relationships. The first level is the child’s ability to be calm and regulated in order to engage with the surrounding environment. The next level involves the ability to feel close and relate to others in an intimate manner. The third level is the ability to relate to others using nonverbal two-way
communication (Greenspan, 1997). For example, the child must communicate their needs by expression of a cue, and an educator must be able to read the cue in order to elicit feelings of security and trust. The fourth level is the ability to problem-solve and create a sense of self. As a child engages successfully in communication of their needs, they are able to gain their esteem and establish their relationship. The ability to engage in empathy, think reflectively, and interact emerges from the relationship situated on a foundation of trust.

As noted in chapter 1, the classroom setting offers a unique opportunity for an educator to engage in this important relationship building with a child and the next section explores the frameworks and approaches supportive of this.

**Frameworks and Approaches**

The Pikler Institute (Gerber, 1998; Gonzalez-Mena, 2004; 2007) offers a pedagogical approach as a curriculum that focuses on allowing development to unfold naturally, in an unhurried manner, and where each child is viewed as capable. More precisely, where freedom of movement is essential to instil a lasting view of the self as a competent learner (Gonzalez-Mena, 2007). The key element and objective is respect, where a child is embraced and regarded as an equal participant during their daily care routines (Gerber, 1998; Gonzalez-Mena, 2004; 2007). In addition, the intimate personal contact and rich language exchanges during these care routine times afford the relationship to form between educator and child (Gonzalez-Mena, 2004; Petrie & Owen, 2005). The deep sense of security gained from this relationship allows for the play time to be much less structured, and as a result honours the child’s natural development (Gonzalez-Mena, 2004).

I examine the extant research that also relates to this approach in the review of the literature, presented next.
Review of the Literature

In this review of the literature I examine the benefits of primary caregiving practices within the classroom setting and explore the value of the educator within that context.

Primary Caregiving Practices Supported in Small and Large Group Classrooms

As previously noted, the implementation of primary caregiving practices is a method to encourage educators to engage with and nurture secure attachment relationships with children in the classroom (Colmer et al., 2011). Higher educator qualifications, smaller class sizes, and low educator-to-child ratios were considered as important factors that led to increased opportunities for interactions, which in turn, contributed to quality care (Hestenes, Cassidy, Hedge, & Lower, 2007; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1996; 2005; Thomason & La Paro, 2009). In their study exploring support for this practice within a small group classroom setting, Ebbeck et al. (2015) observed increased displays of secure behaviours, including more positive social interactions between educators and children. In related research about primary caregiving practices, findings revealed that the recognition of continuity from home to classroom led to increased feelings of security and belonging (Colmer et al., 2011; Ebbeck & Yim, 2009), as well as encouraged more communication with families, who appreciated how educators were able to act as a role model and provide emotional support (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1996; 2005; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014).

In similar research, primary caregiving practices had been successfully supported within a large group setting at the Pikler Institute (Gerber, 1998; Gonzalez-Mena, 2004; 2007; Petrie & Owen, 2005). More specifically, Gonzalez-Mena (2004) described that an educator was responsible for overseeing the whole group during play time, but focused on two or three specific children’s daily care routines and close observation of their development. This encouraged the
educator to recognize the child’s nonverbal voice as an important form of communication that in turn, strengthened their relationship.

In the next section, I examine the significance of reading and responding to a child’s nonverbal efforts of communication.

**Importance of Reading, Interpreting and Responding to Nonverbal Communication Cues**

The quality, not quantity, of interactions between educator and child was the single most important factor in fostering a secure attachment relationship (Dunst & Kassow, 2008; Lee, 2006). The language utilized by an educator during these interactions was explored by Hallam et al. (2009) and Recchia and Shin (2012) who noted that the daily care routines assisted an educator in observing for, reading, adaptively interpreting, and accurately responding to each child’s specific, individual method of communication that led to engagement in a joint attention and a turn taking conversation.

The importance of recognizing nonverbal communication had been validated by Johansson and White (2011) who explored the concept of physical expression and gestures. They noted that body movement is often interpreted as bodily function or practice of movements for later development, as opposed to being viewed as an intentional form of communication to signal an educator an emotion or thought of the current situation or experience. Likewise, in his study regarding nonverbal communication, Liszkowski (2014) reported that a child’s nonverbal communication is not simply a precursor to verbal communication, but a meaningful contribution to support connection and should be embraced as a positive outcome of cognitive development and social experiences.

In the next section, I outline the benefits of a secure attachment relationship for a child.
Benefits of a Secure Attachment Relationship

Both the small and large group classroom approaches advocate for a child to stay with their educator for the first three years of care in order to contribute to the formation of trust necessary for the relationship to flourish; yet, Essa et al. (1999) noted this practice rarely occurs due to staff turnover, division of age groups based on developmental milestones or parental preferences. Children who stay with their primary educator exhibit increased competence with their peers and demonstrate better school achievement in the later years (Raver, 2002; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014). In similar research regarding the positive effects of being engaged in a secure attachment relationship, children who were granted the opportunity to quality interactions were considered to have greater intellectual ability, greater competence with communication, higher emotional regulation, an increased ability to engage in more complex social and creative play, as well as a strong foundation for a healthy social-emotional life (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Delius et al., 2008). The caring displayed by an educator was an intentional and intellectual endeavour that required reflection and introspection.

In the next section, I explore the need for mentorship and administrative support to create an environment that is supportive of reflective practices and building relationships with children.

Educator’s as Co-Constructors of Meaning and Need for Continued Educational Training

As mentioned in chapter 1 of this project, Elliot’s (2007) studies exploring the pedagogy of caring from the educator’s perspective noted how they experience a wide range of feelings and tensions throughout the day that intertwine with being emotionally present, responsive and intuitive to a child’s cues. She concluded that building and engaging in relationships took empathy, trust, and self-reflection. In addition, the various demands of the day including, balancing intimate time with each child, understanding parent concerns, and negotiating routines
with coworkers, took a significant amount of patience, understanding, and effort from the educator.

Shin’s (2015) exploration of how an educator influences the relationship as a co-constructor recognized that care and intimacy is physical, emotional, and reciprocal between educator and child. The educator’s engagement in responsive, attentive, and sensitive caregiving, prompted the children in the classroom to demonstrate increases in empathy for one another and display active participation in their care routines by expressing their positive vocalizations of acceptance and interest. Shin (2015) concluded that this demonstration of responsive caregiving highlighted the pedagogical knowledge and skills educators possess that is necessary for engagement in the extraordinary caring practices that were often undervalued in society. Quality interactions were not an easy task that could be accomplished by anyone; instead, this practice involved commitment to communication, specialized training, and support (Elliot, 2007; Rockel, 2009; Shin, 2015).

Manlove, Vazquez, and Vernon-Feagans (2008) noted an environment rich in resources, including opportunities for mentorship, enhanced an educator’s practice. More specifically, Shin (2015) emphasized that educators ought to have a competent mentor to model positive interactions from, and be available to collaborate with.

In their study exploring the quality of academic preparation for educators, Saracho and Spodek (2007) noted an increase in the amount of positive behaviours displayed by the educator, based on the number of years spent in educational training; for example possessing a post-secondary degree in early education led to better interactions between educators and children. This finding was also supported by Brownlee et al’s (2009) conclusions that supervisors who held higher educational qualifications, for example a post-secondary degree in early education,
appeared better able to articulate and connect theory to practice within the classroom. This, in turn, contributed to increases in quality caregiving practices. Moreover, the role of supervisor as mentor to their educators was supported by Livingston (2014), who noted that supervisors acted as facilitators of communication between educator teams. Educators relied on each other for emotional support, debrief, and reflection (Elliot, 2007), and felt that increased training offered recognition for their professional work and sustainability in the field (Brown & Inglis, 2013; Harwood, Klopper, Osanyin, & Vanderlee, 2013). Petrie and Owen (2005) stated that supervisors were encouraged to demonstrate the type of relationship they wanted their educators to display towards the children in care. In addition, Gable and Hansen (2001) and Norris (2010) concluded that educators wanted access to continued educational training and specialized courses to assist with their own self-growth and understanding of their role and responsibilities within the classroom.

In summary, in this chapter I have examined Vygotsky (1978), Bronfenbrenner (1994), Bowlby (1958; 1988), Ainsworth and Bell (1970), Stern (1977), Erikson (1950) and Greenspan (1997)’s theories. I have also reviewed the extant literature regarding primary caregiving practices and how this can be supported by positive interactions during care routines and ongoing educational training. An understanding of attachment theory, coupled with how the relationship is nurtured, is crucial information for the educator who is attempting to balance the daily demands of care with their own emotions and licensing regulations (Elliot, 2007). The extant research has illustrated the importance for educators to engage in communication with both the children in their care and their fellow colleagues in order to sustain a secure attachment relationship formed on trust. In chapter 3 I make connections between the reviewed literature and my own personal experiences to exemplify the importance of connective relationships.
CHAPTER 3: CONNECTIONS TO PRACTICE

In this chapter, I explore the ways an educator can enhance their practice by nurturing secure attachment relationships with children and how supervisors can support their educators during this process.

As described in the review of the literature, the quality of the educator and child relationship is dependent on the social interactions that occur daily (Elliot, 2007). Educators blend and incorporate their own emotions, thoughts, and experiences with the set government policies to support the formation of relationships in the classroom (Brownlee et al., 2009; Elliot, 2007). With this context in mind, I outline my personal experiences in the scenarios below to illustrate the importance of supporting connection and interaction that nurture relationships. Each of the following scenarios took place in the group childcare centre where I currently work or in centres where I have previously worked.

Educators Connecting Deeply to Children during Care Routines in the Classroom

I have found that when a trusting relationship exists within a classroom, there is very observable evidence to indicate the established level of comfort between an educator and child. I describe this evidence of a secure attachment relationship between educator and child in the following scenario, scenario 1 that took place during the morning routine, in a toddler classroom with twelve children and three educators. For the purposes of privacy and confidentiality, in this scenario I refer to the child as Noah.

Scenario 1: As I arrived at the start of my shift, I immediately made eye contact with Noah, who was waiting at the door. I crouched down to his eye level, offered a smile and said good morning. He smiled, took my hand and together we moved quietly around the classroom extending our good morning greetings to each child, but we were careful not to
disrupt the play that was occurring. Some of the children received a gentle touch on their shoulder, while others eye contact and a wave from across the room. I knew each child well, and this was made evident by my individual connections and attention to the interactions taking place. Once we finished Noah, still holding my hand, looked up and signed “eat.” I responded by acknowledging “you are right, it is snack time, would you like to help me get the chairs out?” As the transition to the snack routine commenced, he took out the chairs, one by one and placed them around the table. We continued our conversation about the happenings of the morning by means of reciprocity and respect.

Reflecting on this experience, the interaction between Noah and I, as the educator, resonates with principles from the Pikler approach (Gonzalez-Mena, 2004) in that children are given tasks when they are physically ready and happy to take on more responsibility, but not as an expectation to meet a milestone. Noah demonstrated he was prepared to engage in the task of setting up the chairs as a productive, capable contributor. I was able to honour and encourage his desire to participate for the duration of the routine by my acknowledgement and acceptance of his assertion of autonomy. As Ainsworth and Bell (1970), Erikson (1950), and Vygotsky (1978) noted, children are able to assert their autonomy and confidence when in an environment supportive of their ability or zone of proximal development. The sense of security and belonging, established from our educator and child relationship was evident and observable in Noah’s initiative, willingness, and acceptance to participate (Ebbeck & Yim, 2009; Gonzalez-Mena, 2004).

Moreover, reflecting on this experience resonates with Shin’s (2015) highlight of the pedagogical expertise displayed by an educator that is often undervalued and unrecognized. I, as the educator was able to hear Noah’s ‘voice’ (when he used the sign for “eat”) and, as noted
previously, I also supported his participation in the routine. As Hallam et al. (2009) and Recchia and Shin (2012) stated, these types of routines assist an educator when observing, accurately reading—and appropriately responding to—a child’s cues. Drawing from my own experience as an educator, listening for a child’s cue with intention is not an easy task in a busy classroom environment; however, it can be accomplished by paying attention and observing (Johansson & White, 2011; Rockel, 2009). Scenario 1 depicts how I was able to allow a child to invite me into his world, because I was observant and listened for the communication cues (Correa-Chavez & Rogoff, 2009; Liszkowski, 2014). As Dunst and Kassow (2008) and Lee (2006) noted, the quality of an interaction is imperative, including the eye contact, joint attention, and reciprocity between educator and child. I realized how important paying attention to a child’s cues can be to afford them the chance to be acknowledged and able to contribute as an active participant in their care routines.

Unfortunately, and echoing Gonzalez-Mena’s (2004) findings, I have realized how care routines are not always viewed as a time to support interaction. In my experience, I have witnessed some care routines to be a hurried process, where in Elliot’s (2007) words “children are seen as routines to be managed, rather than individuals to be cared for and appreciated” (p. 159). The most prevalent of this rushed care routine can be observed during the changing of a child’s diaper, as it is often plagued with distractions instead of interactions. Toys and stickers are often utilized to entertain or divert the attention of a child for the duration of the routine.

The next scenario, scenario 2, took place in an infant classroom during the morning diapering care routine and describes how this intimate time can become rushed without intention to listen for cues or opportunity to engage a child in interaction.
Scenario 2: An educator approached a child from behind, picked up the child, and swiftly carried her to the changing area without any interaction or direction. The child was handed a toy to explore, which she promptly dropped. In an attempt to regain the child’s attention, the educator pointed to some stickers placed above the child’s head. The stickers did capture the child’s focus and the routine was completed quickly and silently before the child lost interest in the stickers. There was little effort to include or engage the child in conversation or participation during the routine. The child was returned to the play area and the next child picked up for their turn.

My experience with this type of hurried care routine exemplified Elliot’s (2007) statement that when the environment is staged to complete a routine, the task can quickly become distasteful, robbing the child of their participation and leading educators to become disconnected from the moment. I draw from my own personal beliefs about quality care practices and connecting with attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1958; 1988; Stern, 1977) as well as with the psychosocial stages of development (Erikson, 1950) posits in particular regarding the importance of establishing trust. The next scenario, scenario 3, offers a contrasting depiction compared to the previous routine scenario. Scenario 3 took place in an alternate infant classroom during the same morning diaper care routine, but favoured the child as a competent participant, where the educator was required to listen and respond to the child’s cues; thus resonating with Gonzalez-Mena (2004) and Hallam et al’s (2009) findings. For the purposes of privacy and confidentiality, in this scenario I refer to the child as Max.

Scenario 3: I approached Max engaged in play, I gently touched his shoulder and said it was time for his diaper change. I extended my arms out and asked if he was ready to go. He responded by turning, reaching his arms up towards mine and smiling. I took the time
to wait for his response and during the routine, I placed Max facing towards me, in order to maintain eye contact and be observant for each other’s cues. I narrated what I was about to do at each step and paused to allow Max time to respond. He cooperatively participated in each step as he lifted his legs to assist with getting dressed and reached his arms up towards mine when told we were finished his care routine.

Reflecting on this scenario, I realize Max’s secure attachment to me, as his educator, because of his willingness to accept and be a participant in the care routine (Bowlby, 1958; 1988; Ebbeck et al., 2015). My experience with this care routine resonated Colmer et al. (2011) and Bergin and Bergin’s (2009) statement that these moments offer intimate instants of interaction that are the foundation for later social and emotional development. Max’s engagement in conversation about what was to occur, illustrates Elliot’s (2007) posits for educators to embrace an enjoyment for this time of interaction and deep connection with a child. More specifically, this routine provided me with an invaluable opportunity to engage in back and forth communication, as I had Max’s full attention, could make eye contact with him, and listen for his response. In addition, I recognize how I heard and valued his autonomy, as I provided him with time to respond. This time for reciprocity afforded Max an opportunity to be understood and actively participate by expressing his nonverbal cue of lifting his arms to be picked up as well as acknowledging his acceptance of what was happening by his smile (Erikson, 1950; Johansson & White, 2011; Liszkowski, 2014). What I learned from this experience, depicted in this scenario 3, was that by engaging in these interactive moments and including a child in their care routine, educators like myself are better able to embrace each child as an active and capable participant (Correa-Chavez & Rogoff, 2009; Hewett, 2001).
Drawing from these experiences, I advocate for increased amounts of time and emphasis to be placed on these care routines throughout the day, where educators can allow for development to unfold naturally, without a focus on achieving milestones and where a child’s autonomy is honoured and respected (Gonzalez-Mena, 2004; Hallam et al., 2009). These are the moments that deepen our understanding and appreciation of what it means to value being “with” a child that, at the same time, allow us as educators to connect meaningfully.

In reflecting upon this scenario 3, I realize how when I was able to embrace Max as capable, I opened the space for his sense of self and empathy to flourish (Erikson, 1950; Hewett, 2001). For example, I have witnessed on numerous occasions a child, who is not yet verbal, observe their friend in distress and offer assistance or comfort from their gestures. I have found that there is no greater moment of empathy than when a child falls down, and their friend comes over, places their hand on the child’s shoulder, looks them directly in the eye and asks “yo’kay?” (You okay?), and then offers their hand in assistance to their friend. As Vygotsky (1978) noted, the interactions and social experiences shared with children is what nurtures their empathy and social emotional development. This instance resonates with Vygotsky’s (1978) posits regarding children being able to understand and mimic behaviours long before they can utilize them with intention. In reflecting about this interaction, I realize this expression of empathy illustrates how children learn to care for one another based on the care and responses they experience from ourselves as educators within the classroom (Shin, 2015).

I advocate for educators to take the time to engage in unhurried care routines and recognize that this practice requires a team effort. The next section illustrates the importance for educators, like myself, to engage in collaboration and communication to create an environment supportive of quality interactions during care routines.
Educators Connecting with One Another to Support Care Routines in the Classroom

Drawing from my personal experience, educators often work in teams of two or more within a classroom setting and the cooperation amongst these team members can influence the execution of the daily care routines as described by Elliot (2007) and Manlove et al. (2008). Communication between educator teams is important to support consistency and continuity in the classroom (Colmer et al., 2011); yet, according to Ebbeck et al. (2015), and in reflection of my own experiences, the common practice of utilizing a communication book is often not enough to ensure a team of educators is working collaboratively. The next scenario, scenario 4, provides an example of how two educators were able to support one another by means of positive communication and collaboration. The scenario took place in a toddler classroom with twelve children and three educators as they transitioned outside for morning play. The exchange occurred between a new educator (“Lexa”) and an experienced educator (“Julia”) when the group reached the playground.

Scenario 4: While observing outside on the playground, I overheard Lexa and Julia engage in a brief, reflective conversation about their feelings and struggles that just occurred as they were helping the children get dressed for outside play. Lexa, the new educator stated how she felt frustrated with a child who would not cooperate to put on their boots. Julia, the experienced educator, acknowledged Lexa’s feelings of frustration and offered that the boots were new and a little too big for the child, which was more than likely causing discomfort and the subsequent struggle to get dressed. Lexa accepted the thought and indicated how her own feelings and response might have escalated the situation. Lexa and Julia continued to discuss strategies to enhance the child’s willingness to wear the boots outside, and as their conversation progressed, the empathy and shared
understanding of the circumstance was evident as each educator offered support and encouragement to the other.

Reflecting on this scenario, both Lexa and Julia’s communication with one another evokes Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) posits that our thoughts and reactions are influenced from a variety of sources that impact how our relationships are established and maintained. Lexa, as a new educator had become aware of her range of emotions she felt throughout the routine and noted how those feelings impacted the situation with the child. Moreover, in reflection of this scenario, both Lexa and Julia’s reactions resonate with Elliot’s (2007) statement that educators rely on each other for emotional support, debrief, and reflection. Although a moment of frustration, Lexa was able to accept her feelings and enrich her practice as she explored options to support the child in collaboration with her mentor Julia, thus echoing Shin’s (2015) findings regarding an educator’s need for supportive mentorship.

Unfortunately, I have realized that not often enough do supervisors set aside time for their educators to engage in this type of reflective conversation. This lack of time resonates with Doherty et al. (2000) and Elliot’s (2007) findings regarding the importance of communication. I have observed additional barriers to this collaboration that impede an educator’s ability to form relationships with not only the children in their care, but also to the other educators in their team. I have witnessed and experienced firsthand how the rhythm of the daily routine can be disrupted when an educator team is not working together, due to a lack of time for collaboration or to high staff turnover (Doherty et al., 2000; Ebbeck et al., 2015). In reflecting on my own experiences as an educator and in connection with Bowlby’s (1958; 1988) and Erikson’s (1950) posits regarding the necessity of trust to be the foundation of relationships, what I have learned is that children are continuously forced to rebuild their trust when a new educator enters the classroom. This process
of forming a new connection can be strenuous on the one consistent educator, who also has to balance the training and support of the new educator with maintaining their own established relationships in the classroom.

As Brown and Inglis (2013) and Doherty et al. (2000) noted, having a mentor readily available to model and from whom to learn is imperative to ensure educators are exposed to best practices. In connecting with Brownlee et al. (2009) and Petrie and Owen’s (2005) findings, I realize how supervisors are in a unique position to act as a mentor, as Shin (2015) noted they are able to offer authentic feedback and demonstrate the kind of relationships they want their educator teams to display towards the children in their classrooms. The last scenario, scenario 5, took place in an infant classroom where I worked many years ago and provides an example of how a supervisor was able to create an environment supportive of educators sharing their expertise to enhance classroom practice. This scenario also incorporates the importance of time for collaboration in order to nurture a secure attachment relationship between educator and child (Petrie & Owen, 2005). For the purposes of privacy and confidentiality, in this scenario I refer to the child as Ben.

Scenario 5: As a new educator, I was working in an infant classroom and during the nap routine I had placed Ben on his back to sleep in a crib. I was standing over the crib, facing him and gently stroked his hair as he fell asleep. The supervisor observing me mentioned that my interaction with Ben would detract from the routine and prevent him from falling asleep. I persisted as I was not comfortable placing Ben face down in the crib. Ben fell asleep smiling and when the supervisor and I emerged from the nap room, she shared that I had just taught her something profound about care routines, compassion, and the need to ensure every child feels secure in the classroom.
Reflecting on this moment shared between myself, the educator, and Ben, validated our secure attachment bond with each other (Bowlby, 1958; 1988; Stern, 1977). In addition, I realize how this scenario supports Shin’s (2015) statement that care is intimate and reciprocal between educator and child. I was able to share a moment of trust and deep connection with Ben as he fell asleep. Likewise, scenario 5 illustrates Elliot (2007) and Petrie and Owen’s (2005) findings that supervisors, who are often in a position of power over their educators, can encourage collaborative conversations, and can utilize reflective practices to enhance connection in the classroom. The example of scenario 5 echoes Hewett (2001) and MacNaughton and Smith’s (2008) findings that supervisors, in the role of mentors, are able to create and sustain an equal dialogue, and I recognize how our conversation was encouraged to continue by my supervisor’s willingness to be vulnerable and open to a new perspective, and thus in turn, strengthened the connection between Ben and I. According to Elliot (2007), pre-service education often focuses mainly on the theoretical and developmental aspects of care, but fails to acknowledge the significance of introspective practices and this experience instead illustrated the importance of engaging in communication and reflective practices.

Setting aside time for communication can be challenging to accomplish within the classroom as supervisors and parents often view the academic side of curriculum as more important and separate from the care routines because the academic activities implemented offer a concrete, measurable product. In connection with Elliot (2007), Petrie and Owen’s (2005) and Shin’s (2015) findings that supervisors ought to set aside designated time for communication, I realize that there is a need to make simple or creative changes to our daily routines to afford educators like myself an opportunity to connect with one another. As Doherty et al. (2000) noted the quiet or down times of the day are often reserved for cleaning duties or other curriculum
tasks and these tasks may contribute to the feelings of exhaustion and overwork mentioned in chapter 1. Drawing from my experiences in the previously outlined scenarios, I advocate for incorporating volunteers from the community to assist in some of the daily tasks, for example washing toys, to allow educator teams time to meet to engage in discussion and reflection. In reference to actively supporting connections with children, I echo and appreciate Petrie and Owen’s (2005) quote that for educators, it is “not about what they do, but about who they become in the lives of the infants” (p. 123).

Each one of the above scenarios has provided examples of how educators have a crucial role in a child’s social and emotional development and I advocate for expanding pre-service and continued training opportunities, especially mentorship, to enhance educator’s engagement in communication. Time for reflection and connection can enrich the collaboration within the educator team and strengthen the quality of the educator’s practice. Moreover, I advocate for educators to commit to slowing down their day to fully participate in care routines with intention and interaction in order to connect deeply with children in secure attachment relationships.

**Workshop Description**

I have designed a workshop, entitled “Connecting Deeply: Educator and Child Relationships in Infant and Toddler Classrooms” that offers insight to the value of connection with children. The content of the workshop includes an examination of the extant literature supportive of interactions between educators and children and it incorporates scenarios illustrative of connection during daily care routines. The workshop endeavours to inspire and sustain a dialogue regarding the importance of relations that encourage quality practices (See Appendix B).
The workshop is approximately two hours in length, and includes time for educators to participate in reflective discussions drawn from their own workplace practices. I anticipate the workshop to offer educators practical experiences to support secure attachment relationships in the classroom and enable a view of themselves as having a crucial role in a child’s future development.

I begin with an introduction to the topic of relationships and offer my motivation for sharing in discussion with other educators. I next outline the guiding questions for the workshop and define the key terms relevant to supporting attachment relationships in the classroom. I then provide a brief explanation of the theoretical frameworks that guide the topic including, the sociocultural theory, ecological systems theory, and attachment theory as well as two additional influential theories, the psychosocial stages of development and the functional emotional developmental levels of the mind theory. Next, I explore the extant research that is supportive of attachment relationships within the classroom including, primary caregiving practices, reading a child’s cues, the benefits of the relationship, and the importance for continued educational training opportunities to help educators expand their practice. I pause for a brief group discussion that encourages educators to ponder, reflect, and share how in their own classrooms they engage in interactions with children. Finally, I share a few of my own personal experiences of connecting deeply with children in my classroom to inspire educators to continue to investigate how they may support their own practices. I conclude with another brief group discussion, reflective of the first one, to stimulate a discussion where educators are able to share their own stories as a means to encourage one another.

Summary
In this chapter I have connected the extant literature of supporting secure attachment relationships within the classroom context to the practical application of building those relationships with children. I have emphasized the importance for educators and supervisors to recognize connection and how daily care routines can contribute to interactions supportive of relationships. I have offered examples of quality practices including, taking time to listen with intention to children’s cues to support the relationship, and advocated for ongoing training opportunities for educators to ensure these quality practices are implemented. Finally, I have outlined my resource for educators and their supervisors in the form of a workshop exploring attachment in the classroom. In chapter 4, I conclude by addressing my guiding questions, offering my personal reflections and discussing the limitations and possibilities for future research.
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

“The art of teaching is the work you do on yourself to become an ‘environment’ to allow other beings to do what they need to do...” – Ram Dass

In this chapter, my guiding questions offer my reflections, concluding thoughts, and suggest areas for research.

The literature reviewed and the connections I established by the scenarios have described that secure attachment relationships between educators and children are very beneficial, as these relationships provide the foundation children require for their future development. In terms of addressing, understanding, and implementing quality practices to support those relationships I have realized how important it is for educators to feel a sense of value for the expertise and abilities they demonstrate in their work with children (Shin, 2015). Moreover, I have come to appreciate a need for educators to shift their thinking to embrace each child as an equal, active participant in care, worthy of honour and respectful interactions.

In addressing my first guiding question, “what are ways in which educators engage in and build relationships with children in the classroom?” the literature reviewed suggested that trusting and respectful relationships are established and maintained when primary caregiving practices including, interaction during care routines are implemented (Bowlby, 1958; 1988; Colmer et al., 2011; Ebbeck et al., 2015). Reflection of my own experiences and in connection with the Pikler approach (Gonzalez-Mena, 2004) illustrated that these practices can be successful within a large group setting because it is the positive interactions between the educator and child that are the most important factor contributing to the secure attachment relationship (Dunst & Kassow, 2008; Gonzalez-Mena, 2004; Lee, 2006; Petrie & Owen, 2005; Recchia & Shin, 2012). In addition, participation in the care routines requires an educator to be in tune with a child’s
cues in order to open the space for interactions that convey a message of respect, trust, and security necessary for the child to then venture out to explore their learning environment (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Greenspan, 1997). Reflecting on my own practical experiences and in connection to the reviewed literature, I believe that increasing the emphasis on reading cues expressed by children could assist educators to better understand and incorporate a child as an active participant in their care routines (Hallam et al., 2009; Recchia & Shin, 2012).

Moreover, my own classroom experiences coupled with the findings from the literature reviewed exemplified the importance of recognizing our own feelings, attitudes, and capabilities as educators, and how those can in turn influence our connections with children (Elliot, 2007; Shin, 2015). I believe educators do require more time to engage in reflection and connection with children and with each other.

This reflection about the need for more time to be available to educators for communication purposes leads me to address the second guiding question, “in what ways can pre-service training institutions, administrators, and fellow infant and toddler educators better support one another to connect deeper to the children in their classrooms?” The literature reviewed, in connection with my own experience-based scenarios, illustrated the importance of communicating in open conversation that is grounded in reflection and introspection. I have realized that more focus needs to be placed on the role of administrators and supervisors to encourage the creation of a supportive classroom context, where quality practices have the potential to enrich the connective relations being nurtured (Brown & Inglis, 2013; Brownlee et al., 2009; Harwood et al., 2013; Manlove et al., 2008). In connection with Ebbeck et al’s (2015) and Elliot’s (2007) findings, I believe that having a commitment to create time for daily, face to face, and respectful communication and collaboration between educator teams is essential to
enhance relationships for both educators and children as well as for educator teams. Upon reflection of the literature reviewed and in connection with my experiences, training brought directly to the classroom in the form of mentorship and continued education has the potential to provide educator teams opportunities to engage in reflective practices regarding their roles and responsibility in the classroom (Gable & Hansen, 2001; Norris, 2010). In addition, this dialogue ensures educators understand the profound need to nurture relationships with children and enhances the practice of supporting one another during routine times (Colmer et al., 2011; Livingston, 2014; Manlove et al., 2008; Saracho & Spodek, 2007). The vast division across Canada of policy systems and licensing regulations, including the minimum educational training required to work, illustrates the need to re-examine pre-service education and continuing educational opportunities as these differences create disparity of experience and expertise for educators. For example, in the province of British Columbia and Ontario, an educator requires a post-secondary degree to participate in the elementary school system; however, an educator only requires a post-secondary diploma to work in a preschool setting (Harwood et al., 2013). By engaging in continued training educators are able to advocate for their professional role and expertise they display in the deep connections sustained with the children in their care.

**Reflections and Concluding Thoughts**

As I expressed in this Capstone project, I believe it is imperative to acknowledge the far reaching impact secure attachment relationships have on a child’s later development and how continued training experiences assist educators in strengthening their own confidence, abilities, and appreciation of the capability of children. Doherty et al. (2000) noted that the relationships educators form is at the heart of our work, is what keeps us engaged, motivated, and encouraged to be more aware of our profound impact on a child’s life. There is specialized care involved
with infant and toddler aged children and we, as educators, need to ensure we value and support each other for the tremendous work we engage in each day with our youngest citizens.

Articulating the complexities associated with caregiving, separate from academic learning in the classroom can be challenging; yet, when we recognize this, we are able to connect more deeply and meaningfully to the children in our care (Elliot, 2007). Empowering educators to value their relations with the children in their care shifts the focus from creating children for tomorrow, to embracing the children that are today.

By way of this Capstone project I have come to recognize and appreciate the vast knowledge and expertise exhibited by an educator when they engage in the daily care routines with children. Educators hold the best interests of children in their hearts, by their recognition that needs vary and is reliant upon careful decision making (Woodrow & Busch, 2008). There is a difference between stepping out and stepping back to observe and listen with intention to allow a child to become an active participant. I have acknowledged that educators require increased and ongoing training to support their relationships with children because having a relationship is not the same as being involved in one. The observations educators, including myself reflect on each moment we are aware of a child’s cues affords us the chance to enhance our connection and participate with children. I have realized that our relationships provide children with the sense of security necessary for their own confidence to flourish when exploring their learning environment independently, and this allows us time to attend to the needs of the other children in our care. When we engage in interaction that is mutual and respectful we send the message to a child that they matter, are an important part of the classroom environment, and an equal participant in their care routines.
As noted in chapter 1, with the rise of private, large group childcare centres we are at risk of losing the caring and social aspects of education. Honig and Shin (2001) and Zeece and Churchill (2001) noted that educators are spending less than 1.5 minutes per day reading with infant children in the classroom during unstructured play. Reading offers an alternate moment for intimate interactions, where connection and participation with a child can contribute to the nurturing of the secure attachment relationship (MacNaughton & Smith, 2008).

The caring side of education is often viewed as a paradoxical image that creates confusion and detracts from the professional skills displayed by educators each day (Woodrow & Busch, 2008). Importantly, our childcare classrooms are structured from the adult views of what children require for care and this contributes to our failure to honour children’s voice and capacity to be active participants in their own care (Elliot, 2007; Woodrow & Busch, 2008). In order to create change, we must ensure that each and every day we, as educators, are committed to engaging in quality care practices, including listening and acknowledging children as differently equal contributors (MacNaughton & Smith, 2008; Woodrow & Busch, 2008). This is why I believe pre-service education is a place to reconceptualise educator leadership as an everyday practice where, by our activism and engagement in nurturing our own and others’ strengths, we are able to create change within the classroom in support of fostering relationships. These relationships formed on trust and positive interactions are crucial to lay the foundation for a child’s lifelong success.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research and Practice**

Given the limited scope of this capstone project, I did not include the role families play on the secure attachment relationship formed between an educator and child in the classroom. The literature reviewed focused specifically on the educator and child perspective, and therefore,
I recommend that future research investigates and focuses on the impact of the relationship triad generated between an educator, the child and his or her family. Investigation of the child’s viewpoint and perspective of their relationship experience was also beyond the scope of this project, and I recommend that future research explore the child’s involvement and perception of their connection with their educators in the classroom. In addition, the literature reviewed denoted the importance for educators to embrace more equal power relations with the children in their classrooms and illustrated the need to feel supported by their supervisors. I recommend that future research explore educator’s participation in continued training activities regarding the interconnectedness of care and education, as this could promote the value of educators, increase recognition for the important work they do with children, and strengthen their commitment to the caring side of education.

In terms of recommendations for practice, my suggestions include that educators focus more on the interactions that occur during the daily routines and focus less on controlling the classroom. This can be easily accomplished by offering a less educator directed and structured activities during play to afford an opportunity for a child’s development to unfold naturally and for a child’s cues to signal the routine. A reflective pedagogical approach focused on listening and connection as the foundation for co-constructing meaning between educator and child requires vulnerability from the educator, where they are open to possibility, curiosity, and believe that all children are capable and worthy of exerting their own decisions when involved in learning and care (Hewett, 2001). I have come to realize that sustainability in the field of early education can stem from acknowledging educator’s expertise, and that this expertise emerges from engagement in reflection, introspection, and collaboration to deepen one’s own thoughts and understanding of development and learning (Hewett, 2001; MacNaughton & Smith, 2008).
Brown and Inglis (2013) noted that many educators are in favour of increasing training opportunities to gain recognition for their professional work with children. Furthermore, this professional attitude could lead to a better understanding of the responsibilities and roles each educator has to listen with intention and participate with children in daily care routines (Doherty et al., 2000; Norris 2010; Saracho & Spodek, 2007). I advocate for bringing workshops and training directly to the classroom, to afford educators a chance to participate in expanding their practice and growth, both professionally and personally (Gable & Hansen, 2001; Harwood et al., 2013). Finally, I recommend that conversations with mentors be readily available, along with follow up time for team communication. This time for collaborative reflection (Hewett, 2001; Livingston, 2014) would allow educators to create a supportive classroom environment that increases our recognition of, and appreciation for, the vital role Early Childhood Educators have in nurturing relationships as well as permit all of us in this field to better embrace the moments we spend in connection with children.
References


http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0300443991480102


http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0300443011660104


Hestenes, L. L., Cassidy, D. J., Hegde, A. V., & Lower, J. K. (2007). Quality in inclusive and


http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2013.822229


http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10409280902773351


http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13502930801897053


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) Ecological Systems Theory. This figure illustrates the interconnectedness of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and Macrosystem layers.

Image source: Microsoft Clipart (2016).
APPENDIX B

A workshop designed for Educators that examines the importance of recognizing the role the educator has in fostering attachment relationships with children and articulates the significance for interaction to take place during care routine times in infant and toddler classrooms.
Overview

This workshop was created as a result of my Capstone Project for a Master's of Education in Early Education.

- Introduction
- Rationale and Purpose
- Guiding Questions
- Key Terms
- Theoretical Frameworks
- Extant Literature
- Connections to Practice
- Conclusions

Audience: Early Childhood Educators working in large or small group, infant and toddler classrooms.

I begin with an introduction to the topic of relationships and offer my motivation for sharing in discussion with other educators. I next outline the guiding questions for the workshop and define the key terms relevant to supporting attachment relationships in the classroom. I then provide a brief explanation of the theoretical frameworks that guide the topic including, the sociocultural theory, ecological systems theory, and attachment theory as well as two additional influential theories, the psychosocial stages of development and the functional emotional developmental levels theory. Next, I explore the extant research that is supportive of attachment relationships within the classroom including, primary caregiving practices, reading a child’s cues, the benefits of the relationship and the importance for continued educational training opportunities to help educators expand their practice. I pause for a brief group discussion that encourages educators to ponder, reflect, and share how in their own classrooms they engage in interactions with children. Finally, I share a few of my own personal experiences of connecting deeply with children in my classroom to inspire educators to continue to investigate how they may support their own practices. I conclude with another brief group discussion, reflective of the first one, to stimulate a discussion where educators are able to share their own stories as a means to encourage one another.
As an educator who has worked for the past ten years in a variety of urban centre based infant/toddler classrooms, in two different provinces in Canada, I have experienced firsthand the diversity and range of quality care practices and curriculum approaches that exist. Each classroom, both large- and small- group contexts had the common thread of some educators struggling to appreciate and understand the complexities encompassed within secure attachment relationships. I began to observe how some of my colleagues became disengaged from the shared experiences of the day and simply moved through care routines without mindfulness or connection to the children (Elliot, 2007; Rockel, 2009). I also realized that the dominant discourse emitted from the educators indicated that the children were passive recipients of care (Elliot, 2007), with very little power or control over their situation or experiences (MacNaughton & Smith, 2008).

This sparked my interest to explore how we, as educators, could better nurture relationships with each child in our care to ensure that all children feel a place of belonging and security strong enough to allow for learning within the classroom environment (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Erikson, 1950).
Icebreaker: Introduction – Getting to know you…

Duration: 5 minutes

Wouldn’t it be great if each time we met a new person or child, we knew something interesting about them so that we could begin a conversation with that knowledge? There is opportunity to offer good feelings to another and receive back a shared joy when we celebrate others. This activity is illustrative of connection to break the barrier of a new situation or relationship. Creative congratulations can be made up and if nothing comes to mind, simply offer a compliment!
In reference to my concerns about educators not connecting deeply to the children in their classroom, Elliot (2007) offered that “when caregiving is a task to be done, rather than an engagement with individual babies in unique contexts, it robs babies of their individuality and caregivers of their agency” (p. 127). The common perception is that the work of educators is easy, undemanding and often assumed rather than named. This can reduce and remove the knowledge and expertise held and demonstrated by educators within the classroom (Doherty et al., 2000; Shin, 2015).

Educators often do not have time during the day to engage in conversation or reflective practices, which can result in decreased quality. In addition, this workshop adds to the extant literature detailing and raising awareness about the complexities encompassed within relationships and the significant role connection has in encouraging educators to honour a child’s capability. The knowledge and insight gained may inspire educators to participate in collaborative and reflective conversations to advance their professional practice and assist in combating the feelings of fatigue from balancing the daily demands of academics and care (Brownlee et al., 2009; Doherty et al., 2000; Elliot, 2007).
For the purpose of this workshop the term “educator” refers to any Early Childhood Educator, with or without specific specialized infant/toddler training, working directly with either or both infant (0 to 18 months) and toddler (18 to 30 months) aged children in a group care setting or classroom (BC Ministry of Education, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). The term “child” or “children” refers to any child or group of children in the infant and/or toddler age range within a classroom setting.

Both age ranges are unique in their developmental milestones; however, their necessity for care that involves secure attachment remains the same (Bowlby, 1958; 1988; Petrie & Owen, 2005). In addition, across Canada this age range is grouped very differently depending on the licensing requirements. For example, in the province of British Columbia, some centres group both infants and toddlers within one classroom, which is in contrast to the province of Ontario that obliges a separation once a child ages to 18 months (BC Ministry of Education, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).
I now introduce and define the key terms related to this topic of building relationships in the classroom between educator and child.

**Attachment relationship or bond** refers to the emotional and physical feelings of closeness established between a primary caregiver (educator) and child that is reciprocal, respectful and founded on trust. This secure attachment is fostered by consistently meeting the needs of a child (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1958; 1988; Stern, 1977).

Positive interactions, consistency and predictability all contribute to the secure attachment relationship (Colmer et al., 2011).

Educators strive to engage in secure attachment relationships with the children as this is well-regarded as a crucial milestone for a child, as this first caring interaction is an integral piece for the child’s future relationships as well as a contributing component to many positive outcomes, including increases in social and emotional capability (Deluis, Bovenschen, & Spangler, 2008; Erikson, 1950; Greenspan, 1997; Raver, 2002).
The educator becomes acutely aware of, and understands the child’s specific, distinct cues to signal a need or desire (Colmer et al., 2011; Ebbeck, Phoon, Tam-Chong, Tan, & Goh, 2015) and as a result, primary caregiving practices have become the preferred method for quality care within the classroom to promote the development of mutual trust and respect over time (Ebbeck & Yim, 2009; Rockel, 2009). The recommended implementation is with no more than 6 children and 2 educators per group (Essa et al., 1999); however, the reality of large group centre based care makes this a rarity (Ebbeck et al., 2015). Furthermore, cooperation and mutual helpfulness from the whole team of educators is necessary for primary caregiving to be successful (Ebbeck et al., 2015) and affords the opportunity for a relationship to be created between the triad of family, educator, and child (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1996; 2005; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014).
Cues are the communication method that signals an educator of the need or want from a child. The cue may come in the form of a spoken request of an object or need for example, “cup” or in the form of a nonverbal gesture including, pointing, sign or facial expression (Johansson & White, 2011; Liszkowski, 2014).

A relationship allows the educator to become acutely aware of, and understand the child’s specific and distinct cues to signal a need or preference. This is especially important during routines times of the day when intimate interactions occur.
I now introduce the theoretical frameworks that guide and inform the establishment of the relationship between educator and child.

Vygotsky (1978) – stated social interactions are the foundation for learning. Children learn by interacting with others and their learning is stretched when able to engage with or observe a more capable other. Vygotsky (1978) stated that “learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers” (p. 90).

The social interactions engaged in between educators and children contribute to the flourishing relationship, as children are able to observe social skills and emotions supportive of communication.
Bronfenbrenner (1994) – a layered approach to exploring relationships. The first level, the microsystem, encompasses the face to face patterns of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by a child, viewed as the commencement of all relationships. The next level, the mesosystem, is comprised of the interrelations among two or more environment settings or contexts that the child is an active participant within, for example, the interconnection between an educator and a child’s family. The third level, the exosystem, exemplifies the influence from a child’s neighbourhood or community, where the child may or may not always be an active participant. The macrosystem, the most distant layer from the child, provides the cultural, historical and political influence of the other levels. Bronfenbrenner (1994) noted how these proximal processes exert their influence on the emerging relationship between an educator and child and do not occur in isolation from the other layers; for example, the classroom setting in the microsystem is affected by the governmental policies in the macrosystem, including educator-to-child ratios and group size (Goelman & Guhn, 2011).

The influences on the child from each of the different layers all impact the relationship formed with an educator. Similarly, the educator brings with them all of their influences from the different layers into the relationship. Exploring each of the interrelations of the ecological influences offers a deeper understanding of a child’s world and exemplifies the impact an educator can have on a child’s development.
Educators must have an understanding of how attachment forms in order to establish a space for connection with the children in their care.

Bowlby (1958; 1988) - During the first pre-attachment phase, a child orients and accepts care from any person present, until the child begins to distinguish others as separate and unique from themselves. At this point, the child is now in the second phase, where they exert their preference to have their needs met by a specific person for example, the child might cry until a preferred person offers comfort. The third phase commences when the child actively seeks out the preferred person as a secure base from which to explore for example the child will make eye contact with the preferred person during play, illustrative of the deep connective bond formed (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Stern (1977) – extended Bowlby’s (1958; 1988) theory on attachment and noted how moments of interaction often occurred at unlikely or unexpected times in the space amongst activities for example, the transition between feeding and play. Stern (1977) stated that by six months of age a child has mastered the rhythm of communication and is able to understand and utilize nonverbal cues. These cues are what signal the caregiver of the child’s needs and as the child continues to hone their interactive skills in moments of reciprocity, the mutual relationship is fostered. These interactive moments lay the foundation for secure attachment to grow.
A sense of trust and the ability to relate to others are essential to contribute to a relationship.

Erikson (1950) - Trust versus mistrust and autonomy versus shame and doubt. Trust is formed by the consistent, predictable, and continuous feelings of familiarity when a child’s needs are met. The quality of the encounter during that shared time is the most important factor to foster the trust. Autonomy is achieved by a supportive environment that allows opportunities for a child to experiment with their own abilities and where support can be relied upon when distress occurs. The child is able to develop their sense of self control without a loss of self-esteem when supported by an entrusted adult or educator.

Greenspan (1997) - The first level is the child’s ability to be calm and regulated in order to engage with the surrounding environment. The next level involves the ability to feel close and relate to others in an intimate manner. The third level is the ability to relate to others by means of nonverbal two-way communication (Greenspan, 1997). For example, the child must communicate their needs by expressing a cue and an educator must be able to read the cue in order to elicit feelings of security and trust. The fourth level is the ability to problem-solve and create a sense of self. As a child engages successfully in communication of their needs, they are able to gain their esteem and establish their relationship.
Group Activity!
Duration: 10 minute group discussion.

The purpose of this activity is to stimulate our conversation and encourage us as educators to reflect on our current practices within the classroom. Given what we have just discussed regarding the importance of social interactions, influences from a variety of contexts and how attachment relationships are formed, ponder how you engage with the children in your classroom. Think of some of the ways you foster and engage in relationships with the children? What does this look like? Are there specific behaviours you observe between you and the child that support attachment? How do relationships make us feel? Who else influences the relationship?

As a large group we will share our thoughts and I will record the answers on the whiteboard/chart paper under categories, including communication/interaction during play versus care routines, influences on the relationship and our own feelings when we are connected and interacting with a child.
As defined in the key terms, primary caregiving practices are the preferred method for caring for children. Implementation of primary caregiving practices in the classroom is a method to encourage educators to engage and foster relationships with children (Colmer et al., 2011).

The Pikler Institute implements these practices focuses on allowing development to unfold naturally, in an unhurried manner, where freedom of movement is essential to instil a lasting view of the self as a capable learner (Gonzalez-Mena, 2007). The key element and objective is respect, where a child is embraced as an active participant who is regarded as an equal participant during daily care routines. The Pikler approach states that a relationship is formed from the intimate personal contact and rich language exchanges during these routine times (Gerber, 1998; Gonzalez-Mena, 2004; 2007). More specifically, Gonzalez-Mena (2004) described that an educator was responsible for overseeing the whole group during play time, but focused on two or three specific children’s daily care routines and close observation of their development. This encouraged the educator to recognize the child’s nonverbal voice as an important form of communication that in turn, strengthened their relationship and connection.
The communication that occurs daily between an educator and child contributes to the sense of trust necessary for the foundation of a relationship. The quality, not quantity, of these interactions was the single most important factor contributing to a secure attachment relationship (Dunst & Kassow, 2008; Lee, 2006).

As defined in the key terms, educators read a child’s cues to understand what is being communicated and the daily care routines assisted an educator in observing for, reading, adaptively interpreting, and accurately responding to each child’s specific, individual method of communication in order to engage in a joint attention and a turn taking conversation (Hallam et al., 2009; Recchia & Shin, 2012).

During interactions, body movement is often interpreted as bodily function or practice of movements for later development, as opposed to being viewed as an intentional form of communication to signal an educator an emotion or thought of the current situation or experience (Johansson & White, 2011; Liszkowski, 2014). How an educator reads, interprets and responds to a cue has an impact on the growth and maintenance of a relationship.
Educators who support and incorporate quality practices, including primary caregiving offer children the benefits associated with being engaged in a secure attachment relationship.

In primary caregiving the recommended practice is for children to stay with their primary educator for the first three years of care; yet, Essa et al (1999) noted this practice rarely occurs due to staff turnover, division of age groups based on developmental milestones or parental preferences. Children who stay with their primary educator exhibit increased competence with their peers and demonstrate better school achievement in the later years (Raver, 2002; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014).

The positive effects of being engaged in a secure attachment relationship grant children the opportunity to have quality interactions, which lead to increases in their overall development. Children were considered to have greater intellectual ability, greater competence with communication, higher emotional regulation, an increased ability to engage in more complex social and creative play, as well as a strong foundation for a healthy social-emotional life (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Delius et al., 2008).
As noted previously, educators come equipped with a variety of experiences that inform their practice and contribute to their engagement in relationships. By acknowledging their own feelings, educators are able to reflect on their practice and deepen their connection with children.

Elliot (2007) stated that educators experience a wide range of feelings and tensions throughout the day that intertwine with being emotionally present, available, responsive and intuitive to a child’s cues. She concluded that building and engaging in relationships took empathy, trust and self-reflection. The various demands of the day including, balancing intimate time with each child, understanding parent concerns, and negotiating routines with coworkers, took a significant amount of patience, understanding and effort from the educator.

Quality interactions were not an easy task that could be accomplished by anyone; rather, this practice involved commitment, communication, specialized training and support (Elliot, 2007; Rockel, 2009; Shin, 2015). Care and intimacy is physical, emotional and reciprocal between educator and child (Shin, 2015). An educator’s engagement in responsive, attentive, and sensitive caregiving, contributed to increasing children’s display of empathy for one another. In addition, this also afforded children more active participation opportunities in their care routines, illustrated by their positive acceptance, vocalizations, and expressions.
The educational training of an educator and mentor contribute to how relationships are supported within the classroom. Supervisors act as competent mentors, facilitators of communication and were encouraged to demonstrate the type of relationship they wanted their educators to display towards the children in care (Petrie & Owen, 2005; Shin, 2015). Supervisors that held higher educational qualifications, for example a post-secondary degree, appeared better able to articulate and connect theory to practice within the classroom and contributed to increases in quality caregiving practices (Brownlee et al., 2009; Saracho & Spodek, 2007).

Educators wanted access to continued educational training and specialized courses to assist with their own self-growth and understanding of their role and responsibilities within the classroom (Gable & Hansen, 2001; Harwood, Klopper, Osanyin, & Vanderlee, 2013; Norris, 2010; Livingston, 2014).

Educators relied on each other for emotional support, debrief, and reflection as well as felt increased training offered recognition for their professional work and sustainability in the field (Brown & Inglis, 2013; Elliot, 2007). This is important for educators to understand when they reflect on their relationships because educators need to be aware of their own emotions and thoughts that impact the formation and sustainability of their connections to children.
I now offer a brief outline of some personal scenarios of educators connecting deeply to children in the classroom.

Scenario 1 – Supportive of reading child’s cues, honouring child’s ability to participate in routine.

Scenario 2 – Supportive of embracing routines as a time for interactions, not distractions and note how routines teach children how to care for one another.

Scenario 3 – Supportive of educators engaging in conversation to better their practice and work together.

Scenario 4 – Supportive of honouring each other’s expertise and encouraging connection of educator teams.

By making simple and creative changes to the daily routine, educators are afforded an opportunity to connect with one another to ensure quality practices are implemented. Including volunteers from the community to engage in some of the daily tasks, for example washing toys, allows educator teams to meet to engage in discussion about their practice. Typically, this quiet time of day is reserved for cleaning duties or other curriculum tasks that can lead to the feelings of exhaustion and overwork (Doherty et al., 2000). Setting aside a designated time for educators to engage in discussion strengthens their primary caregiving practices and demonstrates value of their experience (Elliot, 2007; Shin, 2015).
For the purpose of this scenario, I refer to the child as Noah. There is observable evidence to indicate the established level of comfort and trust between an educator and child engaged in a secure attachment relationship.

The sense of security and belonging, established from our educator and child relationship, was evident and observable in Noah’s initiative, willingness and acceptance to participate (Ebbeck & Yim, 2009; Gonzalez-Mena, 2004). Noah demonstrated he was prepared to engage in the task of setting up the chairs as a productive, capable contributor. I was able to honour and encourage his desire to participate for the duration of the routine by my acknowledgement and acceptance of his assertion of autonomy.

Reflecting on this experience resonates with Shin’s (2015) highlight of the pedagogical expertise displayed by an educator that is often undervalued and unrecognized. I as the educator was able to hear Noah’s ‘voice,’ (when he used the sign for “eat”) and as noted previously, support his participation in the routine. As Hallam et al. (2009) and Recchia and Shin (2012) stated, these types of routines assist an educator in observing for, accurately reading, and appropriately responding to a child’s cues. Drawing from my own experience as an educator, listening for a child’s cue with intention is not an easy task in a busy classroom environment; however, can be accomplished by paying attention and observing (Johansson & White, 2011; Rockel, 2009). Scenario 1 depicts how I was able to allow a child to invite me into his world, because I was observant and listened for the communication cues (Correa-Chavez & Rogoff, 2009; Liszkowski, 2014). I realized how important paying attention to a child’s cues can be to afford them the chance to be acknowledged and able to contribute as an active participant in their care routines.
For the purpose of this scenario, I refer to the child as Max. Gonzalez-Mena (2004) stated the “consistency, continuity, and predictability” (p. 29) of care routines provides opportunity for educators to embrace interactions. Unfortunately, I have realized how care routines are not always viewed as a time to support interaction. In my experience, I have witnessed some care routines to be a hurried process, where “children are seen as routines to be managed, rather than individuals to be cared for and appreciated” (Elliot, 2007, p. 159). The most prevalent of this rushed routine can be observed during the changing of a child’s diaper, as it is often plagued with distractions instead of interactions. Toys and stickers are often utilized to entertain or divert the attention of a child for the duration of the routine. My experience with this type of hurried routine exemplifies Elliot’s (2007) statement that when the environment is staged to complete a routine, the task can quickly become distasteful, robbing the child of their participation and leading educators to become disconnected from the moment.

In contrast, the above scenario favoured the child as a competent participant (Hallam et al., 2009; Gonzalez-Mena, 2004). Max’s secure attachment to me, as his educator, was reflected in his willingness to accept and be a participant in the care routine (Bowlby, 1958; 1988; Ebbeck et al., 2015; Stern, 1977). This routine gave me an invaluable opportunity to engage in back and forth communication, as I had Max’s full attention, could make eye contact and listen for his response. I recognize how I heard and valued his autonomy, as I provided him with time to respond. This time for reciprocity afforded Max an opportunity to be understood and actively participate by his nonverbal cues of lifting his arms to be picked up as well as acknowledge his acceptance of what was happening by his smile (Erikson, 1950; Johansson & White, 2011; Liszkowski, 2014). What I learned from this experience, depicted in this scenario, was that by engaging in these interactive moments and including a child in their care routine, educators like myself are better able to embrace each child as an active and capable participant (Correa-Chavez & Rogoff, 2009; Hewett, 2001).
Drawing from my personal experience, educators often work in teams of two or more within a classroom setting and the cooperation amongst the team members can influence the execution of the daily care routines (Elliot, 2007; Manlove et al., 2008). Communication between educators is important to support consistency and continuity in the classroom (Colmer et al., 2011); yet, according to Ebbeck et al. (2015) and in reflection of my own experiences, the common practice of utilizing a communication book is often not enough to ensure a team of educators is working collaboratively. In reflection of this scenario, both Lexa and Julia’s reactions resonate with Elliot’s (2007) statement that educators rely on each other for emotional support, debrief, and reflection. Although a moment of frustration, Lexa was able to accept her feelings and enrich her practice as she explored options to support the child by engaging in collaboration with her mentor Julia; thus echoing Shin’s (2015) findings regarding educator’s need for supportive mentorship. Unfortunately, and resonating with Doherty et al. (2000) and Elliot’s (2007) findings regarding the importance of communication, not often enough supervisors set aside time for their educators to engage in this type of reflective conversation with one another.

As Brown and Inglis (2013) and Doherty et al. (2000) noted, having a mentor readily available to model and from who to learn is imperative to ensure educators are exposed to best practices. In connecting with Brownlee et al. (2009) and Petrie and Owen’s (2005) findings, I realize how supervisors are in a unique position to act as a mentor, as Shin (2015) noted they are able to offer authentic feedback and demonstrate the kind of relationships they want their educator teams to display towards the children in their classrooms.
For the purpose of this scenario, I refer to the child as Ben.

Reflecting on this moment shared between myself, the educator, and Ben, validated our secure attachment bond with each other (Bowlby, 1958; 1988; Stern, 1977). In addition, I realize how this scenario supports Shin’s (2015) statement that care is intimate and reciprocal between educator and child. I was able to share a moment of trust and deep connection with Ben as he fell asleep. Likewise, this scenario illustrates Elliot (2007) and Petrie and Owen’s (2005) findings that supervisors, who are often in a position of power over their educators, can encourage collaborative conversations and can utilize reflective practices to enhance connection in the classroom. The example of this scenario echoes Hewett (2001) and MacNaughton and Smith’s (2008) findings that supervisors, in the role of mentors, are able to create and sustain an equal dialogue, and I recognize how the conversation was encouraged to continue by my supervisor’s willingness to be vulnerable and to be open to a new perspective, and thus in turn strengthened the connection between Ben and I. According to Elliot (2007), pre-service education often focuses mainly on the theoretical and developmental aspects of care, but fails to acknowledge the significance of introspective practices and this experience instead illustrated the importance of engaging in communication and reflective practices.
Group Activity!
Duration: 5 minutes per pair – plus a 10 minute whole group discussion.

This is an opportunity to open the dialogue for a large group reflection regarding our own practices and compare this to our previous discussion about how we build relationships with the children in our classrooms.

Divide into pairs and reflect on one child that you might consider to be “difficult” to attach to and briefly describe the challenges or points of conflict you encounter. How do you feel during those interactions? Are there any barriers to communication?
Discuss one strategy or behaviour you may use with that child to build a more positive relationship.
Discuss any fears, concerns or challenges you think you might encounter when you attempt to implement those strategies.
The listener may write down key points or words during the discussion to act as a reminder for the group discussion.

As a whole group we can share some of the reflections to encourage increasing the time educators spend in interactions and fostering connection during the day. How could your classroom incorporate primary caregiving practices or interactions during routines?

I record points of our reflective discussion onto a whiteboard for everyone to view as tools for their “educator toolbox” when returning to their respective workplaces.
Given the limited scope of this project, I did not include the role families play on the secure attachment relationship formed between an educator and child in the classroom, and therefore, I recommend that future research investigates the impact of the relationship triad generated between an educator, the child and his or her family. Investigation of the child’s viewpoint and perspective of their relationship experience was also beyond the scope of this project, and I recommend that future research explore the child’s involvement and perception of their connection with their educators in the classroom.

I recommend that more emphasis be placed on care routines, where educators can allow for development to unfold naturally, without a focus on achieving milestones and where interactions are embraced as the foundation for our relationships (Gonzalez-Mena, 2004; Hallam et al., 2009). These are the moments that enhance our understanding and appreciation of each child as a competent contributor and allow us as educators to connect meaningfully. As Petrie and Owen’s (2005) noted for educators, it is “not about what they do, but about who they become in the lives of the infants” (p. 123). I have realized that our relationships provide children with the sense of security necessary for their own confidence to flourish when exploring their learning environment independently, affording us the time to attend to the needs of other children.

I advocate for bringing workshops and training directly to the classroom, to afford educators a chance to participate in expanding their practice and growth, both professionally and personally (Gable & Hansen, 2001; Harwood et al., 2013). Finally, I recommend that mentorship conversations be readily available, along with follow up time for team communication. This time for collaborative reflection would allow educators to create a supportive classroom environment that increases our recognition of, and appreciation for, the vital role we have in nurturing relationships as well as strengthen the commitment to the caring side of education.
This workshop has elaborated on the significance of the educator and child relationship, and has suggested that continued learning experiences be available to assist educators in strengthening their own confidence, abilities, and appreciation of children’s capabilities. There is specialized care involved with infant and toddler aged children and we need to ensure we value and support educators for the tremendous work they do each day with our youngest citizens. Empowering educators to connect with the children in their care shifts our focus from creating children for tomorrow, to embracing the children that are today.
References


http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0014444


http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007669.2013.790701


http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0300766001660004
References

Goelman, H., & Guhn, M. (2011). The theoretical frameworks that guide the CHILD project. In New approaches to early child development (pp. 17-12).


References


http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2013.0294


References


References

