Research Article

Attachment in the Context of Early Years Pedagogical Practice: Early Childhood Educator and Director Insights

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Abstract: Given that early childhood education and care is relationship laden, research into attachment can contribute towards our understanding of early childhood education relationships. There is, however, a lack of research in this field and available research is largely absent of the voices of early childhood professionals and directors who work in early years environments. On these grounds a qualitative instrumental case study, nested in a social constructivist paradigm, was designed in Ontario, Canada, to gain insight into how attachment is (dis)embodied in their practice. The ten interviews that informed findings suggest that although attachment merges with practice, reluctance exists to intentionally embrace attachment theorizing and terminology. Instead, attachment is cloaked in care and love discourse, with "*two-sided*" inclinations. Participants of this study compel pre and in-service organizations to fortify their training to ensure that pedagogical approaches espouse the cornerstones of attachment theory and terminology, most notably to counter attachment (mis)understandings. Findings furthermore point to the intersectionality between the personal attachment history of professionals who work with young children, and their capacity to nurture security in their pedagogical practice.

Keywords: attachment, early childhood professionals, directors, pedagogy, qualitative

1. Introduction

Child/adult dyadic attachment relationships, well established in research and clinical practice, are deemed significant protective factors against adversity (Balbernie, 2013; Kennison & Spooner, 2023; Wilson-Ali et al., 2019). Primary to this is child/parent attachment, which has been comprehensively studied (e.g., Ali et al., 2021; Bowlby, 1988; Quintigliano et al., 2021). Likewise influential, however not extensively explored, are child/early childhood educator-caregiver attachment relationships (Drugli & Undheim, 2012; Wilson-Ali et al., 2019). This is disquieting granted that the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2019) reports that universal, or near-universal, participation in a minimum of one year of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is now typical in OECD countries, where on average 40% of one-year-olds and 62% of 2-year-olds are enrolled. Considering this, research is needed to bring attachment out of the periphery and into the epicentre of ECEC.

1.1 *Review of the literature*
1.1.1 *Foundational theoretical underpinnings of attachment*

Defined by Susan Johnson (2019), a contemporary relational scholar, attachment "is fundamentally an interpersonal theory that places the individual in the context of his or her closest relationships with others; it views mankind as not only essentially social but also as *Homo vinculum*-the one who bonds" (p. 6). Comprehensively researched with a focus on child/parent relationships attachment has been established as a key contributor to longitudinal well-being (Bowlby, 1988; Clinton, 2020; Johnson, 2019; Zeanah, 2000). The theory of attachment was first proposed by John Bowlby (Bowlby, 1988; Bretherton, 1992; Wilson-Ali et al., 2019). Theory proposes that from birth children are wired to form attachments by seeking and maintaining proximity to their attachment figure(s) (Bowlby, 1969; Bretherton, 1992; Spruit et al., 2020; Wilson-Ali et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant when the child uses the adult as a secure base to explore in times of safety, and a safe haven when stressed (Ali et al., 2021; Bowlby, 1969; Polkovnikova-Wamoto et al., 2016). Mostly investigated in child/mother dyads (Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2018; Fourment et al., 2022), and more recently child/father dyads (Bureau et al., 2017; Cabrera, 2020), attachment research is important given that approximately 40% of North American children possess insecure working models in parental relationships (Beetz et al., 2012; Spruit et at., 2020; Van IJzendoorn et al., 1999). Furthermore, children's early relational encounters with their attachment figure(s) informs conceptions about themselves, others, and how they cope with their feelings across the lifespan (Colmer et al., 2011; Erozkan, 2016; Spruit et al., 2020). At the nexus of this is an internal working model (IWM) (Kesner, 1994; Obsuth et al., 2023; Spruit et al., 2020) whereby each relationship is determined by a representational template of the attachment figure, structuring "expectations, affect, and behavior" (Atkinson et al., 2009, p. 100). Tied to an IWM are attachment classifications, alternately described as patterns. Mary Ainsworth's work (1991) is instrumental in this area as her research concerning maternal sensitivity, and its significance in child/mother attachment patterns, contributed to the advancement of attachment theory (Bretherton, 1992; Page, 2017). With Bowlby, Ainsworth proposed that there are three predominant attachment classifications that are inclusive of: 1. secure, 2. insecure-avoidant, and 3. insecure-ambivalent/resistant (Ainsworth et al., 2015; Flaherty & Sadler, 2011; Soloman et al., 2017). In the early 1990's insecure-disorganized was ascertained as a fourth attachment classification (Ainsworth et al., 2015; Duschinsky, 2015; Soloman et al., 2017). Currently it is estimated that approximately 62% of children operate from a secure working model, whereas 15% are insecure-avoidant, 9% insecure-ambivalent, and 15% disorganized (Spruit et al., 2020; Van IJzen-doorn et al., 1999). These attachment classifications are measured using the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) (Madigan et al., 2023; Spies & Duschinsky, 2021; van Rosmalen et al., 2015). In child/parent reunion, in the SSP, children with a secure classification access their attachment figure as a safe haven and then typically resume exploration, while children with an insecure avoidant classification tend to avoid relying on the caregiver and instead self-soothe, and children with an insecure ambivalent classification are not comforted by the attachment figure and often present as angry and/or distressed (Benoit, 2004; Bick et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2019). Children with a disorganized attachment classification typically display fear of the caregiver; ambiguous behaviour, erratic movements, freezing and/or disassociation (Bick et al., 2012; Main & Solomon, 1990; Reisz et al., 2018).

Attachment security is associated with a host of optimal outcomes including "feelings of confidence, safety, and expansiveness and empathetic responses to others" (Johnson, 2019, p. 16), resiliency, the capacity to sit in and communicate a wide range of emotions, thinking and reasoning, coping with and finding solutions to stressors (Greenspan, 2009; Powell et al., 2016), and the willingness to engage in intimate, warm, and loving relationships (Johnson, 2002; 2019; Levine & Heller, 2010). Conversely, insecurity coincides with adverse outcomes inclusive of depression, anxiety, psychological trauma, anxious clinging, defensive distancing (Johnson, 2019), a preoccupation with relationships, intimacy avoidance (Levine & Heller, 2010), learning and self-regulation challenges (Drake et al., 2014; Wilkinson, 2016), behavioral problems (Kochanska & Kim, 2013; Laczkovics et al., 2020) and psychopathology (Kobak & Bosmans, 2019; Pascuzzo et al., 2015). Given these outcomes the importance of attachment in ECEC to enhance possibilities for security can be clearly seen. Although research has primarily focused on the mother as a primary attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969; 1988; Howes & Hamilton, 1992; Pinquart, 2022), it is important to highlight that others can act in this role (e.g., father, grandparent, sibling) (Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2021; Newland & Coyl, 2010; Ya-Shin & Carr, 2018). ECEC professionals have also been found to subsume an attachment figure role when children are in early years environments (Arace et al., 2021; Du Plessis, 2009; Verissimo et al., 2017). Consequently, it is worthwhile

to investigate the degree to which early years professionals' pedagogical practice embodies attachment.

1.1.2 *Attachment and early years pedagogical practice*

Pedagogical documents across the globe (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2022; Ministry of Children and Education, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2014) claim that child/ECEC relationships impact holistic development. This attention to relationships points to the need for research and practice to consider attachment. In this, it is vital to note that attachment theory has been critiqued for being deterministic (Cortazar & Herreros, 2010; Diamond & Kotov, 2003; Smith et al., 2017), and limiting due to its westernized orientation (Choate & Tortorelli, 2022; Rothbaum et al., 2000; 2002). Despite this, attachment theory is worthy of examination as it could "help us reconcile with the child that presents what we have defined as disruptive or inappropriate behaviors, by understanding that his/her attachment history might be impacting his/her emotions and behaviors" (Cortazar & Herreros, 2010, p. 198-199). This topic also requires attention as attachment security in child/ECEC dyads is linked with ideal outcomes for children such as lower cortisol levels (Badanas et al., 2012), enhanced social-emotional wellbeing (Arace et al., 2021), and academic success (Verissimo et al., 2017). What's more, investigation into the early years professional, as an attachment figure, is prudent granted it has been shown to compensate for insecurity in child/parent relationships (Eckstein-Madry et al., 2021; Van IJzendoorn et al., 1992), and reduce the stress that some children experience in childcare (Ahnert et al., 2021; Badanas et al., 2012). In spite of this, some studies conjecture that there is a lack of focus on attachment in early years pedagogical practice (Page, 2017; Wilson-Ali et al., 2019). Similarly, the limitation that "attachment theory has not been widely used as an explanatory theory in this field" (Cortazar & Herreros, 2010, p. 193) warrants research. To address these gaps, a qualitative study was constructed to attend to the often overlooked voices of Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) and directors in attachment research.

2. Methodology

2.1 *Ethics, case study, paradigm, and researcher positionalities*

This study was approved by Fanshawe College's Research and Ethics Board (Protocol 22-08-22-1). The question focal to this study was: *How is attachment perceived, by R.ECEs and directors, to apply to early years pedagogical practice*? A qualitative Instrumental Case Study (ICS) was adopted to probe this query given this methodology is appropriate to investigate a bounded case that examines a distinct phenomenon (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mukherji & Albon, 2022). Individual interviews, researcher journals, and a demographic questionnaire were used, as an ICS is typically inclusive of multiple data sources (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mukherji & Albon, 2022). Thick, rich description that embodies contextually relevant information about the case, is furthermore common to ICS (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Snyder, 2012; Wood et al., 2020), which was applied to this research. A Social Constructivist (SC) paradigm was employed as it is rooted in an interpretivist stance whereby social interactions situated in a real-world phenomenon are investigated to capture participants lived experiences (Adom et al., 2016; Salvador, 2016). This paradigm is open to manifold realities (Adom et al., 2016; Musa, 2013), that are derived from case study textual data (Blaike & Priest, 2017). In addition, researchers declared their positionalities as according to Johnson et al. (2019) being transparent about our privileges and power "makes public the biases and experiences we bring to the analysis" (p. 15). The principal investigator of this study identifies as a privileged white woman who was born to two post-secondary educated parents in Canada. She has had access to education, well compensated employment opportunities, and attachment security. The co-investigator describes herself as a disadvantaged woman of colour who grew up in a low-income household in the Eastern Caribbean, with limited access to education, resources, and attachment security.

2.2 *Data collection and analysis*

The three research methods included: a) Individual semi-structured interviews as there is utility in this flexible method when there is "sufficient objective knowledge about an experience or phenomenon, but the subjective knowledge is lacking" (McIntosh & Morse, 2015, p. 1). Each interview ranged between 28 and 66 minutes. Zoom was used as this mode is favourable from technical and logistical perspectives, and often preferred by participants (Archibald

et al., 2019). An interview guide was utilized, which consisted of six questions [*Director only]: 1. *How do you define attachment*? 2. *What does attachment mean to you as an R.ECE [*Director of an early years program] in relation to your pedagogical practice*? 3. *Do you feel that you have been adequately trained to foster secure attachment in your pedagogical practice, [*and to mentor your staff about this topic when needed]*? 4. *Have you faced any challenges in your practice that are specifically related to attachment [*and/or do you see your staff face challenges?] If so, what*? and 5. *Do you have any recommendations for post-secondary institutions, and/or organizations who offer professional development, that are specific to attachment*? b) Researcher Journals to reflect on the literature, interviews, and challenges and successes faced throughout the 10 month research process. Journals were used to bolster transparency, make meaning of the data, heighten quality (Annink, 2016; Ortlipp, 2008), and increase dependability and credibility (Carter et al., 2014), and c) Demographic Questionnaires to describe participants, and to give context to findings (Hughes et al., 2016; 2022), as outlined in Table 1.

Thematic coding and analysis captured "the essence of participant's experiences" (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 102), and in vivo coding evoked participant voice (Manning, 2017; Saldana, 2014). An inductive posture informed the analysis given it is "methodologically flexible" (Liu, 2016, p. 129), allowing the researchers to review the raw data in detail to generate interpretations and extract resonating themes (Liu, 2016; Thomas, 2006). The interviews were manually transcribed, allowing for paced and meaningful engagement with the data (Maher et al., 2018; Mattimoe et al., 2021). Interview and researcher journaling data was populated into a coding template. Data from the interviews and researcher journals were thematically analyzed (Creswell & Poth, 2018; MacNaughton et al., 2010). Theoretical saturation, the juncture where data collection and analysis cease to produce new information in response to the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guest et al., 2020), transpired.

2.3 *Participants*

Purposive sampling was used as this qualitative strategy deliberately recruits participants who can offer viewpoints about the phenomenon examined (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants were contacted by the research gatekeeper (GK) as utilizing this strategy has been found in some studies to elevate ethics in recruitment (McAreavey & Das, 2013; Singh & Wassenaar, 2016). The GK was a faculty member in an ECEC degree with access to programs across southwestern Ontario. She contacted childcare organizations via email with the recruitment poster, and collected signed letters of informed consent and demographic questionnaires. Participant inclusion criteria stipulated that participants must 1. be a Registered Early Childhood Educator (R.ECE) in Ontario, or in the role of leadership as director (executive or program), which in Ontario means possessing a two year diploma in early childhood education with a minimum of two years working in the profession with registered (R.ECE) status (AECEO, 2022), 2. be currently employed in an early years program, and 3. have access to video conferencing technology, internet, and a private interview setting. Five R.ECEs, and five directors, culminating in 10 participants, contributed to the findings.

3. Findings

Ten interviews led to 451 minutes of recordings, culminating in 144 pages of single-spaced transcribed data, and five overarching themes which suggest that: 1. there are some commonalities in the way that R.ECEs and directors describe attachment, 2. attachment is habitually masked with alternate terminology, 3. more substantial training is needed within the ECEC community to contend with attachment (mis)understandings, 4. attachment-based theoretical and practical competencies require fortifying in pre-service learning and in-service professional development, and 5. attachment is "*two-sided*". Demographic information, to give context to the findings, is as follows.

Table 1. Participant demographic information

	Gender	Age	Education	Time in ECEC profession	Current role
1	Female	22	ECEC Degree	4 months	Registered Early Childhood Educator (R.ECE)
2	Female	39	ECEC Diploma	19 years	Registered Early Childhood Educator (R.ECE)
3	Female	47	ECEC Diploma	27 years	Registered Early Childhood Educator (R.ECE)
4	Female	57	ECEC Degree	32 years	Registered Early Childhood Educator (R.ECE)
5	Female	25	ECEC Diploma	6 years	Registered Early Childhood Educator (R.ECE)
6	Female	42	ECEC Diploma	23 years	Director (R.ECE)
7	Female	64	ECEC Diploma	40 years	Director (R.ECE)
8	Female	33	ECEC Diploma	13 years	Director (R.ECE)
9	Female	43	ECEC Diploma	23 years	Director (R.ECE)
10	Female	36	ECEC & Developmental Social Worker Diploma	16 years	Director (R.ECE)

3.1 *Describing attachment*

In the entry to each interview participants were invited to define what attachment means to them. All participants punctuated that family-based attachment relationships take precedence. Family and non-family attachment relationships were delineated as participants noted that "*the parents are first*", and "*I love children but the way I love children at my childcare centre is different than the way I love my own children, it's different than the way I love my husband*". Child/R.ECE attachment was recognized as secondary to child/parent attachment, but of vital importance. Descriptors such as "*comfort*", "*touch*", "*human nature*", "*security*", "*trust*", "*respect*", "*relationship*", "*connection*", "*bond*", "*development*", "*reciprocal*", "*individual needs*", "*belonging*", "*vulnerability*", "*protecting*" and "*honesty*" were repeatedly used. The principle that "*attachment begins from day one*" and is "*the basis of other relationships*" resonated. Non-verbal cues were claimed as integral to attachment as "*how we walk into a space, our body language*" and "*movement*" sends messaging to children about relational accessibility. Furthermore, caregiving routines, such as diapering, were proposed as crucial to fostering security. A disconcerting finding was that daily routines, according to participants, lack tangible unification with security across practice as many R.ECEs do not conventionally affiliate them with attachment. In addition, as participants described attachment they tied positive longitudinal outcomes to security, and adverse outcomes to insecurity, reinforcing that "*a lot of attachment issues, be it good or bad, are rooted in early childhood*". The premise that when a child feels safe and loved they explore their environment emerged as a prevalent theme. On the contrary, harmful outcomes were deciphered as insecurity was explored. One R.ECE rationalized that "*a child who is not comfortable and does not feel that security will not try, they won't put their hand in that goop, they won't experience the insides of a pumpkin, they won't taste new foods*" as attachment was asserted to be a significant informant of holistic development.

There were also two other unexpected discoveries that arose from the research. The first was that parents themselves are "*looking for that attachment piece*" from R.ECEs and directors. Participants voiced that attachment embodies "*parents and families*" as they told stories about profound pedagogical moments when parents accessed them for security, which in turn allowed the parent(s) to be vulnerable, take risks, and achieve their goals in their parenting and professional endeavours. Being attuned and culturally responsive to divergent attachment approaches was asserted to be pivotal in cultivating attachment security with parents, as was parents seeing "*themselves represented*" in ECEC environments. Second, as participants described attachment they revealed that it "*makes some people quite uncomfortable*". Rationales for this centered on the vulnerable nature of attachment, psychological trauma within the child, family, or early years professional, and gendered constructs that typically tether attachment to women's care work.

3.2 *Masked in love and care discourse*

The constructs of "*love and care*" permeated the data as "*love*" occurred 75 times, while "*care*" surfaced 236 times. Both R.ECEs and directors consistently reverted to using these terms, even though they were not incorporated in the interview guide. When detailing how attachment entwines with practice participants used phrases such as "*I love them unconditionally*", and "*you're there to love them*". Moreover, they claimed that "*professional love [is] different than a personal love*", while questioning "*if I don't love children, why am I working with them?*". This trend ensued as participants persistently defaulted to using the term "*care*". In articulating their viewpoints, statements such as "*I genuinely care about the child*", "*there are so many different ways we can provide attachment in the form of care*", "*we need to lead with care*", and "*we plan moments of care throughout the day*" were used. When reflecting on care, in partnership with attachment, a director surmised that "*they are different, but I don't think they're mutually exclusive*". A pedagogy of care was advised as a framework that could be used to compound attachment understandings in the ECEC terrain.

Additionally, when participants used the words "*love and care*", in lieu of *attachment*, they associated these terms and concepts with tensions. Gender emerged as one tension, and as such a R.ECE rationalized that "*care is something that women nurture, or that women automatically have because they're a female*". Elaborating on this a director suggested that "*care is such a forbidden taboo, so attachment seems that much more aggressive [and] if you add attachment to it there's a lot more responsibility of the adult, I think, and that can be really scary*". Participants disclosed that it is risky to pronounce that their work in engrained in a care paradigm, and even more risky to use attachment theory and language as it "*undervalued and underestimated*". R.ECEs and directors attested when they conceive how attachment applies to their work that it provokes "*fear*" as it may disrupt the professional recognition that they seek to attain because if attachment "*happens naturally, how can it be part of a job?*". Moreover, participants expressed that the relational disposition of their work can be "*taboo*", which cultivates concealment of attachment theorization, terminology, and discourse in their practice.

3.3 *Attachment (mis)understandings*

Both R.ECEs and directors questioned if their understanding of attachment theory was adequate. As they unpacked attachment stories, their narration was anchored in words such as "*healthy*" or "*unhealthy*". The infrequent use of the terms "*secure/security*", which emerged 15 times equally across the 10 interviews, and "*insecure/insecurity*", noted four times across the interviews, signal that attachment theorization and terminology is not typical. Other foundational attachment theoretical concepts, such as the classifications of attachment (e.g., secure, insecure avoidant, insecure resistant/ambivalent, insecure disorganized) were not communicated, nor was there mention of cornerstone attachment theoretical principles such an IWM, reunion behaviors, SSP, or caregiving characteristics that nurture or interrupt security. This was reiterated when participants named children's need to gain physical proximity and comfort as "*a concern of unhealthy attachment*", rather than attachment needs that are ubiquitous to all humans or potentially indicators of an insecure IWM. This (mis)understanding was echoed by directors who advised that they often have to offer attachment-informed mentorship to R.ECE's as ideologies such as "*attachment is going beyond, that's the parents job*", children are "*too attached to the parent*", or "*an educator feeling unsettled that another educator is too attached to a child*" arise in practice. Both R.ECEs and directors questioned their (mis)understandings about attachment. As an illustration, one R.ECE questioned "*but I wonder if I am wrong?, that's where I am in my learning, I know I need to do some more deep digging*" as she recounted attachment-based experiences with the children in her care.

Participants also identified attachment (mis)understandings that they believe are pervasive. Directors postulated that the North American focus for children "*to grow up and be confident and self-sufficient*" may disrupt opportunities for attachment security to evolve. They urged parents and other R.ECEs to consider how prematurely pressuring children to be autonomous may compromise security. Diverse attachment parenting approaches were also named as misinterpreted and/or unappreciated, expressly those that subsume family bedding, child carrying, and breastfeeding beyond infancy. Participants implored the sector to construct spaces that nourish curiosity about, and respect for, divergent attachment parenting postures. Requisite to this is an openness to the plurality of attachment cultural positions, and a willingness to re-examine and re-dress "*western cultures, [where] it's a push, push, push, push*" agenda. These attachment (mis) understandings, participants hypothesized, call for amplification in the ECEC milieu to "*learn and unlearn*".

3.4 *Fortifying theoretical and practice competencies*

Directors revealed that new graduates, and seasoned R.ECEs, conjointly "*struggle*" with attachment. Both R.ECEs and directors declared that their pre-service training (e.g., diploma or degree) "*touched on*" attachment theory giving them "*a very base knowledge*". Psychology and child development courses indirectly addressed attachment, which they viewed as "*a filler*", and not "*high on the priority*". This left one R.ECE feeling as though she was "*a baby horse running on broken legs because [she] didn't really know what [she] was doing*", in relation to attachment. Directors expressed their intensifying concerns about new graduates, especially given many completed their training during the COVID-19 pandemic, rationalizing "*because they weren't in class or they didn't have in person classes, I think they lost those skills*". Furthermore, R.ECEs and directors reported that in aims to deepen their attachment understandings that they have had to initiate self-led learning as this is not a topic that is often offered in professional development. Participants argued that attachment is "*never going to go away*", and therefore necessitates inclusion in post-secondary preparatory programs and professional learning.

In response to pre-service learning gaps a mandatory stand-alone course that centres on current attachment theory and research was recommended. In addition, an elective course, field practicum learning outcomes and evaluations, or a supplemental training course that certifies the pre-service R.ECE in attachment, were proposed to further fortify early years diplomas and degrees. Focused observations that set the stage for pre-service R.ECEs to explore attachment were similarly sanctioned to augment practice. To enhance the visibility of attachment in-service learning participants advocated for professional development that is distinctly attachment-centric so that this topic does not "*live in a little compartment*", but rather remains "*at the forefront*". Book studies, case study review, communities of practice, and collaborative policy review that is attachment driven, were also advised to tackle attachment (mis)understandings. This is essential, in the opinion of participants, especially during pandemic recovery as relational challenges (e.g., separation anxiety) have been exacerbated. Foundational to this, as stated by R.ECEs, is that their directors are well versed in the field of attachment so they can act as a resource. R.ECEs disclosed that as they navigate attachment complexities that they find it helpful when "*directors have also been in the positions [they] were as an educator*". Opportunities to be observed by their director, followed by a reflective consultation with attachment "*advice*", were deemed by R.ECEs as a strategy that should be adopted in ECEC settings. Correspondingly, R.ECEs highlighted that it is elemental for directors to "*walk side by side with you*" so that they can form "*an attachment with them*". Directors appeared to recognize R.ECEs need to access them for security as they gave testimony to the notion that they are "*somebody that they need to be able to come to in crisis, and they can only do that if they feel safe with me*". This finding may indicate that directors are attachment figures in their dyadic relationships with the R.ECE's that they mentor.

3.5 *Attachment as "two-sided"*

Participants gave voice to how attachment with the children in their care is a "*beautiful thing that can happen when you are totally transparent and vulnerable*". Of much more significant focus across both R.ECE and director interviews, nonetheless, was the idea that attachment is "*two-sided*" in that although it can be "*rewarding*" there are associated "*challenges*", "*tensions*", "*stressors*", "*difficulties*", "*heaviness*", and "*burnout*". Also "*two-sided*" is the "*risk involved, and that risk can be emotional, it can be physical, it can be intellectual*". One R.ECE elaborated when she expressed that "*you give yourselves only to the children, your body is there for their comfort, [and I] absorb any type of feeling that they're having*" as she contemplated the weightiness of attachment. Other participants augmented this naming psychological, sexual and physical trauma, child abuse, parental neglect, reporting to child protection services, and family attachment insecurity, as "*risks*" that they encounter in their relational work. This, as attested by participants, is challenging to leave in the workplace and hence occupies their them in their personal lives, leading to feelings of inadequacy, and mental and emotional fatigue. As such participants conjecture that elements of attachment that are "*not all warm and fuzzy*" be afforded safe spaces in pre and in-service learning to disentangle as reflective practice occurs. Participants endorsed that attachment be examined in union with professional boundaries as they cautioned about risks. Case in point a director mused:

> We also need to be careful, we are working in a professional environment, there are careful boundaries. I
> know for one I really don't like it if I see an educator kissing a child because I feel like that's a boundary that

shouldn't be crossed. And so, I think how do we build professional appropriate attachment without crossing that personal line? That's maybe why we tend to blur the lines or talk about other things first because it's tricky to talk about attachment and boundaries.

Participants urged post-secondary and professional development organizations to craft learning experiences that prompt (de)construction of child/parent and child/R.ECE attachment, and how these dyadic relationships may look similar or different with respect to boundaries.

The "*two-sided*" nature of attachment also arose when participants relayed that their own attachment history adds another dimension to their work. In this, R.ECEs and directors unveiled that their personal and professional self converge when "*previous stories come into practice, brought in from [their] own family*". Participants professed that their own childhood attachment template significantly impacts the relationships with the children in their care. Directors extended this sharing examples about times when R.ECEs, they mentor, did not operate with security in mind. In explaining this one director concluded that it is imperative for R.ECEs to "*breakdown things that have happened in the past*" so that they are attuned to how their own attachment experiences influence their practice. Focal to this are "*triggering experiences from growing up*" which hinder R.ECEs capacity to be an attachment figure. Reflecting on this, one R.ECE explained how her parents' discomfort with her exploring in childhood has resulted in a "*struggle*" to avoid "*modeling the same type*" of behaviours that may contribute to "*unhealthy attachment*" (e.g., insecurity). A director corroborated this when she recounted the intergenerational insecurity attachment trends in her family, which she posited are due to "*health, mental health, and anxiety*" outcomes of the First World War. The premise that one's own relational genealogy informs child/R.ECE attachment was repetitively brought forth in the interviews. To address this one director suggested that early years professionals should "*tell stories of their childhood*" to deepen their "*understanding of what made [them] feel safe and secure as a child*". As she clarified this, she shared that she has invited the R.ECEs she mentors to place a photograph of themselves as an infant in a playroom drawer. When they are "*having a hard moment with attachment*" they are encouraged to re-visit the photo of their infant-self to incite consideration about the attachment need(s) that they had in their childhood. This re-frames attachment "*back down to the level where we're all human*" and opens the door for them to be in tune with how their own attachment history translates to their pedagogical work.

4. Discussion

Overall, the R.ECEs and directors in this study had similar perspectives about how attachment applies to their pedagogical practice. Some differences were evidenced, however, predominantly in the final two themes. For both demographics attachment was described with similar terms such as "*comfort*", "*belonging*", "*respect*", and "*trust*". Immediate and longitudinal implications of attachment security, and insecurity, were briefly touched on in the interviews. Child/parent attachment was reasoned to be of foremost importance in influencing the holistic wellness of children, while child/R.ECE attachment was secondary. Compelling is that data revealed that attachment is under the guise of love and care discourse. This concealment appears to protect from boundary crossing as attachment is "*the parents job*", and outside of the R.ECE purview. This is discomforting as research claims that upwards of 40% of North American children operate from an insecure IWM (Beetz et al., 2012; Spruit et at., 2020; Van IJzendoorn et al., 1999), and that childcare has the potential to be a buffering factor (Eckstein-Madry et al., 2021; Van IJzendoorn et al., 1992). Likewise disconcerting is de-emphasis of attachment theorizing and language evidenced in the interviews. Concurrent with this is "*fear*", on the part of early years professionals, to adopt an attachment narrative because they believe it will exacerbate their already discounted care-orientated work. Drawing on pedagogies of love and care (Green et al., 2021; Page, 2018), employing an attachment lens, could spark examination of these tensions. Turning to relational pedagogy, "a theoretical perspective based on the concept of human beings as relational beings and teaching as relational processes" (Ljungblad, 2021, p. 863), may also provide a frame to interrogate the uneasiness that participants voiced. Elaborating on Ljungblad's theory could lead to conceptualization of novel pedagogies, such as a pedagogy of relational security, which may bring deliberate focus to attachment in the ECEC ethos.

Also noteworthy is that the attachment (mis)understandings occurred in both demographics of participants,

across variant years of working in the sector, and also across diploma and degree credentials earned by the R.ECEs and directors. These misconceptions were twofold in that the researchers realized them in analysis, and participants brought them forth. First, in some of the interviews researchers identified that some of the data did not align with attachment theory. At the core of this was scant usage of attachment terminology and theoretical underpinnings such as classifications/patterns (Ainsworth et al., 2015; Flaherty & Sadler, 2011; Soloman et al., 2017), an IWM (Kesner, 1994; Obsuth et al., 2023; Spruit et al., 2020), and reunion via the SSP (Madigan et al., 2023; Spies & Duschinsky, 2021; Van Rosmalen et al., 2015). Other misinterpretations, such as worries that children will become "*too attached*" if interdependence as opposed to independence is promoted, point to the need to boost theoretical learning in pre and in-service learning. This requires strategizing in light that attachment theory and discourse seems to be displaced in the early years arena, a trend which Cortazar and Herreros (2010) noted over a decade ago. As this is charted, attachment positionings outside of traditional westernized constructs should be included. This mirrors other literature that has found attachment theory and practice to be narrow in its westernized orientation (Choate & Tortorelli, 2022; Rothbaum et al., 2000; 2002). Secondly, directors revealed that they have to mentor R.ECE's when attachment beliefs contradict behaviors that promote security. On the grounds that directors speculated that mentorship is needed by both new graduates and long-serving R.ECEs, pre and post educational experiences that concentrate on attachment is of the essence. This is pressing as research illustrates that the COVID-19 pandemic has had pernicious effects on attachment security (Gulde et al., 2022; Köhler-Dauner et al., 2022). Looking to organizations that are well versed in attachment theory and practice, such as the Attachment and Trauma Treatment Centre for Healing (ATTCH)(2023), the National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine (NICABM)(2023), the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (NCCAH)(2023), and the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative, could provide the footing to amplify attachment in pre and in-service learning. The Circle of Security International (2023) has also recently designed a program, Circle of Security Classroom (COSP-C), that trains early years professionals to reflect on how attachment is at the heart of their practice. In line with this, it is paramount that future research unravels the "*two-sided*" nuances of attachment that participants posited is central to their work. More specifically, research that appraises attachment "*risks*" is key given participants disclosed that they are prone to embodying the attachment adversities of the children in their care. This, in the opinion of Nicholson et al. (2018), may engender vicarious trauma, hence requiring attention. Along with this, pre and in-service academic and experiential learning opportunities necessitate exploration to uncover how R.ECEs and directors can delve into, and potentially reconcile, their own history of attachment granted data in this study suggests that their IWM may shape their willingness and capacity to nurture security in children. Keeping in mind that research "likened teachers' memories to ghosts that follow us as we move through life" (Clark, 2020, p. 19), it is crucial to conduct enquiry into how the attachment backgrounds of R.ECEs and directors shape the attachment status of the children in their practice. Coupling this, access to mental health benefit coverage, inclusive of counselling for pre-service professionals in their post-secondary setting and in-service early years professionals in their work setting, demand forethought.

4.1 *Limitations and future research*

In keeping with other qualitative case studies, limitations apply to this research. The social constructivist interpretivist posture that guided this study "recognizes the limitations and unreliability of our senses as 'observational' tools and the limiting role of researchers' worldviews" (Blaike & Priest, 2017, p. 31), thus findings should not be generalized. Similarly limiting is that the original study design was structured to recruit participants to engage in a focus group, which only garnered four participants following rigorous gatekeeper recruitment efforts. In linkage to this the principal investigator (PI) queried in her research journal if "*this is reflective of stress and burnout in the sector, which would not allow for prospective participants to have time to partake in the study?*". This idea was debunked as when the method was altered to individual interviews the gatekeeper swiftly received participant interest that exceeded the desired 10 participant sample size. Again, using her researcher journal, the PI then questioned "*if the lack of recruitment was instead linked to apprehensions that early years professionals feel about exploring attachment given it can be deeply personal, and hence a potentially discomforting, topic to examine?*". This obliges mindfulness as future attachment studies are designed. Likewise limiting is that all participants identified as female on the demographic questionnaire, and males yearn to secure exposure and voice in the ECEC domain (Bonnett & Wade, 2022). Although the interviews provide insight into the phenomenon probed, recruiting from other geographical locations and/or with differing gendered

identities would plausibly glean alternate and varied perspectives. Along with this, divergent researcher positionalities (Johnson et al., 2019), would conceivably add breath to findings of this study.

5. Conclusion

Considering that relationships are fundamental to early years pedagogical practice (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2022; Ministry of Children and Education, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2014) it is important to study attachment in the context of ECEC. This instrumental case study (Crewell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mukherji & Albon, 2022), through a social constructivist lens (Adom et al., 2016; Salvador, 2016), assumed this line of inquiry to elicit the voices of R.ECEs and directors in Ontario, Canada. Findings suggest that ECEC professionals view attachment as intersectional with their work, however, are cautious to lodge their pedagogical practice in an attachment paradigm. Moreover, findings convey that attachment demands magnification in pre and in-service learning, primarily to strengthen theoretical conceptions, deconstruct and rectify (mis)understandings, and curate safe spaces to contemplate positionings that expand beyond a westernized blueprint. The *"two-sided"* complexion of attachment correspondingly requires deliberation, to extract both the fulfilling and tenuous elements that participants in this study deem are typical to child/ ECEC attachment. In essence, this research seeks to contribute to attachment discourse, with the aspiration to protract security in children.

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Conflict of interest

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