The Needs of Evaluation in the Field of Early Childhood Development from the Early Learning and Childcare Educators' Perspective

by

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Abstract

Early childhood development (ECD) is an intersectoral and interdisciplinary field as it includes many sectors and programs that serve children from conception to six years of age. This life period is the foundation for human development. Therefore, positive early experiences set the path for adulthood in terms of education, economic stability, and health and wellbeing. In 2015, Canada committed to the United Nations' 2030 agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The federal government is funding innovative initiatives that raise awareness around SDGs. Particularly, it is giving significant attention to enhancing early childhood experiences in Canada due to its importance in achieving the SDGs. However, there are still areas in this field that call for improvement. Evaluation is one way to identify those areas and learn how this field can be enhanced, but there are gaps in doing and using evaluation in this field. Therefore, it was important to understand the evaluation assets and needs in the ECD field. Understanding evaluation capacity assets and needs requires learning from stakeholders that are involved in this field. The Evaluation Capacity Network (ECN) conducted a study in 2021 to understand those needs and assets in ECD and to learn how it can effectively tailor its support in building the evaluation capacity of organizations and individuals. This thesis research builds on the ECN's study to learn about the field's capacity and context, and while this field is intersectoral, the thesis research focused on early learning and childcare (ELCC) as a subsection. ELCC is an important sector as it is where Canadian children spend most of their time when interacting with people other than the family. Among the diverse stakeholders in ELCC, this research focused on ELCC educators in Alberta, Canada. The research used qualitative methodology and drew on two data sources. Secondary data from five focus groups conducted by the ECN with ECD stakeholders in North America were used to reflect the field's capacity at the organizational and

system levels. This was followed by seven semi-structured interviews with ELCC educators in Alberta to reflect their individual capacity needs and assets to engage in evaluation. The findings revealed that educators have a unique evaluation capacity due to their natural evaluation practice with children that is embedded in their day-to-day work and interaction with children. Their natural evaluation practice makes the quality of their evaluation vary from one another based on their experiences. This research suggests that educators need evaluation capacity building at individual, organizational, and system levels. It is significant, however, to consider how educators define evaluation and the contexts in which they work to tailor evaluation capacity building opportunities more meaningfully. Improving educators' evaluation capacity will ultimately enhance the collection of baseline data about children in the province that is currently lacking and ensure more coherent evaluation in the system to determine if significant funds and initiatives are making change.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Reem Razzouk. This research project received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board; project name "The Needs of Evaluation in the Field of Early Childhood Development from the Early Learning and Childcare Educators' Perspective", Pro00117975, May 16, 2022.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Research indicates the need for evaluation capacity building in the field of early childhood development (ECD) in Canada (Gokiert et al., 2017). An important starting place is to understand the evaluation capacity assets and needs of early learning and childcare educators (ECEs) because they play an influential role in children's development (Halfon, 2021). Early childhood is the period of a child's life from conception to six years of age when they develop motor, communication and language, cognition, emotional health, and social competencies (Doherty et al., 2003). These years are critical because they impact an individual's future in terms of education, health and wellbeing, and economic stability. Development in the early years begins at conception, moves toward primary education, and ultimately lays the foundation for lifelong learning (Council of Ministers of Education, 2020). Because of the brain's flexibility, the early years contribute to an individual's long-term cognition, learning capacity, and social and emotional competencies (Center on the Developing Child, 2007; TheirWorld, 2016). Moreover, early experiences such as quality early learning and childcare, health, family support and income, stimulating and nurturing environments, neighbourhood resources, and other socioeconomic factors lead to better health and wellbeing (Braverman et al., 2014; Britto 2015). Ensuring quality early experiences minimizes the cost of improving children's quality of life in later years (Evaluation Capacity Network, 2015) and helps children not only to survive but also to thrive (Britto, 2015). Furthermore, high social, emotional, language, cognition, and fine and gross motor development are associated with lower poverty rates (Statistics Canada, 2016). Magnuson (2013) found that early investments in ECD help in long-term poverty reduction by increasing competencies for academic and professional pursuits and, in turn, affect future earnings (Magnuson, 2013).

Positive experiences in the early years lay the foundation for a sustainable future that extends beyond individuals (Smidt, 2018; Woodhead, 2016). Focusing on the early years paves a path for achieving the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Woodhead, 2016). The 17 SDGs aim to alleviate poverty and hunger, ensure human equality, enhance dignity and peace, foster inclusive and just societies, enhance natural resources, and promote a prosperous economy for all (Britto, 2015). Due to the strong relationship between positive early experiences and enhanced education, health, and ultimately income stability of individuals, investing in the early years for Canadian children is significant for a better future at a societal level. ECD can serve as an important factor in achieving three SDGs: access to education, ensuring health and wellbeing, and poverty alleviation for everyone (Smidt, 2018).

Gaps and challenges in ECD persist. Despite the Canadian government's investment in early childhood initiatives (Government of Canada, 2019), this sector continues to experience gaps and challenges. In 2020, out of 38 high-income countries, Canada was found to spend the least on ECD (Canadian UNICEF Committee, 2020). This is due in part to a lack of robust and coherent funding policies in all provinces across Canada, particularly in early learning and childcare (Akbari & McCuaig, 2014). Early learning and childcare (ELCC) should be one of the critical ECD investment areas for many high-income countries, including Canada. It sets the path for lifelong cognitive, social and emotional learning and integration in the community (The Muttart Foundation, 2011). ELCC in Canada is the out-of-home care that children receive from ECEs from birth to approximately six years of age (Mardhani-Bayne, 2021). Recently, the federal government signed a 2021 agreement with provinces and territories to increase ELCC quality, inclusivity, accessibility and affordability. This agreement includes securing funds for the ELCC sector, investing in the ELCC workforce, and aiming to bring ELCC fees down to ten

dollars per day in the next five years (Government of Canada, 2021a). Specifically, the agreement provides 3.8 billion dollars in the next five years; this agreement was expected to reduce fees of licensed ELCC programs by 50% in 2022 to increase their affordability (Strueby, 2021). Many Canadian children and families cannot access ELCC facilities that meet their needs based on disability and other special needs (Government of Canada, 2021b). Therefore, a portion of the 2021 agreement is devoted to enhancing the safety and accessibility of approximately 350 ELCC centres by improving their infrastructures, such as elevators, washrooms, classrooms, playgrounds, doors, and learning equipment (Government of Canada, 2021b).

Access to ELCC is not enough; ELCC also needs to be of high quality. Childcare educators are the foundation of the system and are the most influential in improving the quality of the field and children's outcomes (Halfon, 2021). Nevertheless, they still receive low wages, at an average of $19.20 per hour (Government of Canada, 2021a). Moreover, ELCC requires minimal education and professional development standards and training opportunities for ECEs that prepare them to work effectively with children (Halfon, 2021). To improve the quality of care, the federal-provincial agreement aims to value ECEs by increasing their wage and building their capacities based on their current assets and needs (Government of Canada, 2021a). However, their needs are still unknown. Therefore, it is important to understand educators' assets and needs in order to know how this agreement will fill the gaps of affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, and quality.

To know if this significant investment in ELCC in Alberta will achieve its goal of eliminating ELCC gaps, the field needs robust evaluation data. Evaluation is one way to understand program and policy effectiveness through the systematic process of gathering data and using it to make decisions about practices, programs, and policies (Cousins et al., 2014). In

ECD, evaluation can also be used as a process for understanding children's strengths and challenges, identifying needs, and guiding initiatives toward better meeting children's needs (Peter, 2003). In Canada, evaluation in ECD lacks resources, practical approaches to evaluation, skills, funding, and access to evaluators, all of which equate to a lack of the capacity to do and use evaluation (Flaspohler et al., 2003). Therefore, building evaluation capacity in the ECD field is key to achieving effective evaluation outcomes (OECD, 2010). Evaluation capacity building is "an intentional process to increase individual motivation, knowledge, and skills, and to enhance a group or organization's ability to conduct or use evaluation" (Labin et al., 2012, pp. 308). Individuals and organizations that work in this field should inform the evaluation process, outcomes, and decision-making (OECD, 2010). The capacity building, thus, needs to be reflective of the current capacity and context of individuals and organizations in order to identify their needs and potential to do and use evaluation (Labin et al., 2012; Tink et al., 2017).

Individuals' and organizations' evaluation capacity-building needs are context-dependent as the context shapes resources and opportunities, and in turn, it informs the needs to build the current capacity (Lee & Walsh, 2004). However, context is often overlooked in the evaluation process (Bremner & Bowman, 2020). As ECD is an interdisciplinary and intersectoral field (Derrick-Mills, 2021), the array of stakeholders (those who have a stake in the initiative) can represent and contribute to the context (Gauthier et al., 2010; Gokiert et al., 2017). Thus, evaluation capacity building requires understanding the context of stakeholders in the field, such as community organizations, government, and ELCC educators. Context understanding will reflect the different stakeholders' values and inform programs through gathering more relevant data (Sundar et al., 2011). Furthermore, as beneficiaries of ELCC services, children and their families are key stakeholders that can influence the context of the services provided based on

their needs (Cousins et al., 2014). Children and families have socioeconomic, environmental, and health-related factors that can influence their access to ELCC and the extent to which they benefit from programs. Diverse family backgrounds influence program directions and the evaluation capacity to service the wide range of family needs (Center on the Developing Child, 2016; Lennie et al., 2015). As a result, building evaluation capacity necessitates identifying the assets and needs of stakeholders at the individual and organizational levels that are engaged in the field, with deep consideration of the context in which evaluation will ultimately be used (Bremner & Bowman, 2020; Derrick-Mills, 2021).

Purpose of the Research

This qualitative study aimed to understand the evaluation capacity needs and assets of ELCC educators in Alberta, Canada. The primary research question guiding this study was: What are the needs and assets of ECEs in Alberta to do and use evaluation in their practice and programs? ECEs are the connection between children, families, and the larger ELCC system. The findings from this research will contribute to filling the gap in the literature on programs and stakeholders' evaluation needs and assets in the field of ELCC. The findings will also support the future development of evaluation capacity building initiatives for this field.

Background and Context: Evaluation Capacity Network

This research is nested within the work of the Evaluation Capacity Network (ECN), which is a collaboration aimed at improving evaluation practice and the use of evidence in the field of ECD (Gokiert et al., 2017). The ECN is part of the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families in the University of Alberta's School of Public Health. It focuses on evaluation in the interdisciplinary and intersectoral field of ECD and supports the social service sector more broadly. The network supports individuals and

organizations with evaluation through a partnership across Canada and the US. ECN's goal is to build the capacity of individuals and organizations that support children and youth in their communities. To accomplish this goal, they have created an evaluation hub that connects students, academics, funders, evaluators, and community organizations to learn and build capacity together, network, co-create research and evaluation projects, and share evaluation knowledge and resources.

In 2016, ECN conducted a needs and assets assessment of evaluation capacity across Alberta that currently guides the network's activities (Gokiert et al., 2022; Tink et al., 2017). The network conducted focus groups and a survey with individuals at the leadership level (e.g., executive directors), management level (e.g., program managers), and front-line (e.g., ELCC educators). The study aimed to understand individual and organizational evaluation capacities, resources and needs (Tink et al., 2017). Participants showed high evaluation motivation with limited knowledge and skills. For example, individuals at all levels, including leadership, management and frontline, indicated that they lack the skills and resources to conduct evaluations within their organization and don't have the skills to oversee external evaluators (Tink et al., 2017). To understand stakeholders' evolving needs and assets, the ECN has an ongoing engagement to help understand the field's capacity and context to inform and support the resources and supports that they develop and provide. The original needs and assets assessment was conducted six years ago; since then, much has changed in the field due to the global pandemic and, more recently, the federal investments in ELCC. It is important for the network to understand if the needs and assets have changed as a result of the changing ECD context and how the ECN can most effectively tailor its support.

Chapter Two: Review of The Literature

This review of the literature will cover four main areas that prioritize ELCC educators (ECEs) in learning about the needs and assets of evaluation in the ECD field in Alberta, Canada. This chapter will begin with an exploration of the literature on ECD in the Canadian context, followed by a discussion of the importance of ECD in Canada and its role in sustainable development goals. The review of the literature will highlight some evaluation capacity gaps and opportunities in the context of this interdisciplinary and intersectoral field. It will then describe ECD stakeholders and elaborate on engaging ECEs to understand evaluation needs and assets in the field.

Early Childhood Development in the Canadian Context

ECD in the Canadian context is an intersectoral and interdisciplinary field that includes education, health, nutrition, and social protection and is supported by the government, non-governmental organizations, and many academic disciplines (Doherty et al., 2003). In the Canadian context, some programs focus on providing care to children during their parents' work hours. This care is organized and concerned with child development and is known as early learning and childcare (OECD, 2004). Early learning and childcare (ELCC) is the main component of ECD today and refers to child education. It includes programs that are not part of the formal education system but are related to children's social and emotional development (Statistics Canada, 2019; Tanaka et al., 2019). Those programs include nursery and preschools, regulated family or home childcare, childcare centres, and other services and programs for children and families, including early intervention services and resource programs (Halfon, 2021). Daycare centres, preschools, or centres de petite enfance are the prevalent forms of ELCC for children (Statistics Canada, 2019).

Many studies in the ECD literature and beyond indicate the importance of accessing quality ELCC to support healthy child development (Brussoni, et al., 2021; Friendly, et al., 2006; Gerlach et al., 2021; McLean et al., 2022; The Muttart Foundation, 2011). However, access to childcare is a barrier in Canada (Akbari & McCuaig, 2014). A national survey about childcare arrangements found that among 10,605 young Canadian children, 52% access regulated and unregulated childcare arrangements inside or outside their homes. Parents/guardians were asked about the criteria for choosing their respective type of childcare arrangement. Forty percent of parents reported affordability as the reason behind selecting their childcare arrangement, along with a suitable location, characteristics of the person providing the care, and hours of operation (Findlay & Wei, 2021). This percentage shows that affordability is essential for accessibility in childcare arrangements. However, expanding and increasing accessibility to affordable ELCC is not enough without significant evidence of its quality and effectiveness (Akbari & McCuaig, 2014; Armor, 2014). Quality ELCC necessitates qualified educators as the human resources (teachers, caregivers, and facilitators) with the most direct impact on children, families and childcare programs on a daily basis (Halfon, 2021). For these reasons, the federal government is making efforts to improve accessibility, affordability, and quality.

The federal government is not directly responsible for ELCC; rather, it falls within the jurisdiction of the provincial and territorial governments. In Alberta, ELCC is an inter-ministerial responsibility (Doherty et al., 2003). The Ministry of Children's Services is responsible for ELCC and other ECD programs, while the Ministry of Education oversees education from kindergarten to grade 12 (Government of Alberta, 2021). Hence, ELCC is not entirely separate from other sectors in the early childhood field. Therefore, improving the field of ECD in Canada can start with ELCC but not in isolation from other child development sectors such as health,

education, and social services. Models exist that support our understanding of ECD and the many systems that intersect to promote healthy child development.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model to ECD

ECD has been studied through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological system theory of human development (e.g., Allen & Henderson, 2017; Boivin & Hertzman, 2012; Hamilton & Luster, 2003; Krishnan, 2010). This theory provides a comprehensive understanding of individual and environmental factors that can protect or create risks for children's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This thesis research draws on the bioecological theory to describe the influential factors in ECD and how this theory is connected to practice in the Canadian context, particularly in ELCC. The age, sex, health, and competencies of the child are important to determine an individual's characteristics and how they are affected by the layers of the ecological system (Allen & Henderson, 2017). As shown in Figure 1 that is adapted from Boivin & Hertzman (2012), the bioecological model consists of four evolving layers of the systems that shape child development (Boivin & Hertzman, 2012). The microsystem is the immediate environment surrounding the child and includes the closest individuals to the child, such as parents and families, educators, ELCC centre directors and peers. This layer also includes institutions such as schools and ELCC centres that host the proximal processes, which are the interacting activities of children with their immediate contacts (Hamilton & Luster, 2003). The mesosystem is the second layer of the model and refers to the relationships and interactions between the microsystem components (Allen & Henderson, 2017). This layer helps understand the relationships between families and centres or educators. The exosystem includes all settings, such as caregivers' workplaces (e.g., as parents or educators) (Boivin & Hertzman, 2012; Hamilton & Luster, 2003). The impact of those settings is called the distal dimension that

influences child development but does not have direct relations with children (Hamilton & Luster, 2003). Some policies or events in caregivers' workplaces may affect their wellbeing, such as income increase, which may affect the energy and time they provide to interact effectively with children. Lastly, the macrosystem is the outer layer of the model that includes the functions and interactions between all layers with respect to economic, cultural, social, and political norms that can influence both the child and the family. Bronfenbrenner points out that the macrosystem has an indirect but strong role in influencing the extent to which the proximal processes result in positive outcomes in child development (Hamilton & Luster, 2003). Proximal processes can have negative impacts on children living in disadvantaged communities with cultural, socioeconomic and political difficulties and positive impacts on children living in nurturing environments. However, the impact of disadvantaged environments, such as poverty, is greater than those of nurturing environments (Hamilton & Luster, 2003), which makes it significant to highlight the needs of this field on provincial and national levels and make action-based decisions.

Beyond describing the process of child interaction with the surrounding people and environment, the bioecological model helps understand the chronological events that influence child development (Krishnan, 2010). The time component of the model is essential as it affects a child's development in all the layers, and it is considered the invisible layer in this model (Allen & Henderson, 2017). For instance, parental divorce, immigration, loss of a family member, having a newborn sibling, changing from one centre to another, and, more recently, dealing with a major disruption such as a pandemic, can directly or indirectly affect the child's development. The chronosystem does not only reflect the remarkable events in a child's life, but it can be more inclusive of day-to-day events as well as all the individuals and institutions in the bioecological

systems (Allen & Henderson, 2017). More importantly, the outcomes of early experiences can be more intensive with the ongoing nature of the proximal processes. For example, continuous nurturing and positive relationships with children have more effect on their competencies than short-term relationships.

Figure 1

Bioecological Model and its Influence on Child Development
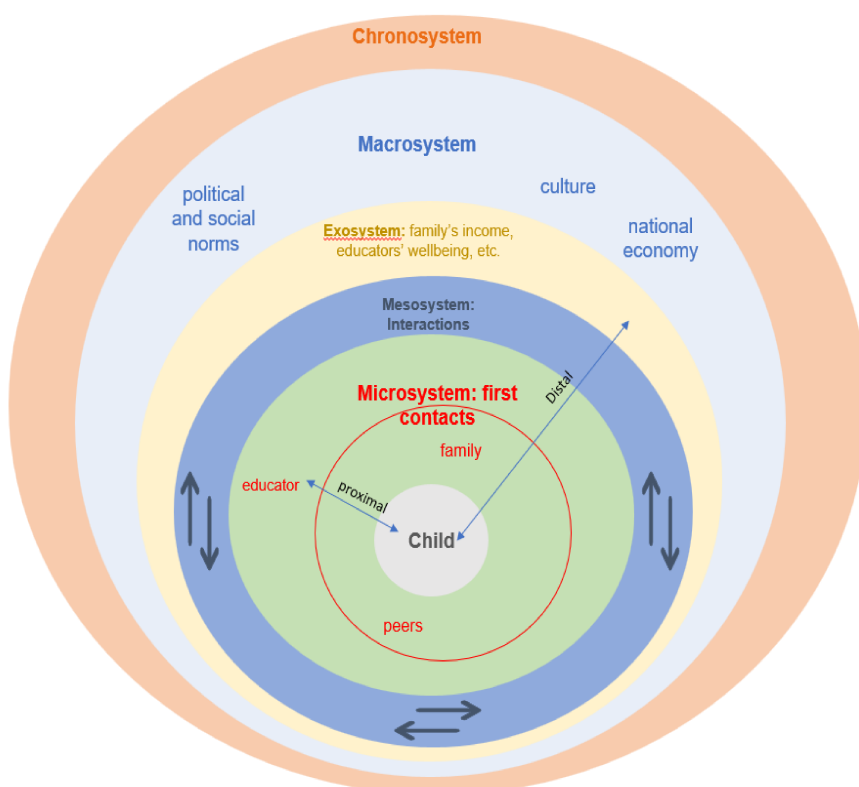
Note. This figure is adapted from *Early Childhood Development: adverse experiences and developmental health* (p.12), by Boivin, M., & Hertzman, C., 2012, Royal Society of Canada. Copyright 2012 by Michel Boivin Clyde Hertzman.

As illustrated in Figure 1, ECEs that are part of the microsystem have direct contact with the child, family, peers, and other individuals in the respective ELCC centres/organizations, for example, centre directors and other educators. These bi-directional relationships with others give educators the privilege of being a sound source of knowledge in the child's environment. The

ELCC centres/organizations interact with other ECD sectors to create intersectoral and interdisciplinary relationships in the field. Therefore, early childhood educators are the engine that connects the child's closest environment to the intersectoral and interdisciplinary field of ECD.

COVID-19 and Its Impact on Economic, Education, and Health and Wellbeing

COVID-19 has impacted a wide range of sectors around the globe, including health, ELCC, education, the workforce, and the economy. Research has shown that in addition to death as a possible outcome of the infection, physical health (e.g., heart attacks) and many mental health issues (e.g., depression and anxiety) have increased dramatically (Callow et al., 2020). Social distancing has also created education-related challenges with shifts to online learning, a gap in resources and skills of educators to do this effectively, and challenges for students that struggled with this form of learning. This has left significant learning gaps for children of all ages (Daniel, 2020). In addition, many low-paid workers have lost their jobs due to the pandemic, which increased the number of families experiencing poverty (Hou & Schimmele, 2020). Much attention is needed to bring about improvement in these sectors, reflecting three main areas within the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs). All of these impacts and the recovery efforts are critical to achieving the SDGs.

Early Childhood Development and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, said: "The Sustainable Development Goals recognize that early childhood development can help drive the transformation we hope to achieve" by 2030 in terms of education, wellbeing, poverty alleviation, and prosperity (Britto, 2015, para 1). Child development is at the centre of the field of development due to its crucial role in conceptualizing human development phenomena in

multiple sectors, such as health, education, economics, and child welfare (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). As an interdisciplinary field, ECD covers a broad range of human development. Similarly, SDGs are studied through an interdisciplinary lens; children are seen as the agents of change that can direct their potential to create a world that strives for education, health, and prosperity for all (Britto, 2015). Therefore, having quality early experiences are needed to achieve important SDGs (Woodhead, 2016). Although ELCC is a key area of ECD in the Canadian context, children's education is not the only important ECD-related goal for achieving sustainable development. Early experience is the bridge to also alleviating poverty and improving health and wellbeing. Below, the review of the literature presents three main SDGs in Canada that are rooted in ECD: alleviating poverty, ensuring health and wellbeing, and ensuring education and lifelong learning.

Alleviating Poverty

Human capital is the essence of poverty alleviation and sustainable economic growth, and early childhood development is the basis for building human economic sustainability (Richmond & Lacker, 2007; Smidt, 2018). Accordingly, the UN has defined its SDG of poverty eradication in alignment with ECD. The UN stated that ECD is proven to be the most cost-effective strategy that leads to poverty eradication through preparing children for the challenges, opportunities, and complexity of the 21st century (Braverman et al., 2014; Britto, 2015). Affordable quality ELCC benefits children of less advantaged families. It provides them with enriching early experiences that support their development and the transition to learning environments as do preschool and formal education (Richmond & Lacker, 2007). Contributing to children's development not only has the potential to eradicate poverty on an individual level but enhances the country's economic prosperity in the long term (Britto, 2015). When ELCC is unaffordable, some children will not

have access, and this will affect families, especially women that want to enter and remain in the workforce (Government of Canada, 2021a). Quebec has one of the highest employment rates for women worldwide along with the lowest median toddler childcare fee in Canada. In 2020, a family living anywhere in Quebec would have paid $181 monthly compared with a family in Toronto that pays $1,578 per month for childcare (Government of Canada, 2021a). Affordable childcare results in greater accessibility for families and a higher employment rate for parents. The employment rate in Quebec increased the province's GDP by 1.7%, highlighting the influential role that affordable and accessible ELCC plays in enabling parents to participate in the workforce and boost the economy (Government of Canada, 2021a).

Despite significant investments in the early years, 17% of Canadian children that lived in low-income households in 2015 experienced challenges with social, emotional, language, cognition, and fine and gross motor development (Statistics Canada, 2016). With 18.2% of Canadian children living in poverty in 2018, efforts to eradicate poverty and improve families' quality of life significantly impact children's overall development (First Call BC, 2020). Neuroscience research suggests that tackling this issue early in life is critical as it puts in place, at an early stage, the critical resources and supports that children and families will need in later years (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). By improving quality early childhood experiences, communities and countries can make positive changes in improving the status quo and avoiding serious consequences related to poverty.

Ensuring Health and Well-being

Another United Nations goal is to promote health and wellbeing for people of all ages and across societies (Howden-Chapman et al., 2017). In the Canadian context, this SDG goal focuses on all children having equitable healthcare and wellbeing opportunities (Temmer, 2017).

To achieve this, quality early experiences contribute to long-term health and wellbeing in adulthood because babies' brains are structured to set the path for lifelong potential (Hertzman, 2010). This potential needs to be stimulated in all aspects of the early years for the child to be healthy and thrive, including access to health services, quality ELCC, positive parenting, stimulating and nurturing environment (Hertzman, 2010). The fact that 90% of the human brain develops by age five reveals the sensitivity of this period of life (TheirWorld, 2016). Therefore, the United Nations shaped this SDG through the lens of ECD to ensure child health and a positive environment are the trajectory to achieve healthier communities and enhance their wellbeing (Britto, 2015).

Children can encounter physical health issues that affect their development and require more attention on what is needed to provide the best possible environment for children's development. Research suggests that physical activities in the early years result in developing life skills such as self-control, self-motivation, and teamwork competencies (The Canadian Press, 2021). Canada ranks 30th amongst 38 high-income countries in physical health because one in three children is overweight, immunization for diseases such as measles is falling short of full coverage, and there has been an increase in child mortality (Canadian UNICEF Committee, 2020). Also, only 39% of Canadian children fulfilled physical activity requirements (ParticipACTION, 2020). Research shows that poor physical health and low activity lead to increased mental health issues (The Canadian Press, 2021).

In a study by Waddell et al. (2014), 12.6% of 677,900 Canadian children, aged four to seventeen, experienced mental health issues. Most of them experienced significant mental health disorders, mainly anxiety. 29% of the anxiety cases co-occur with other mental disorders, with only 31% receiving specialized clinical services (Waddell et al., 2014). More recently, the

Mental Health Commission of Canada (2021) has stated that the increased mental illness of parents with suicidal thoughts can affect young children. This indicator can increase the risk of children developing mental health issues 10-fold (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2021). Therefore, improving a family's overall mental health can contribute to children's positive mental and physical health (Hertzman, 2010).

Family and other environments where children interact frequently can significantly impact children's wellbeing, including their capacity to benefit from ECD services (Smidt, 2018). In the Canadian context, the Early Development Instrument was developed and adopted by many provinces to examine kindergarten children's overall wellbeing on a municipal, provincial, and national level; this is a useful tool for gathering comprehensive data on Canadian children. However, this instrument is not used consistently in all provinces, such as Alberta, where EDI data was only collected from 2008 to 2013 (Guhn et al., 2016). As a result, research suggests improving the coherent and effective use of existing data in early programs (Armor, 2014).

Nonprofit organizations, such as UNICEF, gather data on child wellbeing. A report put out by the Canadian UNICEF Committee (2020) indicated that Canada ranked 23rd among 38 high-income countries in 2020 in providing the necessary conditions to enhance early experiences. These conditions are clean air and quality water, supporting the social environment, advanced academic proficiency, and high national income. This suggests some significant room for improvement, especially since this ranking is likely further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, many children have had positive experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, including more family interactions, decreased bullying, and reduced academic and

social pressure (Canadian UNICEF Committee, 2020). It remains to be seen to what extent these findings will persist post-pandemic, possibly implying more improvement in ECD policies.

Ensuring Education and Lifelong Learning

The UN aims to ensure everyone's inclusive access to education and lifelong learning (Webb et al., 2017). Lifelong learning starts at birth to build academic and socioemotional prosperity in adulthood (Britto, 2015), with quality ELCC opportunities as a major contributor (Statistics Canada, 2019; Tanaka et al., 2019). Lifelong education starts with increasing children's academic as well as emotional and social competencies (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). Negative early learning experiences can lead to harmful consequences in the second decade of life, such as academic failure and antisocial behaviours (Hertzman, 2009). One in three Canadian children struggles with mathematics and reading (Canadian UNICEF Committee, 2020). Also, 26% of Canadian children have difficulties in making friends and socioemotional competencies (Canadian UNICEF Committee, 2020).

Research suggests that unequal access to ELCC, compounded by affordability, explains why some Canadian children experience academic and socioemotional learning issues (Akbari & McCuaig, 2017). The Council of Ministers of Education in Canada (2020) highlighted the importance of children having access to ELCC as part of the UN SDG to improve their transition to primary and secondary education. One way to achieve this goal is new investments that focus on inclusive accessibility to quality ELCC. Funds to increase ELCC affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, and quality through the federal-provincial agreement in 2021 could have a significant impact however the outcomes for young children and their families remain to be seen through monitoring and evaluation (Government of Canada, 2021a).

Evaluation in the Field of ECD in Canada

Evaluation of the effectiveness of ECD programs and policies in Canada has been carried out by the provincial and federal governments, non-governmental organizations, and academic researchers (Center on the Developing Child, 2016; Doherty et al., 2003; Gokiert et al., 2022). Evaluation is a systematic process for gathering data about programs as they are being implemented. It helps to make sense of how the activities in these programs are producing outcomes or change (Peter, 2003). In the Canadian context, Winkler & Fyffe (2016) found that the early childhood field typically focuses its evaluation efforts on accountability rather than strategic learning. Focusing only on accountability leads to measuring the effectiveness of programs through short-term outputs (e.g., how many children attended, ages, etc.) compared to long-term outcomes for children, families, and the organization that are more meaningful in enhancing practices and programs that support children and families (Akbari & McCuaig, 2014). Also, the focus on accountability more than strategic learning affects the motivation to do and use evaluation in the ECD field (Moretti, 2021), which is called evaluation capacity.

Evaluation capacity is applying the learning from evaluation and using it to inform decisions around programs and policies (Ramirez & Brodhead, 2019). In 2016, the ECN explored the evaluation capacity of leaders and their staff in the early childhood field. They found that less than half of the participants have the resources and skills to do and use evaluation, suggesting a lack of evaluation capacity (Tink et al., 2017). This gap in resources and skills can affect evaluation progress in this field. As a result, research indicated the need to build the current evaluation capacity within the field of ECD (Tink et al., 2016). Also, a recent scoping review that explored evaluation in the ECD context (Puinean et al., 2022) found that the

literature around evaluation capacity in the field of ECD is quite limited, especially in implementing a context-dependent approach in evaluation capacity building.

Evaluation Capacity Building in ECD

As defined above, evaluation capacity building (ECB) is "an intentional process to increase individual motivation, knowledge, and skills, and to enhance a group or organization's ability to conduct or use evaluation" (Labin et al., 2012, pp. 308). Evaluation capacity building needs and assets often change based on the evolving conditions and needs of individuals and organizations (Moss & Pence, 1994) and require knowledge and skills at every level of involvement in ECD. It is, therefore, important to build the evaluation capacity of practitioners, researchers, funders, and decision-makers in governmental and non-governmental sectors to support the changing needs of children's services and programs based on current assets (Center on the Developing Child, 2016).

In order to build evaluation capacity, there is a significant demand for updated resources, skills, knowledge, and motivation (El Hassar et al., 2021; Labin et al., 2012), responsive to the context of individuals, service-providing organizations, and the communities served (Gokiert et al., 2017; Lennie et al., 2015). In Canada, evaluation capacity building activities in the field of ECD lack sensitivity to the context (Puinean et al., 2022; Bremner & Bowman, 2020). Being less sensitive to the context affects the responsiveness to the complexity of the ECD field (Gokiert et al., 2017). This gap requires reliable approaches to unpack and understand the context (Lennie et al., 2015; Tink et al., 2017).

To unpack the context of evaluation in the ECD field, stakeholders are a key element. Research suggests the importance of including the diverse experiences and interests of various stakeholders in capacity-building initiatives (Stack et al., 2018). As the intersectoral and

interdisciplinary field of ECD includes a diversity of stakeholders, this creates significant potential for innovative collaborations in programs, practices, and policy in the early years (Cantor et al., 2015). It is, thus, important to include the mix of stakeholders' voices in evaluation capacity building to represent their values (Flaspohler et al., 2003).

ECD Stakeholders in Evaluation

The bioecological model can identify and map ECD stakeholders that are involved or should be involved in the evaluation practice. Thus, stakeholders are all individuals of the microsystem (e.g., parents, educators, and peers) and mesosystem (e.g., policymakers, organization representatives, and funders). As children are the central layer of the bioecological model, they are the first stakeholders for communicating their satisfaction with the experience and revealing the impact of programs and practices on their development. Research identified children's significant role in the evaluation of their own programs and practices due to their frank and unguided perspectives, which are needed for evaluation (Dupree et al., 2001). However, children's participation in evaluation is limited due to the need for higher consultation ability and the ethics that surround engaging children in evaluation activities (Lansdown, 2005). For this reason, caregivers are targeted to provide information about their child's growth and development and satisfaction with a program (Wachs & Evans, 2010). Brotherson (2001) suggests that parents know their children's strengths and weaknesses. They can share important details to inform best practices for their children, so they should also participate in the evaluation process. While many parents are willing to partner with professionals to add more value to understanding this field and the accountability of its evaluation (Brotherson, 2001), parents' involvement in evaluation is inconsistent or completely absent (Akbari & McCuaig, 2017).

Research indicates that ECEs are the main stakeholders in child development in the Canadian context, as their interactions with children can influence child development more than any other feature (Melhuish et al., 2016). ECEs are considered context and content experts (Attygalle, 2017); they are the professionals in the field that know the context surrounding children, such as their home environment and the content of their programs. Possessing these two essential roles puts educators in a position to use evidence to enhance the quality of ELCC programs (Government of Canada, 2021c; Lee & Walsh, 2004).

Involving ECEs is crucial in promoting a contextual understanding of evaluation (Lee & Walsh, 2004), yet educators' participation in evaluation is quite limited. They are responsible for screening and assessing children's health and learning competencies (Syverson & Losardo, 2004) rather than evaluating programs. There is a gap in the literature around educators' participation in doing and using evaluation; it does not explain if and how these educators participate in decision-making based on findings. Thus, it is critical to know both whether they are involved in the evaluation planning and process in earlier stages and whether and how they use evaluation findings to inform their practice and programs (Stack et al., 2018).

Research extends the list of stakeholders to include individuals that hold various degrees of motivations and skills around evaluation in ECD. As the bioecological theory explains, the systems include varied individuals and institutions and their interactions to influence child development. For example, centre owners, directors, policymakers, evaluators, and funders use evaluation data and evidence to make decisions in programs and policies (Harrist et al., 2007). These individuals and organizations' representatives have critical roles as they come from interdisciplinary settings. Thus, they have different knowledge, skills, and motivation around evaluation (Tink et al., 2016).

Why ELCC Educators are Important for this Thesis Research

The bioecological model indicates the importance of the relationship between the different layers of the context where stakeholders interact in their various roles affecting children's development (Krishnan, 2010). The model shows how ECEs influence the proximal processes that directly impact children's development. It also illustrates ECEs' connecting role between children and other systems in the model, which gives them content and context-related experience. As ECEs are situated within ELCC centres, building the capacity of these individuals will build the respective centres' capacity for evaluation and, in the long run, the capacity of the ECD field.

ECEs have various educational backgrounds (level-1, 2, and 3). The levels refer to an educator's certificate in Alberta. Level-1 educators are those that completed a post-secondary course of 45 hours, Alberta Child Care Orientation Course, or Child Care Staff certificate obtained from career and technology high school studies (Alberta Government, 2022). Level-2 educators are those that completed a one-year post-secondary early learning and childcare program or equivalent, and a level-3 certificate requires a minimum of two-year post-secondary childcare education or equivalent (Alberta Government, 2022). Therefore, it is important to engage ECEs to understand how their education shapes their evaluation capacity needs and assets to inform needed evaluation capacity-building actions in the field that build both individual and organizational capacities.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This research used qualitative descriptive methodology to explore the research question: What are the needs and assets of early learning and childcare educators in Alberta to do and use evaluation in their practices and programs? Qualitative methodology is interpretive research that depends primarily on the human sense to induce meanings from certain data (Mayan & Daum, 2016). The qualitative descriptive methodology is "a comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those events" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336). The qualitative descriptive methodology enables a factual understanding of the studied phenomenon regarding people's feelings, understanding, reasonings, and what they know or do not know (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). Thus, this methodology was suitable for my research because I aimed to understand a phenomenon by inquiring about people's experiences, stories, and knowledge around their context of work.

This research was conducted in two phases, drawing on two sources of data. The first phase involved a secondary analysis of data from five focus groups that the ECN conducted from August to November 2021. The focus groups included funders, evaluators, organization leaders, front-line staff, evaluation and research directors, senior evaluators, and program managers in ECD. Content analysis was used to analyze the focus group data and generate an understanding of the evaluation capacity needs and assets that could be further explored in the second phase of this study through interviews. The interviews aimed to understand the perspectives of ECEs on evaluation needs and assets at the individual, organizational, and system levels. The interview data primarily answered the research question with the background provided by the focus group data.

This research was conducted based on a constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm is used in qualitative research to represent various views of participants considering multiple socially constructed realities so that knowledge is created based on an interactive connection between the researcher and participants (Schwandt, 1994). Thus, this research has built knowledge collaboratively from the focus groups and interviews. In turn, knowledge was constructed from diverse stakeholders' experiences and skills (Peter, 2003), emphasizing the ECEs' perspectives. Generating knowledge from different perspectives enriches the description of the phenomenon (Mertens, 2019). The first phase of the study, which included focus groups, was conducted as part of a larger ECN project for which the University of Alberta Ethics Board granted approval. For the second phase of the research (interviews), I also received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board to allow me to reach out to participants, providing a recruitment flyer, verbal consent form, and information letter (Appendix A) in addition to post-interview gift cards. The ethics approval also includes de-identifying the data to maintain the anonymity of participants. Throughout the interview process, I applied for an ethics amendment, for which I received approval. The amendment included conducting in-person interviews and flexibility with the recruitment criteria.

Positionality

As a researcher, my experiences and background influence how I think about this topic and how I engage with my research participants. I am a young international female student from Syria and new to the Canadian context. Personally, I am not a parent, but I have a four-year-old niece who has increased my interest in the ECD field. I have general knowledge about ECD in the Syrian context that is not professional or academic but still impacts my point of view on this topic. From 2015 to 2018, I worked part-time in a preschool and English learning centre for

children from two to six years in Bangladesh. Although I was not a main educator, I learned a lot about working with young children, and this experience built my emotional connection with them. I am completing my Master of Arts in Community Engagement at the University of Alberta. I have completed a bachelor's degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics with a minor in Development Studies at the Asian University for Women. My academic background is not directly embedded in the field of ECD and evaluation but generally in the field of development.

I recently started exploring my interest in studying the ECD field through my voluntary and practicum experiences. In January 2019, I volunteered as an English-Arabic translator and interpreter in cultural integration in the field of ECD at the Ismaili Council for Syria. In that setting, I started participating in training and community engagement action which inspired me to think beyond the translation task and learn more about the field. In 2020, I did my practicum experience for my master's degree with the ECN, where I was involved in multiple governance committees and activities. One of these activities was developing an engagement strategy and conducting focus groups with ECD and social service stakeholders. The learning includes some of the secondary data that I used for phase one of my research. With the ECN, I gained practical experience in evaluation within ECD which helped form my research question. I was also a research assistant with the ECN's Strategic Learning Team. I was mentored to develop a survey to explore the ECN partnership that ultimately aims to enhance the field of ECD in Canada and the United States through evaluation capacity building. My experiences with the ECN were mainly with academics and others in the field at the decision-making level, which was useful for me to understand the context of the ECD system in Canada as an international student. I am influenced by my hands-on learning experiences with the ECN as it sharpened my understanding

of evaluation capacity to plan, do, and use evaluation for enhancing and making changes to programs. Learning with the ECN also stimulated my interest in evaluation capacity building in the field of ECD from the educators' perspective. I believed that participants would express diverse points of view to answer my research question. Therefore, I was very interested in learning from the participants' perspectives in the Canadian context.

Phase 1: Secondary Analysis of Focus Group Data

Focus groups are helpful in getting a shared understanding and impressions on a particular topic based on a group conversation that stimulates individuals' thoughts (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Focus groups can provide reliable, in-depth information from multiple participants in a short time (Mertens, 2019). The ECN conducted focus group discussions aimed at understanding the assets, gaps, support, and needs of evaluation in the field of ECD. As part of the research team, we conducted five focus groups with an array of stakeholders in ECD. The purpose of the focus groups was to explore the following questions: How do participants define evaluation in their work context? What are the needs and assets of evaluation in their work? From where do they get support to do evaluation, and how? The data from the focus groups generated preliminary themes around the research topic, and these themes helped inform the questions for the interviews that I conducted as part of phase two of my research.

Participants and Recruitment

Focus group participants represented several organizations, such as ConnectWell, United Nations Development Programme, Carizon and Child360, from Alberta and Ontario in Canada and from California in the US (see Table 1). Recruitment for the focus groups relied on relationships and snowball sampling techniques: ECN hosted an open dialogue for those connected to the ECN; two of the groups had purposefully recruited organizational

representatives from organizations that are also connected to ECN, while the last two were

recruited through open invitations on the ECN website. The recruitment contained a consent

form and an information letter expressing the purpose of the focus groups which was to

understand participants' experiences with evaluation in ECD, including gaps, needs and assets,

and how the ECN could provide support around evaluation capacity building.

Table 1

Demographic of the Focus Group Participants

Name of the Organization (location)	No. of Participants	Sector/Type of Organization	Participant Role	Level of Eval Experience (novice, intermediate and experienced)
ConnectWell (Ontario)	2	Funder	Unknown	2 novice
	4	Children's mental health service provider	Managers	2 intermediate, 2 experienced
Carizon (Ontario)	3	Child, Youth and Family support agency	Front line Practitioners	1 novice, 2 intermediate
Child360 (US)	3	Early childhood development	Eval/research director, senior evaluator,	3 experienced

		evaluation/research agency	program manager	
Open Session (varied organizations)	2	Nonprofit organization, United Nations Development Programme	Evaluators	2 experienced
Open Session (varied organizations)	4	Early childhood agency/service provider	Research & Evaluation coordinator, Executive Director	1 experienced, 1 intermediate, 2 unknown

Data Collection

The five focus groups were conducted between August and November 2021 and consisted of 18 participants in total (the size of each focus group ranged from 2 to 4 individuals). The pandemic did not allow for face-to-face meetings at the time, given public health restrictions, so the focus groups were conducted virtually through the Zoom online platform. Additionally, the facilitators used a Google slide deck with Nearpod (an add-on application) to engage participants in discussions that lasted approximately one hour. Participants provided their consent prior to the sessions and had to press a confirm button to start recording. Participants could withdraw from the sessions at any time, but they were informed that once data was collected, it would be difficult to remove as it was a group conversation and was, for the most

part, de-identifiable. The focus groups were facilitated by a lead facilitator and a co-facilitator, who were doctoral graduate research assistants working with the ECN. I attended one session and was able to access the focus group data as part of the research team.

Secondary Data analysis

Three research team members (the two doctoral research assistants and myself) analyzed the data from the five focus groups. We transcribed the focus group data using Otter.ai, a smart transcribing software recommended for conducting qualitative research (Cardon et al., 2020). All transcripts were de-identified and saved on a shared drive with the team. In addition, the facilitator/co-facilitator wrote informal notes/observations about each session. After that, I conducted a secondary analysis using qualitative content analysis, which is "a dynamic form of analysis of verbal and visual data that is oriented toward summarizing the informational contents of that data" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338). Transcripts were reviewed to generate codes that reflected the content of the focus groups and aligned with the questions that were asked in the focus group sessions. I then reviewed the transcripts to find different data-derived notes/quotes under each code and included the data source (the referenced focus group) using Excel. I generated subthemes from the collected notes/quotes. In this secondary analysis, I found four subthemes that were categorized into two main themes based on the similarity in the content and their relationship with the research question (Sandelowski, 2000). The focus group themes informed the development of the interview questions for phase 2 of this thesis research (Mayan & Daum, 2016).

Phase 2: Qualitative Interviews

Based on the themes generated from the focus groups, I created an interview guide (Appendix B) and conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews to collect primary data.

Interviews are a qualitative data collection method which helps create further in-depth knowledge about a topic of study (Mertens, 2019). I conducted interviews with ECEs to capture participants' perspectives on their diverse knowledge and experiences in evaluation in the ECD field (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The interviews primarily supported answering the research question about the needs and assets of educators' evaluation capacity. Therefore, the interview questions were directed toward deepening understanding of the themes that were generated by the focus group data. Mainly, the first theme from the focus group provided background on motivation, skills, knowledge and resources in the field to practice evaluation. The second theme included suggestions on needed actions and a participatory approach to enhance evaluation practice. As a result, the interview questions emphasized the evaluation skills, knowledge and motivation of educators and the available resources for them to practice evaluation. The interviews also explored the evaluation capacity needs that were discussed in the focus groups. For example, participants were asked about their understanding of evaluation; the process they use and their level of participation in evaluation, and the resources and opportunities for professional development they draw on to carry out evaluative work.

Participants and Recruitment

This research used purposeful sampling, which is common in qualitative and constructivist research (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purpose-guided or purposeful sampling is commonly used when researchers aim to make the best use of resources to select information-rich cases, allowing in-depth study of the issue (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is associated with multiple sampling strategies and does not initially require a specific number of participants. Therefore, the study used the iterative purposeful sampling strategy that is widely used in

constructivist research to keep the decision about the sample size tentative until relevant opportunities allow the researcher to do so during the research (Mertens, 2019).

For recruiting the interview participants, my supervisor introduced me to an individual connected to the ECN who has direct contact with ECD organizations and particularly ELCC across the province of Alberta. I had a list of organizations that acted as brokers to ECEs. I reached out to the Child Care Association for Resources to Administrators (CAFRA) and the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA). I virtually met with representatives from these organizations and shared information about the study, the type of participants that I hoped to engage, and what educators could expect when participating in the study (e.g., study process, benefits). I provided them with the recruitment flyer, information letter, and consent form (Appendix A). CAFRA shared these documents with ECEs, and AECEA posted my research information in their newsletter for interested educators to contact me. In addition, I reached out directly to particular centres that provided contact information on their websites or through community organizations. They welcomed my research and introduced me to some educators who were interested in participating. I aimed for approximately 10 to 15 participants or until data saturation was reached.

My initial goal was to recruit participants with a minimum of two years of work experience in licensed childcare, a minimum level 2 (main teacher in ELCC), and experience working in either for-profit or not-for-profit ELCC sites. Given COVID-19 has had a significant impact on ECEs, their time, the focus that they need to have in their centres, and policies and processes to manage their workload with continued restrictions, I made shifts throughout the thesis research to accommodate the difficulties in recruitment and participation. I had to be more flexible with the recruitment criteria; I recruited level 1 educators recognizing their long work

experience in the field (e.g., 11 and 27 years of experience). As a result, I was able to

successfully recruit seven participants and stopped when I reached data saturation, which is when

no new information is being generated by additional data collection (Saunders et al., 2018).

These educators created knowledge about evaluation assets and needs in the field from their

diverse experiences and skills. The sample for this research was quite diverse. Table 2 illustrates

this diversity including: educators' years of experience, the age of children that they work with,

their level of education (1, 2 or 3), whether their centre is for profit/nonprofit, and the role they

hold in the centre.

Table 2

Participants' Demographic Information

Years of experience	Number of participants
1	1
8-13	4
15-17	2
Age of children	**Number of participants**
0 (birth) - 3	7
3 – 4.5	3
0 - 6	2
Profit/nonprofit	**Number of participants**
Profit	5
Nonprofit	2
Level	**Number of participants**
1	3

2	2
3	2
Front-line educator/director	**Number of participants**
Frontline educator	5
Director (interact directly with children)	2

Data Collection

From May to June 2022, I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with three ECEs on Zoom and four educators in person for approximately 30 to 60 minutes. Participants received the information letter, consent form, and recruitment flyer via email prior to the interview. They were given time to review the documents and ask questions or share concerns. Informed verbal consent was provided prior to conducting the interviews. The Zoom sessions were audio and video recorded. However, participants in the in-person interviews did not feel comfortable having the interview recorded, so I wrote detailed notes instead. The mp4 of the Zoom recording was downloaded and stored on my personal password-protected and secured computer and then it was deleted from Zoom. The interviews were transcribed as soon as they were conducted. I used Otter for audio transcription of the Zoom recordings and deleted the data from Otter immediately after transcribing. Also, I wrote the transcripts of the in-person interviews during the interviews as participants did not agree to be recorded. I reviewed all transcripts for accuracy and saved them on my personal computer as de-identified data.

Preparing the data took place during the data collection phase as I was reading the transcripts and taking notes in the margins "memoing" on how each interview went. Memoing helped me choose the relevant parts of the data for my research and facilitate a more accurate report (Mertens, 2019). It also helped me make decisions around what questions I needed to

refine or which areas I had to elaborate on as I was collecting data. I sent the transcripts along with some notes of my own interpretations to participants to review for accuracy, suggest changes, and approve them. Sharing notes of interpretations helped create meaning from the provided data. For example, most educators were not directly asked in the interview about their motivation to practice evaluation and learn about it, which is part of their evaluation capacity in the research. Therefore, I added my understanding of their motivation to the interpretations shared with participants. Participants did not change anything in the transcribed data or interpretation notes. They provided their approval to use the data shared with them which contributed to the trustworthiness of the research.

Analysis

Content analysis was also used in the analysis of the interviews (Sandelowski, 2000). I started analyzing the interviews during the data collection stage to determine when I had reached data saturation. I used deductive coding guided by the bioecological model's components (Azungah, 2018). ECEs are frontline staff and engage directly with children as part of operationalizing ELCC programming. For this reason, their individual evaluation capacity may be distinct from those at a decision making level. However, evaluation capacity is influenced by the field's capacity that the focus group data reflect. The bioecological model was helpful in understanding where educators sit within the child development systems and how they influence and are influenced by components within the system. Thus, to analyze the interviews, this research looked at the individual characteristics of ECEs, and most importantly, their interaction with children in shaping child development outcomes. Also, the research looked at how those interactions enhance their evaluation practice as part of the proximal processes. Other codes were

created to understand how the relationships with parents and directors affect ECEs' engagement

in evaluation.

I began the analysis by creating a code list reflecting ECE's individual characteristics and

the relationships they have with children, parents, and others. This step was followed by reading

through each interview transcript, writing notes in the margins, and highlighting key concepts,

words, and phrases to pull quotes that support each code. Moving to a deeper level of analysis, I

used Excel to organize codes, quotes, and notes and create subcodes, and Word to pull together

all the subcodes to categorize them into subthemes. Three main themes emerged based on the

relationships between the subthemes and the research question. This process yielded 311

meaning units/quotes that generated 72 subcodes. Those subcodes were then categorized into six

subthemes under the three main themes. Data analysis was iterative as I continued recruiting

participants and conducting interviews. This enabled me to make slight adjustments to interview

questions or probes as the research was unfolding.

Rigour

Kingsley & Chapman (2013) found that rigour in community-based qualitative research

is not limited to semantics, but it is more about how to use language with respect to the nature of

the research to reflect the context of various participants. To enhance rigour in this thesis

research, I utilized credibility and dependability as trustworthiness criteria. Credibility is about

the accuracy of the findings and whether the research findings reflect the collected data (Loh,

2013; Mertens, 2019). To ensure the credibility of the focus group findings, the research team

used peer debriefing, which is encouraged in qualitative research to ensure credibility (Barber &

Walczak, 2009). Peer debriefing is exposing the data to other researchers that will provide their

feedback on the themes and categories that the researcher is responsible for creating after

interpreting the transcripts (Barber & Walczak, 2009). For the accuracy of the interview findings, I used three strategies: debriefing, note-taking/memoing, and member checking. I debriefed and regularly discussed the analysis process and emerging findings with my supervisor. In addition, I used memoing, which was a process of documenting through note-taking the environment and observable behaviours of the participants during the interview. I also used member checking as I sent out transcripts and preliminary interpretations of findings to participants so they could provide feedback on the accuracy of transcripts and interpretations based on their context (Loh, 2013). This was particularly important for the interviews where participants did not want to be recorded, and I was tasked with documenting our interview through note-taking.

Dependability is ensuring the consistency of the findings and the extent to which these findings articulate the data (Moss, 1995). In constructivist research, findings are never perfect; the researcher needs to track any changes during the research to ensure the study's dependability. For the focus groups, the team members and myself used an audit trail which is a journal of all decisions that were made throughout the process (Carcary, 2009) of recruiting focus groups participants, conducting the focus groups, and throughout data analysis and reporting. For the interviews, I also used an audit trail to track the shifts in my decisions around recruitment, interview questions, sample size, coding, data collection, and analysis.

Chapter Four: Findings

This research was conducted to understand the evaluation capacity needs and assets of ELCC educators in Alberta, Canada. The findings of this research are divided into two parts. First, findings from five focus groups with ECD stakeholders are presented, and this is followed by findings from interviews with early childhood educators. The focus group findings provided information about the evaluation capacity gaps in the ECD field in the North American context, which includes ELCC, and how to improve this capacity. These findings were also used to generate the interview questions, where evaluation capacity was explored in depth from the perspective of ECEs in Alberta. Learning from ECEs provided new perspectives on evaluation capacity, some of which focused on how they perceive evaluation to be a one-on-one activity they engage in with children. They shared this through individual narratives of the children they work with in their centres. Other educators aggregated their experiences and viewed them as patterns for evaluating and improving their practice and program. This chapter will describe the themes and subthemes that emerged from both data sources and use illustrative quotes from the participants.

Focus Group Findings

The findings of the five focus groups reflect various experiences of individuals working in the intersectoral and interdisciplinary ECD field in North America. They shared their perspectives on the evaluation capacity gaps and the support needed to improve this capacity. A secondary analysis of focus group data generated two themes and four subthemes. The first theme, the Capacity to Practice Evaluation in ECD, was made up of two subthemes: motivation, knowledge and skills impact evaluation practice, and resources to practice evaluation. Capacity to Practice Evaluation in ECD describes participants' perspectives on the challenges that affect

how evaluation is being planned, conducted, and used in the ECD field. The second theme, Improving Evaluation Practice in ECD, provides participants' suggestions on improving evaluation capacity in the field at organizational and system levels. It also included two subthemes: needed support to mitigate evaluation capacity challenges, and including a participatory approach to evaluation improves evaluation practice. The themes and subthemes are described below using illustrative quotes.

The Capacity to Practice Evaluation In ECD

In the focus groups, participants talked about gaps in evaluation capacity. Varied perspectives on evaluation capacity reflect the diversity of the participants' backgrounds and roles in the field. Participants described evaluation capacity with respect to individual competencies and resources that are available in the field. These are illustrated below in the two subthemes: motivation, knowledge and skills impact evaluation practice, and resources to practice evaluation.

Motivation, Knowledge and Skills Impact Evaluation Practice. The focus group participants talked about gaps that affect stakeholders' motivation to do and use evaluation as part of their practice in the field. They perceived stakeholders as the individuals that share interests in the field and should participate in practicing evaluation. Participants discussed that some evaluation stakeholders in ECD do not share the same understanding of the value of evaluation, which affects their motivation to participate in evaluation. The findings of the focus groups show that some programs may perceive evaluation as an extra responsibility rather than a learning opportunity as part of their work to improve their practices or programs. One of the participants stated, "I have seen that many programs are not interested to see a program evaluator

in their organizations because they consider it like adding administrative data rather than as a profession" (Focus Group 4).

A focus group participant stated that there is a range of understanding of the value and importance of evaluation among stakeholders in ECD. She asked: "Is everyone on the same page? Does everyone add the same value or put the same amount of importance on this piece?" (Focus Group 1). For example, a participant indicated: "Sometimes people used to consider evaluation as a punishment, or you have to punish them. They don't know that evaluation is to see and to improve the process" (Focus Group 4). Another participant made a direct connection between the value they place on evaluation and the motivation to practice it:

> Because when you're trying to get people to participate, it might seem like another thing on their plate that they have to do is collect this data… I don't want to say, we don't have enough people to make it happen, because I think we do if they all understood why it was important. But there's only so much like what's in it for you. (Focus Group 5)

The focus group participants discussed that shared knowledge and language among stakeholders in the field are important. However, it can be challenging to communicate the objectives and outcomes of evaluation in a way that participants and program stakeholders understand and find useful. This can leave individuals questioning whether practicing it "is worth the effort to do a fully formed evaluation plan" (Focus Group 2).

Many focus group participants pointed out gaps in knowledge and skills for practicing evaluation in ECD, such as the individual skills needed to conduct an evaluation. A participant mentioned that there is "uncertainty about how to proceed" (Focus Group 2) when doing an evaluation. Another participant said,

How do we evaluate, you know, the systems change approach that seems like, so vague, so vast, you know, and so I think that was, that was, it's beyond program development, you know, standard programming evaluation. And so, what's the best methodology for you know, the project, for the community, that will help us identify our outcomes? (Focus Group 3)

Because of the uncertainty in the knowledge around how to conduct evaluation, some ECD programs hire external evaluators. Some of the focus group participants shared that there is a belief that external evaluators have more objectivity when practicing evaluation than those evaluating their programs internally. A focus group participant shared:

In projects we're trying to do everything ourselves because we have the [contextual] knowledge or [if] we're doing it, sometimes we lose that objectivity. And yes, and if it's, you know, the advantage to having someone from the outside… they have the objectivity. (Focus Group 1)

On the other hand, some participants explained that external evaluators do not have the needed contextual knowledge about the program or organization, and this can impact the quality of the evaluation.

Combined with pre-pandemic challenges to implementing evaluation in ECD, the focus group findings indicate that COVID restrictions have had an added impact. For example, participants discussed the shift in the needed skills for conducting evaluation due to working remotely, and one member commented that the field needs more creativity to do evaluation. She stated: "with the onset of the pandemic, we are limited in how we can collect data because we can't really do observations unless we get very creative" (Focus Group 3).

Resources To Practice Evaluation. The research findings highlight gaps in evaluation resources that are an essential part of the capacity to do and use evaluation in ECD. Resource gaps were mainly described as a shortage in funding and time. The focus group participants provided their perspectives on how financial restrictions impact the inclusion of stakeholders, and ultimately, what they consider effective evaluation in the field. One participant stated that the ECD field is "far less able to include evaluation participants as completely" (Focus Group 3). Another participant commented that it is not always possible to include more stakeholders due to funding limitations. Even though the evaluations of some programs are running virtually, in order to recruit more stakeholders, financial capacity such as "a budget to be able to provide tablets and Wi-Fi and other means" (Focus Group 3) for stakeholders to participate and contribute to the evaluation is needed. The focus group findings suggest that if funding is not sufficient, people are likely to prioritize where they spend it, considering other needs of the programs or projects. As one participant shared, "when funding is tight, it can be hard to figure out and convince others that money should be put to evaluation, yet we don't want to take away from programming and support to families" (Session 2).

The shortage of time is another limitation that impacts evaluation practice in ECD. Participants shared that "staff don't feel they have the time to do something more" (Focus Group 2), especially those questioning the importance of evaluation and considering it "extra work." In particular, participants discussed that time is often a barrier to the appropriate amount of planning that an evaluation requires to accomplish all the needed steps, and in some cases, they may skip steps to get the evaluation done on time. One of the participants stated: "like, do we create a logic model and do all the steps so that we can create a really solid survey, or do we just pump out a survey? So yeah, sometimes that timing doesn't work out like it would if everything

went academically best-case scenario" (Focus Group 5). Time was also discussed with respect to implementing findings from an evaluation. As evaluation implementation is a process that requires a thorough review of the data to create meaning and inform actions, the focus group participants mentioned that this process needs time that is not necessarily available in all the settings of the field.

Improving Evaluation Practice in ECD

The second theme of the focus groups was Improving Evaluation Practice in ECD, which included two subthemes. The first subtheme, needed support to mitigate evaluation capacity challenges, suggests building the current evaluation capacity in some areas to overcome capacity challenges. The second subtheme, including a participatory approach to evaluation improves evaluation practice, suggests that more stakeholder involvement across the phases of an evaluation may improve the practice and use of evaluation.

Needed Support to Mitigate Evaluation Capacity Challenges. This subtheme presents participants' suggestions on the needed support to build the current evaluation capacity in the ECD field. The focus group participants discussed the importance of learning about evaluation, starting from understanding the purpose of evaluation to data collection and analysis, and using the findings. Participants suggested that evaluation process needs guidance and it needs to be "step by step for those new to evaluation" (Focus Group 2). The first step in practicing evaluation that was mentioned in the focus groups was understanding the evaluation purpose and objectives. Participants talked about the needed middle ground in understanding evaluation purposes, from learning about the work (improving) to reporting to funders (proving). A participant stated:

> What I see when I look at the organization is definitely people are more in the mindset of improve; they use the information they gather to improve. However, we have to report to funders, board of directors, but they want proof, prove to us this. So now I'm thinking - this is aside from our project. But you know, like an evaluation 101, but that we can use when we're presenting to our board of directors… to educate them a bit more on that fact about, this is what we use to keep us moving forward to be innovative. So, they want innovation. But if we get stuck in this, we just have to prove why we exist and why… we should be here; you lose. So, where's the happy medium? (Focus group 1)

Participants shared that stakeholders practicing evaluation in this field need benchmarks and standards to guide them on how to set their evaluation purpose and objectives. One of the participants stated:

> But in a nonprofit, I don't need growth, I need stability… If I had like, access to benchmarks, or what other people are seeing in the field, then we could set targets that we know are good because right now we can set targets, but they're kind of just based on what we think. (Focus Group 5)

The focus groups revealed that when those evaluating early childhood programs are clear about the purpose of the evaluation, they are clearer on what data needs to be gathered to serve that purpose. One of the participants mentioned that it is important to build the "skills to gather key information" (Focus group 1). More specifically, they mentioned that building data collection skills requires improving stakeholders' ability to ask deep and effective qualitative questions. One participant suggested having "perhaps a basic training for staff that covers high-level why" (Focus Group 5). In addition, the focus group findings suggest that having frameworks and learning from others' best practices would be useful. For example, learning

from others about alternatives to surveys that take into consideration specific population groups, such as parents of children whose first language is not English.

> We are always reaching for surveys with parents because it's kind of the path of least resistance. Everyone knows how to do it. It takes the least amount of visioning and development work. But I think what would be really cool for us as an organization to learn is like having frameworks or samples of other more creative methods for collecting data, especially with children, and with families who maybe English isn't their strongest language. So, I know that there's lots of opportunity to include art-based methods or focus groups, Global Cafe, like, things like that. But it's hard to implement that as an agency, because you'd have to train everybody on it so that it could be effective. So yeah, it would be really neat to have resources around other options. (Focus Group 5)

In addition, the focus group data suggested that the ECD field needs professional development in analyzing qualitative data so that the data can be used meaningfully by organizations. A focus group member discussed that using project management software that shows progress in achieving evaluation outcomes can improve the analysis of evaluation results. She stated: "Then I want to learn any software, any applications that can help… to track not only outputs but the outcomes and impacts with analytical frameworks" (Focus Group 4). Most importantly, evaluation training and capacity building should not be time-consuming and difficult. For example, a focus group member suggested it should be "a simple process so it doesn't feel daunting, so it doesn't feel like it's one more thing" (Focus Group 2).

Including A Participatory Approach to Evaluation Improves Evaluation Practice.
The focus group participants discussed the importance of adopting a participatory approach in supporting the evaluation process and building evaluation capacity. It was shared that including

stakeholders that are part of the program in every step of the evaluation process is important to bring the context of those stakeholders to the evaluation process in this multidisciplinary field. Participants shared that when stakeholders are asked to participate in planning evaluation, they feel more motivated and have a sense of ownership over the process. As one participant shared:

> I think the evaluation plans should be prepared together in a participatory way. Therefore, they will consider this as part of their role and their responsibility to work on it and they will know what is evaluation for them because the plan is prepared together. (Focus Group 4)

The focus group participants mentioned that the participatory approach is needed to collaboratively practice evaluation with funders, especially since they are not always engaged in the whole learning process of evaluation. The focus group participants discussed that people often start with certain ideas and plans with expected outcomes when they initiate a project. However, as they learn from working on the project, they may need to shift their expectations based on new learnings and/or unforeseen challenges. A participant commented: "Funders already decided what the project outcome is going to be, and how they're going to measure it. And so, then it doesn't leave you a lot of flexibility when you are actually carrying out the work" (Focus Group 1). Therefore, the participants found it necessary to include funders in planning and implementing the evaluation so that all stakeholders understand when shifts need to take place in projects and programs, and in some cases, produce different results.

The focus group participants talked about the benefit of the participatory approach in building evaluation capacity for ECD stakeholders by sharing knowledge and resources. For example, participants mentioned that adopting the participatory approach in networks helps exchange knowledge around evaluation between stakeholders. A member commented: "Some

people who are new to evaluation, and some people who are familiar with evaluation but still not feeling that they have a lot of experience, so getting connected with peers and mentors, I think, is a great way to do this" (Focus Group 2). Moreover, participants talked about the participatory approach in the Evaluation Capacity Network (ECN) as one way to engage and connect with others and share resources to build the needed capacities, namely skills and knowledge. One of the participants stated: "It expands our capacity and also helps us with our goal of, you know, being able to obtain more grants, or now with the fee for service, being able to have more clients and do evaluation work for them" (Focus Group 3).

Interview Findings

The interviews aimed to understand the needs and assets of ECEs in Alberta to practice evaluation and use the data to inform their programs. Focus group participants presented the knowledge, skills, motivation, and resources to engage in evaluation in the early childhood field including ELCC. They also provided suggestions on how evaluation can be improved in the field as their contexts in the exosystem of the bioecological model (Figure 1) give them the privilege of influencing programs and policies. Thus, their input provided information about the field to which educators' evaluation capacity can be tailored. Educators are one of the most influential stakeholders in child development and are a key component of the bioecological model. The interview findings present how individual capacities of educators are different from those in the outer layers of the model as they have close contact and interaction with children. Through the interviews, participants shared their role, context of work, and how that shapes their evaluation practice and capacity. Participants shared their unique perspective as ECEs working directly one-on-one with children and how they view evaluation through these interactions. The one-on-one interactions shape how they learn about the children they support and how they can use these

interactions and their interpretations of them to continue to strengthen their practice with children and their families. Three themes and six subthemes emerged following a deductive data analysis process that utilized the bioecological model. However, some of the subthemes emerged inductively, such as evaluation resources and educators' participation in evaluation, because they did not fit naturally into the bioecological model. While the themes are presented separately, there is considerable overlap among all of them.

The first theme that emerged, Evaluation in the Context of ELCC, included two subthemes: defining evaluation in the ELCC context, and the importance of evaluation from the perspective of educators. The second theme, Educators' Engagement in Evaluation, included two subthemes: how educators engage in evaluation in ELCC and educators' relationships in ELCC are the key resource to engaging in one-on-one evaluation. The third theme, Factors Impacting Effective Evaluation Practice, included two subthemes: educators' involvement in making meaning of evaluation findings and using that to improve their practice and program, and educators' knowledge and skills to participate in evaluation. The findings from the interviews are presented below using illustrative quotes from participants. Pseudonyms are used throughout to maintain the anonymity of participants.

Evaluation in the Context of ELCC

Educators' participation in evaluation in the context of ELCC is focused on children. Most educators see evaluation as part of their natural work as they communicate with children, parents, other educators, and directors. Therefore, evaluation varies from one educator to another based on how they perceive those relationships. Thus, this theme will cover defining evaluation in the ELCC context and the benefit of evaluation from the perspective of educators.

Defining Evaluation in the ELCC Context. Participants talked about two types of evaluation: informal/natural and formal. Based on the findings, the majority of participants described how evaluation is natural/informal part of their work in their centres. Most participants found it tricky to define evaluation at the beginning of the interviews. However, throughout the conversation, they connected their natural and daily practice of learning about children's contexts, needs, and interests to evaluation. One of the participants stated: "We have a natural way of dealing with evaluation" (Emily), while another participant said, "When you are an educator, you know children better and can notice the changes in each child" (Susan). Therefore, evaluation for most participants is defined as the natural process of learning together through communication with children, other educators, and parents to find out how children are doing in their centres and what they can do to provide better care to children. Most participants described evaluation as an integral part of their work and mentioned observation as an example.

The second type, formal evaluation, was defined as the systematic collection of data about how children and the centre are doing in order to learn and improve their programs with the ultimate goal of promoting healthy child development. Some participants mentioned using formal evaluation tools annually or every few months, such as screening and assessment questionnaires about children's health and cognitive capacities. However, not all participants talked about this as part of their regular work. Also, a few mentioned that they adopted formal evaluation tools in the past but are not using them anymore. For example, one educator shared that they used to get a survey from accreditation, and she defined it as:

> An accreditation process where our province would provide us with a survey that we
> could use or adapt for ourselves for parents to complete as well as a survey for staff to

complete. So, we used to get that from the government when there was like a mandatory thing from accreditation. We don't have that anymore. (Sarah)

The Importance of Evaluation from the Perspective of Educators. Most of the educators in this research expressed that evaluation is beneficial in their work: "I am very happy that I am asked about this today!" (Susan). Participants discussed a few benefits, such as learning about children and their families' needs, and improving educators' professional learning. Most participants stated that evaluation helps understand the needs of children, and one educator said: "It makes me think of what are better ways for me to be able to cater to their needs… so that I could support them in their growth or in their learning and development" (Christine). Moreover, some participants mentioned that understanding children's needs through evaluation helps them learn about the best care delivery methods. Sarah explained that assessing children's capacities in her centre helped identify a child who was facing challenges in communication in English. However, when educators connected with the parent, they understood that his problem was being overwhelmed in groups, not the language itself. They learned that more one-on-one opportunities helped show his language skills. Sarah reflected on this example:

> We spent two or three days like this, where we spent like a half hour with him in the gym, then when we went back into the classroom, he was like a different child. So just having that time with the educator, the mom and him to make, that, those bonds and understand each other. That was really important, and quite a big success for us.

In addition, participants talked about the importance of evaluation in understanding families' needs. One educator stated: "It gives us a chance to see how we can improve because without those evaluations, we really can't know what the parents want or what they would like to see more…" (Sarah). Some participants discussed their experience that understanding families'

needs, as a form of evaluation, increases trust between educators and families, which enriches the family-educator relationships. One of the participants, for example, commented that evaluation "makes them feel that we know them and we know what they need, so they trust us. This builds trust!" (Ana).

Some participants mentioned that evaluation benefits their personal and professional development. One of the participants shared:

> Not only families and children, but me professionally…We do, you know, a lot of work on ourselves as professionals to evaluate ourselves too so not only are they evaluating me, and I'm evaluating children, and you know, we're working altogether, but I'm also, you know, evaluating myself and growing myself. (Mona)

Another participant stated: "I think evaluation would really bring out good points for us to be like self-aware intentionality ... Where we're standing at, like, how we are, are we doing a good job or not?" (Christine). In the context of self-learning and development, one of the participants expressed that evaluation is important for her self-motivation to keep learning at her work. She commented: "We throw something on the wall that doesn't stick all the time. But when you evaluate it, when you debrief it, you're like, Okay. This is why you get excited, you try again. (Mona)

Educators' Engagement in Evaluation

This theme discusses how participants engage in evaluation in the context of their work and what resources they have and/or need in order for them to do evaluation. Participants talked about different forms of evaluation: evaluation with children, the centre, and self-evaluation as part of their practice. Most participants talked about their evaluation experiences in their immediate work context, the centres in which they work. This theme includes two subthemes:

how educators engage in evaluation in ELCC, and educators' relationships in ELCC is the key resource to engage in one-on-one evaluation.

How Educators Engage in Evaluation in ELCC. Participants talked about how they engage in evaluation with children, parents, other educators, and directors as evaluation is a natural part of ECEs' day-to-day work with children. Participants shared that they do a lot of observation of children, pointing out that this is the main way that they engage in evaluation. In some centres, observation is described as Daily Noticing's. One of the educators defined Daily Noticing's as: "We spot something during our day and we just want to quickly jot it down with our daily noticing, which is just a tool of a quick snapshot of an observation" (Mona). For most participants, this observation does not happen in isolation but is a form of co-learning. "Teachers also speak with each other a lot for ideas. What are you guys doing for this? And here's what we're thinking; our kids are very interested in this. So, we're looking at doing something like this…" (Sarah). When observing children, most participants mentioned that they keep in mind that each child is different in terms of their background, individual characteristics and capacities, and age. One educator said: "We watch each child separately because they come from different families and different cultures, so we see the behaviour of each and how it's changing" (Emily).

Participants mentioned that observation is done in some centres to monitor toddlers' development (e.g., cognitive ability, communication). For example, one of the participants noted: "We watch the way they respond and understand. We monitor their general understanding when we communicate with them, and then we can tell if the child is normal and okay" (Emily). Another participant talked about doing observations to evaluate toddlers' socioemotional development. She mentioned:

When their family drops them in the centre, they might cry and want their mommies or

daddies, so we communicate with them and how far they would understand. For example,

we tell them: okay, I can call your mummy, but she cannot come back here. We monitor

their understanding and analytical skills based on these examples and their reactions to

communication. (Ana)

In addition to observation, some participants mentioned some evaluation techniques they

adopt while working with children. For example, one of the participants talked about using the

Nipissing, which is a developmental screening tool, to understand a child's development.

It's kind of like a checklist of where children should be developmentally. Let's say for

children ages 15 months, they're able to, like, walk without support, or, like, feed

themselves or like use a spoon. Or like, there's like a checklist for that; it's a yes or no

checklist. (Christine)

Another participant mentioned that educators in her centre recently used a COVID-19 form to

assess children's health during the pandemic, which is no longer being used. Ana stated: "We

used to have a form, a health form. But this is not for behaviour; it was mainly for COVID

assessment, like we check the temperature of the child, if the child is tired, coughing, sick, etc."

In addition to evaluation with children, most participants talked about the evaluation they

do with families of children that relies on communication. One of the participants mentioned that

when they communicate with parents, they create a context for them to understand how the child

is doing by gathering some specific data about the child. As Mona shared:

We share context, you know, because this is what we saw, what happened. If it becomes

something that's common, we create that data, that observation; what's the word I'm

looking for? And we'll all be in on it together… That's kind of how we would create that

cycle. You know, here's the context. Here's the observation. And now here, we can have

this full conversation.

Another participant mentioned sharing an app with parents that allows educators to post photos

and information about each child, and parents can use it as data to share their thoughts and

feedback (Sarah). Also, another participant talked about an evaluation her centre had before the

pandemic. She described:

> We used to have feedback forms that is filled by parents but that was before COVID.
>
> Parents used to fill these forms and keep them in a box. After this has stopped, parents
>
> tend to stop at the office and share their thoughts if needed. (Susan)

Most participants mentioned that they engage in evaluation with their directors and other

educators in their centres through a deliberate process of reflection. For example, one participant

noted that educators in her centre get the chance to build professional learning portfolios with

their directors. She commented: "We've picked four goals and four different areas. And we focus

on those for a year" (Mona). Another participant mentioned that she sends weekly emails to

update her director and reflect on her experience: "We get Friday, like end of the week emails.

For things that we have done and what we're doing, for the next few weeks" (Christine).

Participants shared their contribution to child-related screening rather than program

evaluation. It is, however, worth, mentioning educators' input regarding what they know about

program evaluation. Most educators shared that they were exposed to the licensing body's

evaluation, an external program evaluation across centres in the province, where they witnessed

some issues. Licensing purpose is to ensure that the program's plan is following the requirement

and standards of licensed programs, and this evaluation is needed to confirm if the program is

committed to that plan to maintain its license. One educator mentioned that when an external

agency does the evaluation, such as the licensing body, the quality of that evaluation is affected by the time dedicated to the evaluation process. Despite the vital role of external agency evaluation, one participant mentioned that it sometimes does not take enough time to understand the context of children in each centre that is important to influence programs' plans. For example, she stated that educators from the licensing body conduct program evaluations in a short time which affects the collected data. She commented: "Some needs might not be seen in a short visit. Some children have ADHD or autism and they need special care. General needs could be seen but others with special cases like behaviour problems need more time to assess" (Susan).

Educators' Relationships in ELCC are the Key Resource to Engaging in One-On-One Evaluation. This subtheme mainly focused on the educators' role in supporting children's development, which provided insight into the context of work with children and allows them to engage in natural evaluation. The bioecological model (Figure 1) shows that educators have a direct connection with children, and they build relationships with others in the context of their work, which help them learn and enhance their practice with children and families. The findings illustrate that the educators' role in improving child development is found in various relationships in the context of ELCC. These relationships and how they influence child development are explored in two complementary ways child-educator relationships enhance child development, and educators engage in their context to build co-learning relationships.

Most educators referred to their interactions with children as helping build bi-directional relationships with children, and these relationships allow educators to understand the children's context. One of the participants mentioned: "We are not only spending a few hours with children, we feel it and let them feel that it is their second home" (Julia). The child-educator

relationship allows children to understand how to communicate with others. Participants

mentioned that educators help children learn how to express themselves over time. Some

children are too young or unable to speak, so it is the educators' role to understand and interpret

children's behaviour to support them. One educator commented: "Children cannot always talk.

They make moves to show what they actually want, like, dislike, and how they feel. They may

cry, use body language to express, and we get it by experience" (Ana).

A participant mentioned that some children don't feel comfortable expressing that they

need help from someone if they don't trust that person. The bi-directional relationships between

educators and children create an environment of trust. Thus, children will no longer feel that

educators are strangers and will trust that educators know what they want and how to handle

situations and respond to their needs. Mona explained that when children trust educators, they

ask for their help when they need it to solve problems. She said:

> But this time, they need me to help them sort through this problem. Like, so something's
>
> working there, because they're asking for help instead of just attacking each other. Yes,
>
> so I've created, you know, a relationship with them that they trust me to help them.
>
> (Mona)

Participants were aware of the importance of interactions with children for their social

development. One of the participants mentioned: "They're learning, and they're not even to the

point of like learning like math, or like reading, writing and nothing like that. But socially"

(Christine). The child-educator relationship helps children to learn how to improve their

socioemotional skills and build relationships with other children. One of the participants

provided an example of how they facilitate conversations and support children's interactions

with each other. She talked about the educators' role in helping children understand the concept

of "share" when connecting with their peers daily. Understanding this concept and using it makes it easier for them to share the environment and activities with others. She stated:

I was really working with sharing and having these scaffolded conversations with them to be like, you know, facilitating that conversation of sharing and using that language. And you know, I've said it 18 million times a day with them when it comes to sharing. And then, one day, we were at the sandpit and it clicked and they had the conversation by themselves. I was like, it worked! (Mona).

Participants talked about the co-learning relationships that they and other educators build with each other. Based on the findings, educators' work relies on ongoing communication with each other, directors, parents and the broader community, and those relationships help them build co-learning relationships in the centres where they work. Many educators mentioned that communication helps them share ideas and seek advice from each other in certain situations. One of the participants commented: "We do have understanding in the team and communicate a lot. This helps us learn about our work and also about the children we work with" (Emily). Educators have different opportunities to communicate with others in the centre. One participant talked about the communication spaces available in her centre, mentioning: "We have team meetings, and we have group meetings with the staff, we have opportunities to build relationships… with our lunch hours together or bringing in special food or desserts on special days" (Sarah).

Similar to the relationship's educators build with their colleagues, participants mentioned that the relationships with their directors are important for everyone. Participants noted that the educator-director relationship helps directors to learn more about the context of the child so that they know when to communicate with parents and what information needs to be shared. Also, participants discussed that this relationship allows directors to support the ongoing learning

among educators in the centre. One participant expressed that she can't be happier in her nonprofit centre due to her relationship with the director, which makes her more confident to learn from her mistakes. She stated: "I feel like I've won the lottery!" (Mona).

Educators expressed that they communicate with parents to learn more about the context of children and their families' and their interests. The communication between educators and parents allows educators to discuss better practices for children. As a result, parents reach out to educators to ask for help or advice. One of the participants mentioned: "The centre does its work and we do our best. Then, we get help from the family; we communicate with parents" (Julia). For example, a participant stated:

> Sometimes, parents might come with concerns or curiosity because their kids might have difficulties in speaking. And because this is our job, we know multiple reasons why children may face such problems, and we share that with them. For example, one of the main reasons is usually communicating with them in two languages at a small age. (Ana)

Through their relationships with families of the children that are in their centres, some educators find ways to connect to the communities that children are a part of. The definition of community differs amongst educators. Some referred to it as the workplace of parents while others perceived it as the community with which the parents identify, such as their ethnocultural community. One participant shared the connection they build with communities: "A lot of our parents are teachers; a lot of parents work in the healthcare system. So, I think that's a connection as well. When we build connections with children and families, we're creating those connections within our communities" (Mona). Another participant shared her understanding of community as cultural communities that children belong to and talked about engaging parents in the centre's

activities to reinforce the child's culture and expose them to the cultures of the other children in the centre. Susan shared:

>We celebrate Chinese New Year, Diwali, Christmas and we invite parents to explore their cultures with the kids. Some families sometimes bring their cultural dresses and jewelries and play with all children. Sometimes they bring their food and share it with everyone in the centre.

As a result, participants found that a child's development is the responsibility of everyone in the community. One of the participants commented that if children "have that supportive, solid foundation in their early learning, their health benefits, their social benefits, their community benefits" (Mona). Another participant pointed out a triangle of shared responsibility and relationship for child development between the centre, family, and community. She stated: "The family communicates and seeks help not only from the centre but also from the community, so the community will connect to families and centres" (Julia).

Participants talked about the shortage of educators in the field as a key barrier to have a full-time interaction with children. As interaction is a main resource for practicing evaluation in the centre, the lack of educators impacts effective evaluation practice. For instance, the shortage of educators affects the ability to be present and observe the children at all times. Susan stated:

>If we change the ratio and increase the number of staff, observation can be better. For example, if one of the kids wants to go to the washroom, the educator will take him and, in some cases, will leave other children for a while. However, if there is at least one more educator, the other one can take care and watch the rest of the children.

Some participants mentioned that educators' underrecognition and low wages could be significant reasons for leaving ELCC.

Factors Impacting Effective Evaluation in Practice

The findings presented some factors that can impact the effectiveness of educators' evaluation practice. The factors are described in relation to the individual ECEs' capacity, and the centres and system's influence on this capacity. Two subthemes emerged under this theme: educators' involvement in making meaning of evaluation findings and using that to improve their practice and program, and educators' knowledge and skills to participate in evaluation.

Educators' Involvement in Making Meaning of Evaluation Findings and Using that to Improve their Practice and Program. This subtheme reflected how educators use findings of observations and screening to inform their practice. The majority of the participants mentioned that they respond naturally to evaluation findings, especially to observations and regular communication within the centre. For example, one educator explained this point as children get exposed to different topics in ELCC, and educators observe children's reactions to those topics to identify their interests and modify planning activities. She stated:

> We did notice from our observation that some children love rain from their talks, so we planned for a week of activities related to rain. Similarly, we noticed some children are interested in gardening and flowers, other weeks we introduced "building" as a new topic and observed that children liked it so we had activities on those topics. (Susan)

Another participant mentioned that when educators identify children's interests through observation, they use their findings to facilitate ELCC learning activities. For example, "So they're really interested in sports, so we can plan to, you know, influence social emotional skills and to scaffold and facilitate those social emotional skills through sports" (Mona).

As a result of observing particular cases where support is needed, most of the participants mentioned that they engage with community organizations to respond to those certain situations

that are beyond the centre's capacity. Julia commented: "We check with parents and let them know if there are some issues and if a child needs help. We talk to parents about issues and I advise them on where they can get help and how." Participants mentioned some examples of governmental and community agencies from which they receive support, such as Inspired Minds Early Childhood Coaching and Consulting, GRIT Program, and MacEwan University.

Participants discussed the process of reporting to create meaning from evaluation data, knowledge-sharing about evaluation between centres, and informing decisions. Educators' participation in reporting and writing notes on their observation is different from one centre to another. Some centres empower educators to share their observations with their thoughts and interpretations. Mona from a nonprofit centre stated: "We type it down, and then we you know, we have that interpretation aspect of it's like, this is this is what happened word for word; what's your interpretation? What are we going to do next?" Other centres ask educators to share their tangible observations without their reflective thoughts about what they will do with that information.

Participants talked about educators' engagement in responding to evaluation findings and using them to inform decisions within educators' centres. Based on the participants' input, some centres allow educators to influence decision-making based on observation findings. Mona mentioned that through observation, she found a child who was biting his peers in her nonprofit centre, and she was allowed to work on changing this behaviour. In contrast, Mona commented that this was not her first time facing this behaviour with children. She had a previous experience in a for-profit centre where she was told to sit next to the child and watch him so that he doesn't bite others without having a conversation about changing the behaviour, which is part of the learning process. Another educator from a for-profit centre talked about their participation in the

communication process with parents as part of using observation findings. She said: "But if the situation is out of control, we talk to the principal to talk to parents. We don't talk to parents [on] our own. She will then observe, then communicate with parents and can guide them upon the need" (Ana). Mona was not sure if all nonprofit centres empower educators more than those for-profit. However, she noted:

> We're told in school to kind of find those nonprofits because of the value that they have in their staff and their families…I feel, you know, that I couldn't have found a better place for not only families and children, but me professionally, I don't think I would have grown as much as I have in the last year. (Mona)

The interview participants expressed that they do not know how other centres are functioning in comparison to their own. One of the participants stated: "I think in terms of evaluating ourselves, we're okay, but I've never been able to compare ourselves to other centres or other areas. There isn't a lot for us to go on with that" (Sarah). Another participant suggested connecting educators from different centres to understand how everyone learns from evaluation, which creates connections between their centres. She stated:

> In our centre, I learn from other educators, and they learn from my experience, too. It's good if we have a bigger network with more variety of experiences. If we can have a platform where we regularly share thoughts and stories, it will help everyone to learn individual stories and improve self-evaluation in a systematic way.

Educators' Knowledge and Skills to Participate in Evaluation. Participants discussed that they developed knowledge and skills academically and professionally, which formed their capacity to practice evaluation in ELCC. They highlighted some areas where gaps exist in their knowledge and skills and offered suggestions to fill the gaps. Participants shared that they have

the skills to practice evaluation naturally, however, they don't have knowledge or skills for formal evaluation, such as developing tools. One participant shared, "Educators cannot develop tools; we can't create that. I cannot" (Ana). A director commented on the notion of building educators' skills to develop evaluation tools: "They don't need that; educators have their own ways, and they can be different." (Julia)

Some participants discussed that varied skills and knowledge are the reason for practicing evaluation in different ways. One of the participants mentioned that educators don't have the same skill set in Alberta because some learn from the Flight curriculum while others don't. This curriculum was defined as online guidance for educators to practice and create their ways of care, including evaluation, and it is becoming the standard across the ELCC field in Alberta. This curriculum inspires reflective and evaluative thinking to plan day-to-day activities with children. Sarah stated:

> It's very much like a centre can decide what kind of curriculum they want to use. Nothing like standard that says you should use this curriculum, or there's data that says, doing it this way is the most beneficial for the child that I know of. (Sarah)

For this reason, participants suggested that including some expectations within human resources hiring practices that educators should be knowledgeable about the Flight curriculum was a step in the right direction.

The findings revealed that varying degrees of education and certification (level 1, 2, and 3) influences the knowledge and skills with which educators enter the workforce. Level-3 educators have more years of educational background, which could lead to more skills and preparation for interacting with children. Knowing that this interaction is a main resource for

natural evaluations, level 3 educators can be more prepared with their knowledge about ELCC program to engage in evaluation with children. As Christine pointed out:

> I know this sounds like a dream, but level three would be ideal. Because it helps, right? Where if everyone's on the same page and everyone is on that same level of education, like they have the same set of skills, then that would really be helpful if everyone had the uniform, you know, understanding of how a childcare program should work (Christine).

As a result of the variety in evaluation skills and knowledge, a participant shared how it might be useful if there was some evaluation standards and tools that might provide a unified approach to evaluation in ELCC. She noted:

> It will help a lot if the government or some agencies create some rules and give it to all centres to follow. In this case each centre can follow these rules or let's say evaluation tools and spread it to every educator. (Ana)

> Most participants talked about workshops they attend as part of their professional development to enhance their childcare delivery knowledge and skills, including skills to conduct observations. An educator mentioned that they need more workshops devoted to improving capacity around evaluation. She commented: "I think it will be good if we get more and more of these workshops and some of which focus on evaluation in particular" (Ana). Sarah mentioned that the funding under the 2021 agreement is significant to provide professional development based on educators' needs. She noted that the government is "providing more funding for professional development and for ECE providers to take higher level courses and stuff, which is nice."

Chapter Five: Discussion

High-quality early experiences increase the likelihood of children to thrive as they move through life toward their adult years. Therefore, this research looked at needs and assets for evaluating practices and programs to improve the quality of early learning environments. However, the literature indicates areas for improvement in practicing evaluation in ECD. This study focuses on understanding the evaluation capacity of ELCC, the major sector in the ECD. Due to educators' influential role in child development, this research values their input about their evaluation capacity needs and assets in ELCC. Because of the limited literature about educators' engagement in evaluation, this study is a step forward in informing needed actions for ECB initiatives investing in their capacity. The study used secondary analysis of focus group data about North American organizations' representatives and one-on-one interviews with Alberta's ELCC educators to provide a comprehensive understanding of educators' capacity and the influences of the ELCC system on this capacity. When considering all of the findings together, three key learnings about educators' capacity emerged and will be discussed below in light of the literature: (1) educators' individual evaluation capacity and practice; (2) the evaluation capacity at the level of the centre; and (3) the evaluation capacity of ELCC sector.

Educator's Individual Evaluation Capacity and Practice

Bronfenbrenner's model (Figure 1) highlights the importance of the educators' role in influencing child development as they sit in the first layer of the model, the microsystem. Zooming in on the microsystem, educators have individual characteristics that allow them to provide childcare in their unique ways. Therefore, this study aimed to understand their unique individual capacity to work with children and practice evaluation. Cousins et al. (2014) and Peter (2003) define evaluation as a systematic process for collecting data about programs to learn

about implemented activities in these programs and inform decisions. Educators provided their understanding of evaluation in practice that is distinguished from the academic definition and is more natural and embedded in their work. Research indicates that the field of ECD, including ELCC, lacks the skills, knowledge, and resources to practice evaluation, and most importantly, the practical approaches to using evaluation to inform their practice (El Hassar et al., 2021; Flaspohler et al., 2003; Labin et al., 2012). Although the organizational representatives in this study agreed with this capacity issue, educators presented their powerful individual capacity to practice evaluation and discussed their practical evaluation approach. This key learning will discuss (1) educators' knowledge, skills and motivation to participate in evaluation, and (2) educators' relationships as the engines of their evaluation practice.

Educators' Evaluation Knowledge, Skills, and Motivation to Participate in Evaluation

In addition to the importance of the child's individual characteristics at the centre of Bronfenbrenner's model, the characteristics of all individuals in the microsystem impact their engagement in the proximal processes of child development (Guhn & Goelman, 2011; Hamilton & Luster, 2003). This research reveals the needs and assets of educators' characteristics that allow them to engage in evaluation with children. Educators have natural ways of engaging in evaluation that reflect their unique skills and knowledge about collecting and using evaluation data. Evaluation is not part of educators' work in the formal ways that evaluation is conceptualized in the literature, however, it is strongly associated with every activity they engage in. They actively observe children and respond to families and children's needs and interests without necessarily labelling it as "evaluation." Therefore, educators tend to use their human senses to observe actions and respond to them, which indicates that every educator could have different skills and knowledge about how to do those observations.

Despite the differences between educators' individual skills and knowledge, this study shows that educators share a strong passion and commitment to improving children's early experiences. Bronfenbrenner found that when adults share an emotional connection with children, their personal characteristics directly influence children's competencies (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Hamilton & Luster, 2003; Krishnan, 2010). As childcare centres are the most interactive environment for children outside their homes (Findlay & Wei, 2021), educators in this research consider themselves second family to children in their centres. This connection gives them parental characteristics due to their active concern about children's socioemotional learning, health and wellbeing.

Educators' characteristics give them a strong and unique motivation to practice evaluation. Winkler & Fyffe (2016) discussed that evaluation in early childhood in Canada pays greater attention to accountability than learning and improving early experiences. Accountability-based evaluation often limits stakeholders' motivation to participate in evaluation (Moretti, 2021). However, this study shows that educators' evaluation practice is a process of learning and responding to children's needs and interests and is not driven by accountability. Evaluation that is not motivated by accountability yields more effective outcomes and learning than short-term outputs (Akbari & McCuaig, 2014). Thus, educators' evaluation with children is a key asset in improving the effectiveness of ELCC with their active willingness to learn and make a positive change in the experiences that children have under their care.

Despite educators' motivation to practice evaluation and ensure better quality ELCC, the motivation of some educators has been affected by their psychological wellbeing in the last few years. Bronfenbrenner's model suggests that the psychological wellbeing of caregivers and those with close contact with children impacts their motivation and the time they spend with children.

If caregivers are not well in terms of physical and mental health, this can negatively impact children's development (Guhn & Goelman, 2011). In Alberta, educators earn approximately $19.20 per hour (Government of Canada, 2021a), which does not reflect the work that they do and may impact their satisfaction with their work as they may feel undervalued. This dissatisfaction and lack of motivation may either impact the quality of the care they provide to children or, more likely, lead them to find other more fulfilling employment. The increased number of educators leaving ELCC puts the remaining educators under pressure; it affects the quality of ELCC, shifts priorities in childcare delivery, and evaluation practice is not even considered a priority.

This study indicates that educators' educational backgrounds shape their skills, knowledge, and motivation. Research proposes that unequal academic, socioemotional, and health and wellbeing performances of children are associated with the quality of ELCC they access, which is influenced by the credentials of educators (Akbari & McCuaig, 2017; Halfon, 2021; Richmond & Lacker, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2019; Tanaka et al., 2019; The Muttart Foundation, 2011). Educators' training can be one of the exosystem's interventions that indirectly impact the care they provide to children because it shapes the educators' characteristics, and in turn, the proximal processes in their context (Krishnan, 2010). Similarly, this study shows that educators' capacity to participate in evaluation can differ based on their educational background (e.g., level 1, 2, or 3 educators). The levels refer to the education level and an educator's certificate in Alberta (Alberta Government, 2022). The study suggests that level-3 educators are more prepared with the needed skills, knowledge, and motivation to practice observation and build relationships with children. Despite this capacity difference, in practice, centre educators with the most interaction with children can be from any educational

level in ELCC. This variety of certificates creates a gap in the evaluation practice among educators. The varying levels of early childhood education among staff impact the competencies they bring to the work. One of those competencies is the ability to assess where children are at in their development through observation and to use those observations to adjust their practice accordingly. This gap requires equal training opportunities and professional development for educators in Alberta, with some focus on evaluation capacity building.

Educators' Relationships as the Engines of Their Evaluation Practice

In the microsystem of Bronfenbrenner's model (Figure 1), child development is affected primarily by the proximal processes as they build competencies through interactions with others, such as educators. Halfon (2021), Melhuish et al. (2016), and Smidt (2018) found that educators' bi-directional relationships influence the extent to which children benefit from childcare services. Still, there is a lack of literature on how those relationships influence evaluation practice. This study provided more depth into how those relationships enable educators to practice evaluation as part of their work. As observation is the primary evaluation method that the study participants shared, it requires being close to the child. Educators' relationships with children provide an opportunity to build trust and observe small details. Therefore, those relationships are a significant means that allows educators to practice natural evaluation as they facilitate an environment of dialogue and learning.

Bronfenbrenner found that those relationships and emotional connections are not only important to be effective, but there is a significant need for continuity of those relationships' effectiveness (Hamilton & Luster, 2003). This ongoing effectiveness allows better interaction over time, resulting in more positive outcomes in children's competencies. Educators of children from birth to one or one to three years old differ from those from three to six years old.

Educators for children under three years old can be from level 1, while educators for older-aged children are likely to be from level 2 or 3. Each educator has different ways of interacting based on their educational backgrounds and various abilities to build reciprocal relationships with children. Knowing that level-3 educators are more equipped with the skills and knowledge to build those relationships effectively, they influence the proximal processes differently than those from level 1. They are, thus, equipped with better skills to engage in observation and screening with children. In childcare, children progress through "rooms" based on their age. Because of this, they may have a new educator in the room. Thus, while they have built a relationship with one educator, they will have a new educator when they move to the toddler or preschool room. The same educators may still be in the centre, but they are not interacting in a full-time capacity with that child anymore. When children meet new educators with different relationship-building capacities, the continuous effect of those relationships on the care they receive is interrupted. Thus, there is a need to create a linkage between educators' capacity to interact with different age groups of children under six to ensure constant emotional and social support to children in their early years. This continuity over the first few years of life will contribute to emphasizing the positive outcomes of ELCC to enhance children's competencies.

Educators' reciprocal relationships with other individuals in the microsystem of the bioecological model allow them to engage those individuals in the evaluation process. This engagement is part of the proximal processes, so it can directly impact the child's development (Allen & Henderson, 2017; Guhn & Goelman, 2011). For example, educators consult parents and use evaluation findings to help them understand children's context and needs. In addition, their natural capacity to build relationships helps them communicate with other educators and directors to debrief and informally evaluate various situations to make decisions accordingly.

Educators' relationships in the exosystem create a distal dimension that indirectly influences children's development (Guhn & Goelman, 2011; Hamilton & Luster, 2003; Krishnan, 2010). This study similarly shows that educators' relationships with community organizations allow them to connect those organizations with children and their families. For example, based on observations with children, educators debrief with the centre's directors and families to look for resources if needed. Those resources, such as Inspired Minds Early Childhood Coaching and Consulting and GRIT Program, support children and families in health, socioemotional, cognitive, and other developmental areas.

The Evaluation Capacity at the Level of the Centre

As the field of early childhood development is intersectoral and interdisciplinary, this research focused on the context of ELCC to understand evaluation practice and capacity in the early years. However, this study shows that ELCC centres in Alberta are also very diverse in shaping educators' evaluation capacity. This key finding discusses that educators' engagement in evaluation depends on the centre's context.

One way to indicate educators' evaluation capacity needs and assets is to recognize their participation level in evaluation at their centre. Stack et al. (2018) and Syverson & Losardo (2004) agreed that educators are one of the most important stakeholders to participate in the whole process of evaluation. Attygalle (2017), Government of Canada (2021c), and Lee & Walsh (2004) found that educators are essential in evaluating child development as they bring their context and content knowledge about children to the process. However, in practice, educators' participation in evaluation relies on their centers' environment and culture. For example, some participants shared that their centres empower educators to interpret their observations, while others ask educators to simply report observable behaviours without any

interpretation. While there is value in both approaches, it is what is done with the reporting and interpretation that is important; if the information is used to enhance practices or program effectiveness then this demonstrates capacity to use evaluation (Flaspohler et al., 2003).

Centres are one of the microsystem's components of the bioecological model and need to provide the best environment for individuals' personal and professional growth and nurture their capacity to interact with children (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Hamilton & Luster, 2003). Thus, some educators were advised during their post-secondary education to work in non-profit centres because they empower educators and allow them to provide input on their day-to-day work and observation. This empowerment takes place through communication and knowledge-sharing that enriches educators' capacity to be confident and learn from their mistakes as part of the evaluation practice. Educators from non-profit centres appreciated being empowered to learn and share knowledge and being engaged in evaluation and informing decisions, and they find it important for all educators to have the same enriching environment. In contrast, a few educators from for-profit centres in this study sample did not express their need to be more empowered in the evaluation practice. Given that some of them had not worked in other centres before, this may not necessarily mean that empowerment is not important for them. Therefore, these study findings indicate a need for centres to empower their educators to attend to children's unique characteristics and developmental challenges and participate in responding to those findings.

Because educators come with varied capacities to conduct observation, they may collect observational data and respond to it differently. Knowing the staff's assessment skills impact the effectiveness of the evaluative process, centres can support the development of their capacities through debriefing and reflection. This study shows that educators communicate with each other at their centre to debrief and learn from one another. However, not all centres have debriefing or

reflection protocols. It is worth noting that non-profit centres encourage educators to conduct self-evaluation and debriefing practices. Given that the sample size is small and does not reflect all for-profit and non-profit centres, this study does not suggest that non-profit centres are more equipped to empower and encourage self-evaluation than for-profit centres. A bigger sample size could have brought a wider range of educators' experiences in for-profit and non-profit centres.

Educators in different centres may also impact the cultural responsiveness of their observational data about children. Han & Thomas (2010) suggested that educators in some countries, such as Canada, are considered low-context cultures and therefore developing social competencies for children will be different from other countries with high-context cultures. For example, low-context cultures focus on individual identity while those from high-context cultures focus on social identity. These two types may influence the values and competencies of children differently. Therefore, there is a need for educators in both types of cultures to understand the context of the child in order to be culturally responsive in their observations (Han & Thomas, 2010).

This thesis study shows that some educators dedicate a fair amount of time and energy to naturally understanding children's cultures and backgrounds which, in turn, helps them identify their needs. Oftentimes, a few educators engage in observing the behaviour of one child. This group evaluation is significant to have more lenses and collect deeper and more contextual data about children. However, due to the variety in educators' educational and cultural backgrounds, some centres may have more educators with culturally responsive training. This indicates the need for ensuring educators' cultural responsiveness in every centre as it can bring value to responding to the observational data in that centre. This multicultural analysis of educators' observations enhances the inclusion of children from different backgrounds.

A study in Ontario conducted surveys and interviews with immigrant communities that speak eight different languages and found that educators-director-parent relationships are important for finding the best communication practices and enhancing children's learning (Ladky & Peterson, 2008). For example, this study shows that there is always a gap between the English language and parents' mother tongue; partnering with parents can help fill this gap and find ways to enhance children's English language learning. Similarly, this thesis study presented a need for creative evaluation tools with non-English speaking parents to ensure inclusion and allow their input to inform program directions. The interview findings suggest that some centres invest in educators' relationships with parents to communicate and discuss their observational data. Other centres ask educators to report to their director, and the director then communicates with parents and follows up on the evaluation process if needed. The difference between the two approaches reflects the organic structure of different centres. However, Han & Thomas (2010); Ladky & Peterson (2008) argue that enhancing educator-parent relationships is important to reflect the cultural background of children, which can help educators make meaning of their observational data.

The Evaluation capacity of the ELCC Sector

Bronfenbrenner explained that the environment of the macrosystem has an indirect but vital role in influencing the proximal processes' positive outcomes in child development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This key learning focuses on (1) the coherence in evaluation practice, (2) the use of standardized curriculum and training for educators, and (3) standardization in gathering data on child development.

The Coherence in Evaluation Practice

The Government of Canada is dedicating funds to improve the quality of ELCC across the country (Government of Canada, 2021a). Quality ELCC is a complex concept. Research suggests that it can be understood as the policies and practices in the ELCC system (McLean et al., 2022). This thesis research showed that ELCC practices are hard to determine at a provincial level due to the inconsistencies between centres in practicing evaluation. Educators were concerned that they were not aware of what other centres were doing in terms of evaluating their childcare programs. As this gap impacts evaluating the quality of ELCC, there is a need to standardize evaluation practices by distributing evaluation tools among educators across the province. Also, the findings revealed that not having a shared understanding of the evaluation's objectives among centres could be one reason why everyone brings different values when practicing evaluation. Ensuring a systematic evaluation approach with a clear purpose and objectives will help practice more coherent evaluation among centres.

The disconnection between evaluations of programs at the system level leads to the question of whether there is a need to have the annual accreditation evaluation back to ensure more coherence. Accreditation used to be mandatory for licensed childcare and was an essential annual evaluation of centres to get accredited or maintain their accreditation, but it is no longer used in childcare. Getting a centre accredited ensured that they had certain policies and practices that contributed to a quality program, which leads to positive outcomes for children. Having some standardized way, which accreditation provided to indicate some level of quality, will help gather some baseline data about child development, childcare environments and quality in Alberta that is currently lacking.

The Use of Standardized Curriculum and Training for Educators

The ELCC sector in Alberta lacks unified educational opportunities for educators. Because of the unequal qualifications of ELCC educators, research encourages educational and professional development opportunities for educators to ensure more effective interaction with children and better quality childcare (Halfon, 2021). Educators in this study access professional development sessions to enhance their observation skills with children. However, those sessions are provided through their centres, leading to differences in the way educators are empowered to take an active role in evaluation (as discussed earlier). The study revealed a learning source to which educators across the province could have equal access, called the Flight curriculum. The Flight curriculum is a free online guide used widely by ELCC educators and is promoted in Alberta. This curriculum encourages reflective and interpretive thinking and freedom of thought to co-structure children's day-to-day activities (Makovichuk et al., 2014). As evaluation in ELCC is a reflective and learning practice to improve childcare, this curriculum is an asset for enhancing educators' evaluation capacities. However, the Flight curriculum is not mandatory for Alberta educators (The Muttart Foundation, 2021). This thesis study suggests that level-3 educators and diploma holders are more likely to complete the Flight curriculum courses, such as those provided by MacEwan University, Mount Royal University, Bow Valley College, and Norquest College (The Muttart Foundation, 2021). Participants shared that all applicants for ELCC educators' jobs need to take courses about the Flight curriculum to have an equivalence in evaluation capacity among educators in the province. Integrating the Flight curriculum will mitigate the skill and knowledge gaps between educators from different formal educational backgrounds and ELCC certificate levels. Ensuring educators' equal access to educational or

professional opportunities will significantly increase the coherence of their capacities to interact with children and engage in evaluation.

Standardization in Gathering Data on Child Development

Evaluation in ECD, in general, needs to be more sensitive to the context (Bremner & Bowman, 2020; Puinean et al., 2022) to reflect the field's complexity (Gokiert et al., 2017). Similarly, this study explains how evaluation in the diverse ELCC sector lacks sensitivity to the context. As systematic/program evaluation is limited for educators in their centres, the findings suggest that the field sometimes seeks external evaluators who are more knowledgeable and skilled in evaluation practice. However, external evaluators in ELCC often lack the contextual knowledge of those programs. For example, evaluation done by the licensing body does not provide the needed time to recognize the context and environment of every child. Not having a clear understanding of children's context yields less relevant data (Sundar et al., 2011), which affects the quality of their evaluation and the decisions that are made accordingly (Puinean et al., 2022). Thus, there is a need for external evaluation to reflect educators' contextual knowledge of child development at the centre and provincial levels.

Moreover, Guhn et al. (2016) suggested a gap in collecting comprehensive evaluation data about Canadian children at provincial and national levels, which calls for more coherent and effective use of the collected data (Armor, 2014). Some external evaluations collect data about children's cognition, socioemotional learning, and health and wellbeing. The study shows that ELCC lacks time and funds to collect, use, and implement the evaluation data. Educators collect data about children daily but do not collaborate with external evaluation in the field, such as the evaluation done by the licensing body. As educators engage naturally in evaluation with children, they are vital data sources to gather data about children. This will ultimately provide

some baseline data at a municipal and provincial level to be used in significant policy investments such as the 3.8 billion to have quality and affordable childcare (Government of Canada, 2021a; Mazloom, 2022). Baseline data across the system can inform whether these types of investments or policies make a difference in ELCC.

This chapter discussed the key needs and assets of educators' evaluation capacity, starting from their individual characteristics to the system components, including the individuals (children, parents, other educators, and directors) and interventions (education, training, environments, and policies) that impact this capacity. Educators' capacity at the individual, centre, and system levels in Alberta can provide insight into the needed efforts at all three levels. Those efforts are significant for educators' evaluation capacity and leveraging evaluation effectiveness in ELCC to provide better care to children. Studying educators' capacity suggests that the evaluation capacity in ELCC needs more coherence among educators within and across centres and within the system. However, that does not mean changing ELCC into a homogenized unit. The capacity building needs to be sensitive to the complexity and variety of educators' contexts in ELCC and invest in educators' natural capacities. Building educators' evaluation capacity will ensure better direct and remote environments for children's development as they impact the proximal process directions and can make them more positive.

Chapter Six: Future Research, Implications, and Conclusions

In this final chapter, I will share the limitations and future research opportunities as it relates to the research topic of understanding the evaluation capacity needs and assets of educators. I will then share the implications of the findings and provide some concluding remarks.

Limitations and Future Research

This research has many strengths, as the diversity of the focus group samples from across Canada and the US provided insights about the range of competencies in evaluation. The diversity was also helpful in understanding the field's capacity beyond the literature; this could connect the educators' evaluation capacity to the ECD's capacity. Moreover, due to the lack of literature on ELCC educators' evaluation capacity, the interviews provided examples of educators' capacity and engagement in evaluation practice in their context, which is a step forward in raising educators' voices and highlighting their evaluation capacity needs and assets. However, some limitations should be discussed.

The focus group samples were small and also quite diverse, representing different organizations in the field of ECD in North America. Yet, as a result of this research, the complexity and diversity of centres, with varying policies and curriculums, became more evident. Further research can focus on ELCC's context, especially with the suggestion of this study that non-profit centres can be distinguished from those for-profit in terms of empowering educators and the quality of childcare delivery. Different methodologies are possible, such as surveys to give breadth to the study, followed by interviews for in-depth information about the difference between for-profit and non-profit centres.

This research aimed to recruit 10 to 15 educators or until data saturation with the inclusion criteria: educators with post-secondary education (level 2 or 3), direct contact with the child, a minimum of two years of experience in the field, and from Alberta. In addition to the workload the pandemic has produced, the ELCC sector is very busy, and educators had little time to engage in research outside of their work. ELCC educators are currently undervalued, and while they may view participation in research as an opportunity to share their perspectives, this has to be weighed against time away from their work and other responsibilities. Therefore, I changed the recruitment criteria slightly to adjust to those interested in participating. Hence, the interviews included an educator with one year of experience and three level-1 educators. Despite this adjustment and engaging the support of many community organizations to help with recruitment, I was only able to engage seven interview participants in this research. Although this research used gift cards, this was not a strong enough incentive to attract more participants. Therefore, contextual methodology research is needed to add value in learning about the best ways to recruit ELCC educators and boost their motivation to contribute to similar academic research.

For example, potential future research areas could work in partnership with AECEA to send out a survey which would include ECEs. This would give broader information about evaluation capacity needs and assets. Survey participants could then be recruited for interviews or focus groups for in-depth information. In addition, as this research discusses the influence of ECEs' training and educational background on their interaction with children and collecting observational data, future research can connect with post-secondary institutions that provide ELCC training for levels 1, 2, and 3. This institutional-level research may help recruit educators

and understand what curriculum is provided, if and how they learn about evaluation, and how their training is preparing them to provide care for children.

Educators are one of the main engines in the proximal process of child development, and their individual capacity is mutable over time (Allen & Henderson, 2017; Krishnan, 2010; Hamilton & Luster, 2003). Thus, the study findings might not be valid after a few years, and ongoing research/evaluation in this area is crucial for two reasons. First, the evolving capacity in the early childhood field and changing opportunities over time can lead to a change in the capacity of organizations and stakeholders, such as educators (Moss & Pence, 1994; Puinean et al., 2022; Tink et al., 2016). Second, the 2021 agreement started taking action in the field, such as increasing educators' wages, so it is important to have ongoing learning about whether this agreement is achieving its goals and whether educators are satisfied with those changes. Their satisfaction informs their motivation to stay in the field, leading to filling the gap in the child-educator ratio that is important for their full-time interaction.

Implications: Evaluation Capacity Building Opportunities

Understanding the evaluation capacity needs and assets of ELCC educators helps inform evaluation capacity building opportunities and actions in Alberta at the individual, organizational (centre), and system levels. Those opportunities will aim to invest in educators' evaluation capacity assets at all three levels to fulfill evaluation capacity needs in ELCC. ECB is a purpose-oriented activity to enhance evaluation skills, knowledge, and motivation of individuals and organizations to implement evaluation and use the information gained to make decisions (Labin et al., 2012). The research proposes ECB through professional development and policies for improving educators' socioeconomic status, enhancing educators' engagement in evaluation to strengthen their centres' evaluation capacity, and improving the use of evaluation data in ELCC.

First, the research highlights professional development as a significant opportunity which requires funding resources. Halfon (2021) found that educators' qualifications and capacity affect the quality of ELCC, so improving this quality requires leveraging educators' qualifications. The 2021 funding from the federal-provincial agreement aims to build the capacity of educators and provide professional development to improve the quality of childcare (Government of Canada, 2021a). As evaluation is an integrated part of educators' work with children, building their capacity to provide better care to children helps improve their evaluation practice. Therefore, the federal-provincial agreement can be a great opportunity to initiate professional development to enhance educators' interactions with children, which is the key engine for practicing their natural evaluation. The funding agreement states that training and professional development will be provided to educators based on their needs (Government of Canada, 2021a). This research can serve as a needs assessment for capacity-building actions, as educators and other stakeholders in the field mentioned a few suggestions on what professional development actions in evaluation would look like. Professional development needs to be provided with a step-by-step guide, especially for those with novice experience in evaluation. This study also suggests that professional development activities must be creative to meet the changes of COVID-19 in this field. Although COVID regulations regarding in-person gatherings are lifted, the consequences of those regulations remain in the field. Based on the requirement of this research interview, some educators still feel more comfortable having virtual meetings while others don't. Having this variety of interests may impact the recruitment of educators in professional development. Innovative and inclusion-oriented recruitment strategies will help more educators access professional development.

The federal-provincial agreement can be a significant resource for encouraging educators to stay in the field and interact more effectively with children. Although most educators acknowledge that they are aware of their essential role in child development, sometimes they are not given the social value they expect in their society. The social norms in the macrosystem influence individuals' confidence and motivation to do their work effectively (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Hamilton & Luster, 2003). Advocating and spreading awareness at a societal level around the important value of educators can be one way to boost educators' motivation. Increasing educators' wages is another tangible driver for motivating them to provide more time and energy for the proximal processes in child development. Being socially and financially secure can play a significant role in educators' productivity and quality of work as they feel more valued (Government of Canada, 2021a). The 2021 agreement increased educators' wages in order to value their essential role in child development starting from October 2022 (Mazloom 2022). The chronosystem in Bronfenbrenner's model includes all events that can affect any of the layers in the system (Allen & Henderson, 2017). This agreement is an essential event in educators' workplace that can change their satisfaction and, thus, the outcome of their interactions with children. As evaluation needs and assets change over time (Moss & Pence, 1994; Puinean et al., 2022; Tink et al., 2016), updated resources and capacities are required to adapt to those changes. An ongoing assessment of educators' needs and satisfaction is necessary to learn about their response to the wage increase and whether it succeeded in improving their motivation to stay in the field.

Second, engagement is another capacity building opportunity that this research indicates. Due to the disconnection between ELCC centres in Alberta and the lack of comprehensive ELCC data, more coherence in evaluation practice is required to fill the gap between centres. Educators'

engagement in evaluation is essential for enhancing ELCC, and in turn, the field of ECD (OECD, 2010). Gokiert et al. (2022) conducted a mixed-method study about evaluation capacity needs in the field. They found that learning and engagement enrich the culture of organizations to increase stakeholders' contribution to conducting and using evaluation data effectively. Educators' capacity to build relationships in their context is one of their significant capacity assets that allows them to learn from others within their centres. Engaging educators across centres will expose them to other centres' environments to learn from them. Hence, it is one way to empower educators and facilitate independent learning spaces for them. Therefore, this research suggests creating engagement platforms for educators across centres to share their various experiences and resources and build their evaluation skills, knowledge, motivation, and resources on a bigger scale. Bronfenbrenner's model (Figure 1) shows that educators have those powerful two-way relationships in their mesosystem. This study suggests expanding those relationships into the exosystem which, in turn, helps connect the exosystem's components (educators from multiple centres). This connection can take place in a peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing environment using an engagement platform across centres in the province.

Third, this research shows that educators' participation in evaluation is devoted to observation and a few other evaluation methods with children, while engagement is limited or nonexistent in program and policy evaluation. However, due to the gaps in provincial and national data about children and using it effectively (Armor, 2014), educators can be active human resources. Educators have opportunities for ongoing evaluation data collection with children, and the ELCC sector can use the data as a secondary source. This context-relevant data about children on a micro level can be helpful for directors, licensing bodies, and community organizations to make meaning of that data and inform decisions at the system level. More

importantly, including educators' input in the evaluation process about children in ELCC can fill the data gap about children and save resources that would be needed to collect that data using external evaluators.

Conclusion

This research collected data from focus groups as secondary sources about evaluation capacity of the ECD field in the North American context, particularly in Canada. This data provides macro-level information about the programs and policy context in which ECEs provide care to children. The focus groups were followed by interviews with ECEs in Alberta to understand their evaluation capacity needs and assets. Connecting the evaluation capacities of ECEs to the macro-level capacity informs some ECB actions needed in this field.

The individual characteristics of ELCC educators are implied in their work and evaluation practice, which makes it hard to confirm their actual evaluation capacity. Despite not knowing for certain, it is still possible to indicate some of their capacity needs and assets. Early learning and childcare educators have a unique natural capacity and are supported by a strong motivation to learn about improving children's early experiences. However, educators need more educational and professional capacity building to leverage their individual capacity, especially for those with less than two years of post-secondary education. Educators also need to be empowered in their centres. Empowerment helps educators feel more valued and heard and allows them to collect more effective evaluation data. Moreover, organized capacity building actions are needed considering educators' characteristics. In other words, there is a need for standardizing evaluation training and resources that are prepared to be personalized and creative to meet every educator and the centre's needs.

Moreover, due to the inconsistencies between centres' evaluation practices in the province, this research suggests scaling up educators' interactions with other centres to learn from their best practices and utilize that in their implementation. Engaging educators from different centres will yield more connections and coherent evaluation practices across those centres. Coherent evaluation practice will lead to more comprehensive data about children in Alberta (Guhn et al., 2016). Comprehensive evaluation data enhances decision making in ELCC to improve its equality, quality, and accessibility for children in the province. When evaluation in ELCC contributes to having equal access to quality ELCC for children in Alberta, they will have better early experiences. Also, due to the need to use existing data about children more effectively (Armor, 2014), educators can serve as active human resources in this field to collect relevant information about children in ELCC. Governmental and non-governmental organizations can use that data to inform decisions.

Better experiences set the path for sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Britto, 2015). Canada is paying dedicated attention to and funding initiatives that raise awareness around the SDGs, revealing the necessity of achieving those goals in ECD in the Canadian context. This research contributes to enhancing one of its most significant and influential sectors in child development in Alberta, ELCC. The research shows that ELCC is connected to other ECD sectors and three SDGs. Educators acknowledge the importance of children's early experiences because when they get quality ELCC, they will have a solid foundation for long-life health and wellbeing, cognitive and socioemotional learning, and community and economic stability. Empowered and engaged educators can convey their context and content knowledge about children in program and policy evaluation that informs more relevant decisions in ELCC. Therefore, building educators' evaluation capacity is key to improving the effectiveness of

ELCC programs and policies to enable children to flourish and build a better foundation for adulthood. Due to the chronosystem influence on child development, the process and individuals involved in this development are changeable (Hamilton & Luster, 2003). In other words, educators' capacity and interactions with children may evolve depending on their opportunities in the field at individual, centre, and system levels. Therefore, further research is needed to continue to build educators' capacity based on their evolving needs and assets.

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Appendix A: Informtion Letter and Consent Form

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SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

MASTER'S OF ARTS IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

3-300 Edmonton Clinic Health Academy

11405 - 87 Ave Edmonton, AB T6G 1C9

Tel (780) 492-9027

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Interview Information Letter - Pro00117975

Study Title: The Needs of Evaluation in the Field of Early Childhood Development From

The Early Learning and Child Care Educators' Perspective

Research Investigator:	Supervisor:
Reem Razzouk	Dr. Rebecca Gokiert, RPsych
School of Public Health	School of Public Health
3-300 Edmonton Clinic Health Academy	3-300 Edmonton Clinic Health Academy
11405 - 87 Ave Edmonton, AB T6G 1C9	11405 - 87 Ave Edmonton, AB T6G 1C9
razzouk@ualberta.ca	rgokiert@ualberta.ca
(587) 599-8080	(780) 492-6297

Dear Potential Study Participant,

I am an international graduate student in the Masters of Arts in Community Engagement at the University of Alberta's School of Public Health. I am conducting thesis research to learn about evaluation capacity needs and assets in the field of early childhood development (ECD) in Canada through a community-driven approach. Evaluation is a systematic process for learning about programs as they are being implemented. It helps to make sense of how the activities in these programs are producing outcomes or changes. Because early learning and childcare is a major sector in the ECD field in the Canadian context, I aim to learn from you (the early learning

and childcare educators) about your role in the early childhood field and your experience in this learning process. Your unique experiences will help us better understand the evaluation capacity needs and assets that exist in the field to inform evaluation capacity building efforts moving forward. The research findings might be presented to organizations that concern with child development. It might be also used to inform future research. This will take place with an approval from the Research Ethics Board.

Data Collection: You are invited to participate in approximately a one-hour one-on-one interview. Prior to the interview, we can discuss the definition of evaluation and how useful it is for improving the child development field. The interview will take place on Zoom and will be audio and video recorded. Your honest responses are valuable for this study as I seek to learn from your unique experience. Before the interview starts, you will provide a verbal consent to stay on the call and proceed with the recording. Information typed in the Zoom chat box will also be de-identified at transcription and used as data. Also, demographic information such as the years of work experience, type of childcare centre, and province will be used as data. You can choose if you want to participate in a follow up once the interview is done to review your transcript and data interpretation. This follow up will take place within 2 months after the interview. It will be highly appreciated to hear back from you within 2 weeks after you receive back your provided data. When this research is complete, I will send you a summary of the research findings for you to take a look at the knowledge that you participated in creating.

If you have any problem to participate on Zoom, you can choose a phone call or an in-person interview, where your verbal consent and interview will also be recorded. If you choose to participate in person, I will keep my face mask on and you will be requested to keep your on.

Protecting Privacy: The study data will be de-identified. Your respective organization/agency will not get to know if you consent to participate in the research or not. Therefore, identifiable information (names, email address and phone numbers) will be kept confidential and stored in my personal password-protected computer separately from the data. They will be used to contact you to book the interview, share your transcript and the research findings. Identifying information will be deleted from my computer after the research is done. Research results will be used for my thesis, and I will comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. Please note that this session will be audio and video recorded, but you can shut your camera off if you choose. The recording will be downloaded to my password-protected computer immediately and deleted from Zoom to maintain confidentiality. The recording will be encrypted and stored securely on my computer, and all data will be destroyed after 5 years.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: Participation is completely voluntary. There are no adverse consequences if you choose to withdraw from the study at any time. All data will be de-identified once it is transcribed. However, if you wish to withdraw provided data, you are requested to inform the study investigator (Reem Razzouk, email: razzouk@ualberta.ca or (587) 599-8080 at any point until you give your feedback on the transcript and data interpretation in the follow-up phase.   Please be reminded that you can choose to skip certain questions that you are not comfortable answering. If you wish to withdraw consent, please contact the study investigator.

Risks and Benefits: The data collected during this study will help inform future evaluation capacity building efforts and identify strategies for supporting evaluation needs with the ultimate goal of contributing to the capacity of the field. More effective evaluation will not only benefit

children but everyone who works in the field including early learning and childcare educators, as evaluation is one way to improve practices, programs and policies. There may be no direct benefits to you as a participant, and there are no anticipated risks associated with your participation in this study. However, if you choose the in-person interview, this will increase your risk of getting COVID-19, which will require maintaining the use of face mask for safety. To thank you for your time in participating in the interview, a $20 e-gift card will be sent to you from Starbucks, Tim Hortons, or other coffeehouses. The gift card will be sent to you at the end of the interview by email to thank you for your participation. If you choose to end your participation in the study or choose to withdraw your data, you will still receive the gift card.

Additional Information: The plan for this study has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at reoffice@ualberta.ca. This office can provide ethics-related information but has no affiliation with the study investigator. If you need more information or have any concerns, please contact the primary investigator, Reem Razzouk at razzouk@ualberta.ca or the research supervisor Dr. Rebecca Gokiert at rgokiert@ualberta.ca.

Interview Consent Form - Pro00117975

Study Title: The Needs of Evaluation in the Field of Early Childhood Development From

The Early Learning and Child Care Educators' Perspective

Research Investigator:	Supervisor:
Reem Razzouk	Dr. Rebecca Gokiert, RPsych
School of Public Health	School of Public Health
3-300 Edmonton Clinic Health Academy	3-300 Edmonton Clinic Health Academy
11405 - 87 Ave Edmonton, AB T6G 1C9	11405 - 87 Ave Edmonton, AB T6G 1C9
razzouk@ualberta.ca	rgokiert@ualberta.ca
(587) 599-8080	(780) 492-6297

The purpose of this thesis research is to understand, from you (the perspective of early learning and childcare educators), the evaluation needs and assets of the early childhood development field. If you need more information about anonymity, data collection, and privacy, please refer to the Information Letter that has been shared with you over email and will be dropped in the Zoom chat box on the interview day. If you have any problem in online interviews, you can choose an in-person interview, where the information letter will be shown on the screen of my laptop on the interview day. Should you have any questions or concerns about the content shared in the Information Letter about the research study and/or ethics, please reach out at razzouk@ualberta.ca or (587) 599-8080. Also, you will be given an opportunity to ask any question about this research on the interview day before you provide your verbal consent.

Please be reminded that the interview will be audio and video recorded, but you may choose to turn off your camera. Recording will start once you provide your verbal consent.

You will be also requested to provide a verbal consent if you choose to participate in person before the recording starts. Please make sure that you have your mask on during the in-person interview.

I will reach out to you for a follow-up within 2 months after the interview to share the transcript of your interview with the data interpretation. You can take a look at the data accuracy and share your feedback within 2 weeks. Please be reminded that if you participate in this interview, you do not have to participate in the follow-up.

By showing up to the interview and staying on the call, you verbally consent to participate in the interview and the recording. Zoom will also give you an option to proceed with the recording once it begins.

Appendix B: Interview Guide

School of Public Health

Thesis – MA Community Engagement (Pro00117975)

Study Title: The Needs of Evaluation in the Field of Early Childhood Development From

The Early Learning and Child Care Educators' Perspective

The interview will apply the following steps in order:

<u>Introductions</u>

Hello _____,

- Thank you for being on the call to participate in my thesis research.

- First, I will briefly introduce myself.

I am an international student from Syria, completing my Master of Arts in Community

Engagement at the University of Alberta.

I recently started exploring my interest in studying the ECD field through my practicum

experiences with the Evaluation Capacity Network. I learned that early experiences are the

foundation of human development. However, this research shows that different areas in early

childhood call for improvement. Evaluation is one way to improve these areas and enhance the

experiences of children and everyone who work in this field. *Evaluation is a systematic process*

for gathering info. (learning) about programs as they are being implemented. It helps to make

sense of how the activities in these programs are producing outcomes or change.

Evaluation capacity is planning and conducting evaluation and applying the learning from

evaluation to inform decisions around programs and policies.

So, I am interested in learning evaluation and how to build the evaluation capacity to know if

programs are making any difference and to enhance programs and policies.

This stimulated my interest in learning about your unique experiences in evaluation as early learning and childcare educators.

<u>Review the Information Letter and Consent form</u>

Please find the Information Letter that was sent to you, dropped in the chat box.

Also, you have read the consent form that includes:

- Data will be used for the thesis of my master's degree

- The interview is audio and video recorded

- You can choose to withdraw your consent at any time during the session

- If you wish to withdraw provided data, you are requested to inform the study investigator by the end of the interview

- Information typed in the Zoom chat box will be used as data

- Data will be de-identified

Do you have any questions about the information letter or the consent form? By staying on this call, you will consent to participate and record the interview.

Note: I will Make sure the verbal consent is provided and all questions of the participant are answered.

<u>Start audio and video recording and remind participants that the recording started based on their consent.</u>

Note: I have around eight questions, but they might change slightly as I go and collect more data.

The questions are:

1. About your work and what brought you to the field, how many child? How long have you been in the field? What is your role in your early learning and childcare center.

What's your role as a frontline educator in ensuring child's learning, health and wellbeing?

2. How do we assess that?

What comes to your mind when you hear the word evaluation?

After hearing from the participant, I will mention the definition I use based on my review of the literature: Evaluation is a systematic process for gathering info. (learning) about programs as they are being implemented. It helps to make sense of how the activities in these programs are producing outcomes or change. Evaluation capacity is planning and conducting evaluation and applying the learning from evaluation to inform decisions around programs and policies

3. How do you describe your experience in evaluation?

how does evaluation help in bridging equality, quality, affordability and inclusiveness childcare?? You know some children could be (disabled, financial or social crisis)?

Do you see differences through evaluation? How do you deal with this? Meaning how do you implement the findings?

How do you interact with parents and decision makers (owner, director)? Is it helping in evaluation?

Can you share a story about your role in evaluation in your context? How did your skills and knowledge around evaluation help you in that role? How do you interact with parents and decision makers (owner, director)? Is it helping in evaluation? Does your current work require to do evaluation? and if so, what does it involve?

What do/don't you do? What can/can't you do? Do you participate in evaluation planning, tools development, and use of findings? Do you give recommendations? How?

4. How is evaluation benefiting you as an ELCC educator and your centre/organization?

5. Do you have enough resources? Enough of what's needed for an effective evaluation? Where do you get your evaluation resources from? Resources, such as evaluation tools, training, engaging workshops, showcases of previous evaluation findings, portfolios, observations, etc.

6. For enhancing the evaluation capacity of everyone working in the field, it's important to learn from those working in the field about the evaluation capacity needs. Therefore, what evaluation capacity do you think you would need to plan and conduct evaluation and use its findings effectively?

7. What opportunities or resources would you find useful in improving your knowledge and skills around planning, conducting, and implementing evaluation findings?

I will share some examples of opportunities that were mentioned in the ECN's focus groups by other stakeholders: Identifying specific learning needs, strategies (tools).

8. Do you have anything to add?

Please be reminded that you will be reached out as you will get the chance to review your interview's transcript and interpretation to check the accuracy (Credibility) of this interpretation to your provided data. I will send you the transcript and interpretation via email within 2 months after the interview, and it will be highly appreciated if you can provide your feedback within 2 weeks after sharing the documents with you. Also, I will send you a summary of the findings

once I finish the research for you to take a look at the knowledge that you participated in

creating.