

'Because we want your family to keep flourishing': A Critical Discourse Analysis
of Online Parenting Educational Materials

by

Teila Reynolds
BChSt, Mount Royal University, 2012

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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In the 2012 Families First Agenda, the Government of British Columbia outlined the provision of ‘evidence-based’ parenting information as part of its official commitment to support vulnerable families. This thesis investigates and analyzes the particular views and assumptions about parenting responsibility and child development in a selection of web-based parenting resources endorsed by the BC government. Study findings show that parenting education materials promote a universalized account of childrearing that privileges expert-driven knowledge, largely drawn from Euro-Western frameworks. The examined materials are also found to present a view of parents as responsible for monitoring and mitigating personal and environmental stressors. Discussion of these features considers the ways in which parenting education materials marginalize the knowledge and practices of diverse families, and conceal oppressive structures that perpetuate social and economic inequalities. Implications drawn from the findings contribute to a discussion of more inclusive and collaborative approaches to parenting support and education.

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Chapter 1: Introduction & Context

Over the course of the last few decades, childrearing in Western industrialized countries has been noted for becoming an increasingly intensive and goal-oriented task, as the emphasis of parental care has shifted from children's physical health and safety to now include other domains of development, including their cognitive, social, and psychological wellbeing (Quirke, 2006; Smyth, 2014; Wall, 2010). A growing feature of intensive parenting models has been a proliferation of parenting 'experts' and 'evidence-based' parenting knowledge. The move toward increasingly intensive parenting frameworks and expert childrearing advice has both reflected and shaped increasing policy activity and state-sponsored programming to support and educate parents in their responsibilities as the custodians of children's developmental wellbeing. Contemporary expectations on parents must be examined within the social, historical, and ideological contexts in which they have emerged in order to recognise the ways in which these factors have shaped taken-for-granted cultural understandings about parental responsibility and optimal child development. Further, such examination must seek to uncover the ways in which these discourses position diverse parenting knowledge and identities within existing social institutions and relations of power.

In this thesis, I aim to critically examine discursive representations of parental responsibility and child development in the social and political context of British Columbia, Canada by applying a critical discourse analysis to web-based parenting education content disseminated throughout the province of BC. Specifically, in response to a growing preoccupation with the 'importance of the first three years', I focus the attention of this inquiry on materials targeted toward parents of children aged zero to three years. I introduce this thesis with an overview of the current state of parenting education support programming and policies in

BC, in order to ground my inquiry in the relevant social and political contexts. This is followed by an outline of the questions guiding my study, and then an overview of my own personal motivations in pursuing this research.

Current Context

Parenting Support Programming in British Columbia. Parenting support programming and policies encompass a wide spectrum of service delivery models that vary according to the needs of targeted populations, regional context, policy directions, and mandates by funding bodies. Included on this spectrum are parent training programs, such as Triple P and Nobody's Perfect; parent and child drop-in programs, such as StrongStart and Parent-Child Mother Goose; and province-wide campaigns, such as Success By 6. In BC, the overall legislative and policy direction for these programs has been guided by a number of different ministries and funding streams, including the BC Government, the Ministry of Health (MOH), and the Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD). The introduction of the *Families First Agenda* by the BC provincial government in 2012 outlined a commitment and plan to “help families in BC continue to progress and thrive” (Province of BC, 2012, p. 3). Included in this plan was a pillar for “Supporting Vulnerable Families” through a series of social support programs and the provision of informational resources for parents. The *Families First Agenda* also highlighted the Healthy Start program, under MOH's *Healthy Families BC Policy Framework*, providing intensive home visitations for new mothers, as well as other core family health services that include “childhood screening, well-child assessments for growth and development and health promotion through evidence-based educational resources that support parents and caregivers” (Ministry of Health [MOH], 2013, p. 18).

The MCFD Office for the Early Years is responsible for expenditures that contribute regional funding to “a range of community-based services designed to increase the ability of parents to support the healthy development of children up to six years of age” (Ministry of Child and Family Development [MCFD], 2013, p. 16). These funded services include prenatal supports, home visitation programs, and a variety of local non-profit organizations designed to promote family engagement and strengthen parenting skills. In BC, under the *Child, Family and Community Service Act*, counselling and parenting education resources such as these also make up part of the MCFD Family Development Response in cases of child welfare program involvement. This policy aims to strengthen parental capacity for safe care of children through access to parenting education resources in response to a child protection report (MCFD, 2007).

‘Evidence-Based’ Parenting Information. The component of these government and ministry activities that I wish to foreground is the political and financial endorsement of ‘evidence-based’ educational materials and resources supplied to parents and caregivers to “improve parenting knowledge and positive health outcomes for children” (MOH, 2014, p. 18). This includes materials provided either directly through government institutions, or through the funding support of local non-profit groups that provide similar resources. For example, the BC Government has developed a number of publications and resources, made widely available online and offered in hard-copy to new parents, intended to “provide parents and caregivers with evidence-based information to support healthy pregnancy, childbirth, early parenting and child development” (MCFD, 2013, p. 15). This series of resources and reference guides, designed to equip parents with information and tips for child health and development, constitute one of the primary strategies for “Helping Vulnerable Children Get a Good Start” within the *Families First*

Agenda. The provision of ‘evidence-based’ resources is introduced by the agenda in a preamble, stating:

The earlier interventions are made to support vulnerable children, the better their chances of maturing into successful citizens that can help our province thrive. Providing such supports early in life also helps break the cycle of generational poverty. We have increased resources for parents to support health literacy and promote evidence-based self-care. (Province of BC, 2012, p. 18)

Also highlighted in the *Families First Agenda*, a significant component of the *Healthy Families BC Policy Framework* was the 2013 launch of the “Pregnancy and Parenting” section on the HealthyFamilies BC website, which provides parents with information, interactive tools, videos, and further reading on early child health and development (MCFD, 2013). The website constitutes part of the response to the *HealthyFamilies BC* policy direction to “provide key educational materials and resources for parents and caregivers” (MOH, 2014, p. 18) as a way of supporting caregivers to “have the capacity to provide healthy early environments that are free from violence, abuse, neglect and poverty and that provide positive supports for healthy development and outcomes throughout the mother and child’s life course” (MOH, 2014, p. 17).

Of particular note is the fact that much of these materials have been made freely available through web-based media, which serves to provide a population-level approach to parenting education by making informational resources widely accessible to parents across the province, rather than to targeted parent groups or individuals. Such strategies allow for the wide-spread dissemination of information across the general parenting population in a cost effective manner, overcoming some of the limitations of targeted and location-based programs (Munro, 2009). This has been highlighted as a strategy in BC to address “the significant prevalence of behavioural

and mental health problems in children population-wide, and the lack of knowledge of authoritative parenting techniques” (Munro, 2009, p. 24).

Vulnerable Families in BC. Policies and initiatives that seek to promote parenting knowledge as a strategy to “Support Vulnerable Families” should be considered in the context of the current social landscape in BC. As a recent report revealed, in 2012, 20.6 percent of children under the age of 18 in BC were living in poverty (First Call, 2014). Of the families in this category, income was on average \$10,000 per year below the poverty line (First Call, 2014). Despite this reality, BC remains the one of only two provinces or territories in Canada without a provincial plan to reduce child poverty (Canada Without Poverty, 2013). Further, the high rates of poverty among families with children exist alongside high childcare costs in BC and limited childcare space (Canada Without Poverty, 2013). BC has also seen a lack of affordable housing, with an estimated 116,000 people experiencing housing crisis, as well as a plateau in BC’s income assistance rates since 2007, in spite of a rising cost of living (First Call, 2014). Largely, the provincial government’s response to battling poverty has been an emphasis on job creation (Canada Without Poverty, 2013). Such policies have been linked to increasingly neoliberal form of governance in BC, typically characterized by regressive welfare reform, and emphasis on self-sufficiency and labour market participation (Pulkingham, Fuller & Kershaw, 2010).

In BC, as in many Canadian provinces, the burden of these conditions is disproportionately borne by the province’s Indigenous communities. Indigenous peoples in Canada are more likely to face barriers to employment, with a three to one ratio of unemployment rates compared to the rest of Canada. Those who are employed experience a substantial gap in earnings, with a median yearly income in 2006 of \$18,962 for Indigenous employees, compared to \$27,097 for non-Indigenous Canadians (Wilson & Macdonald, 2010).

These realities are compounded by poor housing conditions and overcrowding on First Nations reserves, as well as limited access to healthcare, education, and legal services (Make First Nations Poverty History Expert Advisory Committee, 2009).

Rationale

The high proportion of BC families experiencing poverty, and the constraints imposed by such circumstances, are crucial factors to be taken into consideration in evaluating political and professional responses to family needs. What are the implications of ‘parenting support’ that takes the form of guidance and education rather than meaningful material assistance and structural-level interventions? What are the assumptions underlying such an approach? Further, because a population-level approach to parenting education aims to reach an expansive number of parents, it is of interest to understand how these materials widely disseminate a particular view of parenting that can be said to be motivated by policy directions and endorsed through financial and political support of the BC government and ministries. These questions compel a critical interrogation of the discursive representations of contemporary parenting within such materials, in order to make visible the normative accounts of parenting responsibility that BC authorities have designated for circulation across the province.

Research Questions

This research applies a critical discourse analysis to web-based parenting educational content produced by government and non-profit programs, focusing on the current socio-cultural and political context of British Columbia. This analysis will be guided by the following research questions: (1) How is parental responsibility for child developmental outcomes discursively represented in web-based parenting educational content?; (2) What are the ideological and epistemological assumptions that shape the formation of these discursive practices?; (3) How do

these discursive practices position parents within existing social, economic, cultural, and political conditions in British Columbia?; and (4) What alternative conceptualizations of parenting education and support might be possible?

Through exploring these research questions, I aim to make visible the taken-for-granted values and assumptions embodied in representations of parental responsibility, child development, and recommended parenting practices. This analysis seeks to explore the ways in which such representations and assumptions both are deeply entangled and mutually produced. This enfolds two interwoven objectives: to understand how parental responsibility discourses are *produced by* dominant ideological regimes; and how, in turn, these discourses might be *productive of* dominant cultural understandings about parental responsibility within the context of wider social structures that differentially position diverse parenting experiences within these systems. The purpose of this research, therefore, is not to determine the validity or falsity of the empirical claims regarding child development or parenting practices made in parenting education materials. Rather, I seek to apply a critical lens to the ways in which these claims have been guided by socially and culturally embedded understandings about the nature of contemporary parenting and child development and to reflect on the ways in which these claims may inform social practice.

Researcher Motivations

In explicating my own relationship to this study, I would like to state that I come to this research as a former developer of parenting educational resources. I first came into the world of parenting education as a research assistant involved in the development of a community-university partnership program that aimed to support parents and families in fostering socio-emotional development and resiliency skills in children. Among the myriad components of this

program, I was heavily involved in the translation of academic materials into ‘accessible’ tip sheets, brochures, activities, and other resources targeted at a parent audience. During this time, I was keenly interested in the role of parents in fostering healthy child development and earnestly sought to find the best ways in which parents could be supported in that role. As a result of my undergraduate education in the areas of child development, my conviction was that some parents, who may be otherwise well-intentioned, may lack important knowledge about child development, leading to inappropriate parenting practices. It was my feeling that a great deal of adverse childhood experiences could be mitigated by providing parents with the information and skills to make healthy choices for their children.

Since beginning my graduate studies, I have been challenged to reflect critically on my assumptions about the role of parenting education. While I know that education resources are a valuable tool for many parents, I have also been compelled to question, challenge, and problematize some of the fundamental and embedded assumptions on which these practices have been built. Therefore, this research has been motivated by dual purposes on a personal level. Firstly, I desired to contribute to the growing body of critical literature on contemporary parenting expectations and responsibilities. Secondly, I wished to create for myself a space to flex my newly situated critical standpoint in understanding the implicit values and impact of some parenting education practices within current political systems.

At this time, I must also identify myself as an outsider to the experience of parenting, as I am not myself a biological or custodial parent at the time of writing this thesis. There are elements of what it means to be a parent that are not accessible to me. Although I make no claims to understanding the experience of being a parent, the full consequences of this outsider position are difficult for me to fully articulate. However, I do not feel that this impedes my

ability to engage meaningfully with the topic at hand. I acknowledge that human experience is complex and varied; being a parent does not itself make accessible the multiple and intersecting matrices of parenting knowledge and identities in all their diversity and complexity. Therefore, while I occupy a space closer to the outsider position, I would challenge a dualistic manner of conceptualizing insider/outsider status. My previous experiences of working with children of various ages, my experiences of engaging with parents and parenting educational materials, and my experiences of being a child in relationship with my own parents, all contribute meaningfully to the perspective I bring to this research.

Thesis Organization

In this first chapter, I have introduced my research topic and guiding questions, and have established the context and rationale motivating this study. In the following chapter, I provide an overview of the extant literature on parenting discourses and trends, as well as literature that describes some of the social and material conditions impacting families in Canada today. Within this chapter, I also situate my literature review against a conceptual framework that converges a Foucauldian understanding of power, discourse, and truth with an analysis of oppression and social difference. In chapter 3, I elucidate the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of critical discourse analysis, and describe my method of data collection and approach to conducting analysis. Chapter 4 presents a written report of the salient findings from my discourse analysis. My final chapter offers a summary of these findings and a reflection on possible alternatives. I conclude my thesis with a discussion of study limitations areas for further inquiry.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I review a body of scholarship that has explored some of the discursive and socio-political practices relevant to contemporary parenting. I begin by elucidating themes that emerged from the literature with regard to prominent discourses and trends in the area of parenting education. Specifically, this discussion looks at a prominent discourse on the importance of ‘early brain development’, the incursion of expert-driven and ‘evidence-based’ parenting advice and literature, and a trend toward intensified parenting roles and expectations. I then consider these trends and discourses against a body of literature that examines the current structural and material realities in Canada and BC that may differentially position diverse parenting experiences within existing social, political, and economic systems. Finally, I ground this discussion in a conceptual framework that integrates a Foucauldian analysis of power, truth, and discourse with a critical social understanding of oppression and social difference.

Much of the literature I examine in this chapter does not aim to make truth claims about parenting practices or child development, but rather seeks to foreground societal discourses on these topics and their relationship to social practice. For the purposes of this review, the term ‘discourse’ is understood as “a group of statements and practices that define and constrain how a particular phenomenon gets identified and articulated at a particular historical moment” (Nadesan, 2002, p. 402). This focus on discourse is built on an assumption that discourses constitute powerful social narratives that determine what is conceivable within a given society and have significant influence on the actions directed towards these issues (Moss, Dillon & Statham, 2000). Examining discourse allows an awareness of how the language of policies, theories, research, and social practice all shape knowledge, and in turn embody relations of power (Moss et al., 2000).

Parenting Discourses and Trends

Rise of Neuroscience. The 1990s, famously termed by the US Congress as “the decade of the brain”, saw advancements in the capacities of brain imaging technologies that led to significant discoveries in the domain of neuroscientific research (Macvarish, Lee, & Lowe, 2014). As a result of these discoveries, a range of behaviors and social problems that were once seen as a concern of morality or psychology could be understood as a matter of brain anatomy and function. Such discoveries have been celebrated for providing a “more scientific and objective understandings of learning and developmental processes” (Maxwell & Racine, 2012, p. 160). The new brain science has had significant implications for understanding neurodevelopmental growth in infants and young children, as researchers increasingly draw connections between early childhood experiences and the course of life-long human development (see, for example, Knudson, 2004; Shonkoff, 2003; Tierney, 2009).

Much of the research on early brain development posits that early life experiences, starting from early fetal development into the third year of life, are inscribed on the developing child’s brain, which carries the impacts of these experiences forward into adulthood. In this way, ‘the first three years’ have been established as a ‘critical period’ in children’s lifelong learning and development (Tierney, 2009). It has been noted that the promise of an empirical, scientific model for understanding human behaviour and development has been widely adopted by popular culture in Western European and North American contexts (Macvarish et al., 2014). As a result, these models are being increasingly applied in various domains of social practice, including policy, economics, education, and parenting (Macvarish et al., 2014).

A body of critical scholarship has developed in response to the movement toward brain-based early development models. Some of this critique has involved a questioning of the

scientific validity of brain claims, voicing concern that the magnitude and applications of these findings may be overstated (Maxwell & Racine, 2012). Of interest in this review, are critiques about the implications of this trend on the norms of child-rearing. For example, an analysis by O'Connor and Joffe (2012) examined representations of early brain development in newspaper media in the UK between 2000 and 2010. Their analysis found that newspaper media representations portrayed children's healthy brain growth as occurring almost exclusively in the context of parental care (O'Connor & Joffe, 2012). Parents were encouraged to breastfeed infants; to put frequent attention and time into engaging in meaningful daily interactions, playing, singing, and reading with children; to maintain only positive interactions; and to ensure quality child care programming. The totality of these elements was depicted as a requirement for securing successful brain development (O'Connor & Joffe, 2012). Further, these media were found to portray neuro-developmental success as being not just in the best interests of children, but of society as a whole. Failure to provide adequate early environments was seen as resulting in disruptions in normative brain growth, which was linked to later criminal activity and other anti-social behaviours (O'Connor & Joffe, 2012). The authors argue that the limited time-window for fostering positive life-long outcomes communicates an urgency to parents for the necessity of providing the 'right' environmental inputs and making the 'right' parenting choices – or risk having children fall permanently behind (O'Connor & Joffe, 2012).

Nadesan (2002) observed the effect of the 'first three years' discourse in a surge of highly marketed infant development toys, materials, and software. She comments that these materials have been promoted to parents as a way to provide enriched stimulation during 'critical periods', and are meant to ensure children's optimal intellectual and social development (Nadesan, 2002). Nadesan (2002) contends that the neuroscientific research has been appropriated by toy

marketers to play on parents' newly created anxieties, hopes, and fears about delivering optimal early environments. Ramaekers and Suissa (2012) also make note of this trend, stating:

When parents buy toys for their children this is no longer (just) something one speaks about in terms of the concept of 'playing', but in terms of creating stimulating environments for their children, and in terms of what this playing is good for (i.e. what particular capacities it will develop). (p. 356)

This quote speaks to the popular appeal of the new 'brain science', as it engenders knowledge and practices that promise to optimize children's potential and contribute to the achievement of desirable child outcomes. As O'Connor and Joffe (2012) posit, "a culture that strives to identify the optimal ways of raising children may find neuroscientific knowledge distinctly appealing, promising to unambiguously demonstrate the 'real' effects of parenting practices on developmental outcomes" (p. 3).

The implications of neuroscientific parenting discourses were further examined in a series of interviews conducted by Canadian researcher Glenda Wall with fourteen mothers of preschoolers who had been exposed to educational messages about early brain development (Wall, 2010). Findings from these interviews indicated that participants felt intense pressure to be taking actions to enhance their children's intelligence, self-esteem, and happiness, which the mothers linked to children's potential for future success (Wall, 2010). The mothers indicated that they accomplished this by spending plenty of one-on-one time with children, providing educational toys, and accessing high quality daycare programs. Further, the mothers expressed guilt when they felt that they had failed to take all opportunities to maximize children's potential (Wall, 2010). The accounts from participants in this study confirm Nadesan's (2002) contention that infant brain science has contributed to new anxieties in parents, and highlights the impact of

these discourses in influencing everyday parenting choices and behaviours. The tenets of the early childhood brain development have, therefore, been seen as contributing to the moralizing of certain norms and standards for parenting behaviour that are now seen as basic requirements, based on scientific knowledge about lifelong development.

‘Parenting’ versus ‘Mothering’. Wall’s research with mothers also brings attention to the gendered nature of the parenting advice and literature. Despite a shift toward the use of the gender-neutral term ‘parent’, as opposed to ‘mother’ or ‘father’, it has been argued that, in reality, mothers implicitly remain the primary audience of parenting materials (Smyth, 2014; Wall, 2013). In an analysis of online parenting content, Smyth (2014) identified a featured section directed expressly at fathers, which, she argues, positions fathers on the periphery, and presumes that mothers retain the bulk of childrearing responsibility. A similar review of *Today’s Parent* magazine articles found that mothers were much more likely to be discussed and quoted than fathers, despite ubiquitous use of the term ‘parents’ in headlines (Wall, 2013). Gillies (2005) critiques this effect, stating:

This focus on childrearing skills is couched in terms that objectify the nature of parenting as caring labour and obscure its acutely gendered status. Use of the gender-neutral term ‘parenting’ in contemporary policy language disguises the fact that it is predominantly mothers who maintain primary responsibility for the day-to-day care of their children. (p. 78)

Wall’s (2013) examination of *Today’s Parent* articles sought to compare representations in articles from the 1980s and the 2000s. Her analysis confirmed a rise in intensive mothering messages, as well as an increased use of the neuroscientific model of early child development in the more recent decade. This trend was seen as contributing to a construction of women’s paid

work as detracting from children's developmental wellbeing, as the articles sought to equip mothers with tips and information to ensure that their employed work would not interfere with time and attention for their children (Wall, 2013). The cultural expectations placed on mothers in Wall's study substantiates findings from O'Connor & Joffe's (2012) media analysis, which they found to be largely dominated by portrayals of maternal qualities and activities, implicitly conveying childrearing, particularly the loving and attentive aspects, as essentially maternal concerns.

In an introduction to the edited compilation, *Father Involvement in Canada*, Ball and Daly (2012) highlight this traditionally "mother-centric" approach to parent programming and advocate for a shift toward more father-supportive programming and policies. Their discussion suggests the way in which ideals of maternal care not only overload mothers with the brunt of parenting responsibility, but also marginalize men's contributions to childrearing (Ball & Daly, 2012). This publication also addresses the fact that, although there is limited data available on same-sex parenting, it is becoming widely apparent that there is a shift occurring in the context and composition of families in Canada today (Ravanera & Hoffman, 2012). Such changes speak to another aspect that has been noted regarding representations of mothers as primary caregivers and fathers in peripheral roles, which is the presentation of an overtly heteronormative image of childrearing. Sunderland (2006) notes this in another study on male and female representations in parenting magazines. In her analysis, Sunderland finds that parenting articles appeared to presume the presence of both male and female caregivers, and noted an absence of non-heteronormative family structures. Therefore, gendered expectations must also be considered alongside family structures in Canada that are moving increasingly away from the traditional nuclear family (Ball & Daly, 2012).

‘Expert’ Parenting Advice and Literature. Attempts to develop normative definitions of developmental success and effective childrearing practices have been recognised as both reflecting and shaping a recent incursion of expert parenting advice and literature. The rise of ‘expertise’ in childrearing has been seen as aiming to provide parents with the necessary information to meet the demands imposed by the brain-based models of development (Nadesan, 2002; Wall, 2004; Wall, 2010). In tracing the rise of childhood ‘experts’, Rose (1999) observed:

The knowledge of what constitutes normal development and how to ensure it has become esoteric; to have access to it requires reading the manuals, watching the television, listening to the radio, studying the magazines and advertisements. (p. 203)

Indeed, this statement is reflective of a growing expectation that parents actively seek out childrearing advice, which has seen an explosion of parenting books, magazines, websites, and advice columns spanning the breadth of resources now available to parents.

From a historical perspective, Stearn (2004) links greater attention in childrearing to declining birth rates in the 1890s, as parents developed an increased concern for preventing children from ‘going astray’. The 1920s saw the first government published parenting manuals, as well as the creation of *Parents Magazine*. This period, Stearn (2004) argues, marked a sharp rise in the amount of information that became available to parents, as well as a transition in parenting from a moral concern to a matter requiring professional expertise in psychology and medicine. The value of expert parenting advice has been seen carried on into current times. Increasingly ubiquitous parent programs, such as the highly marketed Triple P (Sanders, 1999), or trendy parenting philosophies, such as William Sear’s *Attachment Parenting* (2001) and Jane Nelsen’s *Positive Discipline* (2006), among dozens of others, have represented an increasingly specialized, and even commodified, nature of ‘best parenting practice’.

Even recently, the importance of expert status in childrearing guidance was exemplified in Smyth's (2014) analysis of online parenting materials sponsored by the Australian government. These resources were found to make repeated and explicit references to the scientific framework and expert nature of the content provided. The emphasis on expert authority through a government-sponsored initiative, the author suggests, "highlights how all aspects of the parent-child relationship are subject to scrutiny and upgrading, and amenable to standard-setting by the experts" (p. 17). Like parents responding to the anxiety provoked by the 'first three years' discourse, it has been suggested that the rise of parenting expertise has been prompted by a concern with wanting to do exactly the right thing for children (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2011). Parenting practices grounded in expert knowledge, therefore, provide the assurance of scientific certainty to ensure 'good parenting'.

Ramaekers and Suissa (2011) aptly point out, however, that expert trends in parenting advice and definitions of good parenting "have swung, pendulum style, back and forth for at least the past 200 years, backed up by the latest trends in social science" (p. 207). This assertion is supported by Stearn's (2004) historical account, as he notes how parental anxiety shifted from a primary preoccupation with children's good posture in the 1920s, to concerns with correcting left-handedness in the 1950s, and alarms about hyperactivity in the 1970s. Shifting parenting trends have also been noted in the way precepts of attachment theory have gone in and out of style based on cultural trends, public policy, and ideological debates about maternal versus out-of-home care (Faircloth, 2014).

The Intensification of Parenting. The regime of expert parenting discourse has also been seen as contributing to new and increasingly intensive parenting roles and expectations, whereby parents are held "accountable for each and every stage of their infant's 'development'

and for every future success and failure” (Nadesan, 2002, p. 424). Wall (2013) briefly traces child-rearing advice over the twentieth century, and finds a shift from emphasis on parents’ responsibility for children’s physical health and safety in the early part of the century, to emphasis on parental responsibility for children’s emotional and psychological wellbeing in the period after World War II. Following the introduction of brain-based development science in the 1990s, parenting responsibility was expanded to where it is now, encompassing children’s cognitive development and intellectual potential in addition to all other domains (Wall, 2013).

The prominence of the newly founded parental responsibility for cognitive development was also foregrounded in Smyth’s (2014) analysis of online parenting material. She observed how such materials held parents accountable for preschool children’s cognitive development by providing parents with tips, tools, and strategies to constantly be attuned to opportunities to maximize intellectual capacity by asking questions, providing gentle instructions, and stimulating curiosity throughout preschoolers’ daily routines. Parents were informed that capitalizing on these opportunities would benefit children’s educational achievement, drawing on repeated references to the ‘critical periods’ of brain development (Smyth, 2014). A similar account of parental responsibility for cognitive development was put forth by Quirke (2006), who charted the same trend in parenting magazines. She finds both a stark rise in the number of publications available since 1975, as well as a move toward increased emphasis on children’s cognitive development and academic success (Quirk, 2006). Consistent with Wall’s (2013) account, Quirk suggests that this trend signals a departure from an early twentieth century focus on keeping children clean and healthy, toward increased attention paid to setting children up for future intellectual and economic potential.

‘Evidence-Based’ Parenting. An increase in parenting expertise has also been articulated in a proliferation of ‘evidence-based’ parenting programs. Largely, this term is used to refer to theoretically-based parent interventions that have undergone some form of empirical evaluation for evidence of their effectiveness (Rodrigo, Almeida, Christiane & Koops, 2012). Lucas (2011) traces the rising popularity of evidence-based parenting programs in North America, beginning around the 1980s and 1990s, linked to shifts in modern policy-making agendas that favour effective and cost-efficient program delivery. She looks closely at a series of evidence-based parenting programs and identifies the presence of ideas borrowed from a series of psychological theories predicting a causal relationship between parenting practices and child outcomes (Lucas, 2011). It is suggested that this focus on discrete parent-child relationships gained popularity with policy makers interested in placing blame for social problems at the individual level, in order to deflect attention from wider social issues that impact child outcomes (Lucas, 2011). Several other researchers, primarily looking at a UK context, have confirmed an emphasis in policy literature on scientifically-informed parenting interventions as a means of addressing social problems (Edwards, Gillies, & Horsely, 2015; McVarish, Lee, & Lowe, 2015)

A significant example of evidence-based parenting is the Triple P – Positive Parenting Program, a worldwide, multi-level parent education program developed by Australian researcher, Matthew Sanders. On its website, Triple P describes itself as “one of the most effective evidence-based parenting programs in the world” (‘Triple P takes the guesswork out of parenting’, n.d., para. 1). Triple P’s claim to a strong evidence base is drawn from extensive program evaluations, published by Sanders and a revolving team of researchers (see, for example, Sanders, 1999; Sanders, 2012; Sanders, Markie-Dadds, Tully, & Bor, 2000). These evaluations variously report on measures related to levels of parenting conflict, competency, and

discipline styles, as well as external child behaviours. As the program widely touts, these evaluations have generally shown Triple P to be effective at achieving their intended effects on parenting choices and child behaviour.

The promise of objective evidence for parenting effectiveness is not without critiques, however. Ramaekers and Vandezande (2013), for example, provide a critical reflection on the Triple P slogan: “Parents need to become independent problem solvers”. They argue that this language presents a picture of parents as ‘in need’ of skills and knowledge, and positions the program itself as a vital source of this information. To this effect, the authors argue, expert parenting programs construct parents as inherently deficient, and as requiring continuous learning in order to achieve necessary skills and knowledge. As Ramaekers and Vandezande (2013) conclude, “childrearing seems to be ‘taken out of’ the parents’ hands, ‘taken over’ by the expertise claimed by Triple P” (p. 85). Thus, the ‘evidence-based’ nature of modern parenting programs communicates that those best positioned to determine appropriate parenting practices are parenting experts and not parents themselves.

A move toward ‘evidence-based’ parenting practices also prompts a question about what is counted as ‘evidence’ by parenting experts and authorities. Lucas (2011) asserts that, despite claims to objectivity, research evidence is inherently tied up with issues of power in determining *how* programs and policies are evaluated, thereby regulating the nature of the evidence that is made available. The evidence base used to inform expert parenting programs might also be considered alongside other forms of evidence about the factors that contribute to children’s health and wellbeing. For example, Canadian researcher Dennis Raphael (2014) reports on evidence from a ‘social determinants of health’ framework, which reveals the broader factors that impact of child and family wellbeing, beyond parenting skills and knowledge. This ‘social

determinants of health' framework includes: material wellbeing, health and safety, education, behaviours and risks, housing and environment (Raphael, 2014).

Raphael suggests that an unequal distribution of wealth and inadequate social supports have contributed to the vast disparities in the health of Canada's richest and poorest families. Raphael's discussion aligns with Lucas' observation of policy shifts toward social programs that focus on individual problems, noting a "commitment to the ideas of individualism and individual responsibility as opposed to communal responsibility" (Raphael, Curry-Stephens and Bryant, 2008, p. 225). These authors challenge the nature of evidence that is used in traditional 'evidence-based' programs and policies, for focusing on individual factors in order to avoid dealing with environmental conditions. Consideration for the social determinants of health in Canada reinforces Lucas' (2011) assertion that the nature of 'evidence' informed programming and policy is inherently selective and adaptable to ideological commitments.

Parenting Diversity and Material Positionings

Overall, the articles examined so far suggest that parenting responsibility has been intensified in the last two or three decades. This has been seen as a response to a proliferation of neuroscientific research, emphasising the 'critical period' of the early years, itself seen as a response to the lingering ambiguities of previous psychological models of human development, and reflected in a growth of expert parenting programs and literature. In the following section, I review research that has considered the implications of cultural parenting norms against the diverse material realities that may structure parents' experiences differently.

Parenting and Socio-Economic Status. A key area of focus in scholarship on diverse parenting subjectivities looks at class differences. Edward and Gilles (2011) examined the perspectives of different groups of parents with regard to accessing various forms of support and

experiencing expert parenting advice. In addressing this, the authors conducted a series of interviews with a sample of middle- and working-class parents of 8-12 year olds in the UK. Through these interviews, the authors found that middle-class parents experienced expert parenting material as consumers who were able to exert agency over their use of such materials, guided by a desire to achieve optimal development for their children. In contrast, the same expert materials were found to position working-class parents more as passive recipients of professional knowledge and advice. The authors concluded that expert parenting training and literature disseminates 'appropriate' parenting practices as universally applicable, ignoring the ways in which socially structured inequities influence parenting choices (Edward & Gillies, 2011).

In a Canadian context, Romagnoli and Wall (2012) examined how parenting education programs have impacted the experiences of a group of young, low-income mothers in Ontario and their perceptions of themselves as parents. They conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten mothers, 18-25 years old, most of whom were receiving social assistance. These interviews found that the mothers experienced recommended parenting practices as mandatory, as adherence to these practices determined their ability to maintain custody of their children. The participants expressed feeling stigma when attending Early Years programs, indicating that they felt judged by other mothers due to their age and income status (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). In comparing these findings to other studies of middle-class mothers, Romagnoli and Wall (2012) suggest that parenting education messages "played a much more prescriptive role for [the low-income] mothers who were socially positioned as a greater risk to their children's cognitive health given their age and class status" (p. 286). These findings further suggest that different parents may experience the same messages and expectations differently, depending on their positioning within existing social systems. For those mothers already being

monitored through other social interventions, such as housing and social assistance, there was a heightened threat of being identified as part of a risk-group and targeted for intervention (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012).

Mothering and Socio-Economic Status. In their study, Romagnoli and Wall (2012) also highlight the intersection of marginalized parenting with intensive mothering ideology that positions mothers as primary caregivers, placing them with high demands for engaged, child-centred parenting. Similar research by Gillies (2007) highlights the realities for single, low-income mothers in the UK who reported experiencing fewer choices with regard to taking on paid employment in order to support their families. Based on her work with these mothers, Gillies (2007) suggests that the material realities of working to sustain the livelihood of one's family were not conducive to the increasingly demanding time and resource requirements of intensive parenting models. Rather, she equates intensive mothering ideals with middle-class resources and practices, positioning working-class mothers outside of this model (Gillies, 2007). The juncture of intensive mothering and conditions of poverty provide a relevant consideration for the context of BC, in which 49 per cent of children living in poverty in BC today are in lone-parent families, with 81 per cent of this number being lone-mother households (First Call, 2014).

Poverty and Child Welfare. Romagnoli and Wall's (2012) study of Ontario mothers also brings attention to the fear of child protection involvement in mothers' discussions of parenting, even for mothers who did not have a child protection worker at the time. This compels a deeper look at the ways in which contemporary parenting models overlook barriers that might place limits on parenting choices and abilities, potentially linking disadvantaged families with notions of deficient or inadequate caregiving. In considering the impact of material and structural factors in shaping parenting experiences, other researchers have brought attention to the close

connection between poverty and the category of child neglect as a driver of child welfare involvement (Hearn, 2011; Sinha, Ellenbogen & Trocmé, 2013; Swift, 1995). Findings that link ‘at-risk’ discourses with child welfare practices targeting economically disadvantaged families have been substantiated in Canadian reports that suggest that families facing barriers related to poverty are overrepresented in the child welfare system (Sinha et al., 2013; Stokes & Schmidt, 2011). In the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect 2008, 33 per cent of cases of substantiated maltreatment involved families whose primary source of household income was derived from social assistance and employment insurance, while 10 per cent of families had income from part-time or seasonal employment, and 5 per cent from either unknown or unreliable sources. This totaled 49 per cent of families with less than full time employment (Trocmé et al., 2010). Such statistics comprise part of a larger debate about the category of neglect for child welfare intervention, as it is seen as a function of economic and social conditions that limit families’ access to resources rather than parents’ unwillingness to provide for children (Hearn, 2011; Swift, 1995).

Poverty and Other Social Dimensions. Access to economic and social resources is greatly shaped by the unequal distribution of power and influence; therefore, the impact of economic disadvantage is likely to disproportionately impact parents in marginalized social locations. For this reason, dimensions of race, gender, and ability are also interwoven with child welfare practices. For example, Trocmé et al. (2013) indicate that child welfare reports of neglect are highly prevalent with immigrant and Aboriginal families, finding that 26 per cent of neglect investigations involved Aboriginal children, whereas Aboriginal children make up just 6 per cent of the Canadian child population. Pon, Gosine, and Phillips (2011) reported statistics from an Ontario urban centre in which Black youth represented 65 per cent of the children in care,

despite the fact that the Black community only made up 8 per cent of the total population in the city. In a similar vein, parents with disabilities have also faced greater involvement with child welfare systems, largely due to higher levels of social exclusion, resulting in increased vulnerability to poverty and decreased access to social supports (Collings & Llewellyn, 2014; Feldman, McConnell & Aunos, 2012).

While conditions of social exclusion and economic disadvantage put many families at increased risk for child maltreatment and neglect, it has been argued that the prevailing models of child protection and risk assessment “have narrowed the child welfare discourse to one that emphasises blame on individual behaviour” (Stokes & Schmidt, 2011, p. 1119). This has been seen as resulting in an over-simplified analysis that fails to take into account the nuances created by social exclusion, financial disadvantage, and racialization, wherein discrimination and poverty become conflated with parental risk factors. As Trocmé et al. (2013) contend, “child welfare legislation attributes the primary responsibility for neglect to parents without considering the role that poverty and social deprivation play in creating the conditions where less than perfect parenting becomes neglectful” (p. 129). This research brings important attention to the effects of normative constructions of childrearing for parents who are positioned outside of these norms due to structural barriers that limit parenting choices. Consideration of these child welfare practices inform the current study by suggesting the potential material consequences of cultural discourse about parenting risk and responsibility, compelling a deeper analysis of the normative accounts that shape common understandings.

Indigenous Families and Child Welfare. In the Canadian context, an important case in point, meriting significant attention by researchers, is the impact of child welfare practices in the lives of Indigenous families. A more complete grasp of the social exclusion experienced by

Indigenous parents must follow an understanding of the structural barriers directly caused by interventions with Indigenous families by colonial authorities. Such practices can be traced to the forced removal of children from their families and placement in residential schools. As the primacy of residential schooling began to decline in the latter part of the twentieth century, state control of Indigenous families shifted toward provincial child welfare programming, characterised by a sustained pattern of increased apprehension of Indigenous children and fostering with non-Indigenous families (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2006). This pattern has been upheld in current times, as there continues to be a proportionally significant overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the care of child welfare programming. Statistics suggest that this number is higher in current times than it has ever been (Blackstock, 2011).

Colonial interventions have also operated through land and territorial dispossessions, often resulting in the loss of livelihood means, and giving rise to ongoing problematic housing and living conditions. Today, policies such as the Indian Act maintain government regulation over membership of Indigenous communities, restricting the size of population eligible for federal entitlements (Ball & George, 2006). Alongside the Indian Act is also opacity and ambiguity regarding jurisdictional responsibility for health and social services, reducing availability of these services for Indigenous communities (Ball & George, 2006). These historic and ongoing abuses have been largely responsible for disparities of health, education, economic participation, and other indicators of wellness currently witnessed in many Indigenous communities (de Leeuw, Greenwood & Cameron, 2010). The risk factors imposed through sustained colonial intervention have been the main contributing factors to high numbers of contemporary child welfare cases and out-of-home placements (Blackstock, 2011).

In 2007, Blackstock highlighted findings from a detailed analysis of child-in-care data, revealing that “0.67 per cent of non-Aboriginal children were in child welfare care as compared to 3.31 per cent of Métis children and 10.23 per cent of status First Nations children” (p. 74). de Leeuw, Greenwood and Cameron (2010) argue that intercession by state authorities on such a large scale has had the effect of painting Indigenous parents broadly as unfit caregivers, ignoring the current policies and practices that sustain unfair social structures, thereby legitimizing ostensibly benevolent intervention through child welfare programs and policies. This is seen as effectively perpetuating colonial notions of Indigenous people as inferior, and maintaining paternalistic control by colonial authorities, resulting in “an endless deferral of the time at which Indigenous peoples can be deemed ‘ready’ to ‘manage’ themselves” (de Leeuw et al., 2010, p. 290). Again, this suggests some of the ways in which discursive and material elements interact to produce social practices that reprimand parents for failing to sufficiently mitigate risk, rather than addressing the inequitable social conditions that comprise this risk (Blackstock, 2007; de Leeuw et al., 2010). The distinctive experience of Indigenous families in Canada also begs an analysis of the ways in which normative accounts of childrearing interact with Indigenous knowledges and traditions, such as the use of extended family support networks (Neckoway, Brownlee, & Castellan, 2007).

Conceptual Framework

In the final section of this chapter, I elucidate some conceptual tools from the intellectual work of Michel Foucault for understanding the complex relationship between power, truth, and discourse that interact to produce the discursive formations surrounding contemporary parenting. However, these formations must also be understood in the context of current social and political conditions, which I have elaborated in the previous section. Therefore, I also draw on

commentary that commends Foucault for his contributions while simultaneously bringing awareness to the limitations of his analysis for failing to theorize the presence of social difference and dimensions of oppression (Manias & Street, 2009; Lemke, 2002). I aim to work from an integrated framework that draws on Foucauldian concepts, but positions them within a broader analysis of the forces of oppression and domination that shape dimensions of gender, social class, and race, with particular focus on the policies and practices of settler colonialism in Canada. This approach emphasizes that a Foucauldian understanding of power does not negate the existence of other forms of power (Manias & Street, 2009).

Foucault: Truth, Power, and Discourse. In the Foucauldian tradition, power is understood not as a property or substance that can be given, lost, or exerted over others, but rather as the practices and techniques by which the conduct of individuals and populations is shaped (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Davies (2000) describes this conception of power as “a complex set of relations amongst people and in the relations between people and knowledge systems or patterns of discourse” (p. 18). In Foucault’s view, knowledge, power, and discourse are inextricably bound and mutually constitutive of one another, as power produces discourse and shapes knowledge, which in turn dictate the possibilities and constraints around which social action is oriented. Therefore, as discourses gain potency as truth, they are enacted in social and material processes that structure experiences, forming and constraining the types of subjectivities made available to “govern and constitute individuals in particular ways” (Manias & Street, 2009, p. 53).

Foucault’s concern was not to uncover meaning leading to truth in an absolute sense, but rather to expose meanings that are constructed as truth, which determine what counts as reasonable, and, therefore, what can be represented and enacted (Nadesan, 2002; Olssen, 2006).

According to Foucault, it is impossible to gain access to universal truth, as truth and knowledge can never be neutral or impartial; they are always affected by social forces and relations of power (Olssen, 2006). Application of these precepts to the context of parenthood will help to uncover the role of power in the establishment of parenting ‘truths’ and knowledge, and the effects of these discursive regimes on social and political practices in family life.

Governmentality. One of the ways that knowledge is seen as giving rise to power is through the regulation of populations by “describing, defining, and delivering the forms of normality and educability” (Olssen, 2006, p. 29). Such techniques of power were described by Foucault with his coining of the term ‘governmentality’. This notion denotes a conceptualization of governance as the ways in which people are persuaded to act through the normalization of certain social standards for behaviour (Olssen, 2006). In *Governing the Soul* (1999), Nikolas Rose interprets and extends Foucault’s notion of governmentality with significant references to discursive and social forces surrounding modern parenthood and family life. In Rose’s view, contemporary parents are governed not through overt or coercive mechanisms, but through parents’ own internalised accounts of ‘good parenting’. He sees normalized ideals as activating a series of hopes, anxieties, and guilt about childrearing activities, thus acting on parents’ choices and behaviours (Rose, 1999). Under such regimes, parents are expected to act in a manner of self-governance, regulating their activities in accordance with social expectations, dictated by normative representations (Rose, 1999).

Under a political rationality of governmentality, professionals and experts, therefore, play a key role in ordaining the criteria for normative child development and appropriate parenting practices. For Rose, expertise enables modern liberal states to formally maintain individual freedoms, while continuing to act on the behaviour and choices of citizens, mediated through

expert-driven knowledge. This enables the normalization and embedding of specific childhood outcomes and expectations for which all parents must strive on the basis of claims to scientific knowledge (Rose, 1999). Thus, parental behaviour is seen as being governed through families' desires to achieve the normative standards of child development and family life, activated through expert representations and discourse (Rose, 1999).

Discourse, Oppression, and Inequality. Rose provides a useful way of conceptualizing the role of expertise in governing parenting practice. However, his discussion neglects to account for the more active and direct roles of the state in shaping social policies that guide families' daily lives (McKee, 2009), including various forms of state monitoring and intervention, which remain a reality for many families. Rose's discussion also overlooks the material conditions and complexities of social difference, such as those discussed previously (Manias & Street, 2009; Sims-Schouten et al., 2007).

Seminal work by Karen Swift (1995) addresses some of these issues, in considering the way in which social and child welfare practices in Canada reassert the dominant position of political authorities, while reinforcing the marginalized positions of classed, gendered, and racialized parenting subjectivities (Swift, 1995). By failing to adequately account for structural inequities, categories of race, gender, and class become conflated with inherent deficits in parenting capacities (Gillies, 2007). This results in a paradox, whereby authorized discourses hold parents individually responsible for the care of children, in tension with the overregulation and deficit perceptions of certain groups of parents who are positioned outside of dominant parenting ideals and classified in problem categories (Hartas, 2014). To address these varied dimensions in my analysis, I apply an integrated framework, engaging with elements from Indigenous, feminist, poststructural, and disability lenses. I also employ critiques of capitalism

and neoliberalism (Lemke, 2002), which I elaborate in the following section in order to explicate the way in which I conceive of the relationship between neoliberalism and other elements of oppression. Overall, I aim to integrate diverse perspectives so as to focus on the modes of oppression, rather than on any one group in particular.

Critique of Neoliberalism. An analytic of governmentality within a critique of neoliberal and capitalist political systems supports a foundation for analyzing the dominance and the subjugation of social groups (Lemke, 2002). Within neoliberal and capitalist regimes, individuals are constructed as rational actors, who take an active role in their own self-care and act to mitigate possible risks (Lemke, 2002). Such systems feature a celebration of economic self-sufficiency and social mobility, coupled with an emphasis on the minimizing the role of the state (Wall, 2004).

The view of an agentic, autonomous self, with individual will and freedom is seen as presumes that individuals act on the basis of rational decision-making, placing a focus on personal responsibility for life circumstances. Within this purview, “Those unable or unwilling to conform to such dominant values are exceptionalised, positioned as outside the common fold” (Gillies, 2007, p. 23). The individualization and privatization of social problems might, thus, be seen as obscuring an analysis of the structural barriers and inequities that constrain parents’ ability to make choices for their family. Neoliberal ideologies and practices provide a means by which the structures that designate positions of poverty and privilege are maintained.

Summary

This literature review has seen how contemporary parenting discourses place significant emphasis on the quality of children’s childrearing environments during their first years of life, linked to life-long learning and success. Many researchers have suggested that neuroscientific

frameworks have placed increased expectations on parents to provide the right inputs and activities to optimize children's potential. In order to ensure that parents are properly equipped with the right knowledge and skills to meet these expectations, contemporary parenting has additionally seen a proliferation of expert guidance and advice. Failure to comply with these normative accounts of childrearing has been seen as designating individual parenting risk factors, hindering analyses of the structural barriers that shape childrearing environments and constrain parenting choices. As a result, parents experiencing conditions of economic disadvantage and social exclusion are conflated with deviant caregiving and targeted for state monitoring and intervention. A conceptual understanding of power, discourse, and truth as inextricably intertwined establishes the ways in which normative accounts of childrearing act on parents' behaviour and choices in order to produce themselves as good, responsible parents. This is consistent with a neoliberal rationality that individualizes responsibility for social problems, rendering invisible the oppressive power structures that maintain social inequities.

In light of increasingly neoliberal social policies, high rates of poverty, and systematic social exclusion of Indigenous populations in BC, this review raises questions about the nature of parenting discourses circulated within the current context. Specifically, as parenting information has been set forth as a policy response for 'supporting vulnerable families', these materials must be put under examination in order to uncover the assumptions and ideologies guiding discursive constructions of parenting responsibility and child development. In the next chapter, I elaborate the procedures by which I aim to address these questions by describing the methodological framework and method of data collection and analysis I use for this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology & Method

In this chapter, I present the theoretical orientation, methodology, method of data collection, and analytical process used in this inquiry. I begin by briefly revisiting my research questions and provide an overview and rationale for the design of my study. I then offer an explanation of my theoretical orientation of poststructuralism, and link this to my methodological framework of critical discourse analysis. This is followed by an outline of my data collection processes and an overview of the finalized data sample used for my analysis. I finish this chapter by detailing my analytical approach, including a brief discussion on the nature of ‘rigour’ in discourse analysis.

Research Questions

This research is guided by the following questions: (1) How is parental responsibility for child developmental outcomes discursively represented in web-based parenting educational content?; (2) What are the ideological and epistemological assumptions that shape these discursive practices?; (3) How do these discursive practices position parents within existing social, economic, cultural, and political conditions in British Columbia?, and (4) What alternative conceptualizations and enactments of parenting education and support might be made possible?

Overview of Research Design

This analysis examines a sample of web-based educational content targeted at parents of newborns and young children, made available through provincial government-sponsored or non-profit organizational websites, geographically headquartered in British Columbia. The choice to examine website material rather than books, organizational documents, conversations, or other forms of communication was motivated by two decisive factors. The first was an observation of

the increasingly ubiquitous presence of Internet media in North America, making it a site of interest due to its capacity to disseminate information widely across a growing sector of the population, unconstrained by geographical barriers and distance. Further to this point, the Internet has also been noted for increasingly becoming a tool for governments to efficiently deliver communications to citizens (Chadwick & May, 2003). This leads to the second observation that prompted the focus of my inquiry, which was the foregrounding of Internet-based informational material as a strategy for supporting vulnerable families in the BC Government's *Families First Agenda*. Thus, the highlighting of such material as part of the official policy response to vulnerable families in BC makes it a highly relevant site of inquiry.

For the purpose of this study, I define educational content as text, visual images, or videos, intended to provide information to parents about all domains of child development, or that provide suggestions, tips, or strategies for recommended parenting practices. The scope of this selection was narrowed further to include only content that focuses on children's development between birth and three years of age. This choice is based largely on the discursive constructions of the importance of 'early childhood brain development', particularly in the first three years of life, as highlighted in my literature review. Additionally, some of the BC policy literature indicates that many of the educational materials that are of interest in this inquiry have been developed as a response to scientific findings about the significance of early development. For example, when introducing the healthy early child development policy stream, the *Healthy Families BC Policy Framework* (2014) states, "Children's physical, social and emotional health, cognitive development, and speech/language development are all critically influenced by their fetal and early life environments" (p. 15). Therefore, maintaining a focus on the 'critical period' of birth to age three will be consistent with the official mandated focus of many of the materials,

and will also provide some insight regarding the extent to which parenting information is connected to this network of discourses.

Theoretical Framework: Poststructuralism

I ground my analysis in an overarching epistemological framework of poststructuralism. The term poststructuralism has been used to refer to a collection of theoretical views, variously attributed to the work of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault, among others (Marshall, 2004). The diversity within these bodies of work makes it hard to pin down a single definition of poststructuralism. However, largely, poststructural theory has been conceived of as a response to its predecessor, structuralism (Marshall, 2004). As a starting point, both structuralism and poststructuralism claim that linguistic systems are independent of the reality to which they refer and, therefore, see meaning as constructed through language practices (Zeeman, Poggenpoel, Myburgh, & Van der Linde, 2002). Structuralism originated as a field of thought that sought to discover objective, foundational structures that govern linguistic systems and processes of meaning-making (Marshall, 2004). While structuralism viewed these structures as existing as part of a fixed, closed system, poststructuralism understands structures as unstable, contingent, and always shifting in relation to each other (Davies, 2000). Therefore, for poststructuralists, it is through language practices that structures are produced, maintained, and transformed, allowing the potential for structures to be challenged and changed (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Poststructuralism and Discourse. Discourse analytic approaches start with the same assumption as poststructuralism: that our knowledge of the world is only accessible to us through our ways of representing and categorizing it. These ways of representing – languages, texts, conversations, images – exist within the realm of discourse. From this view, discourse is

described as “a form of social action that plays a part in producing the social world – including knowledge, identities and social relations – and thereby in maintaining specific social patterns” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5). This definition calls on a Foucauldian view of discourse, in which discourse informs common social understandings, which determine what forms of social practice come to be seen as natural and normal, while others become inconceivable (Olssen, 2006). This draws a link between knowledge and social action. A poststructural understanding of meanings as shifting and contingent, calls for an analysis of the specific historical and social contexts in which certain patterns of meaning are maintained and transformed through discursive practice (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

The fluid and constructed nature of meaning precludes access to any final, stable account of truth, and rejects the possibility of objective forms of knowledge (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In this way, poststructuralism functions as a critique of positivist frameworks that seek to derive valid, authoritative knowledge of the world through empirical research methods. In denying the possibility of absolute knowledge, poststructuralism embraces a plurality of meanings, and sees positivist research as just one of many different processes of meaning-making (Gravey, 1989). Poststructural theoretical assumptions, therefore, will be suited to the objectives of my inquiry, as I seek to make visible the socially contingent nature of parenting knowledge and identities. A critical understanding of knowledge production processes will permit a challenge to universal truth claims made under the disciplinary traditions of developmental psychology and neuroscientific research, much of which underlie the ‘expert’ literature surrounding child development and childrearing practices.

Poststructuralism and Subjectivity. In conceiving of the ways in which different parenting identities might be constructed through parenting education materials, a poststructural

approach focuses attention to processes of subjectification. This term, largely derived from the work of Foucault, denotes the process through which individual identities, or subjectivities, are produced through language and discourse (Davies, 2000). A poststructural approach assumes that experiences of identity “can only be expressed and understood through the categories and concepts available to them in discourse” (Frazer, 1990, p. 282 as cited in Davies, 2000, p. 89). As different subjectivities are shaped through discourse, they are, therefore, enmeshed within relations of power and knowledge, and become a means by which these relations are reproduced (Davies, 2000). In this way, individual subjectivities are situated in relation to the various social, economic, political, and social factors that differentially structure experiences.

This view of subjectivities as discursively produced challenges the traditional humanist subject, understood as possessing an essential, coherent, fixed nature (Davies, 2000). Rather, because language is seen as a product of dynamic social interactions through which meanings are constantly in flux, the subjectivities made available within those discourses are likewise always shifting. This precludes the possibility of an ever fixed or final identity, and instead constitutes identities as conditional to ongoing processes of categorization, meaning-making, and social positioning (Davies, 2000). This assumption contests any essentialized definitions of what it means to be a ‘parent’, and furthermore acknowledges that individual parents each occupy a multiplicity of subject positions. A poststructural approach aims to reveal how the characteristics associated with different parenting identities have been constructed and positioned through discursive and social processes (Davies, 2000). Applying a critical analysis to the discursive regimes embedded in representations of normative parenting, therefore, allows us to uncover the subjectivities made available to parents at this nexus of power and language.

Critical Realist Ontology. Poststructuralism places a great deal of attention on the role of language, and as such, has been critiqued for over-theorizing the constitutive function of language in social practice, thereby failing to account for the non-discursive elements, such as materiality and institutional power, that also structure experiences. Critics have argued that an emphasis on language and denial of a pre-existing, knowable reality have rendered poststructuralism as a relativist epistemology that undermines the grounds on which to challenge oppressive social structures and advocate social change (Gill, 1995; Peile & Mccouat, 1997).

In order to inform an approach that accounts for the domain of existence outside representation I draw on a critical realist ontology, originally formulated by Bhaksar (1979), and operationalized by Sims-Schouten, Riley, and Willig (2007). This position asserts the existence of a pre-existing reality, but makes a distinction between this reality and our knowledge of it, which is understood as shifting and partial (Fairclough, 2003). Use of this type of framework requires researchers to consider “extra-discursive” ontological factors, “understood as producing a context in which certain discursive constructions are more easily enabled or disabled than alternative constructions” (Sims-Shouten, Riley & Willig, 2007, p. 103). A consideration for relevant material conditions and institutional powers benefits the critical goals of this analysis by making visible the social realities that structure experiences and shape subjectivities in addition to, and in conjunction with, discursive practice (Sims-Shouten et al., 2007). Applying a critical realist ontology will allow me to more comfortably fit a poststructural paradigm into a methodology of critical discourse analysis, which applies a systematic, multi-layered analysis for examining discourses within their socio-political contexts. I, therefore, continue this discussion in the next section, which considers the ways in which these principles are operationalized in the methodological framework of critical discourse analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse analytic methods can be characterized by their aim not to discover the reality behind social representation, but rather to make social representation itself the object of analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Broadly, the methodologies and perspectives of discourse analysis were developed as a way of studying language, not simply as a medium for communication, but as a medium for social practice (Wood & Kroger, 2000). These methodologies are founded on an assumption that discourse plays a major role in shaping the social world and, therefore, makes discourse itself the topic of research (Wood & Kroger, 2000). There are many varieties of discourse analysis that differ with regard to their specific theoretical principles, definitions of terms, and the types of data that are analyzed (Wood & Kroger, 2000). For my study, I use the specific methodological framework provided by critical discourse analysis (CDA).

Critical forms of discourse analysis are often characterized by an emphasis on seeking to understand the role of discourse in social and cultural contexts, and recognizing the presence of power dimensions in discursive practice (Wodak, 2004). CDA defines itself as “critical research” because it commits itself to social change, by aiming to investigate and analyze power relations in society, providing a “basis for a critical questioning of social life” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 15). There have been various approaches to critical discourse analysis developed by different theorists (Lazar 2005; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; van Dijk, 2000). As a general movement, CDA is difficult to summarize; therefore, I turn to a description of the principles and strategies of CDA as developed by Norman Fairclough (1995, 2003, 2010), which I have selected as a guiding framework for my analysis.

Fairclough’s approach has been noted as one of the most comprehensive and systematic frameworks for analysis of discourse as social practice (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In

Fairclough's usage, the term *discourse* can be applied either in a general, abstract sense as language as an element of social life that is distinguished from, but dialectically related to, other elements (i.e., materiality, temporality, interaction), or as a count noun ('a discourse', 'several discourses') to refer to specific "ways of representing aspects of the world" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 215). Discourse as an element of social life can also operate as powerful organizational and institutional practices that control the selection of certain possibilities, to the exclusion of others, through language. These practices are constituted by policies, ideologies, and theories, which are articulated through discourse channels, and function to mediate abstract social structures and the organization of social life (Fairclough, 2003). In this way, "the capacity to influence or control processes of mediation is an important aspect of power in contemporary societies" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 31). The systematic relationships between institutional discourses transform language into the different domains of social life.

Central to Fairclough's approach is an understanding of discourse as constitutive of social practice, but also as constituted by, and reflective of, social structures and processes (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). This framework is built on an assumption of a dialectical relationship between language and other elements of social life. This means that discursive events both shape, and are shaped by, other elements, including physical and temporal materiality, embodiment, and institutional powers (Fairclough, 2003; Sims-Schouten et al., 2007). The variety of contextual elements plays a mediating role in determining the social effects of texts. Fairclough (2003) distinguishes between 'construction' and 'construal', whereby "we may textually construe (represent, imagine, etc.) the social world in particular ways, but whether our representations have the effect of changing its construction depends upon various contextual factors" (p. 8). Therefore, CDA emphasizes the need to analyze the role of language and texts in relation to the

social and cultural processes and structures that mediate the actual social effects of discourse (Fairclough, 2003).

This view of the constitutive-constituted relationship as more dialectical is a slight departure from more purely poststructural discourse theories, which place the greatest emphasis on the constitutive nature of discourse (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). However, this perspective corresponds with the dual-objectives of my inquiry, in seeking to understand how parenting discourses are both *produced by* and *productive of* dominant cultural understandings about the nature of parental responsibility and child development. Elevated rates of poverty in BC, systematic social exclusion of Indigenous communities, and high social welfare involvement with marginalized families, as outlined in my introduction and literature review, are important examples of materiality and institutional practices that shape, and are shaped by, discourse practice. The distinction between discourse and its broader social context provides a basis for examining the ways parenting discourses operate within existing power dynamics and across structural contexts. This consideration for power and social structures will allow me to bring a social critique of normative gender roles and sexualities, capitalist economic systems, cultural hegemony, racialization, and other forms of social exclusion. For this aspect of my analysis, I draw on elements from various critical social theories, including feminist, disability, and Indigenous lenses, in order to make processes of marginalization and exclusion more visible.

Closely intertwined with a critique of structural oppression, I am also interested in processes of subject formation through political, ideological, and disciplinary discourses. Therefore, a Foucaudian-inspired understanding of discourse, power, and truth will allow me to recognise the pervasiveness of dominant discursive formations and productive power in processes of governmentality and subjectification. A critical discourse analytic approach

grounded in an understanding of the current social landscape will, therefore, enable an examination of processes and structures that marginalize and exclude certain parenting knowledge and experiences.

CDA Analytic Framework. Fairclough's approach to CDA involves an analytic framework with three differentiated dimensions of analysis: *text*, *discursive practice*, and *socio-cultural practice* (Figure 1). Analysis of the first level, text, involves a detailed examination of the linguistic form and format of a text, in order to determine how the text is oriented and how discourses are activated (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). This applies a linguistic analysis to the properties of text, in order to explicate both the meanings and modality; that is, *what* is being communicated and *how* it is being communicated (Fairclough, 1995).

The second level, discourse practice, focuses on the processes by which the text is produced, distributed, and consumed, and the transformations that texts undergo throughout these processes (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). This transformation of texts is referred to as *intertextuality*, the analysis of which seeks to examine how materials are recontextualized when they are transmitted across different genres and styles (Fairclough, 1995). This level of analysis seeks to place discursive practices in relation to a broader network of discourses.

The final dimension of Fairclough's analytical framework entails an analysis of the socio-cultural practices in which the communicative event takes place (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). This stage of analysis seeks to chart the landscape of non-discursive structures and conditions within which discursive practices are situated (Fairclough, 1995). The conclusions made through this level of analysis are what render this methodology political and critical (Fairclough, 1995). The three different levels of this approach will provide a framework for understanding what

discourses about parenting and child development are present in the materials under review, how these discourses are articulated, and how they reproduce or transform existing social practice.

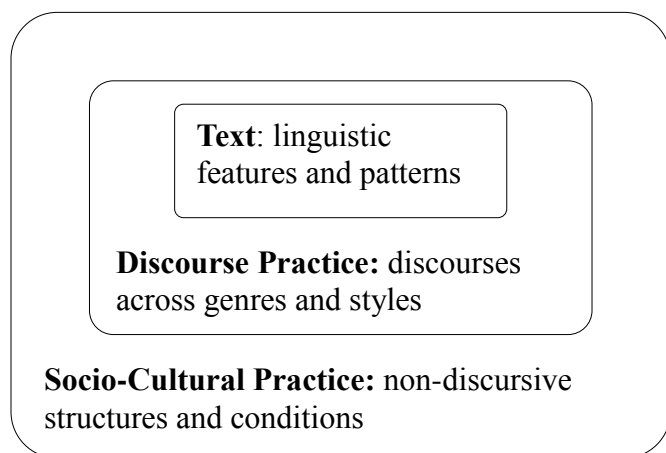


Figure 1. Three-dimensional framework for critical discourse analysis (adapted from Fairclough, 1995)

Data Collection

The process of collecting data for this research consisted of a computerized search of online material. I first sought to identify key relevant websites using a Google engine search, applying variations of the following search terms: *parent**, *infan**, *early childhood*, *development*, *early brain development*, *information*, *tips*, *advice*, *British Columbia*. This procedure generated several pages of results, which I reviewed for relevance based on my inclusion criteria, as outlined in Table 1. During this process, I chose to exclude private and for-profit websites in order to place a limit on the amount of data included for my study, to ensure a manageable sized data set for richer analysis. I, therefore, chose to include only materials from websites that could be shown to be linked politically or financially to BC government policy mandates and to the broader systems of parenting support and interventions that act on the lives of families in BC.

After sorting through the initial set of websites, I identified four domain names with content that fit my inclusion criteria: HealthyFamilies BC, BC Health, BC Council for Families, and KidCare Canada. I cross-referenced the ‘Resources’ or ‘Links’ pages available on each of these websites, which commonly provide a list of hyperlinks to similar online material. These pages linked to a number of additional websites that did not fit my criteria, as well as linking to each other, which I took to indicate that my search had reached a saturation point. Once I settled on these four websites, I sorted through the content provided on each and made note of the specific content that fit within my criteria. After identifying all the relevant content on each website, I downloaded the selected materials and printed them in hard copy for analysis. In the next section I review briefly the four websites that were identified for my analysis and provide a short description of the content selected.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
1) Websites for BC government-sponsored or non-profit organizations based in BC	1) Private and for-profit websites
2) Content is targeted specifically at parents	2) Content targeted at service providers, professionals, etc
3) The focus of information is on children aged zero to three years of age	3) Content that must be ordered in hard-copy
4) Educational content is directly available online	4) Information/ promotion for programs that must be accessed in person

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for data collection

Sample

Several of the websites included in my data set were highlighted in the BC Government’s *Families First Agenda*; therefore, I wish to briefly revisit the intention and goals of this plan. The *Families First Agenda* was introduced in 2012 as a priority area for provincial policy. The document lays out a series of strategies “designed to help families in B.C. continue to progress

and thrive” (Province of BC, 2012, p. 2). These strategies are divided into three pillars: “Family Affordability”; “Supporting Vulnerable Families”; and “Safe Communities, Strong Families”. Within the pillar of “Supporting Vulnerable Families”, the first strategy discussed is the provision of “increased resources for parents to support health literacy and promote evidence-based self-care” (Province of BC, 2012, p. 18). The plan then highlights the first two websites that have been included in my study.

British Columbia Health. The *Families First Agenda* points to two documents published by the Government of BC and available through the British Columbia Health website (www.health.gov.bc.ca): *Baby’s Best Chance* and *Toddler’s First Steps*. An online description introduces these materials as follows: “Based on best practices, these evidence based documents provide new parents with information on having a healthy pregnancy and providing information they need to give their baby the best start in life” (Additional Resources, 2012, para. 1). Both manuals can both be accessed for download as PDF documents on the BC Health website, or are available in hard-copy at public health offices across BC. The *Baby’s Best Chance* document was 168 pages. Of these, I found 7 pages that fit within my inclusion criteria, as the vast majority of the content focused on pregnancy and health related issues. The *Toddler’s First Steps* document was 184 pages, of which 61 pages were retained for analysis.

HealthyFamilies BC. The *Families First Agenda* also highlights the *Healthy Families BC: Healthy Start program*, a province-wide health promotion strategy as part of the Ministry of Health’s *Healthy Families BC Policy Framework*, which includes a variety of different supports for new and expecting parents. A main component of this strategy is the HealthyFamilies BC website, which contains a more recently developed section specifically for parenting advice and resources (www.healthyfamiliesbc.ca/parenting). The website introduces its purpose: “From

ensuring your baby has the best possible start, to breastfeeding resources and strategies for coping with challenging behaviours, HealthyFamilies BC offers the most up-to-date information and practical tips for protecting your family's health and well being” (About Us, 2012, para. 3). The content on this website was organized by age and category, making it easy to select the relevant content for parents of children aged zero to three. This content was sorted by ‘Babies (0-12) months’ and ‘Toddlers (12-36) months’. Each section was further divided by topics related to ‘Feeding/Eating’, ‘Care’, ‘Health’, ‘Development’, ‘Safety’, and ‘Parenting’. Of these topics, all articles related to ‘Development’ and ‘Parenting’ were deemed to fit within the inclusion criteria and were selected for analysis. A total of 48 web pages were selected.

BC Council for Families. An additional website that I identified was the BC Council for Families (www.bccf.ca), a non-profit organization that provides training and networking for family education professionals. Although this organization was not named in the *Families First Agenda*, it receives financial support from BC’s Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD, 2013). In explaining the purpose of organization, the website states: “because we want your family to keep flourishing and prospering, we’re dedicated to providing family education programs and resources that help yours grow stronger and even more resilient” (About Us, 2015, para. 5).

The website provides a catalogue of resources targeted for both parents and family education professionals, classified either by format (article, podcast, etc.) or by topic (‘Parenting’, ‘Early Childhood’, etc.). The resources provided by topic were further categorized by audience: either ‘Parent’ or ‘Professional’. Because the content of these resources were not necessarily targeted to children of specific age groups, I assessed each resource under the ‘Parent’ heading individually to determine if the material was relevant for parents of children

aged zero to three, and related topics on child development or parenting. For example, articles about school-aged children ('Back to School, Back to Reality') were discarded. Additionally, a majority of the links provided under the 'Resources' heading were order forms for publications that could be ordered in hard copy, or promotional information about specific parenting programs. Based on my exclusion criteria, these materials were not usable for my analysis. Overall, eight articles ranging from two to ten pages in length were selected.

KidCare Canada. The final website that I identified was for KidCare Canada (www.kidcarecanada.org), a non-profit organization financially sponsored in part by the BC Government. As stated on their website, this organization "takes the science of Early Childhood Development and brings it to new parents in a visual format that is easy-to-understand and quick to watch" (About, 2013, para. 1). The website is predominantly made up of a series of videos two to twenty minutes in length under several different categories focused on infancy and early child development. Because the website contained a large number of videos that fit within my inclusion criteria, I limited my selection to only those videos less than five minutes in length. This was done primarily to keep the amount of content to a manageable quantity, and was also based on the observation that many of the longer videos were compilations of the same clips used in the shorter videos. Further, I theorized that a parent of a newborn may be more likely to find the time to view the shorter videos. A total of 21 videos were selected and transcribed for use in my analysis.

Analytical Method

Before undertaking my formal analysis, I engaged in multiple readings of the data set in order to familiarize myself with the breadth of content. While going through the data at this stage, I began making notes of the salient thematic elements that emerged across several texts.

From this, I developed a set of broad themes that I could use to help organize the breadth of content. The content within each theme was not exclusive, as there was some overlap between them; however, these rough classifications assisted in providing a starting place for organizing the representational elements within my analysis.

Text Analysis. With my broad themes in mind, I returned to the data set and began a systematic analysis using Fairclough's three-dimensional approach. This began with a systematic coding of the text at the micro-linguistic level, in order to identify and describe the linguistic features and patterns, and to interpret how these elements functioned together within the form and purpose of each text. Fairclough (2003) has provided an extensive collection of linguistic analytical tools, which I relied on heavily for this stage of analysis. Among the concepts that were found to be useful was a typology of different speech functions, which distinguish between the two purposes of *knowledge exchange* (expressed through statements and questions) and *activity exchange* (expressed through offers and demands). The use of statements is further classified by different *statement types*: fact, prediction, hypothesis, evaluation (Fairclough, 2003). These types are used as a way to further identify the function of the text, as well as the presence of implicit assumptions and values. Similarly, the types of *semantic relations* (e.g., additive, contrastive, conditional, etc.) between sentences and clauses provide another way of determining the purpose and form of the texts. For example, semantic relations help identify the extent to which texts are merely descriptive of social events, or whether they make claims that are explained or justified (Fairclough, 2003). These distinctions are closely linked to a typology of *legitimation* techniques, identified as: authorization (reference to authority), rationalization (reference to utility), moral evaluation (reference to value systems), and narrative. These categories help identify the strategies by which texts explain or justify their claims, either

explicitly or implicitly (Fairclough, 2003). Finally, the concept of *modality* refers to the speaker or author's degree of certainty or doubt about what they are saying, whereby, highly modalized language indicates lower certainty of truth claims (e.g., 'may', 'I think', 'possibly'), and low levels of modalization indicate higher levels of certainty (e.g., 'will', 'definitely', 'very'). Modality is, therefore, used to assess levels of authoritativeness, which can be suggestive of how the speaker or author identifies in relation to others (Fairclough, 2003).

Within Fairclough's framework, these concepts and categories can also be used to assess the text's *orientation to difference*. This concept is understood as a continuum between "openness to, acceptance of, or recognition of difference" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 41) that brings in diverse voices on one side, and the bracketing or suppression of different voices through a presumption of commonality on the other. A text's orientation to difference is largely identified through its degree of *dialogicality*. This term refers to the extent to which texts either attempt to explain or relativize concepts and definitions against a backdrop of competing definitions, or the extent to which they use totalizing, absolute language to discuss these categories (Fairclough, 2003). Dialogicality and orientation to difference are particularly important considerations for my analysis, as a way to evaluate the texts' treatment of social difference and the inclusion or absence of diverse voices. All of these analytic tools were synthesized into a series of questions, which I used to guide this stage of my analysis. These questions are as follows:

- What genre does the text constitute?
- Are the texts oriented toward knowledge-exchange or action-exchange?
- What speech functions are used in the text?
- What statement types does the text use?
- What semantic relations are predominant in the text?
- What are the degree and forms of dialogicality in the text?
- What is the text's orientation to difference?
- What assumptions are present in the text?
- How modalized is the text?

By engaging with the text at the level of micro-linguistic features, I was able to focus on specific terminology, images, linguistic orientations, and communication styles that make up the different representational aspects of discourse. This enabled me to bring attention to the specific ways in which these linguistic elements become enacted as genres, producing different ways of acting, interacting, and shaping identities. These are important aspects of meaning-making that may risk being overlooked without deliberate consideration.

Discourse Analysis. The next stage of my analysis involved an examination of the discursive features of the text, which focused on the *intertextual elements*. Fairclough (2003) describes intertextuality as the presence of elements from other texts and the various ways that these elements are related to within the text. For example, is the presence of these elements merely assumed? Are they introduced or described? Are they attributed to an outside source? Are they polemicized? The treatment of intertextual features can be identified by examining how these elements are recontextualized in the genres of the texts. *Recontextualization* refers to the ways in which discourses are appropriated and transformed across different contexts (Fairclough, 2003). This concept is useful for identifying *how* concepts and definitions are translated through text production processes across different texts, genres, and social practices. This level of analysis, therefore, considers which intertextual elements are present, absent, backgrounded, or foregrounded; to what extent elements are abstracted or generalized from the context; and what types of legitimation or evaluation are used (Fairclough, 2003). The concepts from this level of Fairclough's framework were operationalized into the following guiding questions:

- What intertextual elements are present in the text?
- How are these elements recontextualized?
- Which outside texts and voices are drawn upon? Which are excluded?
- What significant absences are there?
- What aspects of social practice are being represented in the text?

- From what perspective are these aspects represented?
- What are the tensions, contradictions, inconsistencies across these texts?

This more macro-level analysis enabled me to identify the broader networks of discursive practice to which these materials belong and to determine the ways in which certain representational elements were translated from their sources into the texts. Tracing the sources of these discourses and identifying the recontextualizing principles helped me to begin to uncover some of the assumptions and ideologies present within the data. In some instances, the different discursive practices I identified were able to be classified neatly into my broad themes, while other times, these practices spanned across the themes. This allowed me to view recontextualizing patterns across the data and to identify the ways in which these discourses were textured together so as to structure gaps and patterns across multiple categories.

Socio-cultural Practice Analysis. The final step in my analysis was to link the linguistic features and discursive practices identified in my earlier stages to elements of socio-cultural practice within the social, political, economic, and geographical contexts of BC. This stage of analysis was, therefore, largely informed by drawing connections between my data set and the ideas, information, and statistics that were examined in my introduction and literature review. In this way, my final level of analysis involved constant movement between the data and neighbouring literature. My discussion at this level of analysis was guided by the following questions:

- What is the socio-cultural and economic context in which the text takes place?
- What ideologies underwrite the discursive practice within the text?
- How does the discursive practice within the text construct parenting identities and relations?
- What are the ideological, political and social consequences of the discursive practice in the text?
- Does the discursive practice within the text contribute to social change or to the maintenance of the status quo in the social practice?

This phase allowed me to draw connections to broader ideological and historical contexts, socio-cultural practices, and political currents that shape the linguistic and discursive practices examined at the earlier stages of analysis. These considerations are important for the dual purposes of examining how specific instances of discursive practice have been shaped through socio-cultural practice, and in turn, how discursive practice functions within existing systems to shape various parenting knowledge and identities.

Based on these frameworks, I also brought to this level of analysis a consideration for elements of socio-cultural practice that *might* have been present in the text, but were not. This was an important way of considering what elements of socio-cultural practice or social identity were suppressed or bracketed, and, therefore, what possibilities may have been constrained by these absences. Further, my analysis has sought to identify instances of ambiguity, contradiction, tension, and inconsistency within the text. Accounting for these inconsistencies opened up a space for theorizing about what other discourses might be possible. In my final chapter, I draw on these instances further, in elaborating a discussion about how parenting education might be conceived differently.

Overall, Fairclough's three-dimensional approach has provided an effective framework for examining the discursive formations of parenting responsibility and child development in my selected data. This analytic procedure allowed me to uncover the assumptions that underpin the particular view of parenting put forth in these texts by tracing the transmission and transformation of broad discursive networks into the specific genres and styles that were present in the data. In connecting these linguistic and discursive patterns to the broader ideological and political contexts, I completed a discussion of my analysis by drawing on neighbouring academic

literature and relevant statistics on the differential material realities of family life in the socio-political context of BC.

Rigour and Researcher Reflexivity

Standard research evaluation conventions of reliability and validity are limited in their applicability for discourse analytic studies. Concepts of reliability and validity are built on the assumption of a single, objective reality that can be revealed through virtue of sound methodology (Cheek, 2004; Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000). This assumption is at odds with the poststructural framework underlying this analysis and much of discourse analytic work, which asserts that it is impossible to assess truth independently of the shifting and multiple constructions of meaning. Attempts to pin down a definitive assessment of analytic quality are mired by the same limitations of language and shifting meanings that this approach seeks to analyze (Cheek, 2004). How, then, does one establish criteria for the evaluation of methodological rigour under these conditions?

In addressing this issue for my current study, I draw primarily from an alternative framework put forth by Wood and Kroger (2000) who suggest criteria for *warrantability* in discourse analysis. Warrantability considers the extent to which an analysis is trustworthy and sound, and to which it may be used as a basis for future work. The following criteria are put forth as indicators of warrantable analysis: orderliness and documentation, demonstration, coherence, plausibility, and fruitfulness (Wood & Kroger, 2000). One aspect of documentation involves the use of an audit trail, so as to track and record the choices made with regard to the collection and selection of data by clearly detailing these processes and providing well-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Rogers, 2008). Orderliness and documentation also refer to the importance of documenting procedures and displaying arguments in order to provide context to the reader for

understanding claims made (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Similarly, demonstration involves presenting the steps and sequence of analysis that “capture the logic of the argument”, rather than simply telling the reader of the argument (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 170).

The remaining criteria of coherence, plausibility, and fruitfulness require that analysis claims are, respectively: consistent, clearly formulated, and identifiable; that they seem reasonable in relation to other implicit and explicit knowledge; and that they are productive to new ways of thinking or acting on issues (Wood & Kroger, 2000). This involves presenting a clear explanatory scope that links the outcomes of the analysis to the initial research goals and locates these claims within social contexts and neighbouring research (Wood & Kroger, 2000). In this way, patterns and gaps identified in the data analysis are informed by, and linked back to, a comprehensive review of the existing literature and relevant statistics outlined prior to analysis, further enhancing the warrantability of claims.

Like other commentators, I acknowledge that traditional conventions of reliability and validity are limited in their applications for discourse analytical methodology, and I therefore offer the preceding criteria as the yardstick against which I have aimed to ensure the soundness of my analysis, while maintaining my epistemological commitments. I do not claim to generate definitive or absolute knowledge of the text, as all interpretations are inevitably provisional and selective. Therefore, in further attending to issues of ‘rigour’, I acknowledge the poststructural understanding that no account can ever be free of contextually-informed assumptions. I have aimed to address this throughout my thesis by making explicit my motivations, theoretical positioning, and the critical orientation from which I seek to challenge processes of cultural hegemony, racialization, heteronormativity, gender inequality, and other forms of social

exclusion. I have sought to articulate the critical intentions of this work in order to account for the emphases and understandings that have motivated my choices throughout my analysis.

Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the theoretical and methodological assumptions guiding my inquiry and described the ways in which I have used these underpinnings to inform my collection of data and approach to analysis. This discussion has foregrounded the multi-layered nature of my inquiry, which examines communication at the levels of linguistic, discursive, and socio-cultural practice. This approach emphasises the dialectical relationship between discourse and other elements of social life, allowing an interrogation of the multiple and varied forms of marginalization and social exclusion that characterize diverse parenting experiences. I ended this discussion with an account of 'rigour' as it has been reconceptualised to fit my theoretical and methodological foundations. In the next chapter, I present a selection of findings from the results of my critical discourse analysis.

Chapter 4: Findings & Analysis

In this chapter, I present select data and findings drawn from my critical discourse analysis of parenting educational content from four British Columbia websites: HealthyFamilies BC, BC Health, BC Council for Families (BCCF), and KidCare Canada. The results of the analysis are organized into two parts. I begin by briefly discussing the prominent linguistic elements and website composition that broadly characterized each of the websites separately. This is followed by an integrated analysis of the broad interdiscursive themes that were present across several of the texts and resources. Interdiscursive analysis presents the ways in which thematic representations were articulated together within the various genres and styles of the texts. This discussion focuses on three main themes that were found to be highly salient in these texts: (1) constructions of normative child development; (2) representations of the importance of early attachment; and (3) incitements on parents to monitor and mitigate environmental stress.

As part of the presentation of my findings, I examine discursive and thematic elements in relation to current social and political processes in Canada and BC. In order to build this discussion, I draw on additional literature that indicates some of the political and material factors that may differentially impact diverse parenting experiences. I also integrate the voices of critical, feminist, and Indigenous scholars who have previously brought attention to some of the issues I have identified. I present my data and findings in an integrated manner in order to explicate the multiple complementary and contradictory patterns across texts, and to draw links between these patterns and broader social forces.

Textual Analysis

HealthyFamilies BC. The HealthyFamilies BC website contains a range of health-promotion tools and resources targeted to families, on topics related to healthy eating, healthy

lifestyles, and, of interest here, parenting. The content for this analysis was taken from the heading “Pregnancy & Parenting”, which contained links to several pages of short articles, divided by age category (Babies, Toddlers, Preschoolers, etc). Analysis of the articles found under the “Babies” and “Toddlers” sections indicated that these articles consisted of a combination of both instructional and descriptive genre types. The descriptive genre was identified in articles that involved the exchange of knowledge, as they were oriented toward the communication of information to parents. This was indicated by a heavy use of factual and predictive statements. The instructional genre articles contained a series of directives, usually in the form of bulleted lists, concerned with eliciting certain types of behaviour from parents. Most of the HealthyFamilies BC articles contained a hybrid of these two genres. As will be shown in more detail in the following section, many components that were meant to be informational also contained evaluative statements about what is desirable parent and child behaviour. The implicit value content in informational texts can be read as an orientation toward eliciting certain actions from the reader despite the absence of directive statement types (Fairclough, 2003).

Many of the articles on the HealthyFamilies BC website drew heavily on intertextual elements originating from academic fields, most prominently, developmental psychology. However, these elements were presented without introduction and without reference to the context from which they were drawn. Fairclough (2003) suggests that failure to situate ideas within the specific contexts from which they have emerged presumes a consensus on these ideas, which constructs them as ‘common sense’ and suppresses alternate views. Semantically, the presence of different views is often expressed through contrastive relations between sentences and clauses (‘although’, ‘however’), in which the author addresses opposing ideas (Fairclough, 2003). These types of relations were largely absent in the HealthyFamilies BC articles examined.

Rather, the majority of clauses were connected by additive or elaborative relations ('and' 'for example'). In this way, a single voice – that of the writer – was privileged and dominated the text. Further analysis of the semantic relations also revealed an absence of explanatory relations ('because', 'in order to'). These texts were, therefore, characterized mainly by the presentation of assertions and directives, without exposition or evaluation of these statements. Occasionally, the articles did make direct reference to external elements, as shown in these examples:

Research shows that the "authoritative" style of parenting is the most successful. (HealthyFamilies BC, 2013, Agreeing on Parenting Styles for Toddlers, para. 6)

Research has shown that babies who are responded to quickly and consistently will flourish and thrive in every way. (HealthyFamilies BC, 2013, Babies Social and Emotional Development from 0-6 Months, para. 2)

Here, the use of “research has shown” makes it clear that these claims were drawn from a particular evidence base. However, these statements are not attributed to any specific sources and, as can be seen in the above quotes, were often highly generalized. Such a reference appeals to the authority imbued by the status of ‘research’, without naming the source of this information or providing direct evidence. In abstracting away from identifiable research sources, the HealthyFamilies BC texts avoid engaging or dialoging with this evidence, again subverting alternate interpretations.

BC Health: Baby’s Best Chance and Toddler’s First Steps. The two documents from the BC Health website, Baby’s Best Chance and Toddler’s First Steps, are available as lengthy PDF downloads, containing introductions, tables of contents, extensive descriptive and instructional content, indexes, and glossaries. The content in the middle parts of these documents was made up of much of the same information as the HealthyFamilies BC website. Therefore, much like the HealthyFamilies BC articles, the Baby’s Best Chance and Toddler’s

First Steps texts were similarly characterized by a failure to situate or explain the presence of intertextual elements.

Despite the similarities between the HealthyFamilies BC and BC Health texts, a noteworthy difference in the BC Health documents was the inclusion of parent voices. Both of the documents contained quoted statements that appeared to have been collected from real parents under the heading “He Said” or “She Said” in Baby’s Best Chance, or “Family Stories” in Toddler’s First Steps. These statements were presented as parenting narratives related to the content on the each page. Although the stories were not attributed to specific parents, they were set-up as direct quotes through first-person language, and use of the heading “He Said” and “She Said”. This sharing appeared to be a means of symbolizing spontaneous dialogue and the exchange of knowledge between parents. However, notably, the introduction of outside voices did not offer any new or alternate messages. Rather, the quotes functioned to reinforce the messages stated in the rest of the document, vicariously normalizing specific representations of desirable parenting actions by presenting them as behaviours other parents already engage in.

BC Council for Families. The BC Council for Families (BCCF) website homepage contains an organization logo at the top; prominent below the logo is a banner of sliding images of children, babies, and parents. There are a variety of different ways to browse the BCCF website: either by clicking through a long list of topics on parenting and family life, by viewing different resource types available, or by exploring parenting programs offered through the BCCF. Clicking on the topic categories brings up a webpage that further divides the content under headings of “Parent” and “Professional”, presumably denoting the intended audience. The resources used for this analysis were a series of articles designated for parents under the topics “Parenting” and “The Early Years”.

The BCCF articles were generally marked by a sharp contrast in the linguistic features used from those of the HealthyFamilies BC and BC Health materials. For one, the genre of these texts contrasted with the instructive elements of the previous texts, as the BCCF articles were largely descriptive in nature. These articles were characterized predominantly by statements of fact, assertions, and evaluations, contrasting with the significant presence of directive statements in the other texts. Another salient difference, connected to the more descriptive nature of the BCCF texts, was with regard to the level of dialogicality. The BCCF articles were much more openly dialogical, as they introduced and situated a number of intertextual elements; most notably, academic studies and interviews with professionals. These voices were often explicitly stated in the texts. Some articles even included APA formatted citations, imbuing a much more academic tone. In addition to the use of cited references, some of the articles also discussed parents in the third person, rather than addressing them directly as in the previously discussed texts. Despite the fact that the BCCF articles were provided in the website section designated for a parent audience, such features gave rise to a sense that these articles were intended for professional readers.

The more formal dialogical nature of the BCCF articles was also marked by the presence of more diverse semantic relations and explanatory logic. The greater explanatory nature of these elements placed emphasis on the utility of certain types of parenting behaviour for achieving specific long term outcomes. This indicated the use of rationalization as a means to establish the legitimacy of the ideas being presented. Many of the BCCF articles also featured appeals to empirical research and institutional traditions as another way to authenticate claims. Fairclough (2003) suggests that texts which urge a set of actions or behaviours on the basis of description can be considered as instances of 'hortatory reporting'. He defines this genre as a "description

with a covert prescriptive intent, aimed at getting people to act in certain ways on the basis of representation of what is” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 96). A prominent example is found in an article, “Reading Aloud to Children Prepares Them for Success” (n.d.):

According to a 2004 Statistics Canada report, a one percent raise in literacy can result in a 2.5% raise in labour productivity and a 1.5% increase in the gross domestic product per person. Reading out loud to children and installing a love of books not only prepares children for academic and career success, but also better health. (para. 5)

The article from which this quote is drawn only refers to parents in the third person rather than directly, but it clearly portrays certain behaviours (reading out loud to children) in a positive tone, linking them to future desirable outcomes for children, backed up with statistics from an authoritative source. Even though BCCF articles like this did not explicitly urge action through specific directives, it was apparent that they sought to encourage certain parenting behaviours through the description of desirable outcomes and appeals to research evidence.

KidCare Canada. At the level of specific communicative technologies, the genre of the KidCare Canada texts was distinct from the other texts explored here as this website was made up of a series of videos, rather than written content. On the homepage of this website, surrounded by colorful pastels, is a large image of a baby, linking to a video introduction of the website. Just above this image is a banner of topics, including: “Nurturing”, “Born to Communicate”, “Parenthood”, “Stress + Adversity”, and “The Science”. Each heading links to a selection of videos. Most of the video clips featured researchers and academics talking directly to the camera on the video’s respective topics. These individuals were identified with a caption, stating their name, academic credentials, and institutional affiliations. Many of the interview shots were interposed with images of parents interacting with babies, professionals working with families, and occasionally, scientific laboratory settings.

An emphasis on ‘expert’ status was made explicit throughout the KidCare Canada website by the label “Expert Series”, which was tagged on the majority of the videos. Under the “Expert Series” heading was a tagline that read: “World-renowned experts share their wisdom to guide you in supporting your child’s Social and Emotional Development” (KidCare Canada, 2013). The captions informing the viewer of the speakers’ credentials created the impression that this expert status was directly tied to educational attainment and ongoing scholarship, which, notably, was achieved predominantly within Western academic institutions. A low level of modalization in the videos further reinforced the positioning of expert authority. For instance, there was a small presence of hedging expressions (e.g., “sort of”; “kind of”); however, I would argue that this was likely due to the oral delivery in the videos. This hedging was outweighed by a frequent presence of markers that indicated a high commitment to truth claims (e.g., “really”, “very”, “there’s no question”). This served to establish an elevated level of authoritativeness on the part of the speakers, further reinforcing their status as ‘experts’.

Also similar to the BCCF texts, was the inclusion of attributed intertextual elements, as these texts made explicit references to ‘evidence-based’ publications and research discoveries related to the various topics on the science of early childhood. The inclusion of these intertextual elements made up a more explanatory logic that also consisted of a high degree of rationalization and narrative in order to legitimize claims. Like the BCCF texts, the KidCare Canada videos did not commonly make explicit directive statements, but rather presented third person descriptions of recent scientific findings as they pertain to early environments. For example, one video stated:

These early relationships of interacting with their mother or father – being touched, being spoken to, being read to – all of these experiences fundamentally effect the growth and maturation of circuitry, of connections within the brain, that last a lifetime. (KidCare Canada, 2013, Early Experiences Last a Lifetime, 0:30)

In this statement, the speaker does not directly address parents, but instead normalizes a certain set of parenting behaviours that are linked to children's life-long development, using a scientific discourse of brain circuitry. The blurring between descriptive content, and content oriented toward eliciting certain behaviours, again can be said to constitute these texts as having a hortatory intent, in that they covertly prescribe certain behaviours on the basis of scientific research findings (Fairclough, 2003). More explicit examples of the types of behaviours advocated in the various texts are elaborated in the following sections.

Interdiscursive Analysis

Normative Development and Normative Parenting. As this inquiry sought to understand parental responsibility in relationship to children's developmental outcomes, a highly significant theme that came out of my analysis was the way normative child development was represented in the various texts. As an excerpt from *Toddlers First Steps* (2012) states:

The overall pattern of child development is the same for most toddlers. Most reach the milestones of development at the about the same pace ... The following charts show the skills you are most likely to see at each stage. They will also give you ideas about how you can support your toddler's healthy development. (p. 12)

This quote is indicative of the ways in which childhood development was conceptualized in many of the texts: as occurring according to a set of universal, observable, and predictable patterns. The content related to development was significantly overlapped between the HealthyFamilies BC and BC Health texts, which presented largely equivalent material in this area. Both texts offered the same bulleted lists of expected developmental achievements at different ages, presented as occurring in one of several distinct domains child development – physical, cognitive, language, and social and emotional. In particular, the HealthyFamilies BC texts made overt and repeated use of the concept of 'developmental milestones' to describe this

schedule of development. Discussion of ‘developmental milestones’ was typified in statements such as:

Here are some more of the social and emotional milestones you can expect. (HealthyFamilies BC, 2013, Babies’ Social and Emotional Development from 9-12 Months, para. 1)

Most reach the milestones of development at the about the same pace. (Toddlers First Steps, 2012, p. 12)

The presence of categories of milestones and developmental domains can be seen as constituting a recontextualization of discourses drawn largely from the disciplinary framework of developmental psychology. Growing critiques of developmental psychology and neighbouring disciplines challenge the highly Euro-Western values and assumptions that underpin these theories (Burman 2008; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2011). I return to this critique in a later section, after a more detailed look at representations found in the text. However, as illustrated in the Toddlers First Steps quote, these categories were largely presented in a way that assumed that they are absolute and universal. The sources of these ideas were not made clear, as the concepts of developmental and milestones domains were neither introduced nor explained; they were simply inserted into various parts of the text, as if understood as a standard part of parenting vernacular.

In a further example, one of the HealthyFamilies BC (2013) articles states:

Your baby will reach many fun and important social and emotional milestones. (Babies’ Social and Emotional Development from 6-9 Months, para. 1)

Here, the technical concept of “social and emotional milestones” is integrated into more colloquial, conversationalized statements addressed at parents, and the existence of these concepts is assumed as a categorical fact. In a similar way, the texts rely on the use of discrete age gradations (0-6 months, 6-9 months, etc.) that may not be applicable across different cultural systems, as not all cultures keep track of chronological age this same way (Rogoff, 2003).

Furthermore, age categories, such as ‘toddler’, as a distinct time of childhood, may also be unfamiliar to some parents, particularly those from non-Western cultures. This may suggest some of the ways in which the language of developmental psychology has come to dominate the conceptualization of children’s need and parents’ behaviour in the cultural setting of these texts.

The ‘developmental milestones’ themselves were featured in both the HealthyFamilies BC and the BC Health texts as bulleted lists, organized according to each of the developmental domains and various age ranges, and offered to parents as indications of what they could expect to see in their child at each age. These items were articulated using a predictive discourse type, as they were expressed in future tense, and they were often highly modalized. For example, the list of milestones were variously introduced with statements such as: “Most toddlers at this age will...”; “At this age a baby will likely...”; and “A typical nine to 12 month old will...”. The use of modal markers (“most”, “likely”), serves to communicate that there may be some variation these processes; however, despite this, several of these statements made repeated use of the word “typical”. This lexical choice suggests there are still observable rates of development constituting a standard that children may or may not meet. Use of the word “typical” also communicates the possibility of its converse, ‘atypical’, for children who do not exhibit expected behaviours.

The construct of normal child development was not uncontested in all of the texts, however, as one BCCF article explicitly challenged this paradigm, stating:

We must take great care in the way we express our ideas of what is and is not normal. Normal can mean many, many different things. (BCCF, 2008, *Is this Normal?*, para. 23)

The article emphasised a need to embrace “how variable and diverse typical child development can be” (para. 23). These messages offered an alternative viewpoint to that of the BC Health and

HealthyFamilies BC texts, which did not give this level of attention to the variability of child development. This article presented a noteworthy disruption to the normalizing influence of milestone charts, creating a discontinuity between the different texts, and perhaps suggesting a productive opening where these messages might be challenged further.

Despite questioning the notion of ‘normal’ development, however, the BCCF article maintained that knowledge of these milestones will inform “better” parenting choices and behaviours:

No matter what they are trying to accomplish with a child – establishing good routines, positive discipline or soothing a troubled child – parents will usually do it better with an understanding of child development. (BCCF, 2008, *Is This Normal?*, para. 2).

The message that parents benefit from knowledge of normative child development was present in several of the texts. For example, *Toddlers First Steps* (2012) also stated:

Learning about child development can help guide your parenting. The following table describes each area of child development. It also gives you some parenting suggestions for each area. (p. 9)

Statements such as this confirmed that, despite variations in ‘normal’ growth and development, authorized accounts of expected developmental progress should be the reference point around which parents orient their decision making.

Concern over the particularities of each developmental stage obscures the larger end-goal of parental decision making, which was not clearly described in these texts. The previous quote offers “parenting suggestions for each area”, but gives no indication about what these suggestions are ultimately meant to achieve. However, the lists of milestones maintain that parents should be marking and measuring their child’s life events and experiences against authorized descriptions of expected capacities for each age. As Rose (1999) suggests, normative views of childhood can function as a means of inciting parents’ desires and expectations about

their own child's status against this norm, manipulating this anxiety as a mechanism for the regulation of parenting choices and behaviour.

Developmental Differences. A small reference in Toddler's First Steps (2012) makes mention of parenting a toddler with special needs, informing parents:

Parenting a toddler with special needs brings both joys and challenges. Your health-care provider will be able to help you understand your toddler's development and individual needs. (p. 117)

Here, the Toddler's First Steps manual acknowledges some diversity in normative development and parenting. However, this mention functions to separate the development and expectations of "children with special needs" as distinct from the developmental norms in the rest of the book. This differentiation creates a clear binary between children with disabilities and the rest of the population. This creates an effect of positioning children with disabilities outside the spectrum of 'typical', marking them as 'other'. As Linton (2011) contends, "The relationship between *abnormality* and disability accords to the nondisabled the legitimacy and potency denied to disabled people" (p. 168). Thus, this piece of text serves to bracket off difference and reinforces an ableist normativity that prioritizes the needs of children that fit into standardized accounts of development (Linton, 2011). At the same time, it also reinforces the status of 'normal' highlighted on the remaining pages, painting the rest of the population with a single normative brushstroke and obscuring ranges and variations that exist within both groups.

This section of the text does bring some consideration to the unique experiences of parenting a child with a disability. Some scholars have identified the ways in which idealized parenting discourses impact the experiences of mothering a child with special needs, as parents, like their children, are positioned as separate from parents of 'normal' children (Levine, 2009; Ryan & Runswick-Cole, 2008). In some ways, the intensive parenting ideals have been noted as

reinforcing and enhancing the impact of this separateness (Ryan & Runswick-Cole, 2008).

However, cultural parenting standards have also been seen as an important site of resistance for parents of children with disabilities in accounts of mothers who actively construct new definitions of ‘normal’ for their family (Levine, 2009; Ryan & Runswick-Cole, 2008).

Universalism in Developmental Psychology. As noted with regard to the unproblematic application of developmental milestones, the BC Health and HealthyFamilies BC texts were characterized by a failure to contextualize the disciplinary frameworks from which these concepts were drawn. The presumption of normative developmental processes as constituting a standard or universal rate of development can be seen as problematic when viewed in light of the methodological and theoretical origins of these concepts. A body of literature has emerged from a variety of critical, feminist, poststructural, postcolonial, and reconceptualist perspectives in early childhood education, interrogating the dominant paradigms that have underpinned the emergence and expansion of developmental psychology theories (Burman, 2008, Cannella, 1997; Cannella & Viruru, 2002; McNoughton, 2006; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2011).

Much of this critique focuses on the philosophical foundations of dominant theories, linked to modernist, Euro-Western ideals of reason and objectivity. The assumptions underlying these paradigms presume that human development can be understood according to a set of measurable, observable, and replicable principles (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2011). Through these rational scientific discourses, the child has emerged as a visible, coherent, analysable object through which knowledge of human development can be ascertained (Burman, 2008; Rose, 1999). Thus, developmental theories have materialized from disciplinary practices that assume “there are particular truths, determined even before a person’s life begins that apply to all human beings” (Cannella, 1997, p. 58).

These claims to objective, authoritative knowledge have prompted critiques highlighting that, although developmental research has been conducted primarily with children living in Euro-Western industrialized regions of the world, it is theorized as universally applicable for all children (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010; Pence & Hix-Small, 2006). Developmental concepts and theories have also been greatly shaped by observational research conducted in laboratory settings that abstract children from their environmental contexts (Burman, 2008). These features have raised concerns about a failure to theorize the range of settings, relationships, activities, and other socio-cultural contexts in which development takes place (Burman, 2008; Rogoff, 2003). Significantly, it has also been asserted that the authoritative knowledge claimed by Euro-Western frameworks “effectively silence and marginalize minority socio-cultural groups that may have very different ways of viewing and understanding young children” (Robinson & Diaz, 2007, p. 7). In this way, the generalized application of developmental research not only fails to recognise the global diversities in developmental processes, it also serves to reinforce the dominance of Euro-Western systems of knowledge by asserting itself as the norm, even in Western countries with thousands of distinct Indigenous nations (Cannella, 1997).

The heavy use of concepts and categories drawn from developmental psychology in the BC Health and HealthyFamilies BC articles, therefore, grounds these texts in a scientific rationality that privileges a Euro-Westernized view of child development, and marginalizes patterns of development that occur in other contexts. The normalized account presented in these texts may be seen as constituting a decontextualized model of human development that takes as given a singular trajectory of ‘typical’ child development, based largely on white, middle class, able children.

On Cultural Difference. One article from HealthyFamilies BC, “Benefits of Cultural Diversity for Toddlers” (2013), did address cultural differences in parenting belief systems and practices. Much of the language in this article appeared supportive of cultural difference, such as through its title and the opening line: “Your family’s cultural beliefs and traditions can greatly enrich your toddler’s life” (para. 1). However, the content of the article urged parents to critically reflect on the impact of their cultural beliefs. Parents were directed to ask themselves:

Do I believe something is important because it was traditional in my family? Is it really important? (para. 7)

Is my belief based on my own fears or my own experiences? (para. 9)

Overall, the apparent support for cultural difference was anomalous to the remainder of the articles, which otherwise overlooked differences in parenting traditions, cultural or otherwise. The problematizing of difference served to create an effect of ‘othering’ cultures outside of mainstream Canada. The representations of distinct cultural affiliations also failed to acknowledge that mainstream practices are themselves guided by culturally-specific values and assumptions.

This ‘othering’ of cultural difference was accentuated in the photo accompanying this article, which depicted what appears to be an inter-racial couple with an infant. Notably, this photo constituted one of the only images on the website of a person appearing to be of non-European ancestry. This created an impression that families who practice “cultural differences” are those that fall outside of the white Canadian prototype. In short, presenting racialized families solely in sections on “cultural diversity” serves to equate cultural diversity with ethnic and racial difference. Further, the ambiguity of the overall message of this article communicated that “cultural beliefs and traditions” – presumably those outside of the Canadian mainstream – may or may not be beneficial for childrearing and that parents have a responsibility to think

critically about the impacts of their cultural traditions on children. In this way, the article seemed to suggest that only those cultural beliefs considered “diverse” need to be held up to scrutiny. This may emphasize and reinforce common stereotypes about non-Western parenting practices as harmful or oppressive to children and in need of correction through rational, evidence-based knowledge. This also contributed to the impression that parenting practices promoted across the remainder of the articles on the website are independent of culture and, therefore, neutral.

The Importance of Play. As part of parents’ role in development, many of the suggestions put forth in the BC Health and Healthy Families BC texts called for participation in a wide range of activities. One of the most highly represented activities was parental involvement in children’s play. A HealthyFamilies BC (2013) article, for example, informs parents:

Play may seem like the most natural thing in the world for toddlers, but your participation and encouragement are important. (Activities to Encourage Your Toddler to Play, para. 1)

The first clause of this quote explicitly states the presumed naturalness of play, while the second part offers an evaluation on parental participation in play as “important”. Other texts, such as Toddler’s First Steps (2012), link assertions about the importance of supporting childhood play to language of developmental skills:

By encouraging your toddler to play, you are helping her physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and language skills to develop. (p. 38)

Parental involvement in play was thus instrumentalized as a means of helping children stay on a track developmentally, suggesting that failure or inability to engage in play activities puts children at risk of falling behind. The Toddlers First Steps (2012) document provides a list of specific tips for how parents should be encouraging play based on what “experts recommend” (p. 39). The reference to “experts” imbues the passage with a sense of gravity, yet the precise ways in which play is meant to influence development were not elaborated beyond this. Rather,

parents were asked to simply submit to the expert recommendations and to accept conceptions of adult-child play as an essential part of childhood.

Like the concept of developmental milestones, the view of play as a natural, universal feature of childhood, again, excludes consideration for the socio-cultural and historical contexts that influence children's play. Lancy (2007) asserts that, although childhood play exists across all cultures, adult-child play, historically and globally, is virtually non-existent, and occurs almost exclusively in contemporary, mainstream North America. He traces the image of a mother playing with her toddler to the rise of the suburban, middle-class family, largely linked with desire to cultivate certain childhood outcomes. Therefore, despite the construction of adult participation in play as universally desirable, this behaviour is highly specific to the current time period and parenting culture of industrialized, Euro-Western societies. Lancy (2007) also suggests that the ways in which the content of children's play varies across cultures is based largely on adult socialization of children for specific expectations of adulthood. This is similar to Cannella and Viruru's (2004) observation that dominant representations of children's play in North America tend to emphasise values of independence, individualization, self-determination and competition, which, they suggest, reflects Euro-western, middle-class biases.

In a more specific context, Gerlach, Browne, and Suto (2014) identify the way in which Indigenous children's play experiences have been shaped by the intergenerational impact of the residential school system, in which generations of Indigenous children were denied the experience of "playing in ways that reflected their families' beliefs, values and local knowledge, and playing on their land and traditional territory" (p. 250). However, contemporary invitations for parents to be active participants in children's play seem to presume that all parents know how to be playful with their children in the specific ways prescribed. This presumption may fail to

recognize the reality of many Indigenous parents' own lack of childhood play experiences due to the systematic forced removal of children from their families across several generations.

Through normative accounts of parents as playmates, parents who do not know how to engage in play risk being framed as “disinterested in, or even neglectful, of their children” (Gerlach, Browne, & Suto, 2014, p. 251), reinforcing the already marginalized position of many Indigenous parents. Therefore, despite its presentation as a universal aspect of childhood, parent-child play may vary across cultures and parenting experiences, and it cannot be understood outside of political and material realities.

Developmentally Appropriate Toys. The foregrounding of childhood play in these texts was also characterized by an emphasis on providing the right kinds of toys at different ages.

HealthyFamilies BC (2013) tells parents of toddlers:

This is a good time to give your toddler balls to chase and later to kick and throw. It's also an ideal time to provide toys to push, such as pop-up toys, or sit and ride toys. (Toddler Play Age 12-24 Months, para. 6)

Here, the use of “good” and “ideal” constitute evaluative statements about the desirability of ensuring toys suited to different ages. The breadth and variety of toys that parents were urged to provide, in both the HealthyFamilies BC and BC Health texts, was expansive. Among this list was included: “soft building blocks”, “activity tables”, “toys that make noise when a button is pressed”, “different sized balls”, “big crayons”, “lots of paper”, “finger paints”, “easels”, “chalk”, “play dough”, “ride-on toys”, “push-pull toys”, “toys that allow toddlers to push and pedal”, “large piece jigsaw puzzles”, “puzzles of different sizes and colours with different numbers of pieces”, and “different kinds of dress up cloths with snaps, buttons, and zippers”.

Provision of this expanse of toys was variously linked to physical, cognitive, and language development, with each new age range depicted as requiring different types of toys.

Giving children the right toys was found to make up a significant part of the construction of normative parenting. This was communicated in the HealthyFamilies BC (2013) literature in statements such as: “Keep adding to the range of objects/toys you are providing for your baby” (Babies ' Cognitive Development from 9-12 Months, para. 8). Here, the words “keep adding” take as a given that parents have already been striving to provide a range of new play materials, and communicates a sense that more is better. This may be seen as mobilizing discourses that produce parents as consumers within capitalist market systems, urging them to orient purchasing decisions around the promise of supporting child development. This may also contribute to normalizing a view of parenting that has access to middle-class resources required to be able to provide this expanse of commercially produced toys.

Despite the abundance of different types of manufactured toys endorsed in the various HealthyFamilies BC articles, a notable counter message was found in the Toddlers First Steps manual. This text informed parents:

Many household items are perfect toys for children. Your toddler does not need fancy and expensive toys. He can use things like plastic bowls for filling and dumping, pillows for climbing or making a cave, and old clothing to play dress-up. (p. 41)

“Natural” toys are free, fun, and easy to find, too. Children love getting down and dirty with earth and clay, water, sand, and stones. (p. 41)

These quotes present an alternative message, suggesting that children can learn and develop from engaging with materials that do not require parents to be continuously purchasing commercial toys. The statement “Your toddler does not need fancy and expensive toys” directly addresses and challenges normalizing messages about children requiring the right types of commercial play materials. Although this message was marginal in relation to the emphasis on providing the right toys, it nonetheless presents another noteworthy discontinuity between different texts that may represent an opening for the inclusion of different views.

Reading for Social Mobility. In addition to playing with children, reading was presented as a crucial activity for ensuring that children “develop skills in listening, language, and math...imagination and creativity” (Toddler’s First Steps, 2012, p. 43). The reasoning behind the importance of reading to children was fully elaborated in the BCCF article, “Reading Aloud to Children Prepares them for Success” (n.d.). This article quoted policy statements from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS):

The policy statement [from the AAP] says that: ‘reading regularly with young children stimulates optimal patterns of brain development and strengthens parent-child relationships at a critical time in child development, which, in turn, builds language, literacy, and social-emotional skills that last a lifetime.’ (para. 4)

The use of a direct, attributed quote in this excerpt is representative of the more dialogical and explanatory nature of the BCCF texts. The above quote also represents an example of legitimization by reference to institutional authority (Fairclough, 2003).

The AAP policy in the BCCF article stressed the importance of reading to children for their development of certain skills, which were linked to future academic and economic success.

This is exemplified in the following quote:

Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have reading problems, and are more likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability and have to repeat a grade. Poor literacy skills in adults is linked with poor economic potential, which in turn, perpetuates the cycle of poverty. (para. 5)

Here, reading to infants and young children is portrayed a means of preparing children for future academic and career success. The emphasis on “economic potential” reveals a neoliberal mentality that seeks to socialize children for participation in capitalist market systems. The negative evaluation of “poor literacy” and “poor economic potential” presents a deficit view of low SES family backgrounds. However, the texts suggest that these deficits can be overcome by reading to children as a means of upward social mobility, breaking the “cycle of poverty”.

The HealthyFamilies BC texts further recontextualized this message about the importance of reading aloud to children, featuring several directives to parents to be reading to children right from birth:

An excellent way to foster your baby’s cognitive development is by reading books together – it’s never too early to start...Make books an important part of your baby’s world. (HealthyFamilies BC, 2013, Babies’ Cognitive Development from 9-12 Months, para. 16)

Continue reading to your toddler as often as possible – reading is an excellent tool for nurturing language development. (HealthyFamilies BC, 2013, Toddlers’ Language Development from 18-24 Months, para. 8)

The phrase “it’s never too early to start” was repeated several times across the HealthyFamilies BC articles, reminding parents of the role their choices play in shaping children’s future outcomes. Such statements represent an instance of “translation from the discourses of science to the imperatives and technologies of practice” (Rose, 1999, p. 201). This allows us to see how parents’ roles in stimulating literacy skills are moved from institutional discourses, such as in the AAP policy statement, into the domain of parenting, where they undergo a transformation into straight directives to parents. In this way, these texts make clear that individual parents are responsible for promoting literacy early on, and consequently position parents as accountable for gaps in children’s reading ability, future life outcomes, and the national economy.

Absent from these texts was a consideration for outside mediating factors that may impact children’s learning, or consideration for the barriers that might impact parents’ ability to read to children on a daily basis. It has been suggested that parents experiencing economic disadvantage may be limited in their own literacy skills and educational experiences and may not have access to reading materials (Li, 2007). Further, the emphasis on literacy means that alternatives to reading aloud to children from books may be overlooked. For instance, although

oral storytelling traditions may nurture valuable listening, language, and creativity skills, as well as cultural knowledge, these practices are pushed out by emphasis on reading from books.

The premise of reading for social mobility has been challenged in works by both Hartas (2014) and Graff (2009), who suggest that the construction of literacy as automatically and inevitably securing prosperity is, in fact, a hegemonic socio-cultural myth. They note that, for many, the attainment of literacy skills has not translated into promised economic success due to other durable structures that restrict intergenerational mobility. Graff (2009) also links literacy promotion to historical colonial discourses that equate literacy with social progress. This, he argues, constructs the illiterate as uncivilized, and creates a hierarchal binary in which literacy functions as a symbol of superiority. In this way, Graff (2009) suggests that demands for literacy are inherently ideological and grounded in modern liberal ideals of inevitable human progress.

Getting it Right. In an interesting contrast to the normative development discourses offered in the HealthyFamilies BC and BC Health materials, the KidCare Canada texts presented childhood development as a dichotomy between optimal and risky development. In this way, rather than representing development as something that generally occurs along a typical path in most cases, development was represented as having the potential to go one of two ways. This dichotomized view of development was exemplified the following quotes:

What is true is that babies are born with tremendous potential. Tremendous potential for self-realization, but also for self-negation. (KidCare Canada, 2013, Love is not Enough, 1:12)

...children seemed to come in two categories: they were either those that had very skinny little medical charts, had few problems, generally thrived...or they were children that had very thick medical charts, who had more than their share of problems with health or development, family issues, things like that. (KidCare Canada, 2013, Stress and Adversity Affect your Child's Health, 0:55)

The first quote represents this dichotomy of developmental pathways by contrasting “self-realization” with “self-negation”. The second quote contrasts children who “thrived” with those who experienced “many health and development problems”. Notably, this second statement also links risky development with “family issues”. The negative consequences associated with not getting the right early experiences were expanded across several of the videos to also include behavioural problems, auto-immune diseases, obesity, cancer, and life-long addictions.

The suggestion that children will take one of two paths with lasting consequences was textured with a discourse that emphasised the significance of experiences in the first years of life. This was suggested, for example, in the first of the previous quotes by referencing babies’ “tremendous potential” right after birth. An emphasis on the enduring impact of the early years can be seen as an expression of the ‘critical periods’ discourse identified in the literature review. These messages communicate an impetus for parents to ensure that they provide children with the right inputs during this period. This was made clear, for example, in the introduction to the video, “Love is Not Enough”, which states:

The brain develops for the most part during the first three years of life. During that time the right conditions need to be met for healthy brain development. (para. 1)

The importance placed on providing the ‘right’ conditions suggests that there is indeed a possibility of making the ‘wrong’ choices for children. This might be seen as establishing normal development as something that must be achieved, a shift which, Rose (1999) suggests, imbues parenthood with a new set of risks, responsibilities, and accountability.

The potential for creating the wrong conditions for early childhood might also be seen as legitimizing the very existence of the educational articles, websites, and videos being examined here. This suggests the self-perpetuating nature of these materials. Parents’ access to information

in order to guide them in making good choices for children was reinforced across the several of texts. In fact, parents were encouraged to seek further information beyond these materials:

Keep learning. With each new stage of her growth, you will be learning new parenting skills. To keep learning, you could try parenting classes, talk with other parents, read books on parenting, and find out more about child development. (Toddlers First Steps, 2012, p. 7)

Think about your goals for guiding your toddler's behaviour. Consider ways you can develop your skills. For example, you might want to watch videos or read some books about discipline. (Toddlers First Steps, 2012, p. 104)

Both of these quotes constitute directive statements, encouraging readers to strategize their goals for parenting and to continue to develop their “parenting skills”. The representation of parenting as a set of skills to be learned was stated even more explicitly in the HealthyFamilies BC text:

Just do your best and remember – like any new and complex skill, parenting takes time to learn. (Creating a Healthy Emotional Attachment, para. 7)

The need to develop skills is presented as a taken for granted reality of parenthood. In contrast to this, Rose (1999) points out that the notion of parenting as a set of skills to be acquired is in fact a relatively recent and culturally specific shift in the conceptualization of parenthood.

Rhetoric about parenting skill development can also be seen as an extension of managerial discourse, a noted feature of neoliberal paradigms. Costea, Crump, and Amiridis (2007) describe managerialism as manifesting subjects as existing in a perpetual state of capability for learning more and performing better. This managerial discourse “projects the self as an always insufficiently utilised resource whose full potential risks remaining concealed unless it is helped to surface through the mediation of experts” (p.11). Thus, representations of parenting skills may be seen as producing parents as ‘learners’, reinforcing the privileged authority of expert-driven knowledge. It also positions parents as constantly needing to monitor their parenting performance and continuously working toward improvement. In this way, parents

are seen as partaking in their own developmental process alongside children, with the same stages of cumulative skill development.

The Instrumentalization of Love. A representation of the importance of early emotional bonding and attachment between children and caregivers constituted another important theme present in all of the texts. Messages about parent-child attachment are likely successors to the work of Bowlby (1958) and Ainsworth (1979) from the mid- to late-twentieth century, on what has come to be known as ‘attachment theory’. Early research in attachment theory sought to study and categorize naturally occurring patterns of attachment observed between mothers and children (Ainsworth, 1979). More recent articulations of attachment in the texts under review represented “healthy emotional attachment” as something that parents must aim to achieve, with an emphasis on what attachment does for lifelong development. As the BCCF article, “Giving Children a Healthy Start” (n.d.), explains:

After birth and in the early months and years of a child's life, the quality of the relationships that develop between the infant and the mother, the father and other significant family members is key to healthy growth and development. These loving relationships support the development of the child as a social and communicative being and influence all other aspects of development as well. Parents who are sensitive to the child's cues and who respond consistently in warm and loving ways establish patterns of interaction that positively influence language and cognition. The importance of this earliest nurturing and developmentally encouraging environment within the family context cannot be overestimated. (para. 18)

This representation of high quality attachment with parents as a crucial component for healthy development was highly congruent with representations in both the HealthyFamilies BC and BC Health texts. These texts describe attachment as “one of the key factors in raising a happy and confident child” (Baby’s Best Chance, 2012, p. 110). Such representations communicate a view of early emotional bonding as an instrument that can be wielded in order to achieve certain prescribed outcomes of development. In the above excerpt, the language used to describe the

actions associated with developing connected relationships (“loving”, “sensitive”, “respond consistently”, “warm”, “nurturing”) seem oddly juxtaposed alongside the more specialized, technical language to describe anticipated outcomes (“child as a social and communicative being”, “patterns of interaction”, “language and cognition”). Again, this represents an integration of colloquial parenting language with a more technical academic discourse, making the presence of these terms appear obvious and unproblematic in this context.

By articulating loving parenting behaviours in terms of what they are expected to accomplish, these behaviours are objectified and abstracted away from the actual relationship between parents and children. Parents are asked to engage in warm, positive exchanges with their child, while simultaneously adopting an instrumental view of these interactions. Parents are portrayed as rational agents who make reasoned, logical choice about the level of love and affection they will exhibit toward their infants on the basis of authorized information to achieve certain objectives. Thornton (2011) describes such attachment accounts as suggesting that “Love is anything but ‘natural’: it is a precisely regulated equation involving ratio and risk” (p. 412).

Alongside a rationalist view of attachment was the overt use of positive, value-laden language, leaving little doubt that healthy attachment is something to strive for. This imbues parent-child attachment with an almost moral significance and makes this narrative one that is hard to challenge. A critique of attachment discourse is not intended to dispute the benefit that children experience from being reared in loving environments, so much as to question the couching of parental love in language of logic and utility. These representations may be seen as giving rise to a view of parenting as a functional role based on formulae of cause and effect. This risks leaving out from the equation parents’ own moral, existential, and cultural meanings in their expressions of affection and their roles as caregivers.

Scientification of Parenting. In addition to the heavily instrumentalized view of attachment was a highly scientific representation of the importance of early parent-child bonding. This was present to a degree in other texts, but was most evident in the KidCare Canada series. In these videos, attachment was articulated largely in terms of the effect that it has on children's developing brain systems and circuitry:

Those circuits again develop or don't in response to childhood experience and the more supportive and secure the environment the more optimally those circuits develop – now you've got the reward and the pleasure and the happiness chemicals inside you and they're available to you. (KidCare Canada, 2013, *The Roots of Addiction*, 2:37)

These early relationships of interacting with their mother or father – being touched, being spoken to, being read to – all of these experiences fundamentally affect the growth and maturation of circuitry, of connections within the brain that then last a lifetime. (KidCare Canada, 2013, *Early Experiences Last a Lifetime*, 0:30)

These quotes indicate a significant use of neuroscientific models of human development as a basis for the importance of attachment. Many of the KidCare Canada videos were characterized by overt use of scientific terminology, including: “epigenetics”, “DNA”, “genomes”, “phenomes”, “hormones”, “chemicals”, and “circuitry”.

The explicit scientific language infuses the KidCare Canada messages with a sense of legitimacy and objectivity, imbuing them with the incontrovertibility of empirical knowledge. The language in the KidCare Canada videos was often presented in conjunction with visual depictions of researchers in labs holding babies, and computer screens filled with charts and data. These images reinforced the view that knowledge of child development is in the hands of experts who have access to scientific technologies, taking this knowledge further out of the hands of parents. This positioning of expert knowledge was also illustrated, for example, in the title of the video “Your Child's Brain – What Every Parent and Caregiver Needs to Know” (KidCare

Canada, 2013). The choice of the word “need” here establishes knowledge of brain development as an imperative and positions parents as knowledge recipients.

Of course parents who access these websites may indeed be interested in seeking out answers to questions from those considered to have authority in childrearing, and may find value in their knowledge and opinions. However, it is worth reflecting on the nature of this evidence and who is considered to be an ‘expert’ by these accounts. For example, it is noteworthy that the authorities featured in the KidCare Canada “Expert Series” were identified by credentials predominantly associated with Western academic institutions. A palpable absence of childrearing knowledge from outside of these institutions may reinforce the privileged status of Euro-Western forms of knowledge and institutional structures.

Biology of Attachment and Mother Care. Underlining the importance of attachment between children and caregivers was its representation as an inherent, natural, biologically-driven imperative. This was clearly expressed in one video that explained the essential nature of ‘loving environments’ with reference to human biological origins:

Biology taught us that we are mammals, which means that mothers are extremely important and we cannot ignore their role... So a mother that chooses to bring a child into this world has to consider this, and has to make all the choices around this, with this biological information as paramount. (KidCare Canada, 2013, Build a Loving Environment, 1:11)

By connecting attachment to our mammalian roots, this text is infused with a sense of legitimacy provided by the depiction of animal characteristics that are presumably free of human culture and values. Here, mother-child attachment is portrayed not as a human construct, but as an ahistorical, biological reality. In some ways, the naturalization of attachment was oddly juxtaposed against the instrumentalized view of attachment, rendering some ambiguity about whether attachment occurs naturally or whether it is something that must be achieved.

Nonetheless, linking attachment to our biological genes as a species contributes to its “paramount” significance for human development and forecloses any suggestion that this concept might be socially contingent or culturally problematic.

A noteworthy aspect of the above KidCare Canada quote was the choice to refer specifically to the *mother* in a discussion about the biological origins of attachment. This draws a discursive link between motherhood, biological imperatives, and maternal instinct as inherent. Such representations appear to both draw on, and reproduce, dominant cultural expectations that view mothers as the primary caregivers, presenting an essentialized view of gender. The depicted importance of maternal caregivers in attachment relationships was communicated fairly explicitly throughout the KidCare Canada texts through repeated narrative descriptions of mothers’ roles. Similarly, two articles from the HealthyFamilies BC website that also featured the importance of attachment, were each accompanied by photos of white, female caregivers with children. In these articles, the association between motherhood and attachment was not expressed in the text itself, but the visual representation of maternal care helped reinforce the notion of mothers as the main agents of early bonding.

Fathers on the Sidelines? Despite a persistent emphasis on the role of mothers, a handful of the texts did contain specific dedicated references to fathers. For example, one BCCF article, “Father Involvement and Early Childhood”, observed an increase in paternal participation in childrearing activities, and advocated for the benefits of father involvement. This article stated:

Studies demonstrate that children with involved fathers have better cognitive, emotional, and social development outcomes. (BCCF, 2003, Father Involvement and Early Childhood, para. 4)

For those concerned with early child development it seems an opportune time to focus on fathers. There is ample evidence that an involved father has a positive effect on a young child. (BCCF, 2003, Father Involvement and Early Childhood, para. 5)

In promoting the benefits of male caregivers taking more active roles in childrearing, this article directs focus toward an important cultural shift entailing higher levels of father involvement in parenting. This transformation has come to be known by some as the “new fatherhood”, whereby fathers have been seen as take larger roles in childrearing and other household tasks than in the past (Gregory & Milner, 2011; Seward, Yeatts, Amin & Dewitt, 2006). Higher levels of father involvement have been seen as representing an important paradigm shift toward greater gender equality in childrearing, allowing more opportunities for women to take on roles outside of parenting (Seward et al., 2006).

However, despite the noted changes to cultural notions of fatherhood, there remains a concern that, at present, these changes are largely superficial and clash with enduring realities that continue to position mothers as primary caregivers (Wall & Arnold, 2007). Indeed, the inclusion of specific articles that explicitly feature fathers, in the absence of content specifically dedicated for mothers, indirectly suggests that the remainder of the materials fall within the purviews of motherhood. This can be read as serving to place fathers on the sidelines, positioning mothers as the ‘default’ parent, and representing any involvement from fathers as an added bonus. This appears to reinforce a view that parenting is mandatory for women, but optional for men. Such gendered parenting stereotypes disadvantage both men, whose contributions to childrearing are underplayed, and women, who are expected to take on the bulk of parenting responsibility (Francis-Connolly, 2003).

Further to this, the representations of mothers’ and fathers’ roles appear to presume the presence of both male and female caregivers. The prevalence of the default nuclear family might convey a highly heteronormative view of parenting that fails to account for the growing presence of different family structures. As authors like Rachel Epstein (2005) elaborate, same-sex or

gender non-conforming parents in Canada are on a continual path of needing to establish their legitimacy as caregivers against a backdrop of normative parenting constituted by both male and female presences. Representations of normative parenting that reinforce the importance of both male and female caregivers do little to aid these efforts, as they render different family structures invisible (Epstein, 2005).

Finally, in addressing constructions of fatherhood, research from Indigenous communities in Canada once again helps to highlight areas where this might be problematic. Ball's (2012) work with Indigenous fathers, for example, indicates the ways in which intergenerational traumas, loss of cultural identity, and sustained inequities resulting from colonial interventions into gender and parenting roles have contributed to an absence of father involvement and positive male role models in many Indigenous families. Ball (2012) suggests that the mainstream promotion of increased father involvement, such as that presented in these texts, is a response to the nuclear, patriarchal family structure characteristic of Euro-Western traditional models. This view of fatherhood and engagement does little to address the ongoing social inequities that have impacted father involvement in Indigenous communities. Similarly, the diversity of fathering experiences of immigrant and refugee men in Canada also presents a challenge to a one-size-fits-all model of father engagement (Hodgins, 2011). Programs and policies promoting father involvement may also be problematic for various blended, shared custody, and lone parent family models, as well as contexts of intimate partner violence (Featherstone & Fraser, 2012). In general, broad requisitions for greater father involvement may ignore the diversity in cultural and biographical contexts of fatherhood, as well as the significant variety in family structure seen increasingly in Canada.

Stress, Self-Care, and Support. Closely connected to parents' role in providing loving childrearing environments was a representation of parents as responsible for mitigating any risk that might adversely impact development. In particular, this was articulated through an emphasis on the impact of stressful environments in causing risky outcomes for children. Prominently, these discourses appeared to represent parents as bearing the responsibility for preventing stressful environments:

Try to choose an environment that is not stressful and when you choose a work place, consider that – consider the amount of stress at work and the impact that it will have on your child. (KidCare Canada, 2013, Build a Loving Environment, 0:53)

A stressful environment that the mother creates, it could be her own stresses or other stresses around her, could be transmitted to the child to tell the child, 'you're going to live in a stressful world.' (KidCare Canada, 2013, Home Life and Phenotypes, 0:11)

The first quote above constitutes a directive addressed to parents, urging them to avoid circumstances that create stressful environments because of the damaging impact on children. The second quote, although not addressed directly to parents, openly places blame for stressful environments on the mother. Even the secondary stresses taken in from her surroundings are synonymized with stresses of the mother's own creation.

Both of these statements assume that parents (or rather, mothers) have a considerable measure of control over their work place and other stressors, and are in a position to make reasoned choices about the level of stress they allow in their lives. These quotes also appear to be addressed at a middle-class audience, as the ability manage one's life circumstances in order to moderate stress may require access to a high level of social and financial capital. Many parents in BC are, in fact, limited in their choices regarding employment due to the structure of the labour market, geographic location, prohibitive childcare costs, and barriers to training or education (Ivanova & Klein, 2015). Additional stressors associated with high poverty rates in BC

include high costs of living and food and housing insecurity, causing additional stressors that also fall outside of parents' sphere of control (Ivanova & Klein, 2015; Raphael, 2014). Again, the intention of this critique is not to imply that stressful environments should not be seen as a concern for early childhood. Rather, these realities raise concerns about the utility and virtue of positioning parents as responsible for managing and moderating environmental stressors with disregard to their level of access to employment and other resources.

Self-Care. In addition to addressing external pressures, parents were urged to deal with their own personal experiences of stress and anxieties in order to safeguard their ability to promote children's healthy development:

I tell parents to really look after their emotional lives, to examine the stress in their lives, and in those first few years make the child's comfort and happiness and security their primary goal. (KidCare Canada, 2013, Love is not Enough. 0:17).

Be sure to care for yourself too, so you can be a good parent. If you feel sad or lonely, talk to your healthcare provider or a family member and learn about resources in your community. (HealthyFamilies BC, 2013, Creating a Healthy Emotional Attachment, para. 7)

The instructions to look after one's own stress may be seen as situating parents in an ethic of self-care and personal responsibility. Parents are advised to monitor their own wellbeing and address their own needs for support so as to mitigate any risk they may pose to their child. Rose (1999) links such discourse to modern forms of governance that create subjectivities of socially responsible citizens who "should want to regulate their conduct and existence for their own welfare, that of their families, and that of society as a whole" (p. 228). Both of the above quotes link parental self-care with quality childrearing environments, painting an image of parents themselves as potential risk factors. In order to minimize this risk, therefore, parents are presented with a duty to self-monitor and regulate their emotional experiences, so as to produce themselves as calm, composed, contented caregivers. The management of parental affect can be

seen as linked with neoliberal values of self-optimization, in this case, extended to optimizing outcomes for children (Thornton, 2011). As Rose (1999) asserts, parents' own hopes, expectations and anxieties for achieving developmental ideals powerfully shape the way parents evaluate and regulate their actions and, as suggested in the examined texts, their emotional lives.

Accessing Supports. The self-care discourse was present in many of the HealthyFamilies BC and BC Health texts in the form of reminding parents to get support if needed. For example, one statement in the *Toddlers First Steps* (2012) directed parents to:

...pay attention to your emotional well-being, and seek help if you are depressed or overwhelmed. (p. 7)

Such statements were often presented alongside a list of professionals that parents might choose to access for support. For instance, one list in *Toddler's First Steps* included: specialized doctors, public health nurses, mental health professionals, child development centres, social workers, speech-language pathologists, supported child development consultants, occupational therapists, public health audiologists, and physiotherapists (*Toddlers First Steps*, 2012, p. 119). The emphasis on accessing specialized supports also represents the unquestioned authority and valuing of professional interventions. This may be seen as positioning health and social service providers in a similarly privileged category alongside parenting experts.

The urging of parents to reach out for support presented a noteworthy contrast to the other elements of these texts that focused more on individual parenting capacities. Reminding parents to pay attention to their own needs, and to allow themselves to receive support, contrasts somewhat with the noted intensity of contemporary parenting expectations. From an ideological viewpoint, this may present a potentially generative tension between an ethos of individualism versus more collectivized responsibility for wellbeing. In reality, however, there are many

barriers in place that may limit some parents' ability to access needed supports and, therefore, limit the effectiveness of this message.

The exhortation to parents to access support services can be seen as obfuscating two important issues. The first is that many parents who experience poverty and other risk factors that may give rise to the need for social supports have indicated apprehension about accessing these services. This has been largely due to a fear of inviting state monitoring and potential child welfare involvement once vulnerable families come to the attention of the social support systems and become labelled as 'at-risk'. Such experiences were conveyed in a 2008 report (Bennett & Sadrehashemi) that highlighted the experiences of low income mothers in BC, particularly Indigenous mothers, who faced a disproportionately higher risk of experiencing material disadvantage. These mothers expressed that they were often prevented from seeking assistance from social workers for fear of coming under scrutiny and having their children removed due to the very conditions for which they were seeking support (Bennett & Sadrehashemi, 2008).

Similar accounts were also reported in BC by mothers with disabilities (Track, 2014). These mothers expressed fear of accessing supports, knowing that a lack of available services meant that they were more likely to have their children apprehended than to receive the assistance they needed (Track, 2014). The recommendation to parents to access professional supports may, therefore, cause greater stress than it addresses by inviting new forms of monitoring into the lives of parents already facing challenges, rather than having these challenges properly addressed. Mothers' resistance to bring themselves under the gaze of the social welfare workers is suggestive of the ways in which such systems facilitate the surveillance and control of family life. Peckover (2002) refers to the "double-bind of welfare and

surveillance” (p. 375) present in systems of social support and health care, which serve the added function of a disciplinary power that produces maternal care as an object of professional gaze.

A second limitation of this message for parents to seek professional assistance is the regional availability of supports and services. Due to British Columbia’s diverse landscape, numerous rural and remote communities face geographic barriers to accessing the level of professional and medical resources that may be more readily available in the province’s urban centres (Browne, 2009). Parents who wish to access these services may experience disparities in the availability and quality of services. For First Nations reserves, this is compounded by ambiguity about funding and jurisdiction for service delivery, leaving many of these communities without access to needed resources (Ball & George, 2006). Furthermore, it has been reported that Indigenous families often experience language barriers, discrimination, and power imbalances through intimidation and harassment when accessing health care and other social services (Cameron, Plazas, Salas, Bearskin & Hungler, 2013). This affects the quality of care that Indigenous families are able to access, and often limits them from receiving necessary help (Cameron et al., 2013). Access to culturally congruent, meaningful material supports and resources may contribute greatly to parents’ ability to address environmental risk factors that impact children’s experiences. However, this calls for more attention to the quality, accessibility, and cultural safety of those services if families are to truly benefit.

Summary

In seeking to critically examine discursive representations of parenting responsibility and optimal child development, this analysis has highlighted a number of significant themes and assumptions underwriting parenting educational resources. The materials under review have been seen as characterized by a privileging of normalizing discourses drawn from developmental

psychology that largely perpetuates normative, white, middle-class, nuclear family models, and excludes growing segments of BC and Canadian populations. This analysis has also revealed an instrumental characterization of parental love in terms of the long-term outcomes it is expected to achieve, couched in highly scientified discourses from more recent neuroscientific research. Finally, the texts were seen as characterized by a decontextualized view of parenting that fails to account for disparities in access to resources and overlooks the social conditions in which parenting takes place. These findings raise questions about the implications of such discursive representations for diverse groups of parents and compel a reflection of what alternative forms of parenting education and support might look like.

Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusions

In this final chapter, I conclude my thesis by providing a discussion of the overarching issues identified in my data analysis. I also bring special attention to some of the tensions I encountered within the data before reflecting on what more inclusive and collaborative conceptualizations of parenting support and education might look like. My thesis ends with description of the strengths and limitations of my analysis, and a discussion of lingering questions that have been generated throughout this process.

Discussion

Parenting Governmentality. One of the overarching findings from my data analysis was the prevalence of normative representations of child development and family practices, based largely on appeals to expert authority. The privileged position of parenting ‘experts’ allows for what Rose (1996) terms “governing at a distance”, which enables governments to restrict their overt involvement in family life by relying on the truth claims of expert authority as a device of social rule at ‘arm’s length’. A neoliberal political system that seeks to limit the role of government in the ‘private domains’ of family life is amenable to such practices that foreground the role of experts, embodying authority and neutrality, as a technology for the regulation of social and personal life (Lemke, 2002). Using this technique of governance, the incitements on parenting behaviour, such as those identified in my analysis, are covert; they present normative assumptions about what desirable parenting behaviour looks like. These discursive representations have been seen as producing normative parenting subjectivities that are actively engaged in the monitoring and fostering of children’s development according to a naturalized set of expectations (Rose, 1999).

As also seen in the findings, the elevated status of parenting experts involved the transformation of informal, everyday interactions between parents and children – responding to babies’ cries, playing together, exchanging affection – into instruments for supporting developmental outcomes. This instrumentalization of parent-child intimacies asks parents to abstract themselves from their own tacit proclivities in interacting with their child, to be replaced with a science-informed causal formula for generating a particular set of pre-defined outcomes. The separating out of actual family life activities, and reformulation in abstract terms, further imbues these texts with the characteristic of ideological practices that value authorized forms of knowledge over lived experiences (Fairclough, 2003; Swift, 1995).

From a Foucauldian perspective, normalizing discourses serve as a means by which populations can be defined and organized. Such institutional discursive formations produce subjects according to a binary of normal/abnormal based on the extent to which they measure up against social norms (Linton, 2011). Contemporary systems of surveilling parenting – home visitation programs, social welfare records, education systems, well-baby visits – enhance the visibility of parenting practices and child development, opening up families to increased observation and judgement (Peckover, 2002; Thornton, 2010). Discourse that locates parents as distinct from parenting experts reinforces and reasserts the privileged position of those who are deemed as having authoritative knowledge. This may serve to legitimize social practices that impose professional interventions on the basis of perceived parenting deficiencies. As social norms come to make up ‘common sense’, the sources of this authority and the types of knowledge they espouse go unquestioned.

Subjugated Knowledges and European Colonialism. By placing childrearing knowledge within Euro-western disciplinary frameworks, another salient aspect of these texts

was that patterns of development and childrearing traditions grounded in other worldviews, value systems, and knowledge contexts were excluded. Largely, the materials were found to rely heavily on Euro-western epistemological assumptions and research traditions of developmental psychology and neuroscience. The failure to relativize the origins of these concepts within the text itself, however, symbolizes the ongoing hegemony of Euro-Western paradigms that reinforce their own privileged position. In universalizing a single account of normative parenting, and suppressing different conceptualizations of parenting knowledge, the examined texts may be seen as having the effect of delegitimising knowledge that falls outside of these accounts and foreclosing on the possibility for diversity and inclusivity in parenting knowledge and practices.

The legacy of the specific disciplinary frameworks on which these texts draw is worthy of deeper reflection. The empirical, positivist knowledge claims of these paradigms have been critiqued for their use as a tool of historical and contemporary European colonialism. Early colonial activity in North America sought violent suppression of Indigenous knowledge systems, built on an assumption of the superiority of European knowledge. The supposition of European supremacy formed the ideological basis and rationale for intrusion of Indigenous lands, whereby both non-white people and nature came to be seen as resources for economic exploitation by colonizers (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). While colonialism is often viewed through a historical lens, the impact and activities of settler colonialism are a continued reality in Canada. Colonial structures remain embedded in contemporary Canadian institutions and rely on the ongoing subjugation of Indigenous peoples in order to maintain settler exploitation of land and natural resources (de Finney, 2014).

The authoritative knowledge asserted by colonial epistemologies has meant that, throughout the formation of the Canadian state and of Canadian child and family policies, “Colonialist knowledges, discourses, and ways of interpreting the world were imposed as if they were truths that could not be questioned” (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p.26). Colonial scientific and social scientific definitions of normality became a means of defining, classifying, and dominating both the natural and human worlds. The resulting emphasis on categorizations has been critiqued for making possible the construction of hierarchical social classifications according to gender, sexuality, race, ability, class, and age (Pon et al., 2011). The centring of Euro-western knowledge and identities within this paradigm has meant that those positioned outside of white, middle-class, able, heterosexual ideals have been constructed as subordinate deviations from these norms.

The privileging of Eurocentric norms, therefore, is argued to have led to the justification of historical and ongoing practices of settler colonialism in Canada, minoritizing families that fall outside of normative family types (de Finney, Dean, Loisel & Saraceno, 2012; Pon et al., 2011). Stark examples of this can be found in the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), released during the course of this study. The report represents the culmination of a five-year mandate to bring national awareness to the legacy of Indian Residential Schools in Canada. The Canadian residential school system comprised a significant component of colonial efforts to displace and assimilate Indigenous peoples; to eradicate the ‘Indian problem’ (de Leeuw, 2009). Findings from the TRC report indicate that, more than just ‘educating’ Indigenous children viewed as ‘uncivilized’, the schools became a site of loss of language and culture, harsh discipline, disease, institutionalized neglect, and verbal, physical, and sexual abuse (TRC, 2015).

Since the phasing out of residential schools in the second half of the twentieth century, colonial authorities have maintained an aggressive focus on the site of Indigenous families, represented in part by decades of systemic removal and external adoptions of thousands of Indigenous children. The disproportionate apprehension of Indigenous children continues along the same path today, with unprecedented levels of Indigenous children in care (Blackstock, 2007; de Leeuw, et al., 2010). The TRC report contends that the enduring elevation in rates of child welfare involvement can be explained in part “as a result or legacy of the way that Aboriginal children were treated in residential schools and were denied an environment of positive parenting, worthy community leaders, and a positive sense of identity and self-worth” (TRC, 2015, p.183). These impacts, according to the report, have been furthered by a lack of funding and culturally appropriate services in modern child welfare practices, as well as “prejudicial attitudes toward Aboriginal parenting skills and a tendency to see Aboriginal poverty as a symptom of neglect, rather than as a consequence of failed government policies” (TRC, 2015, p.186).

The TRC brings important attention to oppressive social practices that have aimed to eliminate Indigenous childrearing practices and the failure of modern systems to adequately address ongoing intergenerational trauma. It also highlights ways in which indicators of social exclusion have been conflated with parental risk and neglect, subsequently resulting in a pathologizing of Indigenous culture and parenting practice. The deficit view of Indigenous parenting can also be seen, for instance, by considering the view of the ‘importance of attachment’ found in the preceding analysis. Largely, representations of attachment were found to emphasize the quality of the early bond between infants and a primary caregiver, predominantly represented as the mother. However, as Neckoway, Brownlee, and Castellan

(2007) suggest, this view of attachment stands in contrast to the traditions in many Indigenous communities in Canada that do not necessarily adhere to a caregiving model comprised of a dyadic, linear bond between infants and primary caregivers. Rather, in many Indigenous communities, they suggest, responsibility for children's care has always been and continues to be shared collectively across immediate family, extended family, and members of the community (Neckoway, Brownlee, & Castellan 2007). Attempts to classify parent and child behaviours based on established accounts of attachment theory may, therefore, misrepresent the actual quality of childrearing environments due to differences in cultural understanding. Similar differences in views on attachment may also impact immigrant families from cultural traditions that likewise value extended family networks and collective childrearing models.

The importing of Euro-Western definitions of 'healthy attachment' and strict nuclear family models has also been problematic in child welfare practices when children's 'attachment' to non-Indigenous adoptive families has been held as more critical to their 'best interests' than connection to their extended families and cultural communities (Carriere & Richardson, 2007). These practices have been seen as further contributing to the erosion of Indigenous cultural identities and community connectedness (Carriere & Richardson, 2007). It is also indicative of how Euro-Western worldviews have come to marginalize different childrearing traditions in a way that has been detrimental to the communities impacted. The example of how narrow, Eurocentric attachment theories have been deployed to govern extended family networks illuminates some of the ways in which normative parenting discourses not only simply exclude diverse voices from parenting resources, but are also interconnected with social practices that perpetuate the marginalization of some families in very real, material ways. Particularly when viewing Indigenous communities, it becomes clear how the impacts of forced child apprehension

and other dimensions of systemic oppression have resulted in intergenerational trauma, as suggested in the TRC report (2015).

In addition to the invasion of Indigenous families, colonial privileging of Eurocentric norms has operated through the targeting of racialized immigrant groups in Canada, who have also faced higher levels of involvement by child welfare authorities and other forms of parenting intervention (Pacini-Ketchabaw, White & Almeida, 2006; Trocmé et al., 2013). The heightened intrusion of welfare authorities has been seen as a function of higher levels of poverty in immigrant communities (Trocmé et al., 2013), as well as negative characterizations of immigrant childrearing practices and the “implicit belief that immigrant families or those ‘suffering’ from cultural and linguistic isolation are ‘vulnerable’” (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2006, p. 107). In spite of, or arguably, because of, Canadian discourses of ‘multiculturalism’, early childcare and other social program settings have also been noted for their aim to assimilate and integrate racialized immigrant families into white, mainstream Canadian norms (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2007; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2006). Programs that target racialized families serve to reinforce the privileging and dominance of Eurocentric, white culture in Canada, and mark immigrant, or ‘culturally diverse’, families as ‘other’. As Pacini-Ketchabaw (2007) describes, “One of the main assumptions in multiculturalism is that there is a normative standard that compares to a ‘different’, somewhat problematic way of being and acting in the world” (p.223). Thus, as confirmed by findings of this study, Euro-Western values and practices in Canada are held as the norm, while traditions informed by other cultures are made open to scrutiny and critique.

It is not only racialized families who have been ‘othered’ through colonial discourse, as individuals with disabilities have also been judged as inferior at various point throughout Canadian history. Victoria Strong-Boag (2007) traces patterns in the institutionalization of

children with disabilities, as well as a failure of welfare authorities to secure homes for these children, largely due to adoptive families' desire for children who were free of defect. The early twentieth century, in some Canadian provinces, also translated deficit views of disability into eugenic policies that segregated and forcefully sterilized individuals regarded as 'undesirable' or 'mentally deficient' (Grekul, Krahn, & Odynak, 2004). Correspondingly, this period of time also saw calls for 'positive eugenics' through pro-natalist social policies that encouraged the reproduction of white, middle-class families (Grekul et al., 2004).

Historical social practices that aimed to manufacture progeny of 'desirable' families, and eradicate those deemed 'unfit', have been connected to an Enlightenment preoccupation with extending the laws of nature into human realms (Grekul et al., 2004). Justification for practices of institutionalization and sterilization, Strong-Boag (2007) asserts, can be attributed to "Modern classification systems", which have been "fundamental to eugenics and such associated ideologies as racism, sexism, and ableism, with their insistence that some human beings are innately more or less valuable" (p. 415). While, the texts in my analysis did not portray children with disabilities as less desirable, the discourses contained within these materials were shown to be a protraction of knowledge traditions that have contributed to a harmful binary of normal/abnormal, and promoted a discourse that privileges children who fall within the range of normalcy.

An assumption of stable male and female caregiving presences also suggested a deeply heteronormative view of parenting represented in the analysed materials, which risks marginalizing families with same-sex or gender non-conforming parents. Such portrayals are illustrative of the ways in which heterosexual parenthood has come to be taken-for-granted as the 'natural' setting for child rearing, implying an 'unnaturalness' of other forms of parenthood

(Folger, 2008). Although legally in Canada sexual orientation and gender identity are not considered when assessing fitness for parenthood, in reality, research has demonstrated that non-heterosexual couples face a variety of barriers when trying to access adoptions or assistive reproduction technologies (Butler & Kirby, 2013). As one report highlighted: “even in Canada, same-sex parents report feeling subtle homophobia during the placement process, and sometimes outright rejection as potential parents because they fall ‘outside of the community norms’” (Butler & Kirby, 2013, p.4).

Finally, the privileging of certain family types has also been seen in social policies that have significantly disadvantaged single, poor, and racialized mothers. The feminization of poverty is an increasing concern for lone mothers, as caregiving responsibilities are seen as contributing to wage penalties and reductions in hours of paid work, compounding already existing wage disparities between men and women in Canada (Gazso & McDaniel, 2010). Social assistance responses have been put in place, such as welfare-to-work programs, designed to encourage self-sufficiency by regulating lone mothers’ participation in the labour market (Gazso & McDaniel, 2010; Pulkingham et al., 2010). Such policies have been critiqued as heavily steeped in a neoliberal emphasis on market citizenship and individualization, and have been insufficient in addressing the economic and social insecurity experienced by many lone mothers (Gazso & McDaniel, 2010; Pulkingham et al., 2010).

Gazso and McDaniel (2010) further contend that “lone mothers are not free from pejorative and racist assumptions about deservedness, normative stereotypes about mothering and family life, and structural inequalities that push them into perpetual low wage employment in gender segregated workplaces” (p. 381). Indeed, the challenges encountered by lone mothers are compounded for Indigenous and immigrant women who face intersecting issues related to

racialization (Pulkingham et al., 2010). For Indigenous women in particular, the experience of lone motherhood is also shaped by legal and social regulation of Indigenous peoples; disenfranchisement from their cultural communities; chronic poverty; high rates of racialized violence and sexual exploitation; and, as has been shown, greater threat of child welfare intervention (de Finney, 2014; Pulkingham et al., 2010). Thus, the gendered and racialized system of colonial government also contributes greatly to the marginalization and perpetuation of the inequalities that come to legitimize deficit views of lone motherhood.

Judgements and categorizations of normative and deviant family types are sustained in contemporary practices of social service work and child welfare, which continue to classify people into categories of ‘normal’ and ‘at-risk’. de Finney, Loiselle, Dean, and Saraceno (2011) aptly summarize these processes, stating:

By excluding other forms of knowledge of what child development or healthy families might look like (Morss, 1996), the hegemony of Euro-Western developmental theories maintains a power imbalance that, as Pereira (2008) explains, allows the dominant group to recognize, control, and discipline minoritized groups through systems of intervention that are disconnected from their needs and realities, and that reassert normative standards. (p.365)

Swift (1995) suggests that clients of social welfare, “by definition, represent a deviation from dominant cultural norms” (p. 146). In this way, minoritized groups are understood through their failure to achieve cultural ideals and characterized by a perceived need for professional and legal intervention (de Finney et al., 2011; Swift, 1995).

Like child welfare practices and other technologies of surveillance and discipline, the materials examined in this study have been shown to be similarly shaped by discourses that

normalize and privilege forms of parenting knowledge founded within hegemonic Euro-Western values and practices. While I cannot draw direct or simplistic links between these parenting education resources and other forms of social practice, such as child welfare interventions or parenting resource programs, this thesis has demonstrated how the examined texts are embedded within a larger pattern of discursive practice that has resulted in the minoritization and marginalization of certain social groups. By offering Euro-Western defined concepts and categories as unproblematic, parenting educational materials reassert the dominance of Euro-Western paradigms, concealing the historical and contemporary abuses of diverse and marginalised families that have generated from these worldviews.

Neoliberalism and Family Life. Some features of the socio-cultural context in which the analyzed texts take place include: high rates of child poverty, particularly in families with lone mothers (First Call, 2014); significant rates of gender-based violence impacting young and racialized mothers (Sinha, 2013); high levels of food insecurity and housing crises (First Call, 2014); high costs of child care and limited spaces (Canada Without Poverty, 2013); large numbers of low-wages jobs (First Call, 2014); numerous remote communities with limited access to resources (Browne, 2009); and manifold forms of social and physical exclusion of Indigenous communities (de Leeuw, et al., 2010).

Yet, by presenting a view of parenting that is decontextualized from these realities, the analysed materials function to individualize these problems with families themselves, shifting attention away from the structures that perpetuate inequalities. In this way, the texts can be seen as contributing to a neoliberal rationality that locates responsibility for individual and family wellbeing within the ‘private domain’ of parenting (Rose, 1999). Therefore, the final critique that I highlight is the privatization of parenting responsibility that positions parents as accountable for

accessing the necessary resources to provide adequately stimulating, stress-free, and optimal-outcome childrearing environments.

Along these lines, responsible parents were represented as those who act to mitigate the presence of possible stressors, so as to protect themselves and their children from the adverse consequences of stressful environments. There were explicit assumptions that parents could and should be able to choose only safe and reliable employment, housing, toys, recreational activities, and caregiving arrangements. Representations of parental responsibility were seen as constructing parents themselves as potential risk factors, imposing an ethic of self-care and self-management for parents to regulate their own liabilities. This promoted a sense that failure to provide the right childrearing environments can be attributed to a matter of individual parent choice, legitimizing forms of parenting support that aim to better inform parenting practices (Gillies, 2005). However, the assumption on which this practice is built fails to consider the social conditions that constrain parenting choice. By bracketing out these factors, governing authorities justify interventions that focus on parents as the source of childhood risk, rather than intervening at the level of structural factors that perpetuate social and economic inequities.

Alongside many of the texts examined in this study, other forms of parenting education and support in British Columbia, including parenting classes, drop-in programs, home visitations, and well-baby clinics, share similar assessment language, funding streams, and policy directions. Therefore, it would not be unreasonable to imagine that they also share similar sets of assumptions and norms. Certainly, at the very least, they rely on an assumption that parents are in need of professional intercession in order to address parenting risk. Further, they exist as part of a socio-political system in BC that is seeing an increasing shift toward policies that withdraw

state responsibility for social conditions and emphasize self-sufficiency (Pulkingham et al., 2010; Teghtsoonian, 2009).

Back to the Beginning. Having completed my analysis, I wish to revisit the introduction of ‘evidence-based’ parenting materials as a component of the strategy outlined in the *Families First Agenda* for “Supporting Vulnerable Families”. This passage states:

The earlier interventions are made to support vulnerable children, the better their chances of maturing into successful citizens that can help our province thrive. Providing such supports early in life also helps break the cycle of generational poverty. We have increased resources for parents to support health literacy and promote evidence-based self-care. (Province of BC, 2012, p.18)

In many ways, this statement speaks for itself in capturing several of the discursive features critiqued in my analysis. It is suggestive of the ‘critical periods’ discourse (“the earlier...the better”); endorses individual parenting practices as a means of social mobility (“helps break the cycle of generational poverty”); promotes knowledge grounded in research (“evidence-based”); and maintains an ethic of individual responsibility for self-care. This passage even makes explicit an ultimate goal of the *Families First Agenda*, which emphasizes children’s foundational role in neoliberal state formation and their ability to contribute to the future (economic?) success of the province (“to better their chances of maturing into successful citizens that can help our province thrive”). Overall, this statement clearly and pertinently captures the assumptions I have aimed to make visible in the analyzed texts, and confirms the link between parenting educational materials and the neoliberal orientation of the current political landscape in BC. The provision of educational materials as a form of support for parents experiencing poverty, racialization, and

other forms of marginalization, in the absence of more comprehensive social supports and system-level change, is insufficient.

Tensions and Opportunities. In my analysis I noted some moments of tension found in the texts, wherein discourses other than those dominant messages arose. I wish to reflect further on some of the tensions and contradictory views that were represented across the various texts. For example, while play was constructed as a natural and normal childhood pursuit, it was simultaneously problematized as an activity requiring parental intervention and participation in order to ensure its fruitfulness. This tension was symbolic of a broader ambiguity characterizing the texts, which framed healthy child development as universal and naturally occurring, yet was also portrayed as dependent on correct parental choices and behaviours to promote, foster, and support, this development. The tension between naturally-occurring and environmentally-dependent development was also prominently articulated in messages of children's development as occurring according to normal, typical pathways, juxtaposed against messages of developmental potential that is expressed through either healthy or risky child outcomes.

Swift (1995) suggests that “erasing or avoiding contradiction in conscious thought results in the reproduction of the status quo” (p.181). Therefore, I underscore these tensions in order to reflect on how such moments of disjuncture can generate opportunities and entry points for the disruption of dominant narratives, allowing different ideas about childrearing to come into view. These openings might allow for a way of expanding rigid or exclusive representations of parenting by suggesting that there is more than one appropriate way to raise a child. My intention is not to suggest that different versions of parenting would be preferable or more correct than the descriptions presented in the texts. Rather, the ambiguities in the data suggest that no single account of childrearing can be said to be ideal and incontrovertible. Further, there are

limits to expanding views of appropriate parenting practices, as this critique is not meant to imply that ‘anything goes’, or that all forms of parenting are equally acceptable. There are indeed parenting practices that may be legitimately harmful to children’s wellbeing. I wish to make clear that I do not advocate the abandonment of standards of practice; rather I wonder how research and practice might be expanded to reflect the needs and experiences of diverse families, rather than limiting them to a single story. As this discussion has shown, measuring a range of different families against a singular, narrow account of ‘good’ parenting practice threatens to equate diversity with parenting risk or deficit. I suggest that the introduction of new possibilities for what constitutes appropriate parenting would allow for financial and material resources to be more efficiently allocated for those families in genuine need of parenting intervention.

I shed light on these tensions because, although these texts were largely seen to promote a universalized account of childrearing, there were instances at various points that interrupted authoritative knowledge claims. Therefore, I bring special attention to the contradictions in order to establish the areas where my findings and critique of the material come up against productive possibilities within the data itself. These possibilities give rise to a sense that parenting education can be done in a way that offers further challenges to dominant paradigms, and embraces a diversity and inclusivity of complementary and conflicting ideas. In the next section, I continue a discussion about possible alternatives by considering more concretely what different approaches might be evoked.

Envisioning Alternatives

Inclusive, Collaborative Childrearing Knowledge. Parenting educational resources and supports are useful and important tools for many families. The objective of this analysis has not been to suggest that all parenting educational materials are inherently harmful or damaging.

However, this study has revealed some of the ways in which these types of resources have been found to exclude diverse parenting knowledge. Therefore, while I am hesitant to advocate for the elimination of parenting education entirely, the messages in these resources should be expanded to celebrate the challenges and triumphs of all parenting experiences, rather than disseminating a singular, idealized, and highly Euro-Western account of normative parenting. As Canadian society becomes even more diverse through fast-growing populations of Indigenous and new immigrant families, so, too, grows the need for expanded understandings of parenting knowledge and values. Therefore, a shift in parent education should be oriented toward the decolonization of parenting knowledge and a critical questioning of the universality of narrow, Euro-Western frameworks. This would also see the development of parenting resources that are deliberately inclusive of diverse knowledges and practices.

A shift toward more inclusive models might draw on Willie Ermine's (2007) concept of "ethical space" as a framework for the recognition of childrearing traditions built on a multiplicity and diversity of knowledge frameworks. Ermine (2007) calls for a partnership model of ethical cross-cultural conversation, to "create new currents of thought that flow in different directions and overrun the old ways of thinking" (p.203). The creation of such a space allows Western and non-Western worldviews to not only co-exist, but to meaningfully, cooperatively, and productively engage with each other, embracing divergent worldviews.

New forms of parenting education might be achieved in a variety of platforms and contexts that reflect the changing needs of Canadian parents and families, including the use of interactive, multi-media modalities. Computer-mediated parenting resources might, therefore, include a shift toward greater use of participatory online formats. Chadwick and May (2003) offer a spectrum of typologies for computer-mediated interactions between governments and

citizens. On one side of this spectrum is vertical, one-way delivery of information from governments to citizens, with the audience as passive knowledge recipients. On other side is a more interactive, participatory model that facilitates multidirectional flow of information from government to citizen, from citizen to government, and from citizen to citizen (Chadwick & May, 2003). In terms of governance, Chadwick and May (2003) suggest the participatory model as a means of facilitating citizen engagement and collaborative decision-making. I would suggest that such a model can also enable a transformation of web-based parenting education from a unilinear, expert-driven paradigm to more collaborative and collective means for sharing of parenting knowledge. Such a model might make use of a variety of online communication formats such as discussion boards, chat rooms, blogs, social media, and feedback forms, allowing more interaction and engagement. This approach would draw on the accessibility of Internet media, linking parents across the province that may not otherwise have access to parenting supports in their own community, and creating opportunities for parents to benefit from each other's knowledge and support.

A mentality that rejects the one-way imposition of 'expert' knowledge should extend beyond web-based parenting resources, and be applied across the landscape of parenting support and education practices and knowledge formation. In the context of interactions between professionals and clients, McKee Sellick, Delaney, and Brownlee (2002) call for "a conversational space in which our clients are invited to engage with our knowledge, not as passive beneficiaries, but as active world makers" (p.497). This would entail a move away from the transmission of expert parenting tips toward more interactional and collaborative forms of engagement with parents, in order to elicit different forms of knowledge and to empower parents

in their own conceptions about what it means to be a parent. As Ramaekers and Vandezande, (2013) conceive:

Parenting support as an ethical encounter ... can then be not only a place where parents tell their own stories (or express their own voice(s)), but also one where through expressing their voice(s) they can themselves give substance to what it means to be a parent and to raise children. (p.81)

This envisions education and support practices that invite parents to share their stories of hope, struggle, resourcefulness, and resilience. Within this vision, parents would be “actively involved in determining the questions which *they* think need asking and answering, and, with guidance, the methods by which this should be done” (Wilson & Huntington, 2006, p.70). Parents would be positioned as knowers with dignity and worthwhile skills and knowledge, while at the same time allowing a space for parents to access supports and gain new capacities.

I acknowledge that by maintaining a role for parenting education, I risk perpetuating the mentalities that I have critiqued by upholding the suggestion that parents should be actively seeking to engage with such activities. However, it is not my intention to suggest that parents *should be* participating and engaging in educational activities, so much as to wish to keep some form of educational resources and activities in place for parents who are interested in accessing these forms of support. I would argue that any changes to the form and formats of parenting education must also take place alongside improvements to the availability, accessibility, and cultural safety of more meaningful materials supports that address the breadth of diverse parenting and family needs.

Beyond Individualized Parenting Support. Looking beyond a focus on parenting educational materials, the broader landscape of parenting support should be grounded in a

transformation of the current social and economic conditions that perpetuate inequality. As Newbury (2011) states, “Once such inequities are acknowledged, ‘intervening’ on an individual level without addressing those conditions feels irresponsible” (p.172). Therefore, within this vision, those who seek to further the wellbeing of diverse families might engage in advocacy efforts to promote changes at the level of social policies. This would aim for the enactment of policy that transforms existing conditions so as to create more just and equitable societies.

Such advocacy efforts might involve a challenge to policy that aims to address the needs of vulnerable families through the dissemination of ‘evidence-based’ parenting information, potentially through a reframing of what gets taken as ‘evidence’ or how is it applied. For example, neuroscientific advances in understanding the role of environmental stimuli in early brain development need not be discarded entirely. Rather, we might seek to expand our understanding of the ways in which contexts, such as structural and systemic barriers, also shape environmental stimuli. In this way, we might deploy this research as a way to advocate for a reduction in disparities between social groups and the promotion of strong, healthy communities, rather than the regulation of parenting choices.

Neuroscientific findings might also be combined with evidence from a ‘social determinants of health’ perspective, which suggests that social, economic, physical, and other environmental conditions play a significant role in developmental health and wellbeing (Raphael, 2014). Such a framework can advocate for an alternative to individualized parent interventions by offering evidence that the primary means of improving the wellbeing of families and children “is through public policy that provides parents with the economic and social security necessary for health” (Raphael, 2014, p. 232). In this way, ‘evidence-based’ parenting programs might be

reframed as those that provide more meaningful material resources to help meet families' needs, and that advocate policies to address economic inequities and reduce barriers to social inclusion.

The notion of re-deploying certain forms of evidence to advocate broad social change stands somewhat in tension with the rejection of truth claims underpinning the poststructural framework that I have used in this analysis. While I acknowledge this tension, I am also aware that empirical knowledge claims continue to carry a great deal of currency in the realms of policy making and funding decisions. The neuroscientific research, in particular, has been shown to have a great deal of salience with decision-makers specifically because of its claims to truth (Edwards et al., 2015; MacVarish et al., 2013). Therefore, from a pragmatic point of view, I am interested in engaging a conversation about the ways in which traditionally valued forms of knowledge might be applied in new ways to support meaningful social transformation. Here, I would moderate my commitment to poststructural epistemologies by stating that, while I reject universal and totalizing truth claims, I would not discount empirical research entirely. I believe that scientific evidence may still provide useful ways of understanding the world; the risk that I have aimed to explore with this analysis is what happens when these forms of knowledge are viewed as the *only legitimate* ways of understanding the world.

Limitations and Remaining Questions

Discourse analysis is subject to the very critique that it puts forth, in that my analysis is itself discursively formulated and, therefore, exposed to and shaped by certain discursive regimes. Similarly, the work of other scholars on which I have drawn are themselves a part of the sets of discourses that constitute the ways in which we talk, think, and do critical analysis. This is representative of the epistemological foundation of the critical and poststructural theoretical frameworks employed in this study, which reject claims to absolute truth. In acknowledging this

underpinning, I also acknowledge that I do not claim to have put forth an analysis that can be said to be final or all-encompassing. Indeed, the nature of the analytic tools I have selected, being those of critical discourse analysis, has contributed largely to the character of this analysis and its findings. In this way, I do not claim this analysis to have revealed any final or absolute account of the data I have analysed. However, I have aimed to establish the warrantability of my analysis by grounding it in current literature; being explicit in my use of critical frameworks; and providing an audit trail of my data sample, conceptual and analytical choices, and argumentation. The lens and foci I have engaged with have helped to uncover some of the assumptions and ideologies within the data that may have otherwise remained uninterrogated and invisible.

My selection of data for this analysis was expansive and, although my analytical process was systematic, the presentation of these findings was, by necessity, rather broad. There were numerous features of the data that were not elucidated in this thesis due to space limitations. However, as others have pointed out, the nature of discourse analysis is inherently selective (Fairclough, 2003; Wood & Kroger, 2000). I have, therefore, endeavoured to select and emphasise the most salient and noteworthy features of my analysis, guided largely by my original research questions and including other pertinent elements that emerged from the data. A smaller data set may have yielded a more detailed analysis, particularly at the level of the text itself. However, the breadth of the materials I used has allowed me to draw a more representative account, which has identified themes that were most highly represented across the discursive landscape of online parenting education in BC.

The methodology of critical discourse analysis is built on the assumption of a dialectical relationship between the discursive elements represented in texts and social processes. The links between texts and social practice are not linear or mechanistic, as they are continuously mediated

by processes of meaning-making, which are dependent on multiple contextual factors that impact the actual effects of texts (Fairclough, 2003). Therefore, while this analysis has allowed me to uncover some of the underlying assumptions built into parent education materials, this is not enough to establish any direct impact of these texts on institutional or political processes, or on the actual experiences of families in BC. The scope of this analysis has been focused on the production of texts, rather than their reception and interpretation by parents or other audiences. Therefore, future research should address the other half of this equation by seeking to better understand how such materials are taken up in processes of meaning-making and subjectification by relevant social actors. This may include political decision-makers, social workers, child and family counsellors, early childhood educators, and, above all, parents themselves. Future study should aim to explore how diverse groups of parents experience, navigate, reinforce, or resist these discourses in their daily lives, and what other excluded discourses and practices might be integrated. Such inquiry might seek to disrupt the dominant, hegemonic expert discourses identified here by opening up space for parents to give voice to their own diverse narratives about what it means to be a parent.

In addition to questioning parents' own experiences and interpretations of these discourses, other lingering questions resulting from this analysis include: How are parental responsibility and child development represented in the discourses of political decision makers, educators, researchers, and other stakeholders? In what way could these discourses make a difference in achieving more diverse and inclusive parenting knowledge? How can parents' own voices be used to create more inclusive, complex, and collaborative approaches to support and education? What openings or possibilities for transformations exist within the settings of other forms of parenting education and support? And finally, what other possibilities exist for the

appropriation and redeployment of dominant discourses in ways that support broad social transformation?

Final Thoughts

Discursive formations play a significant role in shaping the everyday materialities of family life by producing and naturalizing conditions that exclude and marginalize certain families. Therefore, attempts to transform these conditions must give consideration for the discursive contexts in which these factors have emerged. It has been my intent with this thesis to bring into focus some of the discursive practices that shape, and are shaped by, dominant cultural understandings about parenting and child development in the current historical, political, and social contexts of British Columbia.

Parenting educational materials that maintain a singular, universalized account of normative childrearing risk subjugating diverse parent voices, and shift attention away from issues of social justice. I have aimed to uncover and challenge these normative parenting discourses so as to open up new possibilities for parenting support. The intention behind this has not been to negate the positive role that parenting education has played for many families, but to provoke a conversation about the assumptions and ideologies underpinning parenting resources, and to consider what possibilities may be limited by this approach. By understanding parenthood as multiple, complex, and diverse it becomes possible to imagine new potentials for parenting support and education that start from parents' own understanding of what it means to raise, love, teach, and support their children.

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