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Abstract

This article examines the curriculum and pedagogies for ethical practice in a childcare centre in Vancouver, Canada. I draw on Smith's new model of childhood to examine narratives and practices around the 'responsible child' in a context where child developmental theories continue to influence pedagogical decisions. I argue that the elevation of self-regulation strategies as a pedagogical approach narrows children's sense of responsibility to a mere individual trait. In addition, it fails to cultivate children's interdependence and multiple relationships with humans and more-than-human others. Self-regulation-centred pedagogies also reinforce neoliberal and colonial discourses of the child anchored in human exceptionality, choice, autonomy and rationality. This article proposes that pre-service and in-service early childhood education needs to support educators in doing the analytical, embodied and reflective work to shift from educational paradigms founded in neoliberal and colonial rationalities towards an ethic that acknowledges children and educators' interdependence and that cultivates good relations with humans and more-than-human others.

Keywords

early childhood curriculum, neoliberalism, pedagogies, relational ethics, the responsible child

Introduction

Childhood scholar Smith (2014) argues that two well-known models of childhood – the Dionysian (or evil) and Apollonian (or innocent) child (Jenks, 2005) – are insufficient to account for how children are treated and seen in neoliberal times. To address this gap, Smith offers an additional model – the Athenian child – who is seen as a self-governing and responsible individual. It is not uncommon to hear educators, practitioners, policymakers and researchers speak of children as socially competent actors and deserving participants in society who have the right to be heard and listened to regarding decisions affecting their lives (e.g. Murray et al., 2019). Narratives about the competent child are also present in the private sphere of families, where child-rearing and

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education seem to be more democratic and open to communication and negotiation than in the past (Vandenbroeck and Bie, 2006). Much of children's socialisation depends upon their ability to internalise societal norms, which according to Smith, represents a new form of control that 'aims to draw upon children's (newly recognised) capacities for self-regulation' (Smith, 2012: 29). For scholars drawing on a governmentality framework (Foucault et al., 2009) like Smith, the rise of a competent, participative and responsible child results from an assemblage of neoliberal concepts including competition, choice and autonomy.

Smith's new model of childhood offers an analytical lens to examine early childhood curriculum and pedagogies for ethical practice and to understand the image of the responsible child. This analytical lens is beneficial in a field where many educators, practitioners and researchers continue to be concerned with the prevalence of neoliberal and technocratic rationality in early childhood education policy, research and practice (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Diaz-Diaz et al., 2019; Moss, 2014; Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). For those who envision early childhood education as a site of ethical significance (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005), neoliberal and colonial narratives co-opt ethical projects grounded in principles of relationality and collectivity (Diaz-Diaz, 2021). For Dahlberg and Moss (2005), an ethical approach allows children and adults 'to be able to confront dominant discourses that claim to transmit a new knowledge, and that seek to manipulate our bodies, mould our subjectivities and govern our souls' (p. 2). In the current global context – marked by environmental, social and economic crises – the ethical question at the core of early childhood education is: how can we live in good relations with human and more-than-human others?

This paper examines the curriculum and pedagogies for ethical practice using a childcare centre in Vancouver, Canada as a case study. To build my argument, I draw on Smith's model of childhood to examine narratives and practices around 'the responsible child'. More specifically, I focus on pedagogies that render children as responsible and self-regulated individuals as the primary approach to meaningful ethical engagement. This focus is particularly relevant in a context where socio-emotional learning (SEL) theories have become increasingly popular, and self-regulation strategies have been elevated and used as pedagogical orientations (McClelland and Tominey, 2015; Moreno et al., 2019; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). I acknowledge that the early childhood classroom is a complex and contested site where worldviews co-exist and clash. Therefore, I am interested in the competing ethical projects that arise in early childhood education. My intention is not to focus on and critique early childhood educators' intentions but rather to reflect on the unintended and overlooked effects of pedagogies on children's ethical engagement. This article's goals are twofold: first, to denaturalise neoliberal and colonial pedagogical narratives of the self that are grounded in human exceptionality, rationality, standardisation and autonomy; and second, to support pedagogical reflection by bringing to the fore unnoticed pedagogies for more relational and collective ethics. In short, I ask: how do children and their educators engage in responsible practices towards others? Understanding how children engage in responsible practices – broadly understood as children's abilities to respond ethically towards humans and more-than-human others – can support early childhood educators in reflecting on how their pedagogies respond to current ethical commitments.

To illustrate my argument, I draw on a research project on diversity and social responsibility in Vancouver, Canada. The fieldwork for this study was carried out in a single, licenced group childcare centre located in a culturally and ethnically diverse area in East Vancouver, serving 25 children between the ages of 30 months to under 6 years old. For 8 months, I spent around 12–15 hours a week observing and participating in children's routines, which allowed me to witness how keen educators were to create the best conditions for children to be kind to each other.

For the analysis, I present two vignettes around a boy I call Lucas¹ that proved to be productive sites for further examination of the possibilities and challenges around pedagogies aimed at ethical

engagement. By focussing on stories around Lucas, I do not intend to imply that he is independent from the world he inhabits. On the contrary, the vignettes illustrate the network of relationships – discursive and material – that Lucas is immersed in, along with his peers and teachers. Lucas’s stories document the challenges that arise when self-regulation becomes the central vehicle for defining the responsible child. While this analysis focuses on the pitfalls and caveats of self-regulation as a pedagogical framework, it also offers a glimpse of relational and collective responsibility through Lucas’s engagement with the more-than-human world.

By way of context, I start with how Smith’s model of the Athenian child applies to the early childhood context by bringing attention to both SEL theories and the self-regulated child. I also introduce the 2019 BC Early Learning Framework (ELF) curricular guidelines that advocate for more relational pedagogies in order to foreground my argument that the early childhood classroom is a complex and contested place where a myriad of ethical projects co-exist and clash. Then I turn to story time as a moment of pedagogical practice at the centre where teachers and children come together and engage with stories and questions of ethical significance. By bringing in stories articulated around Lucas, I seek to illustrate how pedagogies of the self-regulated child operate as a strategy of governmentality. Particularly, I unpack how narratives of autonomy, choice and human exceptionality counteract pedagogical attempts towards a relational and collective sense of responsibility. I wrap up by bringing forward one example of an unnoticed pedagogical opportunity that offers space for speculating what would happen if educators and children pay attention to what Lucas can offer for relational pedagogies. I conclude with some implications for educators’ pre-service and in-service education.

Before I move to the next section, I ought to acknowledge that early childhood educators (ECEs) in Canada, who are overwhelmingly women, might be the ones who endure the most impact of the neoliberal policies in their lives. The high cost of childcare in Canada – with the exception of Quebec – does not translate into fair wages for early childhood educators. Before the province of British Columbia committed to providing universal childcare to BC families, educators made a little more than minimum wage. The current provincial ECE recruitment and retention strategy has increased ECE’s compensation to \$4 an hour for more than 10,000 ECEs, raising the ECE median wage to approximately a \$25 hourly rate (BC Gov News, 2022). The increase is still under the recommended \$29 an hour for ECEs with a 2-year college diploma (Anderson et al., 2020). In a context of increasing living costs, educators who are also parents of young children must choose between continuing in the profession or leaving it to take care of their children. They face this tough decision because of the quintessential neoliberal premise: childcare is seen as a family problem (Prentice, 2009) instead of societal responsibility.

The self-regulated child in neoliberal times

Drawing on a Foucauldian framework of governmentality (Foucault et al., 2009), Smith’s idea of the Athenian child offers analytical tools to confront the way that society constructs knowledge that manages children’s bodies and lives. From a Foucauldian perspective, children, like adults, are governable subjects and as such, their subjectivities – or the sense of who they are – result from governing strategies grounded in biopolitical frameworks. For Smith, neoliberal – and others would add colonial (e.g. Lowman and Barker, 2015) – narratives of competition, choice, autonomy and rationality give rise to a self-governing image of the child – characterised by their competence to be responsible for their own socialisation process and for their ability to self-regulate.

Based on Smith’s Athenian model of childhood, Gallagher (2016) asserts that the discourse of self-governance through biopolitics and discipline speaks directly to the ‘inner working of neoliberalism’ (p. 491). He said: ‘We are all constantly encouraged to become responsible, rational

individuals, to make sensible choices regulating our own existence within the accepted parameters of economic and political structure' (p. 491). For Smith, the path to becoming responsible and rational individuals starts early in life with strategies of participation and responsibility. Both strategies combined, Smith argues, teach children that they are primarily responsible for their own future and that responsibility is mainly an individual trait.

My fieldwork reveals the prevalence of ideas of the responsible and self-regulated child in the early childhood education classroom in Vancouver. Socio-emotional learning approaches have become a shortcut for many early childhood educators and practitioners to make and justify pedagogical decisions. The popularity of SEL and children's self-regulation in North American educational contexts (McClelland and Tominey, 2015; Moreno et al., 2019; Schonert-Reichl, 2017) might explain the proliferation of state-led, federal and non-governmental SEL programming in both the United States and Canada.

For example, in British Columbia, where this study took place, social and emotional learning programmes have become a significant focus in schools and youth-serving organisations. The Vancouver School Board has created the Socio-Emotional Learning Centre (Vancouver School Board, n.d.) to support elementary students in acquiring social, emotional and behavioural skills, including self-regulation, executive functions and social skills. In early childhood education, workshops on socio-emotional learning and children's self-regulation are readily available as professional development opportunities to teachers. Indeed, the teachers in the childcare centre I observed had attended a few offerings on bullying prevention and safe spaces. As I further elaborate, they used resources and strategies learned in these workshops with the children. At story time, the children read a number of books that touch on some of the skills children are expected to cultivate, such as listening, waiting and identifying their emotions. Educators also used clues in the form of flashcards or posters to help the children calm down by following a few prescribed steps.

While growing in popularity, SEL and self-regulation strategies have not been exempt from criticism. Critics of these approaches argue that socio-emotional methods fall short in dealing with the myriad of children's complex emotions (Hoffman, 2009; Stearns, 2018), reinforce individualist narratives of success (Kristjansson, 2006) and deepen inequalities among children from different socio-cultural backgrounds (Vassallo, 2011, 2013, 2015). Vassallo (2013) warns us that a self-regulating approach to learning renders individuals adaptable to existing social orders, prescribes a certain model of the self and creates dependence on scripts to regulate their learning. Vassallo's critiques align with Smith's model of childhood and is aligned with other scholars concerned with neoliberal rationality in early childhood education (Moss, 2014; Nxumalo et al., 2011).

In addition, the growing popularity of SEL might explain why the language of self-regulation comes as an easy shortcut for adults – parents and educators – to talk about children's relationships with others. Theories about children and their healthy socio-emotional and cognitive development have long functioned as privileged forms of knowledge that significantly influence how children are treated and seen. This body of privileged knowledge works alongside disciplinary tools that make children reach those childhood ideals. In this sense, pedagogies may serve these purposes. Following Smith, SEL has emerged as privileged knowledge that has the power to define what a normal, adaptable, desirable childhood is, and how parents and teachers can make a healthy child's development tangible. Children who learn to self-regulate in their early years will have more success academically, emotionally and socially as they mature into young adults (McClelland and Tominey, 2015; Moreno et al., 2019; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

While I draw on Smith's ideas of governmentality and childhood, I do not suggest that all pedagogies work as governing strategies. As a complex site, the early childhood classroom brings in different educational projects that might clash when pedagogical commitments are opposed. For instance, ideas of the competent child have indeed been taken up in early childhood curricula and

pedagogies. An example is the image of the child in the 2019 BC ELF – the curricular guidelines for the province where this study took place. The ELF presents children as ‘strong, competent in their uniqueness’ (p. 12), emphasising that ‘[w]ithin the contexts of their individual and cultural identities, [children] are listened to and valued for their ideas and knowledge’ (p. 12). By bringing the ELF into the analysis, I am flagging that it is misleading to assert that all ideas of children as competent social actors lead to neoliberal and colonial ideas about the child.

To situate the context, the 2019 the British Columbia (BC) Early Learning Framework (ELF) is a curricular guideline for early childhood educators and practitioners working with children between 0 and 8 years old. It builds on the 2008 BC ELF (BC Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2008) and a multi-year community engagement process that brings attention to children’s and educators’ interdependence with fellow humans and with more-than-human others. Within this curricular shift, early childhood education pedagogies are concerned with the ethical question of how we can live well together. To answer this question, the 2019 ELF undertakes a relational and collective approach by emphasising the need for forging more ethical relationships with Indigenous peoples and the lands where children live and grow. At the core of this intention is acknowledging a colonial legacy and a neoliberal agenda in British Columbia and throughout Canada that configures past and current relationships environmental precarity, forced migration and persistent economic inequities. The framework questions universal assumptions about children and their development that devalue the knowledge and experience found in their local contexts.

As I further elaborate, the image of the responsible child that emanates from pedagogies for self-regulation contrast with the relational and collective pedagogies that the BC ELF commits to. In the next section, I turn to the early childhood education practices around social responsibility at the childcare centre I observed to analyse how pedagogies of self-regulation work. I focus mainly on story time as a site for pedagogical and ethical engagement.

Pedagogies for kindness: The self-regulated child

Every morning, around 9:00 am, teachers and children at the centre begin putting toys and books away to get ready for story time. They walk into the room, one by one, where cloud-shaped pillows hang from the ceiling like clouds in the sky. Colourful round mats arranged in a semi-circle wait to be occupied by children, who sit in the space to listen and be quiet. When all the children are seated on their mats, the teacher greets each one by name: ‘Good morning my friends, good morning Mike, good morning Zoe’. ‘Good morning, Miss Tam’, the children often reply in a lively voice. I sit along with the children and teachers, waiting for story time to start.

Inside her old-fashioned leather bag, the teacher carries books, felt stories, tiny bells, finger puppets and other objects that seem to come alive as she starts story time. The teacher welcomes a myriad of tales about monsters and dragons whose adventures trigger the children’s curiosity and imagination; when possible, she uses these stories to model a kind and calm attitude to the children. As in many early childhood education settings, story time is a central moment of the day. Through storytelling, educators and children interact using artefacts and put into practice what educators have learned through their professional development.

During story time 1 day, the children and I learn that a new boy will start coming to the childcare centre. The teacher selects a book entitled *I Can Be a Super Friend and Work with my Friends* by Grant and Lentini (2002), which reads like this:

I like talking and playing with my friends at school. Sometimes, I want to play with what my friends are playing with. When I play, I sometimes feel like taking toys, using mean words, or hitting and kicking. My

friends get sad or mad when I hit, kick, use mean words, or take toys. I can try to be a SUPER FRIEND and work with my friends. (pp. 1–6)

In the conversation, the teacher encourages children to demonstrate how to be a super friend when the new boy starts coming to the centre. As the teacher continues reading and talking to them, she acknowledges the children who are listening as super friends: 'If you are listening, you can be a super friend! Remember, super friends are good listeners'.

Messages about kindness and how to handle children's varied emotions are found everywhere on the childcare's walls and shelves. For example, there are a few posters displaying actions that children can adopt when frustrated. When a child seems upset, the teacher may point to the poster titled 'Action Breaks' and ask: 'What do you do when you feel really, really frustrated?' The children raise their hands and talk over each other as they say aloud the actions on the handout: 'Stomping, stretching, breathing!'. The Feeling Wheel is another colourful visual artefact that displays a range of emotions such as sad, happy and angry, among others, that teachers utilise to help children identify their feelings. While reading a story on one occasion, the teacher notes that a child is quietly sobbing. In a soothing voice, the teacher asks her how she is feeling, suggesting that the child point to one of the emotions from the Feeling Wheel. The girl refuses to pick one, so the teacher asks the other children to pick an emotion for her. Some children say 'sad' and others say 'lonely'.

Having introduced story time as a site for pedagogical and ethical engagement, now I turn to the two vignettes around Lucas presented earlier in this article. These stories challenge self-regulation-focussed pedagogies for teachers' and children's ethical engagement.

First vignette: 'Lucas is learning'

During story time, one child is giggling with his friend. The teacher reminds the children to stay quiet and listen. Lucas shows signs of concern as he looks back and forth from the teacher to the other children. Suddenly, Lucas pushes the giggling children in what I interpret as an attempt to reinforce the rule of 'stop and listen'. The girl next to me tells me: 'He is a slow child; he can't use his words', while the teacher says to him: 'No hitting, please', showing the flashcard for 'sit quietly'. The children Lucas pushes are complaining to the teacher about his behaviour, so the teacher explains to them concisely: 'He is learning'.

Lucas is a 4-year old boy who has been attending the centre for almost a year. A language therapist has been visiting the centre from time to time to assist him in developing his communication skills. The therapist had advised using flashcards to help him adapt to the routines and interact with the other children. The therapist is glad to observe Lucas's progress in the last few months. He seems to be more communicative and is starting to express interest in playing with other children, rather than staying on his own. For example, Lucas has become keener to find opportunities to join the others in tasks such as cleaning up or putting toys away. When he becomes excited about something, he often uses his body language by pointing it out with his finger, laughing or expressing surprise.

The other children have various ways of relating to him. Some call him the 'slow child' to acknowledge that he is learning at a different pace than others. Other children are less patient and understanding and perceive him as being simply mean or annoying, especially when he cannot find the words to communicate with them.

Teachers constantly work with Lucas to understand basic instructions and interact with the other children. During story time, Lucas is always accompanied by a teacher who uses a set of flashcards to signal what to do. These flashcards display illustrations and written labels of specific actions like

sitting down, keeping quiet, going to the washroom and getting dressed. The children are aware that teachers employ the flashcards mainly with the younger ones and Lucas because of the additional support he needs. The teachers also rely on the colourful mats for sitting to avoid conflicts among the children by reminding them to stay in their mats and not trespass on the personal space of others.

As the teachers made clear, framing Lucas's behaviours as part of a learning process – 'He is learning' – is a strategy to move away from a language of deficit that situates Lucas as a 'slow' child. As this vignette suggests, some children arguably need more time and more discussion to understand what teachers mean by 'he is learning'. However, the standardised response given by the teachers about Lucas is not enough to shift the negative attitudes that some children harbour towards him.

While these lessons and rules support children in becoming independent in everyday situations, it is critical to note what else these practices produce. As I further explain, responsibility resulting from the management of thoughts and feelings posits essential restrictions to the ethical engagement that the BC ELF envisions. The prevalent use of pedagogical tools such as the Feeling Wheel or the flashcards narrows down social responsibility to children's self-regulating abilities. Likewise, becoming responsible involves, first and foremost, focussing attention on the individual child rather than paying attention to their peers' complex experiences.

The question that remains is: what other forms of responsibility are possible in early childhood education that are not yet practised or continually encouraged? The strategies conducive to avoiding conflict seem effective for supporting peaceful forms of conviviality but less conducive for going deeper towards difficult conversations around topics such as Lucas's unique learning needs. In the next section, I explore an event which involved Lucas caring about worms. I include this event to illustrate an alternative sense of responsibility in early childhood education.

Second vignette: Caring about worms

On a cold and sunny morning, Lucas finds a worm on the ground and puts it on his hand. He looks very excited, so other children and teachers join him to see his discovery. I tell him that he can find worms in any wet place in the backyard, so the children and I go on a mission to search in those damp places. After a few failed attempts, we find an empty pot in the yard where many worms live underneath. The pot is behind other plants, so adults do not reach it easily, but the children's small bodies do the trick. Some children are eager to squeeze and take the worms in their hands. Lucas leads the others and gently shares some of the worms he has on his hands with them. After a moment, the children become interested in something else, but Lucas continues to observe the worms wiggling in his hand.

As I take a step back to observe Lucas's interest and encounter with the worms, I notice his particular enjoyment in what I understand as a relational learning practice. As Simpson (2014, 2017) reminds us, learning is not only an intellectual exercise but also a practice of embodiment. As Lucas finds the worms on the ground, he engages with them through his senses and body. He shows both curiosity and surprise for the kinaesthetic feelings as the worms move on his palm. His face and body expressions capture not only my attention but also his peers' and teachers' attention in ways that he often does not in his regular forms of expression within the classroom space. Children follow him to find more worms, which significantly contrasts with the many times children move away from him to avoid interacting with him. Lucas does not need special support or standardised instructions regarding what to do on this particular occasion. He captures others' attention for his discovery and his unique ways of gently relating to these worms. As the event unfolds, Lucas emerges as a strong, competent and unique child who experiments, investigates and

wonders about the worms who live in the centre's backyard. The group of children and teachers gives him attention that shows his differences make him unique.

I propose thinking about Lucas's experience with the worms as a form of relational responsibility for similar reasons as argued elsewhere. As Nxumalo (2019) and Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor (2018) have argued, child-animal relationships offer pedagogical opportunities for shifting educators' and children's ethical frames. Lucas's encounter with the worms is a small but significant achievement of an interspecies relationship that de-centres human exceptionality and counteracts ableism. In early childhood education, relational pedagogies have challenged us to think about our relationships with the more-than-human world in ways that unsettle long-standing assumptions about human exceptionality, what it means to be human (or not) and our responsibility to others, both human and more-than-human. As this brief vignette suggests, Lucas is often praised when he waits his turn, uses his words to express his intentions and is kind to others. In this situation, Lucas is situated as praiseworthy within the frame of being a slow child learning to interact with other children and adults. What if his engagement with worms had been centred as a pedagogical opportunity rather than an isolated moment that reflects his unique personality?

Against children's self-regulation: Making space for the relational child

These two contrasting vignettes encapsulate the way teachers support children in their everyday relations with each other in the childcare centre. These experiences represent the multiple challenges and tensions that arise when two pedagogical frameworks co-exist and even clash. This section discusses the narratives and practices around the responsible child as the primary focus of self-regulation-based pedagogies. I also comment on how unattended events such as Lucas' encounter with the worms offer opportunities to reconceptualise pedagogies for relational responsibility.

As Smith (2012) explains, privileged knowledge about the child's development sets the stage for governing strategies to operate in children's contexts, such as early childhood education. As I commented earlier, socio-emotional learning and self-regulation theories have become increasingly popular, not only in educators' professional development programming but also in the early childhood classroom. Educators have referred that most books and materials they use to cultivate a harmonious environment come from professional development workshops they have participated for supporting children's socio-emotional learning and self-regulation. The rationale for using these books and materials seems broadly accepted as evidence-based knowledge and thus their effects on children's ability to relate to each other goes unquestioned.

These self-regulating strategies used in the centre's group spaces focus, by default, on the individual child. For example, the book *How to be a Super Friend* sets the standard for friendship and provides a pre-defined set of behaviours to be followed individually. The teacher's reminder about the ability of super friends to be good listeners emphasises that each child is responsible for making the right choice and their own capacity to become a super friend by self-regulating their impulses to talk over each other. When each child meets expectations, they are elevated to exceptional individuals – super friends – creating a hierarchy among them. These self-regulating strategies fail to provide pedagogical tools to foster a more collective and relational approach. What can the children do to welcome the new child? Is there anything that children would like to do as a group? How about sharing some of their favourite games, toys, books or places? What does it mean in practice to create a culture of welcoming as opposed to a culture of welcoming individuals?

Pedagogical artefacts (e.g. flashcards, books, the Feeling Wheel) and shortcuts (e.g. 'he is learning') arguably guide children in peacefully resolving conflict daily. However, these strategies also have the unintended effect of reducing the complexity of conflicts. The assumption is that children's sense of responsibility builds on their capacity to make rational decisions based on standardised steps. Indeed, self-regulated-centred pedagogies do not offer tools to teachers and children to address conflicts around unique ways of communicating through body language, as is the case with Lucas. The children do not easily acknowledge Lucas as an equal because he often does not follow the pre-agreed set of story time rules (i.e. communicating using his words, sitting relatively still on his mat, waiting for his turn to ask a question or tell a story). These rules fail to recognise Lucas's unique forms of responsibility and ways of being with others, leaving him as 'a slow child who is learning'.

Teachers' perspectives illustrate some of the tensions between suggesting that children are responsible for their behaviours while also arguing that they are unprepared – because of their innocence – to deal with more difficult conversations. Pedagogical strategies mainly rely on prescribing standardised behaviours and explanations, rather than engaging children in more difficult conversations that acknowledge and value complex emotions. As some of my casual conversations with educators reveal, they believe that children are still too young to understand why Lucas sometimes does not follow the rules or use his words. For this reason, they prefer to convey the consistent message that 'Lucas is learning', rather than having difficult conversations about individual differences. In short, teachers coincide that teaching all the children to behave kindly towards others is the primary goal. This dichotomy represents a core tension in children's sense of responsibility. On the one hand, they are supported to become kind towards their peers, but on the other, they are still governed by the workings of false constructs of autonomy and choice since they are not engaged in the complexity of more relational ways of being.

Keeping children away from others' personal space illustrates how narratives about self-regulation configure not only children's mental space but also their physical space. As mentioned earlier, colourful sitting mats allow children to mark their place during story time. They work as bounded spaces intended to keep children attentive to the stories and prevent them from trespassing into others' personal spaces. The mats also mark the physical boundaries of autonomy and indicate the limits of collective spaces, such as a classroom. Teachers employ reminders such as: 'Mats are for sitting on, not playing with'. The children themselves also reinforce this rule by drawing teachers' attention when someone is not on their mats. When children agree on being close to each other or even hugging, teachers encourage them to use their words instead, along with a gentle reminder to go back to their mats. The demarcation of these repeated boundaries also contributes to a notion of responsibility as an individual affair.

Despite their emphasis on children's socio-emotional development, self-regulation strategies do not lead children and teachers to embody and emotionally connect with others. Conversations around the importance of welcoming the new child or signalling Lucas as someone who is learning are more rational than emotional in nature. On the other hand, Lucas's encounter with the worms provides a point of contrast that illuminates the opportunities that children's relationships with the more-than-human world offer to pedagogies for responsibility and ethical engagement. These opportunities include not only a more embodied response of enjoyment from the encounter with the worms but also an opportunity to practice other relationships among Lucas, the other children and the worms. The event allowed Lucas to be seen as a strong and competent child whose curiosity can attract the interest of others. He was recognised for his ability to investigate and engage with the worms in ways not often distinguished in the centre. These lessons open up pedagogical opportunities to move away from an individualistic understanding of responsibility as self-regulation towards one that is collective and more relational.

An over-preoccupation with children's self-regulation elevates self-regulation strategies to pedagogies for cultivating a sense of responsibility in children. These pedagogies work through narratives and practices around the responsible and self-regulated child as an individual who has the choice to draw on a set of standardised to become exceptional individuals who ethically engage with others. While fostering children's competence and autonomy, self-regulation-centred pedagogies fail to answer the ethical question of how we can live together and in good relations with other humans and more-than-humans. This question demands that educators and children grapple with difficult ethical questions beyond the individual child, become attuned with the 'interdependence with the natural world and generate dialogue about our collective responsibility' (Early Learning Framework, the BC Ministry of Education, 2019: 21).

Conclusion: What or who is the child responsible for?

This article examined how self-regulation-centred narratives and practices around the responsible and self-regulated child reduce children's sense of responsibility to an individual affair. In a context where neoliberal and colonial narratives continue to dominate, self-regulation-based pedagogies centre on human exceptionality, autonomy and rationality as valuable traits for children to foster. As a result, children's sense of responsibility becomes a practice that mainly depends on their ability to follow a pre-established set of rules. According to this understanding, the child continues to be innocent and unprepared (Burman, 2007; Cannella, 1997; Garlen, 2019; Jenks, 2005; Kessler and Swadener, 1992; Smith, 2014) to engage in difficult conversations, for example, around Lucas's unique abilities. However, in a contradictory way, children are mature enough to be responsible for their self-regulation. If early childhood education is faced with how to live in good relationships with others, including the Indigenous peoples and the lands where children live and grow, then self-regulation-based pedagogies for ethical engagement do children a disservice.

This critique provides educators with tools to think and re-image their pedagogies by looking at what well-intended and a critical practices may produce in children's everyday life. As the vignettes analysed illustrated, the success of socio-emotional learning and self-regulation theories rely on an easy-to-follow framework for teachers to cultivate harmonious environments. In addition, self-regulation narratives – arguably unintentionally – go hand-in-hand with neoliberal and colonial narratives of the autonomous, rational and exceptional individual. What is at stake is not the existence, but the dominance of self-regulation approaches, especially in contexts where time for pedagogical reflection is limited.

An individualistic notion of the responsible child fails to accomplish the type of ethical engagement that a number of early childhood educators, practitioners and researchers aspire to in the province of British Columbia and beyond. Relational pedagogies can support the slow, uncomfortable and unpredictable individual and collective re-learning work through not only intellectual but also affective and collective ethical engagement. To create and use those pedagogies, educators need to be supported through their pre-service education and in-service professional development in ways that allow them to reflect on their philosophies and practice. The BC ELF offers opportunities for such reflective work and so does the work started by a number of early childhood educators committed to advancing more relational pedagogies with young children.

To counteract Canada's neoliberal and colonial context that permeates every sphere of children's and ECE's daily lives, two critical questions to ask are: What or who is the child responsible for? and What are the pedagogies that children and educators need to follow to relate among themselves and with those who have come before and will come after them? These questions do not look for easy and standardised answers, but rather, for ones that bear responsibility for the ethical complexities of the world that children live in.

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