Contending Purposes of Pre-Kindergarten: A Comparative Case Study of Early Childhood Education Policy in Minnesota

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Dr. Roozbeh Shirazi, Advisor

May 2022

Acknowledgements

I want to begin by expressing my gratitude to my family for their encouragement and love throughout this dissertation process. To my daughter Cecilia: you are my greatest joy. I love you so much and a lot! To my husband Jon, I love you and thank you for being such a wonderful, caring, and fun partner. Where would I be if I didn't have you to encourage me to eat vegetables, sleep, and have fun, even while writing a dissertation? To my sister, Danica, thank you for being my best friend, and the funniest, kindest, wisest person I know. To my mom and dad, thank you for your love and support. You are my first teachers. To Angie, I miss you every day and hope that I made you proud. To Sara, you belong in my family section because you are like a sister to me. Meeting you during this program has been far and away the best part of my journey and I look forward to a lifetime of friendship. To my dear friends Betsy, Steph, Niki, and Sarah: thank you for being the absolute best. To the Klapperich and Bender family, thank you for all the love you give our family.

I want to express my sincerest thanks to the wonderful students, parents, and pre-K teacher who participated in this study, and to the lead administrator of the 'Rainbow pre-Kindergarten program', where I undertook this research. I am inspired by each of you and grateful for your time, support, and trust in me to engage with your stories.

I would like to thank my Advisor, Dr. Roozbeh Shirazi. It has been a privilege to work with you and learn from your wisdom. No one has pushed my thinking more than you. One of my greatest motivators throughout this process has been to make you proud. Most of all, I will never forget the kindness you showed me as I struggled to continue with this work while grappling with loss and welcoming my daughter into the world. I would also like to express my deepest thanks and gratitude to my three other esteemed committee members: Dr. Rachel Berman, Dr. Joan DeJaeghere, and Dr. Fran Vavrus. This dissertation research has been deeply inspired by each of your work. I hold each of you in the highest regard and I am grateful for your support, the critical insights you have shared, the generous feedback you have provided, and the care you have shown.

Thank you to every wonderful colleague that I have had the good fortune to work with through SASS and a special thank you to Dr. Jenny Steiner, my boss/friend. Jenny, your radical care and leadership are unmatched! Thank you to my CIDE cohort: Dr. Millicent Adjei, Dr. Tiago Bittencourt, Dr. Kevin Clancy, Dr. Hae Lim Chun, Dr. Justin Jiminez, and Dr. Sara Musaifer (thanks again!). Getting to know each of you and to learn from you was such a privilege. Thank you to Megan Deutschman, our friendship has been a bright spot of this past year and I am so grateful for you! Thank you to Hanna Wedajo, it has been a privilege to get to know you and share our work. Thank you to Dr. Lisa Kaler for being such a wonderful friend! Thank you to Zhuldyz Amankulova and Leah Fulton. Our work together for the Caregivers Collective has been one of the most meaningful experiences I have had at the UMN. You are both such inspirations to me! Thank you to the many wonderful OLPD friends and colleagues I had the privilege to get to know. Finally, thank you to the mental health practitioners who helped me through difficult times and made getting through this dissertation research feel possible.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Cecilia, to the students from the Rainbow classroom, and to all of Minnesota's children.

Abstract

Policymakers predominantly represent Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as an investment in children's human capital development. Despite the dominance of this policy discourse, limited research explores how it operates as a policymaking strategy or compares the perspectives of policymakers, children, parents, and educators regarding ECEC. This dissertation research addresses this gap through a Comparative Case Study of ECEC in Minnesota, where investment discourse is pervasive. I apply a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Minnesota ECEC policy texts to explore how policy actors privilege investment discourse in legitimating ECEC reform. Through this CDA I highlight the assumptions regarding children's subjectivity that underlie Minnesota policy actors' use of investment discourse. I apply Critical Race Theory to explore how Minnesota ECEC policy actors' engagement of investment discourse reinforces racist assumptions regarding inequality in education.

Additionally, this dissertation examines the perspectives and priorities of key social actors in ECEC practice, including children, a pre-K educator, and parents. I draw on school-based research that I conducted in a pre-K classroom in the greater Minneapolis, Minnesota area. I describe how two parents and a pre-K educator emphasize the importance of children's social-emotional learning in pre-K, and pre-K's role in readying children for future schooling. I also outline how these participants negotiate investment discourse as they make choices for their children's and students' education. Meanwhile, the pre-K students who participated in this research valued opportunities to engage in free play and artistic endeavors, and to visit their playground and the gym. They also emphasized rules regarding safety, as well as strategies to

negotiate relationships with peers and process their feelings. I contrast students' narratives regarding pre-K with policy actors' prioritization of ECEC as a means to ready children for academic success and eventual economic productivity. I show how students' priorities are at risk as a result of the heightened academic expectations in ECEC. Drawing on the New Sociology of Childhood, I argue that engaging children in this dissertation research offers emancipatory possibilities for destabilizing investment discourse's dominance and forging justice in ECEC.

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List of Abbreviations and Key Terms

- **BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color):** I use Black children or people when discussing scholarship, policy discourses, and experiences that specifically represent this population and then use BIPOC to refer more broadly to Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Color.

- **CDA (Critical discourse analysis)** is a methodological and theoretical framework for analyzing the "dialectical relations between discourses and other objects, elements or moments, as well as analysis of the 'internal relations' of discourse" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 4).

- **CNA (Critical narrative analysis)** is an analytical approach that incorporates tools from critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis. CNA examines how participants "create their selves in constant social interactions at both personal and institutional levels, and how institutional discourses influence and are influenced by personal everyday narratives" (Souto-Manning, 2014a, pp. 162-163).

- **CCS (Comparative case study):** A qualitative methodological approach to compare cases across vertical, horizontal, and transversal axes (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017).

- **CRT (Critical Race Theory)** is a theoretical approach that explores how racialization undergirds key social institutions and mediates individuals' and groups' experiences and access to material goods, recognition, support, and justice within these institutions (Berman, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Scholarship adopting CRT is committed to identifying and resisting racism and its deleterious consequences (Berman, 2020).

- **Collocation** is "regular or habitual patterns of co-occurrence between words" (Fairclough, 2003, p.213).

- **ECEC (Early childhood education and care):** When not referring specifically to Minnesota pre-K, I choose to use ECEC to refer to systems and programs that provide education and care for young children. I adopt ECEC instead of ECE in an effort to respond to the call from Langford et al. (2017) to assert the value of 'care' in early childhood policy discourse.

- **Feminist Ethics of Care (FEOC)** is a relational ethical approach, which places caring and responding to care needs at the center of interpersonal and political decision-making (Collins, 2015; Tronto, 2013).

- **Human capital** is understood as the "skills, competencies and knowledge, such as literacy, numeracy, self-discipline and perseverance" (White, 2012, p. 662) which then become understood in terms of their broader social value.

- **Legitimation** is "a widespread acknowledgement of the legitimacy of explanations and justifications for how things are and how things are done" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 219).

- **Modality** reflects "what authors commit themselves to in terms of truth or necessity" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 219).

- **Neoliberalism** is an ideology which applies the logic governing the market to all aspects of social life (Tronto, 2013).

- **Nominalization** is a "grammatical metaphor which represents processes as entities" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 220).

- **NSC (New sociology of childhood)** is a body of scholarship that views childhood as a biological period, but more importantly, as a social construction (Holloway, 2014). Beginning from the standpoint that childhood is socially constructed (Tisdall & Punch, 2012), and functions as a social institution or category (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015), research within the NSC recognizes children as social actors and seeks to understand children's present experiences and relationships (Holloway, 2014; Matthews, 2007).

- **Pre-K (Pre-Kindergarten):** I use pre-K to refer to Minnesota's voluntary, publicly funded early childhood education and care program for four year olds.

- **Responsibilization:** Drawing on Foucauldian theorization of techniques of governance, Rose (1999) offers responsibilization as a concept to explain processes whereby political subjects increasingly take on responsibility for their own conduct, welfare, and care, becoming more reliant on the self and less reliant on the state.

Chapter 1 : Introduction

I invite you to picture a child who matters to you. Now, picture this child in pre-kindergarten. Take a moment to think about what you imagine and hope for them. I suspect that laboring to avoid prison in the future is not part of your vision. But this is part of how Governor Tim Walz frames the purpose and stakes of pre-Kindergarten in Minnesota. In his 2019 Inaugural address, Governor Walz (2019b) states: “Putting a young child on a yellow bus to pre-Kindergarten in St. Cloud can prevent him from riding a prison bus to Stillwater” (p.3).

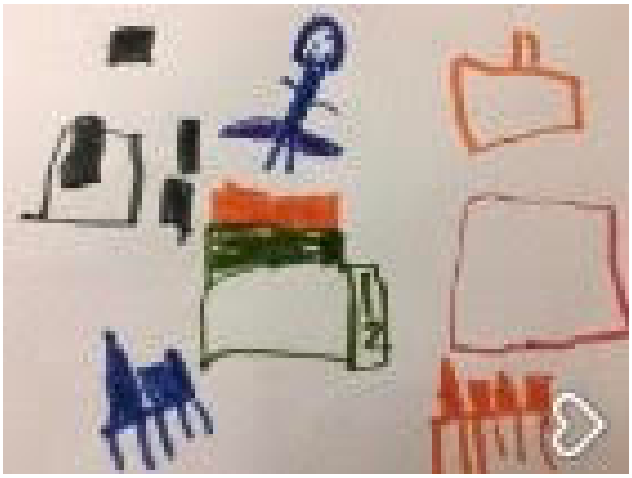

Figure 1: Coral's drawing of the Rainbow classroom

This is a drawing of a pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) classroom in the greater Minneapolis, Minnesota area. I sat down for a conversation with the artist, Coral, in 2019, during the three weeks that I spent observing and participating in her pre-K class. I asked Coral about pre-K and she shared the following insights with me:

> I like the gym because we get to run around and go on bikes…The safe place is important because we go in it to get calm, take deep breaths. Normally there’s an orange pillow on top of the green blanket. This is the lunch table where the lunch boxes live. This is the sink where we wash our hands.

The images offered by Walz (2019b) and Coral tell very different stories about Minnesota pre-K. Walz's (2019b) passage illustrates how children are discursively constructed as both at-risk and a potential risk to the public in the context of Minnesota ECEC reform. Walz's (2019b) statement implies that providing children with access to pre-K will help them avoid the carceral system in the future, obfuscating the underlying role that public schooling, including ECEC, can play in reinforcing the 'school to prison pipeline' (Alexander, 2012). Here, one gains an understanding of just how high the stakes are perceived to be for young children's performance in the context of pre-K. Meanwhile, Coral invites a glimpse into pre-K as a place inhabited by real, young human beings, who are navigating their new learning environment and finding spaces for joy and calm.

Governor Walz's (2019b) argument reflects a dominant global policy discourse that frames ECEC as a means to prepare children for academic success in the service of enhanced future economic productivity and reduced future social intervention and spending (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). Investment discourse dominates Minnesota's ECEC policy reform. Over the past two decades, a coalition of business leaders, public-private partnerships, politicians, and advocacy and non-governmental organizations, have debated how to reform ECEC in Minnesota. Despite debates over funding and specifically, whether to implement targeted or universal ECEC programming for Minnesota's children, policy actors in support of ECEC reform have aligned in their vision of ECEC as a means to build a competitive labor market and address the state's racial "achievement gap" in education, which is widely claimed to be among the worst in

the United States. This alleged “achievement gap” holds that Black children and children from low-income backgrounds are behind their white, middle-class peers.

Policy actors argue the ‘achievement gap’ between white students and Black students places children and the state at risk, and according to Governor Walz (2019c), it is “threatening to hold back our future workforce” (para. 5). Foregrounding this kind of economic argument may earn favor among unlikely supporters of public funding for ECEC, such as economists and business leaders. However, investment discourse has material and discursive effects which undermine equality and justice in and through ECEC. Policymakers’ focus on ECEC’s potential role in addressing inequality turns systemic injustices into individual failures. This occurs through their focus on altering individual’s behaviors and performance in education instead of addressing the policies and practices that impede racial and economic equality (Kendi, 2019). Not only does investment discourse obfuscate the root causes of unequal education outcomes, it is also mobilized to justify ECEC reforms that actually perpetuate inequality (Brown, 2019; Nxumalo & Adair, 2019; Tager, 2017). This occurs as the state places increased academic expectations on children, including surpassing developmental milestones at earlier ages, in order to render a high return on its investment in their education (Brown, 2021; Kaščák & Pupala, 2013). As a result, teachers are increasingly pressured to prepare students in early childhood for the standardized assessments that await them in grade school (Brown, 2021; Pérez, 2019). These assessments center white, middle-class knowledge and produce a “manufactured crisis” (Brown, 2019, p. 10), as BIPOC children and children experiencing economic injustice are then represented as academically behind their white, middle-class peers (Pérez, 2019; Tager, 2017). As a result, children

who are under-served and viewed through a deficit lens within the education system are subjected to segregated learning experiences, which undermine their agency and focus on developing rudimentary knowledge and skills (Adair & Colegrove, 2021; Dudley-Marling, 2019; Tager, 2017).

Through its vision of children and their education as a "reservoir of future capital" (Moss, 2014, p. 45), as this dissertation explores, investment discourse also holds important implications for children's political subjectivity and status. Conceptualizing ECEC as an investment as opposed to a public good and entitlement alters children's relationship with the state and their citizenship status. Within this frame, children are not regarded as rights holders, citizens, or full members of our social world. Instead, they are future capital, whose education needs to be intervened in and whose labor must be carefully monitored and proscribed so that they can render the desired returns for the state (Moss, 2014). This extractive and reductionist framework fails to recognize children as full, complex, agentic beings (Dudley-Marling, 2019; Moss et al., 2000).

The dominance of investment discourse also elides other, more social-justice oriented policy rationales, such as its role in supporting gender equality (Bundy, 2012; White, 2011). Feminist political economists have long argued that ECEC programs play an essential role in supporting women's participation in the labor market (Prentice, 2009; White, 2011). ECEC's connection to gender equality was brought to the forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic, as one in four American women (twice the number of men) indicated they became unemployed due to not having childcare (Modestino, 2020).

Despite its pervasiveness, limited research explores how investment discourse is reinforced through policy texts, or how it is negotiated by key social actors in ECEC,

such as educators, parents, and students. This dissertation research addresses this gap in two ways. First, I identify how Minnesota's policy coalition privileges investment discourse when rationalizing public funding for ECEC. Second, I explore alternative rationales for ECEC through observations and interviews with pre-K students, parents, and an educator. While children are tasked with significant responsibility for securing Minnesota's future through their labor in pre-K, their voices are absent from Minnesota's ECEC policy discourse, and there is limited research that explores their views and priorities regarding policies and practices that affect them (O'Farrelly, 2020). This dissertation research will address this gap by exploring children's perspectives on ECEC, alongside those of policymakers, parents, and a pre-K educator. This research is significant because it demonstrates how consulting children can transform ECEC policy and practice to better reflect their needs and priorities.

Research Purpose and Questions

This dissertation research uses the Comparative Case Study (CCS) approach to interrogate investment discourse's dominance in Minnesota's ECEC policy development and to explore alternatives (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The CCS approach adopts a sociocultural understanding of policymaking "as a deeply political process of cultural production engaged in and shaped by social actors" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 2). It assumes that social actors are conditioned by different contexts, interests, and power relations (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). This makes it ideal for this study's comparison of different social actors' priorities regarding ECEC policy and practice and inclusion of children within this comparison. Pursuant of this aim, this study is guided by the following questions:

1. How does Minnesota's ECEC policy coalition privilege investment discourse in rationalizing public funding of ECEC, and what are its tangible effects?
2. How do Minnesotan ECEC policy actors represent childhood through their use of investment discourse to rationalize ECEC reform? What assumptions regarding childhood and education inequality do policymakers perpetuate?
3. How do parents and a pre-K educator explain the purposes of ECEC and negotiate investment discourse?
4. What are pre-K students' priorities in ECEC, and what might their views contribute to ECEC policy reform?

To answer the first and second research questions, I conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2010) of Minnesotan policy texts rationalizing publicly funded ECEC. I identified the assumptions regarding childhood and inequality that undergird Minnesota policy actors' use of investment discourse to rationalize ECEC reform. To answer this study's third and fourth research questions, in November, 2019 I conducted participant observations in a pre-K classroom (referred to as the Rainbow classroom, which is a pseudonym) in the Twin Cities area. During this time, I conducted one-on-one interviews with eight pre-K students. I later conducted one-on-one, remote interviews with the educator of this classroom and two parents.

Situating the Study in the Field

By exploring contending purposes of ECEC, this dissertation research engages two areas of inquiry that are central to the field of Comparative and International Development Education. In this section, I outline how this dissertation research is inspired by scholarship that questions schooling as a mechanism to secure a certain and

brighter future (Vavrus, 2021) and as a form of "anti-crisis" (Shirazi, 2020, p.296). Second, I align this dissertation research with CIDE scholarship that explores possibilities for negotiating and resisting dominant education discourses in pursuit of more just outcomes.

Education, Certainty, and Crisis

This dissertation engages a question that has long been a focus of Comparative and International Development Education scholarship: what is the purpose of education? In recent years, critical CIDE scholars (Shirazi, 2020; Vavrus, 2021) have identified how the answer to this question often frames educations as a means to cultivate certainty for the future (Vavrus, 2021) and mitigate crisis (Shirazi, 2020). While education policy discourses frame "schooling as a panacea for social ills" (Vavrus, 2021, p. 4), it is "far more precarious and contextualized" (Vavrus, 2021, p. 4). Vavrus (2021) highlights, how instead of being a safeguard against uncertainty, "schooling can become a source of uncertainty itself" (p. 3). Attempts to reform education in the service of a more certain future have led to "a narrow focus on the cognitive aspects of schooling- on learning- as though mastering phonics and multiplication tables could, in and of themselves, guarantee a good life" (Vavrus, 2020, p. 3). Although "learning the basics" (Vavrus, 2021, p.3) and building the behavioral and social-emotional skills aligned with academic success are valuable, the hyper-focus on these skills as key to future success disregards "the inequality of opportunity that lies beyond the school doors for low-income and minoritized youth" (Vavrus, 2021, p.3). Vavrus (2021) further articulates how anthropological scholarship has explored how uncertainty "has too often been conflated with danger, risk, and misfortune" (p. 8). This dissertation research draws on Vavrus's

(2021) insights regarding education and uncertainty by exploring how Minnesota policy actors envision access to ECEC as part of a strategy to advance future opportunities for children who are perceived to be 'at risk'. I examine the assumptions underlying Minnesota policy actors' discursive construction of a more certain, prosperous future for children and the state vis a vis access to ECEC.

Shirazi (2020) provides a compelling account of one answer to the question, 'what is the purpose of education', which frames education as a means "out of crisis" (p.295). Shirazi's (2020) longitudinal research explores how Jordanian men grapple with the failed promises of higher education and uncertain futures. Drawing on Berlant's (2011) work, Shirazi (2020) describes how crisis is not a singular event but instead, functions "as a persistent vulnerability for an undetermined duration, or as a contemporary form of life itself" (p.294). Additionally, Shirazi (2020) engages Berlant's (2011) notion of 'cruel optimism', which he argues "operates in desires for upward mobility, job security, sociopolitical equality, and intimacy—what Berlant calls clusters of promises that make up the good life—while binding people to relationships, objects, and arrangements that actually impede their flourishing" (p.294). For Shirazi (2020) this framework offers an entry point to resist the dominant narrative attributing economic crises to "individual or curricular deficit(s)" (p.297), and to resist the claim that "hard work, pragmatic persistence, and education" (p.294) are enough to mitigate uncertainty for Jordanian youth, "as they labor for their futures" (p.294).

This dissertation research is inspired by Shirazi's (2020) theorization of the relationship between education and crisis, as well as the 'cruel optimism' underlying promises that academic success offers a sure path to the 'good life'. Motivated by

Shirazi's (2020) work, this dissertation research explores how schooling for Minnesota's youngest students has become a project in "education as anti-crisis" (p.296). Earlier in this chapter, I described how policymakers' fixation on children's performance and their alleged deficits constitutes a "manufactured crisis" (Brown, 2019, p. 10) in ECEC. This dissertation explores how Minnesota ECEC policy discourse frames the alleged risks and uncertainty associated with children's perceived gaps in achievement and lack of school readiness as 'crises'. In addition, I explore implications that this "manufactured crisis" (Brown, 2019, p.1) holds for children's subjectivity and education justice in the state.

Negotiating and resisting dominant education discourses

A second way that this research is situated within CIDE is through its examination of how dominant, neoliberal discourses that frame the purposes of education are negotiated by social actors (DeJaeghere, 2017) and the need to resist discourses that claim to pursue justice while perpetuating deficit understandings of communities (Nxumalo, 2019; Tuck, 2009). Investment discourse functions as a hegemonic global policy framework, which restricts the possibilities of what ECEC can be and do for children and families. However, as Tsing (2004) argues, "gaps" (p.202) "develop in the seams of universal projects" and (p.202) "whenever we want to trace the limits of hegemony we need to look for gaps" (p.202). This dissertation research seeks to identify the "gaps" (Tsing, 2004, p.202) in investment discourse by highlighting the alternative rationales for ECEC that emerge when students' priorities are engaged.

To explore how key social actors in ECEC negotiate investment discourse, I am inspired by DeJaeghere's (2017) theorization of "neo/liberalisms" (p.11). DeJaeghere (2017) employs "neo/liberalisms in the plural" (p.12) because this approach "allows for

consideration of various forms of neoliberalism and liberalism at work in societies" (p. 12). As DeJaeghere (2017) argues, "liberalism and neoliberalism exist alongside each other in development discourses, education policies, and programs aiming to foster economic growth, alleviate poverty, and address inequalities" (p. 12). DeJaeghere (2017) engages "neo/liberalisms" (p.11) to explore how the purposes of 'entrepreneurship education' may take different forms, sometimes more capitalist and sometimes more rights-based, as it is conceived of and applied by different social actors.

DeJaeghere's (2017) approach to the "double-meanings" (p.11) of "neo/liberalisms" (p.11) resonates with how some ECEC scholars approach investment discourse. For instance, Adamson and Brennan (2014) articulate how investment discourse is employed by some in pursuit of human capital development while others engage it to pursue social equality. Similarly, Moss's (2014) understanding of investment discourse reflects this notion of "double meanings" (DeJaeghere, 2017, p.11). Moss (2014) argues that investment can be understood as *"to lay out for profit" (p.78)* or *"to give rights, privileges or duties" (p.78)*. While the first iteration offers a reductive, economized frame, the latter approach reflects "hope, obligation and incalculable hospitality" (Moss, 2014, p.79). Moss (2014) has chosen to "forego" (p.79) investment discourse; however he does not see "investment" as a "lost cause" (p.78). Instead, he leaves the possibility open that it may eventually "be reclaimed" (Moss, 2014, p.78). This dissertation research engages these notions of potential "double meanings" (DeJaeghere, 2017, p. 11) to explore how investment discourse is taken up and negotiated by different social actors.

This research is also inspired by Nxumalo's (2019) interrogation of the prevalence of "damaged centered" (Tuck, 2009, p.412) research in the context of ECEC. Here, Nxumalo (2019) draws on the work of Critical Race and Indigenous Studies scholar, Dr. Eve Tuck. Tuck (2009) defines "damage centered research" (p.413) as "research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation" (p. 413). In the following passage, Nxumalo (2019) highlights how scholarship that seeks to interrogate this dominant frame in the context of ECEC may question:

> What are the stories told of marginalized children doing to them and what they are materializing? Moreover, if these stories continue to circulate without clear connections to underlying systemic sources of inequality, particularly the unrelenting effects of life within racial capitalism and settler colonialism, what further damage might they do? (p. 165)

This dissertation research engages Nxumalo's (2019) provocation to explore how, through their language, policy actors reproduce stories rooted in "damage" (Tuck, 2009, p. 412) and in turn, what implications this holds for children's subjectivity within the state. Additionally, as I grapple with contending purposes of ECEC, I am inspired by Tuck's (2009) call for "shifting the discourse away from damage and toward desire and complexity" (p.422).

Research Paradigms

This dissertation research examines how Minnesota policy actors' use of investment discourse is rooted in oppressive assumptions regarding children, and particularly BIPOC children and children who experience economic injustice. I seek to engage alternative priorities for ECEC as envisioned by a pre-K educator, parents, and children. These aims position this research within a critical paradigm. The ontological

position underpinning a critical paradigm holds that "The apprehended world makes a material difference in terms of race, gender, and class" (Hatch & Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006, p. 498). In response, critical research seeks to interrogate "the cultural production of structures, processes and practices of power, exploitation and agency" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 39). Epistemologically, critical research regards knowledge as inherently political and that any knowledge produced through the research is influenced by the researcher's own identities and commitments (Hatch & Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006). Critical research seeks social change by highlighting inequality (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017), "raising our consciousness to the oppressive consequences of unjust systems and practices" (Hatch & Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006, p. 506), and "challeng(ing) existing power structures and promot(ing) resistance" (Hatch & Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006, p. 498).

While this dissertation is primarily situated within a critical framework, I also draw inspiration from post-foundationalism. Post-foundationalism is "a paradigm that encompasses a variety of theoretical perspectives including post-modernisms, post-structuralisms and post-colonialisms" (Moss, 2014, p. 93). Moss (2014) argues there are three reasons why a post-foundational paradigm is valuable for interrogating dominant discourses and imagining different possibilities for ECEC. First, this approach encourages attentiveness to "the omnipresence of power relations" (Moss, 2014, p. 95). Second, it shuns the possibility of a single, verifiable truth, embracing a multiplicity of ways of knowing and being (Moss, 2014). Third, a post-foundational framework "provides hope for responding to the diversity and complexity of the world in ways that are welcoming and respectful" (Moss, 2014, p. 95).

This research also engages elements of post-structuralism, as I examine textual representations of social phenomena by interrogating how policy actors' texts frame the purpose and social value of ECEC. In addition, I engage in discourse analysis and explore how investment discourse is positioned as dominant in Minnesota ECEC reform, while also examining the possibilities of alternative discourses to justify ECEC (Hatch & Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006). However, my discursive analysis aligns more with a critical rather than a post-structural approach, as I adopt Fairclough's (1992, 2003, 2010) framework for critical discourse analysis, which will be elaborated in chapter three.

Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the Feminist Ethics of Care, the New Sociology of Childhood (NSC), and Critical Race Theory (CRT), this research seeks to resist the dominance of economic-centered rationales for ECEC.

Feminist Ethics of Care

The Feminist Ethics of Care (FEOC) is a relational ethical approach, which places caring and responding to care needs at the center of interpersonal and political decision-making (Collins, 2015; Tronto, 2013). In this way, care answers "'what is the right thing for me to do?'" (Collins, 2015, p. 6) and "'what is the right thing for us to do?'" (Collins, 2015, p. 6). The FEOC provides an alternative to traditional, liberal theories of justice which frame individuals as autonomous, rational, rights-bearers, who make moral decisions by adhering to universal, abstract principles (Cockburn, 2005; Held, 2005). Instead, the FEOC prioritizes context, relationships, interdependence, and attention to others' needs and emotions in conceptualizing justice (Cockburn, 2005; Held, 2005). The FEOC provides a foundation to resist the future oriented, developmental view of children

by focusing on their relationships and care needs in the present (Cockburn, 2005). Recent critical ECEC scholarship has also identified how the FEOC can provide discursive possibilities to subvert neoliberalism' s dominance and envision more caring, just relations in ECEC (Langford, 2019; Moss, 2014; Powell et al. 2020).

New Sociology of Childhood

Like the FEOC, the New Sociology of Childhood (NSC) emerges in reaction to dominant frameworks in its field. The NSC offers a theoretical and research approach that challenges approaches to childhood rooted in developmentalism and socialization theory (Matthews, 2007). Researchers who work within this framework regard children as competent knowledge producers, social actors, and research participants (Levison et al., 2021; Marshall, 2016). Beginning from this central premise, NSC scholarship seeks to understand children's experiences, relationships, and priorities in the context of key social institutions, including formal education (Holloway, 2014; Matthews, 2007). Marshall (2016) further highlights an "epistemological" (p.59), rationale for consulting children about their schooling, as children have valuable and unique insights. Research adopting the NSC seeks to meet children where they are in life to learn from their experiences, instead of strictly focusing on how children are becoming or what they have not yet become (Albanese, 2009; Matthews, 2007; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Qvortrup, 1994, 2004). Applying the NSC, I recognize that children's critical perspectives may not take the same shape as those of adults. Nevertheless, children have important knowledge and experiences with ECEC that warrant theorization. It is incumbent on me, as an adult undertaking research with children, to find ways to engage their insights (Holloway, 2014).

This dissertation research is also informed by Critical ECEC scholarship that recognizes and explores how the intersections of racialization (Adair & Colegrove, 2021; Berman, 2020; Brown et al., 2010; Nxumalo, 2019; Pérez, 2019), gender (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015), and social-class (Dudley- Marling, 2019) influence constructions and experiences of childhood. The NSC's focus on age as the key social category for analysis risks over-simplifying the complexity of children's challenges, positionality, and relations (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015). Both dominant and critical early childhood theories have white, patriarchal lineages and thus, there is a need for "ontological and epistemic diversity" (Pérez (2019, p. 31) in approaching studies of childhood. It is imperative to recognize that there is a multiplicity of childhoods and that children navigate social institutions, including schools, across the intersection of diverse identities and lived experiences (MacNevin & Berman, 2016).

Critical Race Theory

To explore the racialization embedded in Minnesota ECEC policy discourse, this research is also guided by Critical Race Theory. Initially developed in the 1980s from the field of Critical Legal Studies, Critical Race theory (CRT) first emerged to highlight and interrogate the limitations of the American legal system and the Civil Rights movement in advancing greater racial justice or serving the interests of Black people (Berman, 2020). In the 1990s, CRT was further developed and applied beyond the legal field to examine racism in the context of other key social institutions, including education (Berman, 2020; Lynn & Dixson, 2013).Through this work, scholarship employing CRT sought "to understand both the cause and the context for disparate and unequal out-comes for racially marginalized peoples" (Lynn & Dixson, 2013, p.1)". While CRT has been

applied to research interrogating racism in the context of K-12 education, it has not been extensively employed by researchers working within the context of ECEC (Berman, 2020).

Informed by CRT, this research seeks to understand how racialization undergirds key social institutions and mediates individuals' and groups' experiences and access to material goods, recognition, support, and justice within these institutions (Berman, 2020). In taking up this aim, I recognize race as a social construction and one that has a "social reality" (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 9) as it "produce(s) real effects on the actors racialized" (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p.9). I also adopt CRT's commitment to identifying and resisting racism and its deleterious consequences (Berman, 2020).

This dissertation research project specifically engages three analytical tools from CRT to argue that Minnesota ECEC policy actors' use of investment discourse to rationalize ECEC reform is rooted in racist assumptions regarding education inequality. These concepts include: "whiteness as property" (Harris, 1993, p.1714), resisting liberal notions of meritocracy and equal opportunity (Berman, 2020; Del Real Viramontes, 2013), and "interest convergence" (Bell, 1980. p.523). Each of these concepts will be applied in chapter four, where I articulate the racist assumptions embedded in Minnesota ECEC policy actors' employment of investment discourse.

Preview of Upcoming Chapters

I will now provide a brief overview of the remaining six chapters of this dissertation. In chapter two, I review competing understandings of childhood, along with the purpose of ECEC. I also examine comparative research that explores how key social actors understand the purposes of ECEC. In this chapter, I establish that there is limited

research that explores how investment discourse operates as a policymaking strategy, few studies that compare children's perspectives on ECEC with those of adults, and no studies that specifically compare how key social actors negotiate investment discourse in ECEC policy and practice. I then propose that this dissertation research addresses this gap.

In chapter three, I outline the methodological framework that I adopted to carry out this dissertation research. I describe how I applied a Comparative Case Study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) approach to explore and compare how Minnesota ECEC policy actors, a pre-K teacher, parents, and students represent pre-K. Next, I detail how I utilized Critical Discourse Analysis to explore how policy actors' rationalize ECEC reform through their use of investment discourse in texts. I then discuss how this textual analysis is complemented by empirical school based research, through which I engaged in observations of a pre-K classroom and interviewed students, parents, and a pre-K educator regarding their experiences with pre-K. I also discuss ethical decisions I grappled with as I engaged in research with young children and navigated access and data collection amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, I share efforts that I undertook to enhance trustworthiness of the data and findings shared in this dissertation, as well as outline the limitations of this research.

The next section of the dissertation is dedicated to three analysis chapters, where I share findings from this research. In chapter four, I explore how Minnesota policy actors engage investment discourse to frame the purpose of ECEC reform in the state. I identify the assumptions and connected discursive mechanisms that Minnesota policy actors draw on to position investment discourse as dominant. I argue Minnesota's ECEC policy

coalition simultaneously burdens children with the responsibility of safeguarding the state's social and economic future while also casting them under a deficit lens. Applying CRT, I identify how Minnesota policy actors draw on racist assumptions regarding the cause of education inequality. Then, I reflect on the limited shift in policy actors' use of this discourse over time to rationalize ECEC reform. Finally, I describe the material effects of this discourse, as it is used to justify targeted, instead of universal pre-K.

In chapter five and six, I shift focus from analyzing policy discourse to engage with the perspectives of key social actors in ECEC practice. In these chapters, I draw on school-based research that I conducted in a pre-K program in the greater Minneapolis, Minnesota area. Chapter five explores the experiences and perspectives of a pre-K educator, as well as two parents with children who recently attended pre-K. I describe the pedagogical approach that the pre-K teacher adopted in the classroom, as well as compare her priorities for pre-K with those of two parents who participated in this research. I also examine how these participants negotiate investment discourse as they make choices for their children's and students' education. Ultimately, this chapter highlights experiences of educating and parenting amidst high stakes and precarious conditions in ECEC.

Chapter six applies the New Sociology of Childhood to explore pre-K students' experiences of childhood in a public pre-K classroom. I describe how students shared their perspectives on the important knowledge in pre-K, highlighting places, activities, classroom practices and norms that they found meaningful. Then, I discuss how these findings shed light on how engaging children's priorities and experiences with school can help imagine more caring and just possibilities for ECEC policy and practice.

In chapter seven, I conclude the dissertation by summarizing key findings and arguments, as well as exploring their implications for resisting investment discourse as a dominant policy frame for ECEC reform. I argue that using investment discourse to rationalize ECEC reform undermines justice in and through ECEC, as it is rooted in racist assumptions. Second, I highlight how the perspectives of pre-K students, parents, and a pre-K educator destabilize investment discourse's dominance by highlighting alternative priorities for ECEC, which are undermined by investment discourse. After reiterating these central findings and arguments, I turn to reflect on opportunities for ECEC policy, practice, and research. I suggest that investment discourse is not the path for policy actors interested in pursuing equity and justice in and beyond ECEC. I also offer considerations and inquiries for social actors intimately connected to ECEC practice, including parents and educators. I conclude by exploring opportunities for future research.

Chapter 2 : Literature Review

What is the purpose of children's education? While there is no consensus in responding to this question, many, often conflicting understandings of childhood and the purpose of education have been set forth (Woodrow & Press, 2007). There are many ways to articulate why early childhood education and care (ECEC) matters. The earliest North American rationale for ECEC saw it as a means to support families living in poverty and to assimilate immigrants into the nation's social fabric (Tobin et al., 2013). Feminist political economists have long seen access to ECEC as essential to advancing gender equality, including but not limited to supporting women's participation in the paid labor market (Prentice, 2009; White, 2011). A social pedagogical approach is commonly heard in ECEC settings, framing ECEC as a basic entitlement and a space to support children's well-being and holistic development (Moss, 2006). In recent years, these rationales have been backgrounded by one that has come to dominate the international policy landscape. In this frame, the early years reflect a critical period to invest in children's future social inclusion, economic productivity, and to advance equal opportunity for children from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Heckman, 2011; Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003). This dissertation research seeks to interrogate how this investment discourse is perpetuated in Minnesota ECEC policy development and how it is negotiated by parents, an educator, and pre-K students.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine and situate this dissertation research within three bodies of literature, which include: 1) prominent conceptualizations of childhood and the purpose of children's education; 2) the dominance and implications of

a neoliberal understanding of ECEC; and 3) research examining the perspectives of key social actors in ECEC practice regarding ECEC's purposes.

In the first section of this chapter, I explore how influential theories of childhood have conceptualized children's learning and the purposes of children's education. In the second section, I review research that examines the influence of neoliberal discourse in framing ECEC as an investment in children's human capital development. I attend to the multiple ways that neoliberalism affects, shapes, and limits ECEC practice, by redefining relationships between children, teachers, and parents, and altering ECEC curriculum. Here, I seek to take neoliberalism from the realm of abstracted ideology to explore its real consequences in the context of children's lives and families. I endeavor to demonstrate why attention to neoliberalization in and through ECEC matters. I conclude this section by exploring critiques of neoliberalism in ECEC.

The third and final section of this literature review examines research regarding the priorities of parents, educators, and children in ECEC. In this section, I seek to understand how key social actors frame ECEC's purposes and social value. I also explore the comparative research that has been undertaken to understand how these groups of social actors may hold different priorities with regards to ECEC. I conclude this section by highlighting the need for additional comparative research to examine investment discourse as a policymaking strategy and to explore alternative perspectives regarding ECEC's purposes. I emphasize the importance of engaging children in this comparative research, an approach that has been largely overlooked, with the exception of Brown's (2021) work, which I discuss in detail and aim to build on.

Historicizing Childhood and the State

Before exploring the three bodies of literature that comprise this review, I will first provide a brief overview of how childhood and children's relationship to the state have been historically constructed and evolved in the service of dominant political interests. Children's development is now a crucial area of state concern and intervention. However, this has not always been the case. Children's futures only became interwoven with that of the state during Western European colonial practices in the seventeenth century (Lee, 2001). To support their brutal colonization of other peoples' lands, Western European states sought to enhance their productivity and power by increasingly intervening in the lives of their populace (Lee, 2001). Prior to this period, these states had little interest in children, who were largely left within the purview of the family. It was only once states recognized children as viable investments that they became profoundly concerned with regulating children's development and education (Lee, 2001).

While states' interest in children's development began in Western Europe in the seventeenth century, this interest was adopted by or imposed upon many other regions and peoples in and around the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Lee, 2001). In the context of the United States, modern understandings of childhood materialized around the mid-eighteenth century, and began to take hold in the nineteenth century, when children shifted from being seen as pre-adults to "innocent, malleable, and fragile creatures" (Mintz, 2004, p. 3). These beliefs regarding childhood catalyzed a greater focus on children's development and socialization, and marked a shift toward children spending more time in their familial home and in formal education institutions (Mintz, 2004). While these ideals of modern childhood became fully entrenched in the fabric of middle-

class America in the 1950s, the idea of the innocent, protected child "has never encompassed all American children" (Mintz, 2004, p. 3).

The now dominant belief in children's dependency has been central to modern states' efforts to align children's development and futures with states' own overarching goals (Lee, 2001). As Rose (1999) highlights,

> Childhood is the most intensively governed sector of personal existence. In different ways, at different times, and by many different routes varying from one section of society to another, the health, welfare, and rearing of children has been linked in thought and practice to the destiny of the nation and the responsibilities of the State. (p. 121)

States' attempts to establish order and to enhance civilians' productivity "required children to be incomplete enough to be used as sites of investment" (Lee, 2001, p. 117). In other words, the modern state's aim to regulate children in line with its goals catalyzed a deficit-framing of children (Lee, 2001). As states came to see children as an investment, they not only framed them as dependent, they also sought to develop mechanisms and entire institutions, including public education, to intervene in children's lives and in turn, to cultivate a certain, collective future (Lee, 2001). This is certainly true in the United States, where ECEC is rooted in attempts to forge a strong national identity (Michel & Varsa, 2014) and to surveil and intervene in the socialization and assimilation of children from immigrant families (Beatty, 1995; Tobin et al., 2013).Under the Fordist economic and welfare state system, adulthood increasingly came to be aligned with notions of stability and certainty, while children came to be regarded as "unstable and incomplete" (Lee, 2001, p. 8). Lee (2001) argues it is this notion of children's 'instability' and 'incompleteness' that casts them as "dependent and passive recipients of adults' actions" (p.8) and legitimizes the power adults often exert over their lives.

Framing Childhood and the Purposes of Children's Education

I now turn to explore this review's first body of literature, which articulates influential approaches to understanding childhood and the purposes of children's education.

Childhood and Education, and the State of Nature

This section begins by exploring how childhood has been conceptualized by authors theorizing the state of nature. Focus will be placed on examining the work of political theorists, including Locke and Rousseau, as well as the work of Fröbel and Dewey. Beginning with Locke, Dahlberg et al. (2013) argue Locke sees children "starting life with and from nothing- as an empty vessel or tabula rasa" (p. 87-88). When applying Locke to notions of childhood, children become "knowledge, identity and culture reproducer(s)" (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 87-88). In this frame, what happens in a child's early years is positioned as laying the groundwork for lifelong success. In other words, childhood becomes the beginning of a process of moving from "incompleteness" (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 87-88) and "unfulfilled potential" (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 87-88) to "maturity and full human status," (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 87-88) as a productive adult. From a Lockean view, ECEC should focus on preparing children for learning and school by "fill(ing) (children) with knowledge, skills and dominant cultural values which are already determined" (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 87-88). This process of reproduction includes reproducing "the dominant values of today's capitalism, including individualism, competitiveness, flexibility and the importance of paid work and consumption" (Dahlberg et al., p. 88-89).

A second social contract theorist whose work has had a lasting influence on modern conceptions of childhood and children's education is Rousseau. One of Rousseau's seminal pieces theorizing childhood, education, and nature is *Émile*, a fictional account of the pastoral education of young Émile, who learns in and through the natural world. Rousseau's work offers three central arguments regarding childhood. First, Rousseau saw children as possessing an innate vulnerability and innocence that should be safeguarded from adults' vices (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001). This framing of children, "generates in adults a desire to shelter children from the corrupt surrounding world- violent, oppressive, commercialized and exploitative- by constructing a form of environment in which the young child will be offered protection, continuity and security" (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 89). Second, Rousseau argued that education should be focused on supporting all individuals towards a future characterized by autonomy, self-control, and rational thought (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001). Third, Rousseau held that knowledge primarily is derived from children's inherent nature and not their socialization (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001). For Rousseau, children have an essential "capacity for self-regulation and innate will to seek out Virtue, Truth, and Beauty; it is society which corrupts the goodness with which all children are born" (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 89). Dahlberg et al. (2013) critique Rousseau's approach to conceptualizing childhood, arguing "if we hide children away from a world of which they are already a part, then we not only deceive ourselves but do not take children seriously and respect them" (p. 89-90).

Fröbel is a third theorist who has had a profound impact on conceptualizing children's 'natural state' and the kind of education that should follow. Fröbel is credited

as the pioneer of ‘kindergarten’. For Fröbelians, children are “part of God’s order” (Kaščák & Pupala, 2013**,** p. 322) and as such, “develo(p) in accordance with God’s plan” (Kaščák & Pupala, 2013**,** p. 322). Fröbel “subscribe(s) to ‘divine order theory’” (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001p. 160) and “Fröbel’s God… is the good liberal God, a spirit that believes in and affirms the good sides of the child” (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001, p.160). Fröbel saw children as “malleable plants” (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001, p. 159), arguing that like plants, children should “be able to develop and bloom” (Fröbel, 1912, p. 6, as cited in Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001) and should not be “force(d)… so early into unnatural molds and duties, making them weak and artificial” (Fröbel, 1912, p. 6, as cited in Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001).

Within Fröbel’s approach, the role of ECEC is to protect children and support their natural, innate development (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001). Fröbel believed educational activities should be child-centered and inquiry-oriented, and schooling should strive to nurture children’s individual discovery of knowledge (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001). Fröbel holds that the role of adults in supporting the learning process is to “be positive, protective, corrective, and shielding, and not dictating, decisive, and interfering” (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001, p.7). To support children, adults should maintain space and focus on observing children as they play and engage with their surroundings (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001).

Another early theorist of children’s education is Dewey, who envisioned development as value laden and dependent on broader conceptions of ‘the good life’ (Fass, 2004). As Fass (2004) describes, Dewey framed development as: “a function of socially acknowledged goods for self and society” (p. 155); “fostered through lived

experience" (p. 154); and closely connected to one's "cultural circumstances" (p. 155). Dewey understood education "as a lever of social change" (Fass, 2004, p. 154), where students engage in civic life and learn democratic citizenship values and practices. Dewey (1916) emphasized education's role in supporting democracy by engaging children in democratic practices and teaching children democratic values. In this framework, schools and educators should take up a child-centered pedagogical approach and strive to implement lessons that reflect children's lives and their broader social context and reality, as well as provide them with opportunities to make decisions, and identify their values and interests (Dewey, 1916).

Locke, Rousseau, Fröbel, and Dewey were each theorizing a long time ago, yet their influence on ECEC remains. Their theorizations offer insights as to how understandings of childhood are reflective of broader ideas and debates regarding human nature and social and political organization. For instance, Rousseau and Fröbel hold an image of children's innocence at birth, yet the authors also share an anxiety regarding the power of adults to corrupt children. As a result, children's education and socialization becomes a site of deep concern for these theorists. These scholars frame adults as inherently powerful in determining children's future, a reality which needs to be constrained and managed carefully. In taking up this approach, the authors undermine a belief in children also possessing power and agency, as well as having their own knowledge and ideas regarding the purpose and goals for their education (Dahlberg et al., 2013).

Developmental Model

The next approach to childhood and ECEC that this review will explore is the developmental model. I have categorized this approach into two parts, consisting of a traditional, universalist, stage-based approach and a socio-cultural, experiential approach. Although these two categories share a common vision of childhood as a distinct period of learning about the world and one's participation within it, they hold divergent views regarding how this process unfolds. These differences hold implications for how children's education and status are conceived.

Stage-Based Developmentalism

Scholarship within the stage-based, universalist framework of development examines how children's growth and learning can be best understood through key milestones (Albanese, 2009). Developmental theorists position children as pre-adults and pre-citizens (Dahlberg et al., 2013) and frame their "development as part of a natural biological plan, which occurs in stages" (Kaščák & Pupala, 2013, p. 322).

A key scholar within the developmental framework is Piaget, who defines universal stages of children's cognitive development (Fass, 2004). Piaget's approach views children's cognitive development as "part of a natural biological plan," (Kaščák & Pupala, 2013, p. 322), in which typical development follows key stages. Children learn by assimilating, "using knowledge to understand the world" (Fendler, 2001, p. 130) and accommodation, or "learning about the constraints of the world" (Fendler, 2001, p. 130). For Piaget, the role of educators and parents is to facilitate children's natural development, as they pass through pre-determined stages from childhood to adulthood (Griffin, 2011). Piaget's theorization conceives of knowledge as independently

established through engagement with one's surroundings and experiences, as opposed to a process embedded in relationships and cultural systems of meaning (Fendler, 2001).

Like Piaget, Kohlberg provides a stage-based, universalist understanding of development, focusing specifically on how children develop moral reasoning skills (Fass, 2004). Kohlberg conducted research with male youth, from different backgrounds and provided them with scenarios reflecting an ethical challenge (Olson, 2011). He then interviewed the participants and evaluated their responses (Olson, 2011). From this research, Kohlberg proposed six stages of moral development. At the highest stage, individuals understand and strive to uphold universal principles (Olson, 2011). For Kohlberg, schools support students' moral development by promoting their competence in the middle stages, including their development of interpersonal skills, healthy relationships, and adherence to social norms (Olson, 2011).

Kohlberg's theorization of moral development and decision-making was later critiqued by ethic of care scholar Gilligan (1982), who argued that his research failed to account for the perspectives of women-identifying students. Scholars built on Gilligan's (1982) critical work to further develop a feminist ethic of care, providing an alternative to traditional, liberal theories of justice and moral reasoning, as represented in Kohlberg's framework (Cockburn, 2005; Held, 2005). Unlike the liberal, traditional justice approach, which frames individuals as autonomous, rational, rights-bearers, who make moral decisions by adhering to universal, abstract principles, the feminist ethic of care prioritizes context, relationships, interdependence, and attention to others' needs and emotions in moral decision-making (Cockburn, 2005; Held, 2005). Furthermore, care

theorists oppose the future oriented, developmental view of children, and instead, focus on children's relationships and wellbeing in the present (Cockburn, 2005).

Another influential child developmental scholar is Bronfrenbrenner. According to Smith (2002), Bronfrenbrenner's ecological approach to child development "critici(z)es much research in child development for studying children briefly in strange situations and with unfamiliar people" (p.77). Bronfrenbrenner's scholarship emphasizes the importance of studying children in relation to the environment, institutions, and people that hold significance in their lives (Smith, 2002).

Developmental scholarship has been applied to articulate how educators can intervene in children's early development to support their future academic success and school readiness. Research within the field of developmental psychology and neuroscience has emphasized the influence that early childhood has on future development, learning, and wellbeing (Janus et al., 2010; Morabito et al., 2013). A key focus of this research explores children's 'school readiness', which articulates the skills, behaviors, and knowledge that are held to support children's future academic success (Janus & Duku, 2007; Forget-Dubois et al., 2007).

Stage-based developmentalist research has also contributed to the introduction of 'developmentally appropriate practices' (DAP) informing ECEC. This framework was developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) in the mid 1980s as an attempt to address a shift toward more academic-focused teaching and away from the kind of pedagogical practices that the NAEYC believes help children learn best (Brown, 2009). This approach stresses the need to meet children where they are instead of creating unrealistic and potentially harmful expectations (Warash et al., 2008).

DAP aims to apply developmental theory to foster curriculum and instruction that are child-centered and support children's holistic development, based on their unique needs, interests, and identities (Brown, 2009).

Fendler (2001) describes how the DAP discourse functions as "a technology of normalization" (p. 120) and a "current pattern of power in which the self disciplines the self" (p.120). For Fendler (2001), DAP works as a technology through which children learn to self-govern in line with ideas of 'normal', as defined by "a specific set of qualities that have been rationalized by statistical and scientific justifications" (p. 128). Fendler (2001) powerfully argues, "Educational discourses that advocate developmentally appropriate curricula reinscribe the knowledge and assumptions that were constructed by historical power relations" (p. 128), including harmful claims that development varies along racial lines.

Developmental theories continue to dominate ECEC and have been instrumental in building knowledge regarding changes that occur in children as they grow and learn to navigate their world (Albanese, 2009). However, these theories have also been critiqued for their narrow, prescriptive understandings of childhood and broad claims regarding how children grow and learn best based on research primarily centered on the experiences of white children (Pérez, 2019). Bloch (1991) points out that the developmental model's "focus on individual differences in development" (p.105) reinforces the notion that "problems and prospects are situated at the individual or family or, even, school level" (p.106). Bloch (1991) highlights how these views "distract attention from structural analyses of the problems that help to maintain oppression and inequities in achievement" (p.105). Furthermore, Penn (2011) critiques the

developmental model's assumption that claims about children's education and development that are rooted in the 'Global North' can be repackaged as universal, culturally impartial, and scientifically-grounded, then imposed on communities within the Global South.

Socio-Cultural & Experiential Approaches to ECEC

The socio-cultural model of childhood and ECEC emerges in response to the understanding of child development as a natural, universal process. According to socio-cultural developmental theorists, the traditional developmental model obfuscates the importance of children's social and cultural contexts to their learning (Fass, 2004). Smith (2002) claims, socio-cultural approaches do not see development as progressing along pre-determined, biological stages and instead, "involves participation in social processes" (p. 77) and "depends on cultural goals" (p. 77). This approach views education as a relational process, involving the co-construction instead of the transmission of knowledge between adult and child. In addition, socio-cultural and ecological scholars see children as influencing one another's education and growth (Smith, 2002).

Vygotsky's work has been formative to sociocultural theories of child development (Smith, 2002). Vygotsky is a clinical psychologist whose work has had a significant influence on the study of children's ECEC. Vygotsky departs from Piaget's vision of development and learning as largely independent processes. Instead, Vygotsky regards development as a social process, centered on children's engagement with others (Weinert, 1996). Vygotsky envisioned development and learning as rooted in and built on children's social and cultural context (Edwards, 2006; Smith, 2002). Vygotsky offers an alternative to Piaget's approach to child development, viewing children's development as

"a cultural… contextual… (and) revolutionary or crisis ridden process… which is best encouraged through direct and mediatory educational techniques" (Griffin, 2011, p.i). Vygotsky shared Piaget's view that children move through stages to "develop the skills, virtues and emotional intelligence to deliberate effectively" (Griffin, 2011, p. 19) as citizens. However, Vygotsky saw these developmental stages as being affected by seminal moments (Griffin, 2011). While Piaget saw facilitating children's natural development as the goal of education, Vygotsky advocated for "mediatory techniques" (Griffin, 2011, p. 20), such as the "'zone of proximal development'" (Griffin, 2011, p. 20). Smith (2002) defines the zone of proximal development as "the difference between what individuals can do alone and what they can do in collaboration with others" (p. 78). Through the zone of proximal development, Vygotsky stresses the fundamental role that adults or more experienced individuals take up in guiding children to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to perform activities independently (Griffin, 2011).

More contemporary research from the sociocultural framework examines the fundamental role of apprenticeship and informal learning in children's transition to adulthood, as well as their identity development and sense of purpose within their communities (Rogoff, 1995). Rogoff (1995, 2003) highlights how children's cultural background forms the foundation for their development and learning. Rogoff et al. (2003) differentiate "assembly-line instruction, which is based on transmission of information from experts, outside the context of productive, purposive activity" (p. 176) and "intent participation" (p. 176) or "learning through keen observation and listening, in anticipation of participation" (p. 176). Paradise and Rogoff (2009) further explore this topic, distinguishing school learning from informal learning. On the one hand, formal

education is centered on breaking down tasks so that they are accessible and emphasizes the intrinsic value of the learning process. On the other hand, informal learning is connected to meaningful and identifiable objectives and a decline in students' experiences of failure (Paradise & Rogoff, 2009).

Recognizing that students' motivation to learn is connected to their cultural values and practices (Ginsberg, 2005), socio-cultural scholarship has produced rich theoretical approaches and pedagogical strategies to support ECEC. Pacini-Ketchabaw and Schecter (2002) highlight "Diversity as Curriculum" (p.409), as a framework for teachers to build a deeper understanding of their students and their cultural identities to support their teaching. Ang (2010) articulates how teachers should enhance children's awareness of the diversity that exists within cultural groups and the multiple ways individuals construct and represent their identity.

Literature articulating the importance of attending to the cultural dimensions of learning and community-building in schools not only focuses on engaging children, but also their families. For instance, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Schecter (2002) reflect on how teachers can include parents and community residents in learning activities and incorporate students' diverse backgrounds into their pedagogy. Moll et al. (2005) articulate how teachers can pursue more asset-oriented, culturally engaged practices by visiting students' homes to gain insight into their "funds of knowledge" (p.72) and to nurture relationships with families. Modica et al. (2010) argue culturally relevant curriculum provides the most meaningful approach to supporting children's present and future well-being.

Despite the socio-cultural approach's contribution to understanding children's education, including their development as citizens, this framework has key limitations. At times, socio-cultural research could benefit from further attention and reflection on the use of 'culture' as an analytical concept. Similarly, Rogoff (1995, 2003) can be read as at times equating culture with groups of people, as opposed to the more critical, anthropological understanding of culture as a system of meaning-making (Anderson-Levitt, 2012). This scholarship could benefit from the insight offered by Hoffman (1999), who draws on the work of Abu-Lughod to argue, "anthropologists need to write against culture in order to do justice to their subjects as individual-persons whose lives are characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and contestation" (p. 466). Additionally, socio-cultural research has not always paid enough attention to individuals', and particularly children's, agency.

Social Pedagogical approach

The social pedagogical approach offers an alternative to the developmental model (Moss, 2006). This approach recognizes ECEC as a basic entitlement for children and families (Moss, 2006). Commonly practiced in ECEC systems within social democratic governments, social pedagogy emphasizes a holistic view of children and their development (White, 2011) and encourages educators to "address the whole child, the child with body, mind, emotions, creativity, history and social identity" (Moss, 2006, p. 159).Unlike the achievement-oriented, high stakes, hyper-capitalist vision of ECEC offered by investment discourse, a more holistic approach seeks to support children's "health and physical development, emotional well-being and social competence, positive attitude toward learning, good communication skills, and cognition and general

knowledge" (White, 2011, p. 292). The social pedagogical approach is further differentiated from investment discourse and its emphasis on human capital development, as it moves beyond prioritization of skills and knowledge for success on achievement-based tests. Instead, this approach values curriculum that emphasizes children's present well-being and joy in their learning (White, 2011).

New Sociology of Childhood

The NSC provides another approach to understanding and exploring childhood that departs from developmentalism (Matthews, 2007). New sociologists of childhood share the socio-cultural concern with the developmental model's failure to account for children's diverse experiences. For new sociologists of childhood, the developmental approach's organization of children's development through stages, which label atypical development as problematic, risks pathologizing children's differences and fails to allow for diversity within development (Albanese, 2009).

The NSC highlights how conventional theories of development and socialization have contributed to widely-practiced assumptions of children's 'dependent' status (Lee, 2001). Within these dominant approaches, childhood is seen as only understandable when compared and contrasted with adulthood, with children ultimately becoming the antithesis of adults (Lee, 2001; Matthews, 2007; Qvortrup, 2004; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Developmental and socialization theories cultivate an image of a future-oriented child who is in a process of 'becoming' (Qvortrup, 1994) and considered an "apprentic(e) waiting in the wings of adulthood" (James & James, 2012, p. 59). James and James (2012) argue 'futurity', or the "recognition, in the present, of the child's potential for being different in the future and the predication of present actions on the basis of this

recognition" (p. 63), "defines the social space of childhood" (p. 63). This dominant framing of childhood disregards "children as persons in their own right" (Lee, 2001, p. 8) and devalues children's present ideas and experiences (Matthews, 2007). New sociologists of childhood further argue, this approach lends to a view of children as citizens in the making, who lack the capacity or maturity for full citizenship status, including the rights and participation that this status entails (Albanese, 2009; Tisdall & Punch, 2012).

Scholars working with the NSC recognize childhood as a social construction (Holloway, 2014) and a social institution (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015). Researchers adopting the NSC view children as knowledge producers and social actors (Levison et al, 2021; Marshall, 2016), and seek to understand children's experiences, relationships, and priorities (Holloway, 2014; Matthews, 2007). The NSC also identifies ethical and "epistemological" (Marshall, 2016, p.59) rationales for consulting children regarding decisions that affect them, and their lived experiences, including their participation in key institutions like education. As outlined in chapter one, this dissertation research adopts the NSC as part of its conceptual framework.

Critical early childhood studies

In applying the NSC, this dissertation research is also informed by critical ECEC scholarship. This approach extends beyond NSC's focus on age as the key social category for analysis, which risks over-simplifying the complexity of children's experiences and relations (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015). In contrast, critical scholarship recognizes and explores how the intersections of age, racialization (Adair & Colegrove, 2021; Brown et al., 2010; Nxumalo, 2019; Pérez, 2019), gender (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics,

2015), and social class (Dudley- Marling, 2019) influence experiences and constructions of childhood. Nonetheless, both dominant and critical early childhood theories have white, patriarchal lineages, thereby necessitating greater "ontological and epistemic diversity" (Pérez, 2019, p. 31) in approaching studies of childhood. As work applying Critical Race Theory (CRT) and antiracism to ECEC has highlighted, the developmental understanding of childhood has centered on a false universality, since much of this theorization is built on the experiences of white, middle class children, and then applied broadly to all children (Escayg et al., 2017). Furthermore, children whose development or academic performance do not conform to these norms then risk being pathologized and further marginalized within education (Escayg et al., 2017; Tager, 2017).

Neoliberalism and ECEC

The previous section highlighted different approaches to understanding childhood and children's education, articulating how this research engages the New Sociology of Childhood as part of its conceptual framework. This next section will explore the impact that neoliberalism has had in reimagining ECEC policy and practice. I begin this discussion by defining how neoliberalism is understood and operationalized in the context of this dissertation research.

Defining Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism gained influence around the 1970s "as the single answer" (Harvey, 2005, p. 13) to "threats to the capitalist social order and as a solution to capitalism's ills" (Harvey, 2005, p. 19), as well as a response to Keynesianism and socialist-democratic political trends (Brown, 2015). Since its rise, neoliberalism has left no state untouched,

fostering reactions from enthusiasm, to acquiescence, to resistance, and garnering advocates from powerful positions (Harvey, 2005).

Scholars have different approaches to framing the problem of neoliberalism. These differences are noteworthy, as they represent significant departures in regards to the possibility for resistance. Rose and Lentzos (2017) summarize the myriad ways in which neoliberalism is conceived, asking: "Is neoliberalism an ideology, a doctrine, a political project, a strategy, an epoch?" (p.42). Rose and Lentzos (2017) further state:

> Neoliberalism has become an all-purpose term of critique in much contemporary critical social science. It is often a means of avoiding the complexities of careful analysis and evaluation- what is happening: neoliberalism; why is it happening: neoliberalism; what's wrong with it: neoliberalism. (p.42)

With this caution in mind, I will now explore how I employ neoliberalism as an analytic in the context of this dissertation research.

Tronto (2017) argues, "the main response of scholars to neoliberalism has been either to treat it as the new normal or to think of it as invincible" (p. 27). Within this first body of scholarship, neoliberalism is understood as the reality or background upon which other social problems can be theorized (Tronto, 2017). The second body of scholarship does engage with neoliberalism itself as a problem worthy of interrogation and theorization, but ultimately frames neoliberalism as "a 'stealth revolution' whose power is unassailable" (Tronto, 2017, p. 28). This approach is typical of scholars adopting a Foucauldian approach to neoliberalism. Thus, the focus of this scholarship becomes tracing the reach and depth of neoliberalism's influence on social life (Tronto, 2017).

Tronto (2017) characterizes neoliberalism as an ideology, or "a set of ideas that offer a coherent view about how society should be ordered" (p. 29). Tronto (2013) argues that as an ideology, neoliberalism "believes itself to be definitive of all forms of human

relationships and of all ways of properly understanding human life" (p. 38). Neoliberalism applies the logic governing the market to all social programs, including education (Tronto, 2013, 2017). Here, the market is regarded as the institution that is best positioned to provide and distribute goods and resources by offering competition and choice, which in turn, maximizes personal freedom and opportunity (Tronto, 2017). As an ideology neoliberalism becomes less ubiquitous, daunting, and even possible to resist (Tronto, 2017).

This dissertation engages Tronto's (2017) "more optimistic approach" (p.28) by understanding neoliberalism as an ideology, with deep implications for how ECEC policy and practice are approached. As outlined in chapter one, I am also inspired by DeJaeghere's (2017) articulation of "neo/liberalisms" (p.11), which offers greater analytical space to explore how neoliberal and liberal values are engaged by social actors in education, with different implications.

ECEC policy as an investment in human capital

One way that neoliberalism has come to shape ECEC is through the dominance of investment discourse as a policy rationale. Investment discourse values children's access to ECEC as a means to develop their human capital vis a vis the skills and knowledge that are imagined to support their future labor market integration and social inclusion (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Heckman, 2011; Morel et al., 2012; Nolan, 2013). Under this frame, investing in children's education offers a high return by forging economic strength and reducing the need for future social intervention and spending (Heckman, 2011; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003). The emphasis that proponents of investment discourse place on children's human capital development is connected to the rise of the knowledge-

based economy (Morel et al., 2012). Investment discourse holds that the state must prepare children for participation in the knowledge-based economy to protect their welfare and advance broader social and economic well-being (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Heckman, 2011).

Investment discourse is particularly concerned with how poverty can limit children's human capital development and restrict their future life chances (Esping-Andersen, 2002). As a result, publicly funded ECEC is seen as a means to provide "an equal start for all children alike" (Cantillon & Van Lancker, 2013, p.559). This lends to arguments that ECEC will be most effective and render the highest return when targeted towards families with low-incomes (Heckman, 2011).

While investment discourse focuses on supporting children to *build* human capital, in the case of parents and particularly mothers, the focus is on ensuring they are able to *apply* their human capital through participation in the workforce (Morel et al., 2012). Within this rationale, ECEC becomes a means to support mothers to work and continue to utilize the skills that may be jeopardized by absence from employment (Morgan, 2009). Investment discourse values 'lifelong learning', to ensure workers can continue meet labor market demands (Cantillon & Van Lancker, 2013; Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2003; Morel et al., 2012; White, 2012). Investment discourse also values ECEC as means to facilitate parents' capacity to support their family through paid labor and reduce their need for government support (Jenson & Saint- Martin, 2003; Morgan, 2009).

Funding, access, and delivery

Investment discourse is broadly translated into policymaking and practice, and thus, has diverse material effects on resource distribution and the delivery of ECEC

programming (White, 2012). Adamson and Brennan (2014) distinguish between two different models for ECEC policy that have been established within the broader social investment approach. These include the third way or Anglo Saxon approach, which sees ECEC as an investment in human capital development, and the social democratic approach, which emphasizes ECEC's role in advancing social equality. Despite the range in how investment discourse is applied to ECEC policy development, the rise of an investment-oriented rationale for ECEC has paralleled the increased privatization of service delivery (Adamson and Brennan, 2014; White, 2012).

Neoliberalism and ECEC practice

The implications of neoliberalism on ECEC transcend the realm of policymaking as it also has ramifications for practice. This next section explores how narrowing children's education to a vehicle for human capital development reconfigures curriculum, teaching, parenting, and childhood in ECEC.

Determining curriculum

The rise of investment discourse to rationalize ECEC catalyzed a transition away from programming that prioritizes care toward a model that centers learning and development (White, 2012). Brown (2021) describes how the increased focus in ECEC policy discourse and practice on 'school readiness' is part of the neoliberalization of ECEC. Brown (2021) outlines how the rise of 'school readiness' as a mandate for ECEC meant a shift away from teaching the " whole child" (p. 19) and attending to "individual learning needs" (p.19), to teaching all children the skills, behaviors, and knowledge that are deemed necessary to perform well on future assessments. These changes ultimately cultivate the "schoolification" (Van Laere et al., 2012, p. 527) of ECEC. Additionally, the

standardized assessments that children are prepared for center white, middle-class knowledge (Pérez, 2019). This creates a "manufactured crisis" (Brown, 2019, p. 10), whereby children from marginalized backgrounds are perceived to be falling behind their white, middle-class peers and are often restricted from enriching learning opportunities in favor of promoting basic education (Dudley-Marling, 2019; Pérez, 2019). Pérez (2019) articulates how "children of color are dominantly positioned as deficit and 'lacking,' often being measured against a universalized white standard, whether through development, at-risk, or achievement gap narratives" (p.20).

Proponents of investment discourse contend that human capital development should be pursued through implementing standardized and "high quality" (Moss, 2014, p. 23) educational practices. Although quality lacks conceptual clarity as it is operationalized in ECEC, it generally refers to the "technologies that will effectively produce 'predefined goals' and is thought, therefore, to guarantee the high returns that justify initial investment" (Moss, 2014, p. 23) in ECEC. While quality may seem like an objective framework for analyzing ECEC programs, it is in fact embedded in "colonial, racial and neoliberal formations" (Nxumalo, 2019, p. 166).

The rise of a more academic focus for ECEC not only proscribes what kind of skills and learning is valued, but also places restrictions on activities that are commonly associated with the early years, like play. For instance, play has increasingly taken up a narrow, future-oriented purpose in ECEC programming (Burman, 2011). Instead of being recognized as intrinsically valuable to children's wellbeing and learning in the present and a means for them to cultivate their interests and potential (Souto-Manning, 2017), play becomes a form of labor that children must undertake (Burman, 2011). In

this way, play shifts from being understood as a right (Souto-Manning, 2017) to a form of "cultural capital in the form of investing in future health and skills" (Burman, 2011, p. 428).

Burdening Educators

Educators' roles in ECEC have been reconfigured in line with policymakers' expectation that ECEC will render high returns. Moss (2014) outlines how neoliberalism positions educators as "transmitter(s) and reproducer(s) of predetermined knowledge and values'" (p.45), as well as "technician(s)" (p.45) who implement "pedagogical human technologies" (p.45). In addition, neoliberalism frames early childhood educators as "untrustworthy individual(s) whose performance must be monitored, managed, and moulded" (Moss, 2014, p. 45). The impact of this approach is significant, as it affects educators' understanding of children's school readiness, their engagement with and perception of students, their professional goals (Brown et al., 2015), and their wellbeing (Cumming et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2020). The standardization and heightened academic expectations in ECEC also undermine educators' quality of teaching and capacity to implement curriculum that reflects students' unique needs, identities, and potential (Brown, 2013).

Despite the expectations that ECEC will address society's deepest challenges and the resulting burdens placed on educators, ECEC as a profession remains undervalued (Powell et al., 2020). Powell et al. (2020) draw on the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario's concept of the 'professionalization gap', to describe how ECEC teachers are navigating "increasing responsibilities with few improvements in wages and work conditions"(p. 155). The under-compensation and minimization of early childhood

educators' public service has gendered and racialized effects, as these professionals are often BIPOC women (Langford, 2019).

Regulating Parents

The impact of investment discourse on ECEC extends beyond the school, also making its way into family life. As ECEC is considered an investment, the state mobilizes families in support of achieving high returns. This is accomplished by "'helping parents to parent'" (Mahon, 2008, p. 345), which lends to surveillance and governance of parenting practices (Bundy, 2012).

Heckman (2011), an economist and proponent of investment discourse, argues "high-quality parenting" (p.6) is essential to children's healthy development and future social inclusion. Heckman (2011) cautions that "poor parenting is an important contributor to life poverty" (p.33) but assures that providing children with access to ECEC can help mitigate negative outcomes and improve children's future life chances. For Heckman (2011), ECEC is not a public good or a basic entitlement; it is a necessary solution to parents' alleged limitations and failures.

Bundy's (2012) analysis of ECEC policy texts in Ontario finds that the social investment framework serves as a biopolitical apparatus that regulates children and families to serve the goals of the state and the knowledge-based economy's labor demands. According to Bundy (2012), biopolitics explores "the power dynamics between a population and the state, specifically as these dynamics relate to governance" (p. 596). Bundy (2012) demonstrates how investment and scientific psychological discourses seek to regulate parents' behavior in line with the Ontario government's agenda to produce a viable workforce. Specifically, the state expects parents to take on additional labor at

home and navigate interventions to support the state's investment in children's education (Bundy, 2012).

Not all parents are equally positioned to be 'successful' within an understanding of ECEC as generating human capital. American ECEC policy development is rooted in efforts to assimilate immigrant families, as well as in 'cultural deprivation theory', which blames BIPOC families for racial education disparities (Brown, 2019). The heightened expectations and governance of children and families are particularly harmful for women, who make up the bulk of single-parent, low-income households and whose resources are often over-extended (Bundy, 2012). Parents who already experience marginalization as a result of racialization, classism, and gender inequality, are targeted, surveilled, and scapegoated by the state as a result of the neoliberal aims for ECEC (Bundy, 2012; Dudley-Marling, 2019; Pérez, 2019; Tager, 2017).

Reimagining Childhood

Alongside its effects on ECEC policy and practice, neoliberal ideology and its view of ECEC as a return on investment, reimagines childhood. As will be elaborated in the analysis chapters of this dissertation, investment discourse simultaneously casts children under a deficit lens while also burdening them with immense responsibility. Critical ECEC scholars express concern with the predominance of the deficit-oriented lens undergirding investment discourse (Brown, 2019; Moss, 2014). Investment discourse offers a dehumanizing view of children as instruments for future social and economic prosperity (Moss, 2014). Moss (2014) provides a powerful account of how economized understandings of ECEC forge an "impoverished image of the child as a reservoir of future capital" (p.45) and as "passive and incompetent" (p.45). In a similar vein, Brown

(2019) argues “children are born into a world in which they are often defined as lacking” (p.1) and “requir(ing) early interventions to correct as well as inoculate them against current and future gaps, risks, and deficits so that society will not have to be burdened by them as they become adults” (p.1). This deficit frame is habitually applied to children and families who are economically under-served and racialized (Dudley-Marling, 2019; Nxumalo & Adair, 2019; Pérez, 2019; Tager, 2017).

The focus that investment discourse places on identifying and repairing children’s supposed deficiencies is profoundly at odds with a more respectful approach, which regards children as whole beings, who have complex lives, relationships, and needs, as well as vast potential (Dudley-Marling, 2019; Moss et al., 2000; Moss, 2014). Dudley-Marling (2019) emphasizes the need to replace this disparaging frame with “a philosophy of abundance based on the belief that all children are smart and come from homes rich in cultural, linguistic and cognitive resources and experience” (p.58).

While investment discourse posits a deficit- oriented vision of children, disproportionately leveraged against children from racialized and economically under-served backgrounds, it also places exceedingly high expectations on their earliest performance in school. Under this frame, children are met with higher and higher academic expectations in order for the state to receive significant returns on its investment in their education (Brown, 2021; Kaščák & Pupala, 2013). These expectations lend to a vision of the “superchild” (Kaščák & Pupala, 2013, p. 20), who should be “competitive, individualised, risk-embracing being, capable of exceeding itself” (Kaščák & Pupala, 2013, p. 20).

Critiques of investment discourse's dominance in ECEC

Two central areas of critique have emerged in the scholarship interrogating the dominance of investment discourse in ECEC. The first is a technical critique, which questions whether ECEC will render the returns that proponents of investment discourse have promised. The second critique is more political in nature, arguing that framing ECEC as a mechanism to advance equal opportunity fails to address the systemic barriers that obstruct equality in ECEC. In the following section, I explore each line of critique.

Technical critique

Beginning with the technical critique of investment discourse, this approach questions whether ECEC will render the high individual, social, and economic returns that scholars like Rolnick and Grunewald (2003) and Heckman (2011) have claimed. Support for the argument that investments in ECEC generate a high return are largely based on findings from widely-cited, small-scale, longitudinal studies, including Perry High Scope, Abecedarian, and Chicago Child-Parent Centers (Moss, 2014; Penn, 2011). Findings from these studies are being used to guide international ECEC development policy (Penn, 2011). Critical ECEC scholars question whether these studies' findings are generalizable to other contexts and populations, as their samples constitute marginalized populations in the United States (Moss, 2014; Penn, 2011; White, 2011). White (2011) aptly captures this concern, stating: "The danger of resting investment arguments on research that is applicable to a very specific societal context… and extrapolating policy recommendations to other countries, is that these returns may not ultimately be realized, ultimately killing support for the programs" (p.301). As White (2011) points out, the

possibility that investments in ECEC may not produce as high of returns as expected could jeopardize future political and financial support for ECEC policies.

Political, Social-Justice Critique

When understood as an investment, ECEC is devalued as a public good (Moss, 2014) and instead, oriented towards profit and efficiency, as opposed to serving participants' needs (Duncan, 2007). Investment discourse transforms ECEC from a space for children's holistic growth and the public's democratic engagement to a vehicle for economic efficiency and productivity (Brown, 2021; Moss, 2014). Moss (2014) identifies how framing ECEC as a technical project to render high returns fails to address the political nature of children's education. Unlike the pervasive vision of ECEC as a technical intervention that engenders pre-determined outcomes, which are falsely perceived to be universally valued, in reality, ECEC's purpose remains contested and in need of democratic deliberation (Dahlberg et al., 2013).

The use of an investment rationale to justify spending on ECEC and social policy also raises important concerns regarding the state's responsibility to protect citizens' basic welfare and economic security. Investment discourse posits "very little interest in anyone considered a bad investment or unimportant in market terms" (Bundy, 2012, p. 595). A fundamental concern that follows from investment discourse is that certain social programs, and in turn human beings, may be deemed less beneficial recipients of public funds (Cantillon & Van Lancker, 2013).

Ultimately, the above literature highlights how investment discourse offers false promises regarding access to ECEC as the singular answer to a myriad of pervasive social problems. ECEC's capacity to advance equality is limited without aggressive efforts to

address the systemic barriers including but not limited to racism, classism, and gender inequality, which are embedded in ECEC practice and policy (Brown et al., 2010; Bundy, 2012; Dudley-Marling, 2019; Nxumalo, 2019; Pérez, 2019).

The next and final section of this review will explore the research that has sought to understand the perspectives on ECEC of key social actors, including children, parents, and educators. This discussion provides a foundation for situating this dissertation project within previous research on the contending purposes of ECEC. After exploring this literature, I will outline how this dissertation research builds on the insights gleaned from this work.

Educators', Parents', and Children's Perspectives on ECEC

Children's Perspectives on their Schooling

Research conducted with children has offered powerful insights regarding how to approach meaningful and effective education policies and programs to support them. I now turn to explore key scholarship that has engaged children in research regarding their experiences with and perspectives on schooling.

Di Santo and Berman's (2012) research with three and four year old preschool students in Canada highlights children's priorities and perspectives regarding starting kindergarten and how it may be different from preschool. Di Santo and Berman (2012) found that students anticipated still having opportunities to play once they were in kindergarten. They also notably did not place much emphasis on academic activities in kindergarten. Some students differentiated kindergarten from preschool on the basis that they believed they would do homework once in kindergarten and they also highlighted that they would need help with this homework. Students reflected that while they would

be physically bigger and older once they started kindergarten, they would also need help from parents, particularly in regards to getting ready for school, with a focus on getting dressed. Students also shared insights regarding rules that they felt would be important in kindergarten, which included following their teachers' directions, and avoiding certain behaviors, like hitting or running. Drawing on these findings, Di Santo and Berman (2012) articulate how "starting kindergarten is often discussed in the presence of children, but not with them" (p. 476). Yet, they argue children have important insights regarding transitions and their perspectives should be consulted to support this process (Di Santo & Berman, 2012).

Marshall (2016) undertook research with Ethiopian school children to understand how children view the purpose and value of education. Marshall (2016) compares the children's narratives to the rationale for educational policy development and reform that is traditionally set forth during the policy development process. Marshall (2016) finds that children engaged an economic rationale for the purpose of their education, which reflected the Ethiopian state's policy frame. Children saw their education as aligned with their future employment opportunities and supporting Ethiopia's economic prosperity. However, Marshall (2016) also applies the capabilities approach to articulate how children framed education as a means to expand their "self-reliance (p.66), including their "agency and autonomy" (p.66), as well as their capacity to support their loved ones, and cultivate new opportunities. In addition, Marshall (2016) draws on these findings to reflect the limitations of the human capital frame in encompassing the full value and meaning education opportunities hold for children. Marshall (2016) also demonstrates the important insights gleaned from consulting children regarding their schooling.

Barnikis's (2015) research explored how five children who had recently transitioned from a lab school to a public school kindergarten program viewed their new learning environment and community. Through drawings and semi-structured conversations, the students described a public school kindergarten program where the teacher held the power, where learning and decision-making were primarily teacher-led, and where students' awareness of and abidance by rules was considered important.

Another piece reflecting the power of engaging children as competent knowledge producers is offered by Souto-Manning (2014b). As an entry point to her piece, Souto-Manning (2014b) discusses the commonly held notion that conflict is antithetical to "ideal" (p. 608) early childhood learning experiences. To explore and disrupt this premise, Souto-Manning (2014b) gathers narrative data, based on three participants' experiences in a pre-K site, including a teacher, Ms. Jill, and students, Tiffany and Kendrick. Here, Souto-Manning (2014b) examines "the pedagogical use of conflict between children's interests and the official curriculum in a positive and hopeful way" (p. 616). Ms. Jill and her students investigate 'stink' in their daily school environment. While this intellectual pursuit was "uncomfortable, inappropriate, and conflicted with the official, mandated curriculum" (Souto-Manning, 2014b, p. 625), Ms. Jill "learned to accept this discomfort as she tilted the power structure in the classroom, thereby learning from the children and embracing conflict" (Souto-Manning, 2014b, p. 625). Ultimately, by leaning into topics like 'stink', which at first glance seemed unsuitable and unproductive, Ms. Jill and her students engage in "storying pollution" (Souto-Manning, 2014b, p. 621) in their shared environment in complex and meaningful ways.

Kurban and Tobin's (2009) research engages with Turkish-identifying kindergarteners to understand their sense of belonging and identity in a German Kindergarten. The scholars analyze a transcript from an interview with two Turkish-German kindergarten students, who reflect on their experiences of feeling ostracized by their German peers, their school, and German society (Kurban & Tobin, 2009). In discussing the students' theorization, Kurban and Tobin (2009) argue, "the girls' statements of resentment and alienation suggest that immigrant children are more aware than we tend to give them credit for of the struggles their cultural group is facing in the larger society" (p. 32).

Tager's (2017) research highlights the impact of educators' deficit-oriented views and labels in denying Black children supportive, just education experiences. In *Challenging the school readiness agenda in early childhood education*, Tager (2017) explores the experiences of five Black children who are economically under-served and have been labeled as 'not school ready' by their teachers. Tager (2017) recognizes 'school readiness' as a "dominant logic" (p. 18) and "taken for granted practice" (p.17), which must be made "more visible" (p.17) to demonstrate the need for change. Tager (2017) details how both children and their families are blamed for their alleged academic failures and lack of school readiness. The heightened academic expectations placed on children, and to which their teachers are held accountable, results in "even more ways to fail in kindergarten" (Tager, 2017, p. 61) and means "more young Black children will fail" (Tager, 2017, p.61). Additionally, educators who participated in the study expected children's parents to be highly involved (often understood as physical involvement and time commitment) in their children's schooling, which was unrealistic given the demands

of parents' employment. This approach leads to blaming parents for education disparities among white, middle-class children and Black children and children who are economically under-served, as well as perpetuates these disparities. Ultimately, Tager (2017) argues discourses and approaches that are rooted in a deficit-oriented understanding of children must be resisted in order to cultivate racial justice in education.

Comparative Research with Parents, Educators, and Students

I now turn to explore research that has sought to compare how different social actors, who hold pivotal places in ECEC practice, understand the purposes of children's education. I begin with Docket and Perry's (2004, 2005) research from their *Starting School Research Project*, which articulates how parents, educators, and children have different priorities and views about children's process of starting school. In particular, adult participants emphasized the importance of "adjustment" (Dockett & Perry, 2004, p.177), which parents and educators conceptualized in different ways. Parents prioritized their children cultivating a sense of belonging and integrating into their new classroom community, as well as wanting educators to recognize and respond to their child's unique personality and needs. Educators' prioritization of children's adjustment focused more on children adopting the behavioral norms and practices that would support their participation in the classroom. Children tended to focus on the importance of rules, including knowing how to abide by rules and what happens when rules are broken. Dockett and Perry (2004) argue children's focus on rules may have been their way of representing 'adjustment', like adults. Dockett and Perry's (2004, 2005) research highlights young children's competency in providing information about starting school

and how they offer different perspectives and priorities than those of parents and educators.

Tobin et al.'s (1989) seminal work, *Preschool in three cultures* adopts a multivocal ethnographic exploration of preschools in China, Japan, and the United States. Tobin et al. (1989) depict the crucial role preschools continue to serve as vehicles of socialization, "both reflect(ing) and impart(ing) their cultures' core beliefs" (Tobin et al., 2009, p. 1). After two decades, Tobin et al. (2009) return to this research by examining how globalization has impacted preschool. The researchers find that Chinese and Japanese ECEC practices have become more student-centered, while the American ECEC practices have turned toward school-readiness and standardization. Tobin et al. (2009) argue, "despite modernization and globalization, Chinese, Japanese, and American approaches to (ECEC) are no more alike in their core practices and beliefs than they were a generation ago" (p. 232). The educational practices in these preschools continue to reflect the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they are situated (Tobin et al., 2009). Tobin et al.'s (2009) research offers powerful insights regarding how understandings of effective practices in ECEC and the overarching purpose and social value of ECEC programming. However, this research pays inadequate attention to power relations and fails to include children as participants, missing the opportunity to learn from those who are arguably most affected by their research.

Tobin et al.'s (2013) research with immigrant parents and early childhood educators in the US reveal diverse priorities and visions regarding ECEC's purpose. This research highlights a disconnect between parents' goals for their children's education and the pedagogical priorities and practices that teachers value. Parents often prioritized their

children's academic skills development and learning, which they envisioned as teacher-led. However, teachers tended to prioritize more child- led and play-based pedagogical approaches. Again, a missed opportunity underlying this research is the failure to consult children regarding their perspectives on their schooling. It is noteworthy however that unlike Tobin et al.'s (2009) *Preschool in three cultures research*, Tobin et al.'s (2013) later work provides a more nuanced and critical analysis of questions of power.

Lareau's (2011) seminal ethnography compares how families from different social class backgrounds approach child-rearing and navigate key social institutions, including education. Lareau's (2011) research was based on observations and interviews with twelve families who had children aged nine to ten. Through this research, Lareau (2011) found that families from different social class backgrounds took different approaches to socializing their children, as well as accessed and valued different educational opportunities. Families from middle class backgrounds spent significant resources socializing their children to develop the skills they deemed necessary for success and sought to teach their children how to navigate and succeed within the norms of social institutions, like school. For instance, Lareau (2011) highlights the vital role that 'the calendar' plays in middle class families' lives to organize each child's activities. This finding demonstrates how a hyper-individualized focus on cultivating success can detract from time spent together and connecting as a family unit. Meanwhile, families from working class and poor backgrounds tended to prioritize attending to children's basic care needs and placed less emphasis on adult intervention to cultivate children's individual talents and skills. Lareau's research (2011) powerfully articulates how schools

disproportionately support the success of students from middle class backgrounds, as it is their cultural capital that is reflected and valued in these spaces.

In their book, *Segregation by experience: Agency, racism and learning in the early grades*, Adair and Colegrove (2021) offer a powerful account of the impacts that deficit discourses have on the kinds of education opportunities and ultimately, the kind of childhood and personhood, that BIPOC children have access to in schools. The authors highlight how BIPOC children are not afforded the same opportunities to exercise agency as white students, cultivating, as the title of their book suggests, 'segregation by experience'. Adair and Colegrove (2021) draw on findings from the Agency and Young Children study, conducted from 2010 to 2018, which used a video-cued ethnographic approach to examine how educators, administrators and students understand agency and learning in Texas public schools. Adair and Colegrove (2021) describe how educators who participated in their study, and who engaged in deficit thinking and faced intense demands to prepare their students for success on standardized assessments, demonstrated "the belief that young children of color arrive at school with little more than their compliance to offer" (p. 141). Adair and Colegrove (2021) show how these beliefs translated into teachers adopting education practices that undermine children's physical and cognitive agency, instead promoting "stillness, silence, (and) obedience" (p.137). Their research also highlights the impacts deficit thinking has on children's own understanding and enactments of learning, as children who were subjected to teachers who held deficit-oriented beliefs then came to see learning as antithetical to movement, active participation, and agency. Their research offers powerful insights regarding how the kind of learning children participate in and the academic and behavioral expectations

they face are segregated by racialization and classism. It also sheds light on how the "personhood-subpersonhood line begins in early childhood education (Adair & Colegrove, 2021, p. 140).

This dissertation is deeply inspired by Brown's (2021) research and so I will now dedicate significant space to reviewing his contribution to understandings of how key social actors imagine ECEC. The motivation for Brown's (2021) research is examining how "kindergarten has changed into a program that is conceptualized and enacted through economic rather than democratic conceptions of schooling" (p. 5). Brown (2021) provides a historical overview regarding how kindergarten in the United States has shifted from a focus on holistic child development to a neoliberal agenda, which prioritizes school readiness, makes children and teachers accountable for education disparities, and intensifies academic expectations. Next, Brown (2021) shares findings from research he conducted in Texas and West Virginia, exploring how key actors understand and negotiate the "Kinder-race" (p.5), along with standards-based accountability education reform. These actors include groups operating both inside kindergarten (students, family members, teachers, and principals) and outside of it (school district/county, state, and national level stakeholders). First, through video-cued multivocal ethnographic research, Brown (2021) explores how kindergarten students, parents, teachers, and principals navigate the "Kinder-race" (p.5). Brown (2021) finds that students framed kindergarten as a place where activities tend to be teacher-led, and there is a focus on academic learning, 'getting smart', understanding and abiding by rules, and preparing for future grades. When asked their perspective on the change they

would like to see in kindergarten, students prioritized more time for play, including time at 'centers' and recess, and more opportunities to engage in physical activities.

The family members that participated in Brown's (2021) research were critical of the academic demands on their children and "did not want kindergarten to be the new 1st grade" (p.68). They ultimately worried that the pressures that stem from the "Kinder-race" (Brown, 2021, p.5) were going to impede their children's motivation to learn and overall well-being. Parents wanted kindergarten to be reformed to focus on cultivating more joy and less pressure for their children, and to support their growth as whole, social beings (Brown, 2021).

Educators who participated in Brown's (2021) research framed the purpose of kindergarten as preparing students for future grades and assessments. Like parents, educators were concerned about the academic focus in kindergarten and its impact on children's opportunities to build social and emotional skills. Educators wanted to see kindergarten incorporate more time for play and rest, and emphasize children's holistic development, instead of mostly academic skills (Brown, 2021).

Finally, Brown's (2021) findings from research with ECEC stakeholders at the district and state levels in Texas and West Virginia, as well as with national policy actors and advocates, "recognized how policymakers' neoliberal high-stakes SBA reforms created the Kinder-Race, and they wanted to reroute it" (p.130). However, ideas regarding reform tended to be "focused on instruction and teacher training" (Brown, 2021, p.130). Drawing on the work of George Lakoff, Brown (2021) argues that kindergarten reform must center "a yet-to-be realized image of kindergarten that attends to (people's) hopes" (p.12) regarding children's education. Brown (2021) proposes that

this reimagined vision should frame kindergarten as “the expansion of learning” (p.135) which is “a collective act in which teachers, students, and the larger community work together to foster the learning of everyone involved” (p. 136) and “creates space for acts of improvisation that can redefine the purpose and process of kindergarten” (p.136). For Brown (2021) the ultimate goal of ECEC reform is “sustain(ing) the next generation of democratic citizens” (p. 12).

Brown’s (2021) study is the only one that compares how policy actors, children parents, and educators approach ECEC. This dissertation research seeks to build on Brown’s (2021) insights to compare how key social actors prioritize and frame the purpose of pre-K in the context of Minnesota. This dissertation research departs from Brown’s (2021) approach by focusing on pre-K in Minnesota, and specifically interrogating how investment discourse is constructed and negotiated. I also depart from Brown’s (2021) work by engaging in a close, textual analysis of key Minnesota policy documents to explore how children’s subjectivity and education inequality are being constructed by policy actors’ engagement with investment discourse.

Conclusion

The literature explored in this review demonstrates how children’s status and political subjectivity, as well as the purpose of their education, remain diversely defined and precarious. Many, often conflicting, understandings of childhood and purposes of education have been set forth (Brown, 2021; Dahlberg et al. 2013; Moss, 2014; Woodrow & Press, 2007).

As Brown et al. (2015) aptly argue, “neo-liberal policies continue to alter the purpose and direction of early childhood” (p.138). This review has examined literature

analyzing the effects of neoliberal ideology on ECEC policymaking and practice. Through this literature, one gains a deeper understanding of how neoliberalism has seeped into ECEC practice, pedagogy, family relations, and children's daily lives. This research has reflected the stakes of neoliberal ideology by shedding light on how deeply and early it constitutes and constrains contemporary human life, including our most important relationships and institutions.

Turning to research that engages the perspectives of children, parents, and educators regarding ECEC's purposes, offers deeper insight regarding the contending purposes and priorities underlying ECEC. Despite important contributions from comparative education research and scholarship engaging children in research regarding schooling, there is a need for research examining how investment discourse frames children's political subjectivity and status, and how it is taken up and negotiated within ECEC settings by key social actors.

In the next chapter, I explore the methodological framework I adopt to address the gap in the literature that this chapter has outlined. I detail how I apply a Comparative Case Study approach (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017), drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Narrative Analysis, to compare how policy actors, pre-K students, parents, and an educator imagine the purposes of pre-K.

Chapter 3 : Research Methodology and Design

In this chapter, I discuss the research design that has guided this dissertation project. I outline how I adopt a Comparative Case Study approach to explore how policy actors employ investment discourse to rationalize ECEC reform and contrast their vision of ECEC with that of a pre-K educator, parents, and pre-K students. I begin by re-stating the research problem and questions informing this dissertation and position myself in relation to this research. Next, I outline my process of selecting the research site and recruiting participants, as well as collecting and analyzing data. I discuss how I integrate Critical Narrative Analysis (Souto-Manning, 2014a) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2000, 2003, 2010), into a complementary analytical approach. I also reflect on the methodological choices and impasses I grappled with as I navigated difficulty with access to a research site and engaged in research during the COVID-19 pandemic. I conclude by identifying the limitations of this research project, and offer insights regarding my efforts and challenges in seeking to engage in ethical, comparative research with children.

Re-stating Research Problem and Questions

As the previous chapters have explored, framing publicly funded ECEC as an investment in human capital development has earned favor among a broad range of policy actors, from governmental officials and politicians, to social policy scholars (Esping-Andersen, 2002), to economists (Heckman, 2011; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003), business leaders, and civil society. Investment discourse is ubiquitous in ECEC policy reform in the United States, and Minnesota is no exception. Despite the dominance of investment discourse, there is limited research that explores the discursive mechanisms

that policy actors use to privilege investment discourse in rationalizing ECEC reform. Additionally, there are no studies that compare how children, parents, educators, and policy actors negotiate investment discourse as they frame the purposes and value of pre-K. This dissertation research adopts a Comparative Case Study (CCS) approach to address these gaps through answering the following questions:

1. How does Minnesota's ECEC policy coalition privilege investment discourse in rationalizing public funding of ECEC, and what are its tangible effects?
2. How do Minnesotan ECEC policy actors represent childhood through their use of investment discourse to rationalize ECEC reform? What assumptions regarding childhood and education inequality do policymakers perpetuate?
3. How do parents and a pre-K educator explain the purposes of ECEC and negotiate investment discourse?
4. What are pre-K students' priorities in ECEC, and what might their views contribute to ECEC policy reform?

Researcher Positionality

I come to this research from a place of deep concern regarding investment discourse and its implications for children and their education. I first learned about investment discourse as a way of justifying social policy through a presentation I attended in 2008, during my undergraduate education. This presentation stayed with me over the years and came to the forefront in 2014, as I observed the final dissemination of Full Day Kindergarten in my home of Ontario, Canada. I was struck by policymakers' reference to children and their education as 'investments'. The best way I can describe my response was a feeling of deep unease as I heard children being framed as capital and

their education rationalized as an economic investment. During my masters program in Early Childhood Studies, I conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the Ontario Government's justification of this initiative to the public. This experience led me to this dissertation research, exploring how children, educators, and parents negotiate the purpose of pre-K and the implications this holds for children's political subjectivity.

My understanding of the 'problem' that this research interrogates and my approach to engaging with it has shifted in response to my continued journey of recognizing myself as "raced" and striving to engage in antiracist research and activism. I am positioned in this research as a white woman, engaging in a dissertation project that explores racial injustice through ECEC policy and practice. I entered this project concerned that framing children and their education as an investment placed too much pressure on kids and reduced their education to an economic rationale. I have come to learn that the concerns that initially drew me to this work are only part of the story and a reflection of my blind spots as a white woman[1]. For many BIPOC students in the United States the problem is not that they are burdened by the state seeing them as an investment in the future but instead, that the state has failed to invest in their education and well-being (Ladson-Billings, 2006). I feel a responsibility to resist discourses that position BIPOC children and families, as well as children and families who are economically under-served as 'problems' in order to justify their access to basic entitlements, like ECEC. In taking up this work, I am inspired by the insights of Australian Aboriginal activist, academic, and artist Lilla Watson: "If you have come here to help me you are

[1] Conversations and guidance from my Advisor, Dr. Roozbeh Shirazi, and engaging with the scholarship of Critical ECEC scholars and CRT scholars working in education (Adair & Colegrove, 2021; Berman, 2020; Berman et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2010; Dixson et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1996, 2006, 2011; Nxumalo, 2019; Nxumalo & Adair, 2019; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2006; Pérez, 2019) have been essential in this process.

wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together".

My experience of becoming a parent has also influenced how I show up in this research. I was nine months pregnant during my fieldwork. I gave birth to my daughter less than a week after I decided to pause data collection. While my daughter is my greatest joy, the year after her birth was the hardest of my life. I did not anticipate how much I would struggle as a new mother. In the winter 2020 I found myself in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, grappling with post-partum depression, unsure if I could be well enough to care for my child, let alone move forward with my dissertation research. When I think about the time and resources that have helped me and yet I know are unavailable to so many, I am appalled. It is unconscionable that in one of the wealthiest nations in the world, parents and children are entitled to so little support. I am left to conclude that America does not respect children and families.

Becoming a parent has also changed how I relate to other parents who are navigating choices regarding their children's education. Nothing has humbled me more than parenthood. I find myself routinely placing the very pressures on my daughter that I am critical of in policy discourse. For instance, I sometimes notice myself repeating sentences my daughter says and then counting the number of words she used, which I report back to my husband, sharing that this is 'more than average' for a child her age. These moments invite me to reflect on the challenges and stakes of parenting decisions, especially now that they have shifted from the abstract to the very real. I feel a deep sense of empathy toward the parents of the Rainbow classroom that I was privileged to meet and especially, to Ruby and Hazel, who participated in this project. Many of their

questions are my questions. Many of their concerns are my concerns. They also shared different experiences and beliefs regarding their children's education than my own and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from these differences.

I brought my previous experience working as a teacher for pre-K aged students to this dissertation research. For two years, I taught English Language Learning classes in Korea. In my second year, half my days were spent teaching pre-K and kindergarten aged students. The academic expectations on young learners in my school were high. While I tried to carve out space for play, I took part in education practices that I often felt were far removed from my values, as well as the priorities and needs of the young beings whose earliest experiences with formal education I was responsible for. These experiences influenced my relationship with Rose, the educator who took part in this research. Through my conversations with Rose, I also learned that she was navigating competing education demands that were at times removed from her own pedagogical beliefs and view of students' needs.

Approaching Rose's participation in this project, I was inspired by Noddings's (1986) advocacy for research that is "for teaching" (p.227). Applying the FEOC, Noddings (1986) suggests that education research has been hindered by its "failure to meet colleagues in genuine mutuality" (p. 506), particularly as teachers and students have been positioned as objects of research instead of subjects. In response to this common barrier, Noddings (1988) advocates for education researchers to embody "constructive appreciation" (p.226) and to approach teachers with deep consideration for their "needs, views and actual experience(s)" (p.227). I hold Rose in deep regard and it is from a place

of respect and appreciation that I draw on my experiences in the Rainbow classroom to raise critical questions regarding pre-K.

Methodological Design

Comparative Case Study Approach

To examine how the purpose of pre-K is negotiated in the context of Minnesota, I adopt Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) Comparative Case Study approach. This methodological approach was developed by Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) to examine how policies are molded and then take on new life as they are implemented by different social actors. I was compelled to select a Comparative Case Study (CCS) as the methodological framework for this research because of Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) sociocultural approach to policymaking, which they describe "as a deeply political process of cultural production engaged in and shaped by social actors" (p. 2). This sociocultural approach recognizes social actors as positioned within and influenced by unique contexts, interests, and power structures (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). As a result, the CCS approach is a valuable methodological framework to compare how Minnesota pre-K is understood and valued by students, parents, and a teacher with policy actors' discourse.

CCS also offers a valuable framework for this dissertation research due to my commitment to including children as participants and comparing their perspectives with those of adults. Utilizing CCS supported my aim to include children as a group of social actors, while also recognizing and attending to the power relations that imbue their participation in this research and their perspectives regarding pre-K.

The horizontal, vertical, and transversal axes of comparison undergirding the CCS approach each afford a unique opportunity to destabilize the dominant status of

investment discourse in ECEC. The vertical axis's approach compares how policies are constructed and negotiated at different scales. Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) recommend adopting multi-scalar exploration of "connections among actors and authoritative texts" (p. 74) instead of focusing analysis around levels, like the local, national, and global. Applying this vertical axis of comparison, I trace how investment discourse is discursively constructed by ECEC policy actors in Minnesota and draw connections to key texts that have shaped ECEC policy discourse. I adopt an approach to the horizontal axis of comparison that shifts from conceptualizing cases as sites and instead, frames cases as groups of social actors, including policy actors, as well as pre-K students, educators, and parents who all participated in the same pre-K program. I recognize each group (parents, a pre-K teacher, and students) as interconnected and yet they can be differentiated by alignment with unique institutions (education, parenting, childhood), responsibilities, interests, and positioning with their pre-K program. As Moss (2014) highlights, one possibility for unsettling the dominant position investment discourse holds in ECEC policymaking is through consulting different perspectives regarding ECEC's purposes and social value. By comparing how different groups of social actors envision and experience pre-K, it becomes possible to question the taken for granted assumptions underlying investment discourse and to explore other possible rationales for ECEC. Finally, the transversal axis of comparison explores how investment discourse is historically and temporally constituted in Minnesota. Here, I sought to understand if and how rationales for ECEC shift in response to socio-political change and as it is mobilized by different policy actors in Minnesota.

Policy Analysis

To explore how Minnesota policy actors represent childhood through their use of investment discourse, I conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992, 2003, 2010) of Minnesotan policy texts that rationalize public funding for ECEC.

Selection of Policy Texts

I included twenty-six policy texts from key actors in Minnesota's ECEC policy coalition for analysis in this research. These texts include speeches from three Minnesota Governors, policy reports from business partnerships focused on ECEC reform, state legislation, mission statements from ECEC advocacy groups and non-governmental organizations, and statements from individuals who played a pivotal role in Minnesota's ECEC reform process.

My approach to selecting texts to be included for analysis was purposeful. First, I chose to include texts from the years 2003 to 2021. I began with 2003 as this was the year that Rolnick and Grunewald published their seminal Federal Reserve paper, rationalizing ECEC as a productive economic investment in Minnesota. Second, I sought to include texts that reflected a range of social actors who have played a significant role in Minnesota's ECEC policy reform. Third, I included texts that reflect different genres (organization mission statements, policy reports, political speeches, etc.) and are intended for a range of audiences. Finally, I was informed by Sevenhuijsen's (2004) recommendation that critical research on policy discourses can benefit from including what she refers to as key texts, exemplary texts, and authoritative texts. Key texts are those that "have been crucial in setting or influencing a discourse or in forging decisive discursive shifts" (Sevenhuijsen, 2004, p. 20). Exemplary texts "represent a mode of

speaking that can be perceived in several other documents, but that contain, nevertheless, the most elaborated or clear vision of the policy discourse" (Sevenhuijsen, 2004, p. 20). Authoritative texts "impose a dominant definition or mode of speaking on a field (Sevenhuijsen, 2004, p.20)" and are typically "legal texts that have the power of the law behind them" (Sevenhuijsen, 2004, p.20). Selecting texts from all three of these categories supported a focused yet in depth analysis of how policy actors engage investment discourse to justify ECEC reform (Sevenhuijsen, 2004).

Critical Discourse Analysis of Policy Texts

To answer this study's first and second research questions and explore how Minnesota's key ECEC policy actors privilege investment discourse and represent childhood and education inequality I apply a Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2003, 2010) of twenty-six policy texts rationalizing public funding for ECEC. CDA provides a valuable framework for CCS research that embraces "a critical bent" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 81). CDA seeks to analyze the "dialectical relations between discourses and other objects, elements or moments, as well as analysis of the 'internal relations' of discourse" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 4). Fairclough (2003) states that "language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life" (p. 2). He further articulates that "texts have social, political, cognitive, moral and material consequences and effects" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 14). While communication is facilitated by some mutually recognized "common ground" (Fairclough, 2003, p.55), social actors are able to establish power through their capacity to determine what constitutes this "common ground" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 55). The purpose of conducting CDA is ultimately to identify and examine areas of social and political life that should be

changed and to advance the change that is deemed necessary (Fairclough, 2010). Through analyzing and critiquing texts and their representation of discourse and social processes, I propose an additional discourse (Fairclough, 2010).

In this dissertation research, I examine how Minnesota policy actors position investment discourse as a dominant discourse (Moss, 2014). Moss (2014) argues that discourses achieve dominance when they are able to obscure their underlying assumptions and values, and in turn, render certain representations of our social world as commonplace and inevitable, while negating others (Moss, 2014). In chapter four, I explore the taken-for-granted assumptions that Minnesota's ECEC policy actors adopt regarding childhood and education inequality through their privileging of investment discourse.

Fairclough (2003) argues that close textual analysis is "labour-intensive" (p.6) and is "productively applied to samples of research material rather than large bodies of text" (p. 6). Thus, I began analysis by reading each policy text in full and then highlighted sections of the text that address ECEC and/or pre-K. Next, I applied Fairclough's (2003) articulation of how "semantic relations of purpose… are marked by connectors ('so that', 'the purpose of this', 'in order to')" (p. 98) to identify sections of the text that rationalize ECEC. Following Fairclough's (2003) guidance, I only include these excerpts from the text for analysis. Then, I identified the assumptions embedded in the terms and arguments that Minnesota's ECEC policy coalition uses to privilege investment discourse. Here, I examined what discursive mechanisms are used to reinforce investment discourse's dominance (Fairclough, 2003). Additionally, I explored if and how rationales for ECEC have shifted over the past two decades, since significant interest

in ECEC reform began in Minnesota, as well as across policymaking contexts, such as within politics and the business community.

School-Based Research

I now turn to describe the school-based research that I undertook to answer this study's third and fourth research questions.

Research Site

I refer to the classroom that I participated in for this research as the 'Rainbow classroom'. I chose this pseudonym because during my conversation with Lavender, a student who participated in this research, she shared that she was going to draw the classroom as a "Rainbow classroom". I also selected this name because many of the students who participated expressed a love of art.

The broader ECEC program (the Rainbow pre-Kindergarten program, pseudonym) that this classroom was housed in is located in a Twin Cities suburb. The program partners with a public school district to offer pre-K for three and four year old children, as well as programming before and after classes. The program implements a play-based curriculum aimed at supporting students to develop pre or emergent literacy, math skills, and social emotional skills.

The program also offers Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), which includes a parent education component. ECFE is a Minnesota parent education program offered to families with children from birth to kindergarten through community education. This program was offered in the school by a licensed parent educator. The Minnesota Department of Education (2021) states the goal of the ECFE programs is to "support… parent(s)/caregiver(s) and to strengthen and empower families" (para.1), with

the aim of "enhanc(ing) the ability of all parents and other family members to provide the best possible environments for their child's learning and development" (para.1). Their website describes how the program offers classes focused on discussion and exploration of topics related to child development, such as navigating friendship and power struggles, as well as strategies to support students to play in nature. Both parents who participated in this study took part in the ECFE programming.

The Rainbow classroom, where I conducted this research and recruited participants, was an all-day pre-K class for four year old students and included ECFE. The class or 'academic day' ran from 9:30 to1:30pm[2] and was meant for students with prior preschool experience. The class was led by Rose, a licensed pre-K educator, and supported by two assistant teachers. Additionally there were often other educators in the classroom, including a social skills educator, and special education teachers. While unfortunately I do not have access to demographic data on the students in this classroom, I perceived it to be diverse in terms of race and socio-economic status. Rose also saw her class as racially diverse, particularly during the year that I observed. She attributed support for the racial and socio-economic diversity in her classroom to scholarships, as well as a van service that would transport kids to the school. However, the van service was cut in 2020 and she saw this as impacting the decline in diversity in her classroom.

Gaining entry

I had originally envisioned collecting data for this research in the context of Ontario, Canada. From the fall of 2018 to spring of 2019 I applied to three school boards in the greater Toronto area and was denied access from all three. The reasons the boards

[2] Please see Appendix 3 for a description of a typical day in the Rainbow classroom, based on my observations.

provided included but were not limited to the perceived political nature of my study, their lack of confidence in children's capacity to participate in this research, and concerns regarding the impact on instruction time and on educators.

In spring of 2019 I decided to shift focus to engaging in research in Minnesota. This decision was strategic and purposeful. First, Minnesota offered a valuable context for this dissertation research as investment discourse has been prevalent in ECEC reform in the state over the past two decades. This is likely in part due to the influence of economists, Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald, and their 2003 Federal Reserve Paper framing ECEC as an economic investment for the state. Second, I learned from my experience pursuing access in Ontario that this process was going to be much more challenging than I had anticipated, especially as I had no connections to educators or administrators in local school boards. Thus, my next step in pursuing access to a research site was to contact my supervisor through work I was doing with the University of Minnesota collecting data in ECEC programs across the Twin Cities. The supervisor sent multiple emails to her contacts at ECEC sites on my behalf. One administrator expressed interest in the project and agreed to meet with me. I met with the lead administrator of the Rainbow pre-Kindergarten program in May of 2019. We met for an hour and discussed the school, her professional background, as well as my background and the research project. The administrator was very encouraging of the research project and said I would be welcome to recruit participants from the program. She also offered advice on racial justice readings that she thought I may find helpful and we ended the conversation agreeing that I would send her my recruitment materials. She quickly approved of the

recruitment materials and we agreed that I would follow up with her in the fall to begin recruitment. At this time, I completed the UMN's IRB approval process.

My experiences and the impasses I faced in negotiating access to a research site for this dissertation project have left me concerned regarding the possibilities for conducting critical research in the context of public schools. While I understand the responsibility that administrators have to protect children from harm and I unequivocally support efforts aimed at safeguarding children's well-being, I worry about the power these gatekeepers hold in defining and delimiting the kinds of questions that can be raised and meaningfully explored in regards to public schooling. The responses that I received from boards in Ontario included: concerns regarding the failure of this research to align with board priorities; concerns that the research may cause teachers to feel discomfort; concerns that I would be asking children questions that they regarded as too developmentally advanced; and concerns that the research will infringe on instruction time. I was first and foremost struck by administrators' seeming failure to recognize children as viable knowledge producers and the implications this holds for consulting children regarding their experiences and priorities in school. I was also struck by the scope of what may be considered a 'risk' and thus a reason for denying research access, as well as the power that boards have in unilaterally making these decisions, with no option for recourse on the part of the researcher. As schools respond to COVID-19, as instruction time is carefully guarded, and as demands on teachers only seem to grow, I anticipate that the possibilities of engaging in education research in public schools may become even narrower. These experiences and concerns have ultimately deepened my

commitment to demonstrating the possibilities and value of engaging young children in research and particularly, consulting them regarding their perspectives on school.

Recruitment/ Participants

I recruited educators for participation in this study by attending a staff meeting at the Rainbow pre-Kindergarten program at the beginning of the academic year in 2019. I introduced myself to the educators, explained the purpose of my study, and shared a recruitment letter, as well as consent forms. I was also connected with the educators via email by the lead administrator. I invited the teachers to ask questions regarding the project and their potential role in it should they choose to participate. I received a follow up email from Rose (pseudonym) and we agreed to meet in person to discuss the project in more detail. During this meeting, Rose agreed to participate in this project.

I received consent forms from two educators to participate in the study, as well as twenty students and ten parents from two classrooms. I began data collection in the Rainbow classroom in the fall of 2019 and then planned on completing data collection in the second class in the spring of 2020, after I had taken parental leave and adjusted to my new parenting role. Unfortunately due to the COVID-19 pandemic it was no longer possible for me to participate in the classrooms. I made the decision to focus on collecting further data with participants from the Rainbow classroom. I wanted to give time and space to parents and educators as they navigated the pandemic. I revised data collection procedures to engage in remote interviews with parents and educators.

Two parents, Ruby and Hazel (pseudonyms) participated in this study. Both parents self-identified as middle-class, women and had daughters who participated in the Rainbow classroom and this research project. Hazel self-identified as white and Ruby self-

identified as Black. During ‘Parent Day’, I got to know Ruby a bit as we sat together at a table and chatted. I had not spoken with Hazel before our first interview.

In the fall of 2019, twelve students participated in observations and the first eight of the students listed participated in conversations for this research. I gave students pseudonyms based on colorful names, which include: Lavender, Jade, Amber, Indigo, Coral, Olive, Garnet, Violet, Gray, Red, Slate, and Scarlet. All students who participated were four or five. The student population in the Rainbow classroom was racially diverse and the students who participated in this project reflected this diversity. Eight girl students and four boy students participated in observations. Seven girl students and one boy student participated in conversations. I would often play and chat with the boys who participated in observations and many of them seemed to enjoy asking questions and sharing insights about their play and classroom. However, when I approached the boys to participate in conversations in the hallway, they were much more likely than the girls to indicate they would prefer to keep playing rather than participate. Meanwhile, the girls tended to be more interested in participating in the conversations.

Data Collection

Data collection for the school-based research component of this project occurred over approximately one and a half years. In the following section I describe how I engaged in participant observations in a pre-K classroom, semi-structured interviews with a pre-K educator and two parents, as well as conversations with pre-K students.

Participant-Observations

At the end of October 2019, I began conducting observations in the Rainbow classroom. Over the course of about a month, I participated for the full class day twelve

times, from approximately 9:30am to 1:30pm. On my first day, I joined the class right at 9:30am and students were already sitting in a circle for group time. Rose, the lead pre-K teacher, was standing at the center of the circle and I gave a small wave to her. I walked toward the back of the classroom, looking for somewhere to put down my things, not wanting to interrupt. Rose asked an Assistant Teacher to show me to the back closet/ storage area, where I could place my belongings. Afterwards, I joined the circle by sitting on the floor behind the students. They seemed curious about my presence but not particularly distracted by me. Rose introduced me, telling the students that my name is Alex and that I will be joining their class to learn about what they do there and then said "maybe Alex wants to tell us a bit about herself". I shared that I go to school too and am joining their class because I want to learn from them about pre-K (Mayall, 2008). Rose suggested "you can teach her". One student piped up, "but we are just kids". Another student suggested something they could show me. Rose also shared with me that many students like to draw pictures and a couple of students seemed to smile and sit up excitedly. Some students studied me intently after we switched topics to discussing the letter 'I', while others did not pay much attention to my presence.

My participation in the classroom shifted between being an 'active' participant observer and a more peripheral approach (Adler & Adler, 1987). Active participation involves the researcher "assum(ing) a more central position in the setting" (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 51) and "tak(ing) part in the core activities of the group" (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 51). Through this practice, active participants "generally assume functional, not solely research or social, roles in their settings" (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 51) and engage as "coparticipants in a joint endeavor" (Adler & Adler, 1987, p.51). Unlike active

membership, the peripheral approach involves less commitment to the site and the researcher assumes a much less functional role (Adler & Adler, 1987).

My role as a participant-observer evolved as I became more familiar with the educators and students. It also changed based on context, including what was going on in the classroom and my own reflections regarding the research process (Adler & Adler, 1987). As will be discussed shortly, I adopted a "'researcher-member' role" (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 38). At times I participated in the core activities of the classroom with the students, playing with them, performing, and signing alongside them in the circle. During observations, I paid attention to classroom activities, interactions, routines, student-produced artefacts, and lesson materials. I often played with students by pretending to be a customer at their ice cream shop and bakery, helping build puzzles and train tracks, reading books, playing cars, and co-imagining games. Outside I gave students pushes on the swing, received informal tours of important and fun places around the playground, and marveled at the way the playground changed with the shifting Minnesota fall weather. I helped students get ready to go outside and one day I was a hero for finding a lost mitten. I also helped clean up the classroom after lunch time and activities. Perhaps my favorite part of the day in the Rainbow classroom was sitting to eat lunch with the students. We engaged in conversation about their lunches, hobbies, families, and what they would do after school. They also asked me some of my favorite questions about my pregnancy, such as: 'Can the baby hear us?' 'Why do you want to have a baby?' And, 'How will the baby get out?'

In addition to participating alongside students, I took on some of the assistant teachers' roles, such as helping with tidying. This gave me an opportunity to observe in a

way that I hoped was less intrusive, particularly at the beginning of my time in the Rainbow classroom. I typically floated around the classroom but sometimes I was asked to participate in an activity with students if a teacher was needed somewhere else. I sought to navigate being helpful while also wanting to avoid confusing the students regarding my role. As observations progressed, I worried that the more I engaged in activities that teachers typically performed, this may have been confusing for the students regarding my role in their space. Thus, I sought to take a step back from leading any activities and instead, mostly aimed to participate alongside students.

Semi- Structured Interviews and Conversations

I began semi-structured conversations with students during my second week of observations. Rose asked me to approach children for conversations during their dramatic/free play time. Before asking each student to participate in a conversation, I typically would play with them for approximately five minutes. I asked students if they would like to come to the hall to chat with me about pre-K and draw a picture. Sometimes students were keen to participate, and sometimes they demonstrated hesitancy through their facial expressions, body language, or quietness. When I noticed these hesitancies, I would ask if they would like me to ask them to participate another time. Some students simply said not right now or they were busy. In future research, I plan to explore different ways to support students to indicate they want to participate.

To engage in conversations with students, I set up a table and two chairs in the hallway directly outside of the Rainbow classroom to conduct conversations with students. I had paper and markers sitting on the table. Some students immediately started drawing once they sat down, while others waited for my direction and invitation to use

the materials. I began our conversations by explaining that I am trying to learn about pre-K from parents, students, and teachers at their school and that I wanted to talk with them because they are a pre-K student and I wanted to learn from their ideas. I shared that their parents had given me permission to ask if they would like to talk with me. I also let them know we could stop at any time. I asked for their assent and if they agreed to participate, I pointed to my recorder and asked if it would be ok for me to record our conversation so I could later write down what they shared correctly. Two participants' parents did not provide permission for me to audio-record so I took notes during these conversations.

As will be further explored in chapter six, students actively negotiated the terms of their participation in this research. For instance, about four minutes into our conversation, Amber asked, "Can we be done with this?" I said "sure" and we ended our conversation and went back into the classroom. During our conversation, I asked Jade, "So what are you drawing here? What is this important place? And he responded "Um, after I'm finished drawing I can tell you". When he was ready, Jade shared that he was drawing a picture of the classroom's safe place. As I approached students to participate in conversations, some students would enthusiastically join, while other students would tell me 'not right now' or ask if they could first have more time with the activity they were engaged in.

In addition to interviews with students, I also completed an interview with Rose, the lead teacher in the Rainbow classroom, as well as two parents of students from the Rainbow classroom and who also participated in this research. I will turn first to describe my interview with Rose. Due to COVID-19, Rose and I met via Google Meet for one virtual interview. We had also met over Google Meet previous to this interview for an

informal conversation to check in on how Rose and the students were doing amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and so that I could share preliminary findings from my conversations with students, which Rose was very interested to learn about. Our interview was semi-structured as I had a list of questions to ask Rose, which I had shared with her ahead of our interview, but the conversation was also guided by Rose's insights. I sought to understand Rose's background and what inspired her to become an early childhood educator, her pedagogy and goals for her students, as well as how she understands the purpose and social value of ECEC and negotiates investment discourse as a rationale for ECEC policy reform.

I completed two, one on one, remote interviews with parents, Ruby and Hazel. During these interviews, I asked questions to understand their background, their families' experiences with pre-K, and their goals for their child and perspectives on the purpose of pre-K. Like my conversation with Rose, I also sought to explore their perspectives on investment discourse as a rationale for ECEC reform. The conversations also flowed organically and took different turns based on what participants shared and my responses.

Critical Narrative Analysis

I applied CNA to analyze the narratives of students, the pre-K teacher, and parents. CNA combines Narrative Analysis (NA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how participants "create their selves in constant social interactions at both personal and institutional levels, and how institutional discourses influence and are influenced by personal everyday narratives" (Souto-Manning, 2014a, pp. 162-163). While NA examines the meaning people make of their lived experiences, CDA analyzes the use of language, often in authoritative texts, in positioning certain representations of

the social world as powerful and suppressing others (Souto-Manning, 2014a). Souto-Manning (2014a) argues that the true power of policy discourses can be fully recognized by determining if and how they are "recycled in stories everyday people tell" (p. 163). By integrating CDA and NA, CNA offers a means to analyze how individuals grapple with dominant, institutional discourses as they narrate their social experiences (Souto-Manning, 2014a). CNA can also offer opportunities for participants to engage in critical reflection regarding how institutional discourses, like investment discourse, are embedded in their personal narratives and to notice discrepancies between these discourses and their own views and priorities (Souto-Manning, 2014a).

CNA sees an interconnection between policy discourses and personal narratives (Souto-Manning, 2014a). Recognizing this interconnection, CNA offers an approach to explore how policy discourses are embedded in individual's everyday narratives, as well as how everyday narratives reinforce dominant policy discourses (Souto-Manning, 2014a). Through attention to both inquiries, CNA affords opportunities to explore how social actors who participate in ECEC do not just passively respond to policy discourses, but instead, may actively interact with and influence these discourses. In chapter five, I share how the lead teacher in the Rainbow classroom, Rose, describes being pressured by parents to focus on academic content, such as reading. These parental pressures reflect ECEC's "schoolification" (Van Laere et al., 2012, p. 527) and heightened academic demands (Brown, 2021), which are connected to investment discourse. In addition, they demonstrate how investment discourse is not just perpetuated by policy actors, but also reflected through some of the priorities parents' hold for their children's schooling.

I began analyzing data from my interviews and conversations with participants by reading the full transcripts. Through this first reading, I engaged in pre-coding (Saldaña, 2013) by highlighting and making brief comments on sections of the text I found particularly meaningful. Next, using NVivo, I read through and coded the transcripts of conversations with students, then the transcript of my interview with the pre-K teacher, and finally, transcripts from my interviews with parents. In this first round of coding, I integrated elements of open or initial coding, descriptive coding, and in vivo coding approaches (Saldaña, 2013). Saldaña's (2013) advises that in vivo coding, where researcher uses the participants' own language to capture the text's content, is a particularly useful approach when analyzing data from child- participants, as their perspectives remain under-represented in academic research. Thus, seeking to reflect children's own words and phrases offers a means to address this power imbalance regarding representation by facilitating engagement with their voices (James, 1996).

Once an initial list of codes was developed, I re-read through the codes and examples from the data to see if there were codes that represented the same idea and could be collapsed. Through this process, I noted repetition and synonymous words or phrases. I then began to group codes into broad categories and sub-categories. I wrote detailed notes on my decisions to collapse, remove, re-categorize codes, as well as to create new codes and revise existing ones (Saldaña, 2013). I sought to shift from codes that were more descriptive to develop codes that were more "refined… conceptual and abstract" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 11). In this second cycle coding, I engaged axial coding, where I developed categories and subcategories from the initial codes established in the first cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2013). During this process, I further revised codes, as well

as added new ones. Throughout analyzing the data, I wrote analytical memos, to document coding decisions, to capture and reflect on emergent themes, as well as identify and explore interpretations and assumptions that I brought to the analysis process (Saldaña, 2013).

Ethical Considerations in research with children

There is a "democratic impetus" (Marshall, 2016, p. 59) to consult children in education research, as education policy and practice have profound impacts on their well-being and socio-political status. In the following section I explore some of the ethical considerations I grappled with as I engaged in research with the students of the Rainbow classroom.

I aimed to position myself in relation to the students as different from other adults in terms of my role, responsibilities, and decision-making authority in the classroom. It felt important to clarify that I was adopting a "'researcher-member' role" (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 38) and was participating in their classroom to learn, not as a teacher. It was my hope that this would support their comfort in sharing their perspectives regarding their schooling- that I was not testing their knowledge. For my first days of observation, students frequently referred to me as "Alex Teacher" or "Teacher". In response, I would say: "you can call me Alex" or I explained that "I am here to learn about pre-K". Sometimes I shared "I am a student too and go to a school with adults and that I am learning about pre-K". Toward the end of my time observing in their classroom, students would often correct themselves when they began to refer to me as a teacher and would quickly switch to "Alex". I also reminded students that while I could help them and explore ideas with them, I was not someone who would grant them permission. I often

found myself saying: “that is something you should ask your teacher” or simply “I don’t know, who else can you ask about that?” Toward the end of my participation in the Rainbow classroom, I noted that a student began to ask me if they were allowed to do something and then stopped part way through their request to go find a teacher.

In my previous experience participating in ECEC settings, sometimes young students were quick to demonstrate affection with new adults in their classroom. I anticipated this may come up during my participation in the Rainbow classroom and I wanted to approach this as ethically and with as much consideration for students’ feelings as possible. I asked Rose what I should do if students tried to hug me and Rose shared that I should let students know that they need to ask for permission to hug people. I also applied insights I had received during participation in a previous ECEC setting where the teacher advised students that when they are getting to know new adults, it is good to give some space and that hugs come when we know people well. I sought to demonstrate care and respect toward students in establishing relationships with them while also being authentic about my role in their lives. For instance, Lavender one day shared “I love you Alex” and I responded: “those are very kind words to say”.

I also want to reflect on moments where I fell short of my commitment to demonstrate respect and authenticity toward the students who participated in this research. As I read through transcripts of my conversations with students, I noted that I engage in what a youth activist who participated in Taft’s (2021) research on youth-led social movements refers to as “‘wowing’” (p.193). This is the “adult tendency to offer over-enthusiastic praise” (p.194) and a “celebration” (Taft, 2021, p. 194) of students’ mere participation in research, as opposed to a more meaningful critical engagement with

their ideas. I responded with 'wow' thirteen times in four different conversations with students. Despite my perhaps well-intentioned aim to encourage students' participation and to express appreciation for their ideas, the potential effect of my "wowing" (Taft, 2021, p.193) was to deny "meaningful political and intellectual relationships across generations" (Taft, 2021, p. 194). I now turn to reflect on two examples of how I engage "wowing" (Taft, 2021, p.193) during my conversations with students.

Taft (2021) describes "wowing" (p.194) as "similar to when an adult tells a child their artwork is simply the best thing they've ever seen" (p. 194). I explicitly engaged this during my conversation with Amber as we discuss her drawing of the Rainbow classroom. I used 'wow' in response to her insights five times in the interview. In the following passage, I respond with 'oh wow' three times:

Alex: What is another place in the classroom that is important to know? So you told me about safe places, where's another place that is important to know about?
Amber: Mmm, I forgot.
Alex: That's Ok. What is a place in the classroom that you really like?
Amber: Mmmm, art.
Alex: Ooo, can you draw that for me?
Amber: Pictures. This is my ____ (inaudible) paint brush.
Alex: Oh wow.
Amber: I'll be painting on a, on a paper sheet.
Alex: Oh I see that.
Amber: ___ (inaudible)
Alex: Oh wow, what are you painting?
Amber: A… princess.
Alex: What's another place you like in the classroom?
Amber: Mmm, mm, dramatic play.
Alex: Ohhh.
Amber: It has a bunch of toys. This is the table where you play at the doll house. This is the house _____ (inaudible). Those are the windows, this is the door.
Alex: Oh wow.
Amber: Can we be done with this?
A: Sure!

It seems noteworthy that Amber asked to be finished with the conversation. She was the only student who asked to end our conversation and while of course her choice to end at any point is completely valid, I wonder if part of her decision was based on the way I was showing up. Perhaps my hyperbolic responses came across as disingenuous and this made her feel uncomfortable.

My conversation with Jade provides another example of how my efforts to encourage students' participation and 'wow' response resulted in missed opportunities to explore important ideas. In the following passage Jade and I discuss his drawing of the Rainbow classroom's 'safe place':

Alex: So why is that an important place?
Jade: Because when you feel mad or sad or shy you can go there and calm down.
A: Oh, that sounds really helpful. Wow, that's a really good one. What about, what's a place in the classroom that you really like? Like, what's your favorite place in the classroom?

As I read this passage, I am struck by my failure to further inquire about Jade's thoughtful reflection on the safe place. There are so many follow up questions that I wish I had asked, including: What kind of things make you feel mad, sad, or shy? What kinds of things help you calm down and how did you learn about these things? I also wish I had asked him to share about a time he went to the safe place and if there were times when the safe place did not help or even made things feel worse and what happens then? I now recognize that respect for Jade's participation would have been better reflected by more deeply engaging his ideas and creating further space to explore them.

Limitations

I now turn to outline the limitations underlying this research. I will begin by reflecting on limitations in relation to the school-based research. An overarching

limitation of the school-based research was that participant-observations in the Rainbow classroom and conversations with educators, parents, and students were cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While I followed up with parents during the pandemic regarding their participation in the research, I only received responses from three parents and ultimately only engaged in interviews with two parents. Having more parents and educators participate in the research may have offered the opportunity for richer comparisons within and across groups.

I had planned to engage students in three conversations. Unfortunately due to the covid-19 pandemic I only engaged the first set of questions and was not able to speak with all the children whose parents had provided consent. Additionally, at the time I did not feel it would be appropriate to ask students to participate in remote interviews, especially since I did not want to further contribute to the demands and stresses of the pandemic. I now see this as a missed opportunity and an area for further exploration in future research with children.

I acknowledge that engagement in the Rainbow classroom for a more extensive period of time would have generated further insights, including more opportunities to develop rapport with students and build a deeper understanding of their education experiences. However, I argue that the three weeks of observations that I undertook in the Rainbow classroom afforded me with the opportunity to become embedded in their classroom and to develop meaningful relationships with the students, which enhanced my understanding of their experiences and priorities in pre-K. During the three weeks I observed the classroom, I typically spent the entire day with the students, allowing for a more complete understanding of their days and offering more time to engage with them. I

also undertook many efforts to establish rapport with students, including demonstrating interest in their ideas and seeking out their guidance in their learning community, answering questions they had about my role and my own life, engaging in play, helping them accomplish tasks, and taking steps to positioning myself as an adult that was different from the other adults in their space. Thus, I argue that while three weeks is short time to engage in the Rainbow classroom, I was able to develop meaningful relationships with students that strengthened my understanding of the knowledge they shared during our conversations.

Another limitation or perhaps, an area for improvement in future research was regarding how I informed students about the study. I introduced myself to students and both Rose and I explained my role in the Rainbow classroom and described my research. I also encouraged students to ask questions about me and the research I was doing. However, there were ways this process could have been improved. In future research I would send home a 'research book' for students whose parents gave permission for their child to participate. This book would explain who I am and introduce the project to students, as well include an information sheet for parents and students to fill out providing demographic information, as well as important details for me to know about students, as a means to support rapport-building (O'Farrelly, 2020). I also wish I had pursued time for the students as a group to ask me questions about research and about the project I was doing. While I encouraged students to ask me these questions one on one, I also think inviting questions from the larger group may have elicited more comfort and engagement. Additionally, conducting the research with students at a table directly outside of their classroom may have impacted students' comfort.

A further limitation emerged as a result of my membership in the classroom. While the teachers and the lead administrator who granted me access to the program were welcoming, my previous experiences and impasses negotiating access impacted how I showed up in the research process. I made efforts to avoid being an imposition or impact instruction time, as well as to be helpful. I recognize and value the labor that goes into caring and educating young children and inviting a new member into the classroom community. As a result, I was eager to positively contribute to the classroom first and foremost out of respect, but also to continue to be invited back into the space. At times however, I noticed myself prioritizing being helpful above my research commitments and in a way that may have limited my capacity to observe and impacted how the students saw me. As I mentioned earlier, my role in the classroom, including participating in activities and caretaking roles that the teachers typically engaged in, may have also impacted students' comfort in sharing their experiences and views with me.

Not having demographic data on child participants limits a more holistic understanding of the children who participated. While I made efforts to contact parents of children who participated in this research in order to gather demographic data, unfortunately this was unsuccessful. Without this information, I lack a deeper understanding of the identities that the children who participated hold, which leaves any claims regarding the racial and socio-economic diversity in the classroom up to my observation and how I am reading students. I recognize this as limited and problematic, as it risks misrepresenting students' identities. In future research, I will prioritize collecting demographic data at the outset of the research process.

Strategies for Enhancing Trustworthiness

In the final section of this chapter, I outline the efforts I undertook to enhance trustworthiness, including triangulation, respondent validation and critical reflexivity.

Triangulation

Participating in and observing the Rainbow classroom alongside engaging in conversations with students and ahead of interviews with the pre-K educator and parents, invited me to gain a deeper understanding of the insights that participants shared, and the larger context in which their narratives regarding pre-K were situated. I also explored the Rainbow pre-Kindergarten program's online content, and watched a video of a school board meeting for the district that the Rainbow pre-Kindergarten program was situated within to gain a deeper understanding of the research context.

Respondent Validation

A step I took to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings was to check in with participants both during and after the interviews. During interviews, I often paraphrased what I was hearing from the participants to check my understanding of their ideas. Additionally, I offered to share a summary of my findings with the students to get their feedback or if they had any additional insights they wanted to add (Dockett et al., 2009). While a few parents followed up with me about setting up a time to remotely connect with their child, I only ended up sharing findings with one student. I also shared transcripts from interviews with adult participants and asked them to follow up with me if there was anything they wanted to elaborate on or if they wanted to discuss anything that misrepresented their views and experiences. I did not see this as an effort to uncover 'the truth', as this would not be reflective of the critical and post-structural underpinnings of

this work. Instead, I saw offering the participants an opportunity to read the transcripts and engage in further discussion as a way to continue our relationship, and to continue the possibility of co-constructing knowledge.

Reflexivity

Throughout my process of collecting and analyzing data for this research, I engaged in journaling, as well as writing research memos to reflect on my experiences in the research process, analysis of the data, and my positioning in the research. I reflected on Saldaña's (2013) prompt to consider "'what strikes you?'" and Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater's (2011) recommendation to ask: "What surprised me? (p.87), "What intrigued me?" (p.87) and "What disturbed me?" (p. 87). As Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater and (2011) note, these questions helped me reflect on the "assumptions" (p. 87), "positions" (p.87), and "tensions" (p.87) that I grappled with as I analyzed the data.

Conclusion

In this chapter I outlined my application of the Comparative Case Study approach (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) to examine how the purpose of ECEC is negotiated in the context of Minnesota pre-K policy discourse and practice. I began by discussing how my positioning as a parent, former educator, and white woman seeking to engage in anti-racist research and praxis impacts this research process. I describe how I integrated Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze data from key Minnesota policy texts and Critical Narrative Analysis to analyze data from school-based research, including observations of a pre-K classroom and interviews/conversations with parents, students, and a pre-K educator. I also reflected on the ethical decisions I navigated as I engaged in research with young students and offer methodological considerations for future comparative

research that engages children. I concluded by naming the limitations of this research and the efforts I employed to address them, as well as highlighting suggestions for future research. In the following chapter, I share findings from my CDA of twenty-six Minnesota policy texts rationalizing ECEC reform. I highlight the discursive mechanisms that policy actors employ in support of investment discourse and the assumptions that they perpetuate regarding childhood.

Chapter 4 : Legitimating ECEC by making children the problem and answer

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way it treats its children"

(President Nelson Mandela, May 8, 1995).

As Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (2019), scholar of history and anti-racist research, articulates: "How we frame the problem- and who we frame as the problem- shapes the answers we find" (p. 133). This chapter takes up this probe to examine the policy problem that Minnesota policy actors argue ECEC reform is solving and 'who' they are constructing as part of this problem. In taking up this analysis, this chapter addresses this dissertation's first two research questions:

1. How does Minnesota's ECEC policy coalition privilege investment discourse in legitimating public funding for ECEC?
2. How do Minnesotan ECEC policy actors represent childhood through their use of investment discourse to rationalize ECEC reform? What assumptions regarding childhood and education inequality do policymakers perpetuate?

To answer these questions, I draw on a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of twenty-six policy texts from key actors in Minnesota's ECEC policy coalition. These texts include speeches from three Minnesota Governors, policy reports from business partnerships focused on ECEC reform, state legislation, mission statements from ECEC advocacy groups and non-governmental organizations, and statements from key policy actors in Minnesota's ECEC reform process.[3]

Applying CDA, I explore how Minnesota policy actors frame the purpose and social value of ECEC as they legitimate public spending and reform in this area.

[3] Please see Appendix 1 for a table of texts included for analysis.

Legitimation is a useful analytic for interrogating how policy actors, from different sectors and reflecting divergent interests, converge to frame policy problems and justify the kind of social programming that is deemed valuable and worthy of public funds. Fairclough (2003) identifies how "Any social order requires legitimation- a widespread acknowledgement of the legitimacy of explanations and justifications for how things are and how things are done" (p. 219). Van Leeuwen (2007) describes four types of legitimation that are identified in the table below. In this chapter, I demonstrate how Minnesota ECEC policy actors employ each of these forms of legitimation as they use investment discourse to justify ECEC reform.

Table 1

Types of Legitimation

Type of Legitimation	Description
Authorization	"Legitimation by reference to authority- of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92).
Rationalization	Legitimation through "goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and…the knowledge society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92). Rationalization offers the "clearest and most explicit form of legitimation" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 99).
Moral Evaluation	"legitimation by (often very oblique) reference to value systems" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92).
Mythopoesis	"legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92).

In applying Fairclough's (2003, 2010) CDA framework, alongside an engagement with the literature on investment discourse, ECEC, and childhood, I articulate the assumptions regarding childhood and children's political status that undergird Minnesota ECEC policy actors' use of investment discourse. I am guided by Fairclough's (2003) argument that assumptions hold ideological importance and are fundamental to social actors' bids for power. Assumptions are connected to Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which is understood as the power that social actors establish by rendering particular representations of social phenomena as normal, universal, and/or undisputable (Fairclough, 2003). A dominant discourse, such as investment discourse, conceals the assumptions and beliefs underlying its claims about the social world (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Moss, 2014). The effect of this process is to elide alternative ways of representing social problems and to make certain decisions seem logical and even inevitable (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Moss, 2014). By examining the assumptions embedded in Minnesota ECEC policy actors' legitimation of ECEC reform, I aim to interrogate their ideological roots.

Through my CDA of Minnesota ECEC policy texts, I found six assumptions undergirding policy actors' use of investment discourse. In this chapter, I explore how policy actors engage the following six assumptions to privilege investment discourse in rationalizing ECEC reform:

1. High stakes childhood: The early years are a defining period of life, and challenging experiences in the early years have lasting effects throughout the life course.

2. Deficient childhood: Many children enter pre-K and school without the qualities, skills, and knowledge they need to be successful and have a productive future (Moss, 2014).
3. Risky childhood: Children, particularly those from 'at risk' backgrounds, serve as a potential future risk to the state (Lee, 2001).
4. Responsibilized childhood: Children are personally responsible for securing their future through their labor and performance in pre-K (Bundy, 2012; Lee, 2001; Rose, 1999).
5. Instrumentalized Childhood: Children are Minnesota's youngest form of human capital. The state's future economic and social prosperity depends on them (Moss, 2014).
6. Invisibilized and silenced childhood: Policy actors assume that adults are best positioned to know, represent, and protect children's interests. Through this process, children's perspectives are silenced or translated by adults (Lee, 2001).

In addition to these six assumptions regarding childhood and children's subjectivity and status, I also draw on CRT to explore how Minnesota ECEC policy actors employ racist assumptions regarding the causes of unequal outcomes in education for BIPOC children. Children are not equally positioned for success in the ECEC system that investment discourse endorses and cultivates. As this chapter demonstrates, they are also not equally burdened with laboring for the future, both their own and the state's, through their performance in pre-K.

In this chapter, I argue that the deficit frame, responsibilization for the future, and instrumentalization of children's education that undergird Minnesota policy actors' use of

investment discourse perpetuate racial inequality in ECEC. I engage three concepts from CRT to examine the racist assumptions embedded in Minnesota ECEC policy actors' use of investment discourse. These include: "interest convergence" (Bell, 1980. p.523), "whiteness as property" (Harris, 1993, p.1714), and a critique of liberal notions of meritocracy and equal opportunity (Berman, 2020; Del Real Viramontes, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). I will describe each of these concepts here and how they are applied to analyze Minnesota ECEC policy actors' rationalization of ECEC reform in this chapter.

First, Harris's (1993) concept of "whiteness as property" (p.1714), describes how "the law has accorded 'holders' of whiteness the same privileges and benefits accorded holders of other types of property" (p. 281). Drawing on previous work which has described how "whiteness as property" (Harris, 1993, p.1714) functions to perpetuate racial disparities and inequality in education (Berman, 2020; Aggarwal; 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1998), I argue children's academic performance in the early years serves as a form of property for white children.

Second, I engage CRT's resistance of core tenets of liberal ideology, including notions that meritocracy, colorblindness, neutrality, and equal opportunity operate within education institutions (Berman, 2020; Del Real Viramontes, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). I demonstrate how Minnesota ECEC policy actors forge a metaphor of ECEC as a 'strong start' for children, which perpetuates the false notions of meritocracy and equal opportunity (Berman, 2020) undergirding Minnesota's education system.

Finally, I apply formative CRT scholar, Derrick Bell Jr.'s (1980) concept of "interest convergence" (p.523), which argues that: "The interest of blacks in achieving

racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites" (p. 523). I apply "interest convergence" (Bell, 1980, p. 523) to my analysis of how policy actors' privilege an economic rationale for ECEC's social value, above a moral or justice-oriented rationale.

Scaffolding the Policy Problem: High Stakes Childhood

Minnesotan ECEC policy actors preface their legitimation of ECEC as an investment by framing the early years as a high-stakes and decisive period of life. In doing so, they draw on two forms of legitimation: authorization and rationalization. I will now provide examples of how policy actors engage expert authority, which is a form of authorization that grants legitimacy to claims through reference to expertise (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Here, the answer to the question: why care about the early years becomes, because 'the experts say so'. The Early Care and Education Crisis Work Group (2018) provide an example of engaging expert authority, as they state: "A great deal of research tells us what we need to do to alleviate these two crises" (p.10), referring to Minnesota's alleged 'achievement gap' and lack of enough quality ECEC programs to serve all families in the state. Then, as their first bullet point in a list of necessary actions, they recommend: "Intervening early in life to close gaps before they get more difficult to close, especially given that 80% of brain development happens before children reach age three" (Early Care and Education Crisis Work Group, 2018, p.10). Similarly, in referring to a strategy to address achievement gaps, Close Gaps by 5 (2017) write:

> To combat this problem, we have to start early in life. Research shows that about eighty percent of brain development happens by age three, and gaps open as early as age one. Given that research, if we hope to close achievement gaps, we can't wait until kindergarten or even preschool before we begin investing in early learning help for our most vulnerable children. (p.6)

Dayton (2016) takes the argument regarding the high stakes of the early years even further. In his 2016 state of the state address, he contends: "We have finally learned what many child development experts have been telling us for decades: the very first years of a child's life are deeply formative and determinative" (Dayton, 2016, p.11). In this passage, Dayton (2016) instrumentalizes expertise in the service of his political agenda. However, by omitting details regarding the identity of these experts, Dayton (2016) also reduces the possibility of further exploring and contesting these claims. In doing so, he is foreclosing opportunities for democratic engagement and deliberation regarding his policy agenda.

While the above claims draw on authorization through reference to 'research' and 'experts', another strategy to legitimate the early years includes theoretical rationalization (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Van Leeuwen (2007) defines theoretical rationalization as "provid(ing) explicit representations of 'the way things are'" (p.103). In the context of ECEC reform, Minnesota policy actors represent the early years as crucial to shaping a child's future success and in turn, their likelihood to either contribute to or burden society as adults. However unlike the previous examples, where ECEC policy actors reference expertise or research, in the following examples the policy actors make statements regarding 'the way the brain is and grows'. This is exemplified in the following statement from the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF) (2011): "Up to 90% of brain development happens by age five, making those early years a crucial time for children to be in stimulating learning environments" (p. 2). Rolnick and Grunewald (2003) make a similar claim in their seminal Federal Reserve Bank paper, articulating an investment rationale for ECEC reform in Minnesota. They state:

> The quality of life for a child and the contributions the child makes to society as an adult can be traced back to the first few years of life. From birth until about 5 years old a child undergoes tremendous growth and change. If this period of life includes support for growth in cognition, language, motor skills, adaptive skills and social-emotional functioning, the child is more likely to succeed in school and later contribute to society.
>
> However, without support during these early years, a child is more likely to drop out of school, receive welfare benefits and commit crime. (Rolnick Grunewald, 2003, p. 7).

Like MELF (2011), Rolnick and Grunewald (2003) make conclusive statements regarding the high stakes of early childhood and its impact on children's future life chances.

These Minnesotan policy actors' legitimation of public expenditure on ECEC as a high-stakes site of public investment is rooted in telling a partial story of the brain. In the examples provided, Minnesota ECEC policy actors speak conclusively regarding early childhood brain development and its implications for an individual's future. However, the impact of the early years on future brain development is more nuanced and open for debate. Understanding the brain's capacity for growth, as well as which circuits of the brain are amenable to change beyond early childhood, reflect "open questions in neuroscience" (Siegel, 2020, p. 190). On the one hand, important brain development happens in children's first years, at which time the structure of the brain is being formed (Siegel, 2020). Early experiences can also have lasting effects on the brain's structure, especially when brain damage has occurred and in instances of significant neglect or trauma (Siegel, 2017, 2020). However, the belief that changes to the brain's structure are largely reserved to early childhood is outdated and misleading (Siegel, 2017). Recent research in the field of neuroscience reflects how the brain is 'plastic', as it continues to grow and change after childhood and throughout the life course (Siegel, 2017; 2020;

Siegel & Bryson, 2011). Through connection with others, personal exploration, and new learning opportunities, people's brains can grow and change as they age, including for those who have faced challenging early life experiences (Siegel & Bryson, 2011; Siegel, 2020). These insights regarding the brain's plasticity undercut Minnesota policy actors' claims by suggesting that while the early years constitute an important period in developing the brain's structure, changes to the brain remain possible throughout life (Siegel, 2017, 2020).

In making this argument, I do not seek to imply that research from the field of neuroscience can or should be leveraged to claim that the early years are unimportant and publicly funded access to ECEC is not essential. Far from suggesting that the early years do not matter, this research (Siegel & Bryson, 2011; Siegel, 2020) demonstrates how access to education and care support is *not only* important in the early years, but vital throughout the life course. Children grow into adults who continue to have education and care needs. Rather than suggest that these adults are a 'lost cause' for the state if their early years were less than 'ideal', recent neuroscience research (Siegel, 2020) tells a much more optimistic story regarding the brain than the one offered by Minnesota policy actors. Ultimately, this research suggests that more funding for access to education and care programming throughout the life course is what is needed, not less.

By alluding to and drawing on neurobiology and developmental research, policy actors can conceal underlying beliefs regarding the state's role in redistributing resources, advancing equality, and responding to individual's basic needs. Here, targeted ECEC becomes a technical and rational solution to a social problem, as opposed to an ideological claim regarding the state's responsibility for meeting children's and

caregivers' basic needs (Moss, 2014). Embedded in policy actors' focus on the early years as a high stakes period is an ideological assumption regarding who is and who is not a 'good investment'. In making this argument, I do not seek to imply that delegating resources to children should not be a priority. A premise of this dissertation research is that children are deserving of public resources and that their education and care should be regarded as a public good (Folbre, 2001; Moss, 2014). Rather, I argue that rationalizing children's access to ECEC on the basis of their vulnerability and the high stakes of the early years holds ideological implications for the kinds of claims to public resources that adults are entitled to make (Morabito et al., 2013).

In the passages outlined above, policy actors[4] allude to neurobiology and developmental research to justify young children's education as a worthwhile investment. Within investment discourse, children and the programs that support them, such as ECEC, are perceived to render the highest return (Bundy, 2012). The extensive policy support for expenditure on ECEC as a means to address inequality and reduce poverty has been sustained due to this child-centered strategy (Morabito et al., 2013). A consequence of this child-centered rationale is that certain social programs, and in turn citizens, may be deemed less beneficial recipients of public expenditure (Cantillon & Van Lancker, 2013). This approach to understanding social policy can be problematic in relation to supporting social justice, as it posits "very little interest in anyone considered a bad investment or unimportant in market terms" (Bundy, 2012, p. 595).

[4] Here, I am referring to Governor Dayton, the Early Care and Education Crisis Work Group, Close Gaps by 5, the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF), and economists Rolnick and Grunewald (2003).

Framing the problem: Deficient childhood

In the previous section I argued that Minnesota policy actors position childhood as a high-stakes period. Building on this claim, policy actors then frame the policy problem itself, by portraying children in Minnesota through a deficit lens. In other words, in the last section, I showed how policy actors articulate the importance of early childhood and in this section, I show how they portray children in Minnesota as deficient and in need of the state's intervention.

In this analysis of how Minnesota ECEC policy actors articulate a deficit assumption of children to rationalize their education as an investment, I draw on Harris's (1993) concept of "whiteness as property" (p. 1714) and its adoption by critical education scholars (Aggarwal, 2016; Berman, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Specifically, Aggarwal (2016) argues the "architecture of whiteness as property allows for the continued production of race-based inequality to (be) naturalized, articulated, and managed through what has come to be termed the achievement gap" (p.140). Aggarwal (2016) further argues:

> Th(is) ideological architecture of whiteness as property, grounded in the concept of an embodied race-based deficit… narrat(es) inequality as normative and inevitable yet simultaneously re-present(s) and reproduc(es) populations in need of reform. This architecture illuminates how accumulation by dispossession is always and already built into the liberal capitalist state. (p. 145)

I extend and apply Aggarwal's (2016) research to argue that 'school readiness' and 'at risk' status are also rooted in "whiteness as property" (Harris, 1993, p. 1714). White children and specifically, white middle-class children, have disproportionate access to the knowledge and skills that are used to determine achievement, readiness, and risk in ECEC (Dudley-Marling, 2019; Pérez, 2019; Nxumalo & Adair, 2019; Tager, 2017).

I now turn to explore two of these concepts, ‘school readiness’ and ‘at risk’, and their articulation by Minnesota policy actors in their rationalization of ECEC reform. I explore how these subjectivities are articulated by Minnesota ECEC policy actors and draw on literature highlighting how this language is rooted in racist and classist assumptions regarding education inequality (Nxumalo & Adair, 2019; Tager, 2017). I argue that while Minnesota policy actors employ these concepts to advocate for access to ECEC as a mechanism to remediate unequal education outcomes, their use actually risks perpetuating education inequality (Nxumalo & Adair, 2019; Tager, 2017).

Lacking School Readiness

The first concept that Minnesota ECEC policy actors engage that is rooted in a deficit framework is school readiness. School readiness reflects the "reading and literacy skills, math skills and the socio- emotional behavior of a child entering kindergarten or first grade” (Tager, 2017, p.4). The concept was first used by the founders of Head Start in the 1960s to rationalize the need for a program “designed to give low-income non-White families a ‘head start’ on formal schooling” (Tager, 2017, p. 4). Tager (2017) argues “School readiness represents the logic of domination related to White middle class values” (p.18) and the interests of “capitalistic America” (p.26). Similarly, Nxumalo and Adair (2019) describe how school readiness is “premised on a white, middle-class understanding of what it means to be ready for school” (p. 664).

Collocation functions as a prominent rhetorical strategy that underlies Minnesota policy actors’ representation of children as ‘not ready for school’ and thus, through a deficit lens. Fairclough (2003) defines collocations as “regular or habitual patterns of co-occurrence between words” (p. 213). Collocation is identified in texts by “simply looking

at which other words most frequently precede and follow any word which is in focus, either immediately or two, three and so on words away" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 131). Through the process of examining how ECEC was justified in Minnesota policy texts, I identified how words and short phrases synonymous with "deficiency" were used to label young children as they enter school. I found that policy actors engaged deficit-oriented language to describe children in ECEC. These words and short phrases included: unprepared, unprepared to succeed, unprepared for kindergarten, disadvantaged, not yet ready, not ready for kindergarten, less ready to learn, and unready for school.

Governor Dayton provides an example of this deficit lens in his 2016 state of the state address. He argues: "more children from more Minnesota families start school without the education and socialization experiences most other children enjoy. They enter kindergarten or early elementary grades already behind, and they struggle to catch up" (p.11). On a similar note, MELF (2011) states, "Half of Minnesota kids arrive for kindergarten unprepared. Too many never catch up, and eventually drop out of school" (p.1). Close Gaps by 5 (2017) also claims,

> Too many Minnesota children are currently unprepared for kindergarten, and too often those who start behind don't catch up in later grades. When those children don't catch up, they're more likely to need expensive taxpayer-funded services throughout their lives, such as special education, social services, law enforcement, health care and unemployment supports (p. 6).

In these examples, children are positioned as behind, unprepared, and struggling.

The Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory Council's (MSRBAC) (2004) policy task force report engages mythopoesis, or legitimation through constructing stories (Van Leeuwen, 2007) to reinforce a deficit narrative of children. This report is often referred to as the "Pumpkin Report" (Appendix 2), due to its cover, depicting two

outlines of pumpkins that have been colored by students. MSRBAC (2004) argues this cover: “poses a question in pictures: which pumpkin was colored by a child who was socially and intellectually ready to succeed in school?” (p.ii) They go on to claim: “There is a preparation gap in getting kids ready for kindergarten that is important to close ~ Minnesota needs to move quickly onto a path that cost-effectively prepares all kids to succeed in school, work and life” (MSRBAC, 2004, p.ii). MSRBAC (2004) tells a story of childhood through these pumpkins, with one pumpkin depicting an ‘ideal child’ and one depicting a ‘child at a deficit’. The child who drew the pumpkin MSRBAC deems inadequate represents a “cautionary tale” (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 106), as a “protagonis(t) engag(ing) in deviant activities that lead to unhappy endings” (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 106) .

MSRBAC (2004) interpret the pumpkin drawings as demonstrating a powerful message regarding the child artists, including their capabilities and future potential. However, I argue MSRBAC’s (2004) analysis of the drawings offers valuable insight into the kind of education institution children are perceived to be entering and the kind of relationship with the state they should expect. MSRBAC’s (2004) assumption that a coloring activity is indicative of whether a child is “socially and intellectually ready to succeed in school” (p. ii) signals the surveillance and regulation that children may experience when ECEC is imagined as a mechanism to generate future social and economic returns. Instead of envisioning a public education system that is responsive to the multiplicity of ways in which children arrive at school (Valencia, 2015), MSRBAC’s (2004) focus is on identifying and fixing children so they are ready to meet schools’ demands and expectations. These expectations seem particularly narrow, as MSRBAC

(2004) imply it is possible for children to adopt the 'wrong' approach to engaging in creative pursuits, like coloring outlines of pumpkins, while failing to question whether this is a valuable activity in the first place.

Through their focus on children's alleged lack of school readiness, MSRBAC (2004) shifts attention away from the more social justice-oriented question: how can schools be ready to meet children's needs and support their learning (Dudley-Marling, 2019; Swadener, 1995; Valencia, 2015). The implication from Minnesota ECEC policy actors is that readiness for school is a technical determination, rooted in objective criteria. However, as critical ECEC scholars point out (Brown, 2021; Moss, 2014; Nxumalo, 2019; Nxumalo & Adair, 2019) the purposes of schooling and the knowledge and skills children need to be 'ready' for it are not fixed but rather highly situated and subject to shifting political will and dominant interests. Nxumalo and Adair (2019) and Tager (2017) articulate how notions of school readiness reflect white, middle class ideals of readiness that position children who are economically under-served and BIPOC children to be disproportionately deemed 'unready'. Drawing on Brown and Lan's (2015) research, Nxumalo and Adair (2019) further argue that the "narrow construction of readiness contributes to the marginalization of children and families with cultural, social, and academic experiences that fall outside of these normative understandings" (p.664). Furthermore, this view of readiness also translates into education practices that adopt "an interventionist approach toward children and families that are deemed 'at risk'" (Nxumalo & Adair, 2019, p.664), which ultimately reinforces education inequality. Tager's (2017) research further articulates the racist effects of school readiness, highlighting how this label is disproportionately applied to Black children who

experience economic injustice and has deleterious consequences for their future education opportunities.

Being 'at risk'

Another way that Minnesota policy actors frame children at a deficit is by labeling them 'at risk'. In this section, I demonstrate how Minnesota ECEC policy actors apply the 'at risk' label to children in two ways. First, policy actors refer to children as being 'at risk' of a negative outcome due to their inadequate academic preparedness or performance. For example, the Senate Bill establishing the creation of the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF), describes MELF as a "public-private partnership which will identify cost-effective ways to deliver quality early care and education experiences and parent education for families whose children are at risk of being unprepared for school" (Hottinger, 2005, p.1). Similarly, MSRBAC (2004) claims their Policy Task Force Report on ECEC "shows that kids from families with low incomes or limited educational backgrounds are 2-3 times more at risk of failure" (p.ii). MSRBAC's (2004) statement implies that families' education and income status place children at risk. This obfuscates the state's complicity in producing risk by failing to address the economic and racial injustices that forge unequal education outcomes.

Minnesota policy actors' second application of the 'at risk' label is to assign it as a defining feature of a child's identity. Instead of children being 'at risk' of something negative occurring, as was the case above, their identity is reduced to being 'at risk'. For instance, Close Gaps by 5 (2017), advocates for "Helping Minnesota's most at-risk kids" (p.18) gain access to high quality ECEC programming. They go on to define this 'at-risk' status as referring to "Minnesota children under age 5 whose family income is 185% of

poverty level and below" (Close Gaps by 5, 2017, p.18). MSRBAC (2004) also uses the 'at risk' label this way, as they refer to "at risk children" (p. iii), "'at risk' kids" (p.11), and "'at risk' pre-schoolers" (p. 16).

To highlight the implications of Minnesota policymakers' portrayal of children as being 'at-risk', it is useful to briefly explore the history of this label. The roots of the 'at risk' marker have been traced to the field of epidemiology (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). The portrayal of children as 'at risk' also has ties to the 1960s cultural deprivation theory, or cultural deficit framework, which places individuals and communities, disproportionately ones who experience racialization, at fault for children's alleged under-performance in school (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). The 'at risk' label was widely disseminated in education policy discussions after "A Nation at Risk" was published in 1983 (O'Connor et al., 2009). This publication contends that the US's competitiveness in the global economy is jeopardized due to declining academic achievement among American students (O'Connor et al., 2009). This text "provided a logic for assigning at-risk status to members of demographic groups whose educational outcomes were routinely judged inadequate" (O'Connor et al., 2009, p. 1). Thus, Minnesota ECEC policy actors' use of the 'at risk' label is part of a much larger public policy discourse and strategy in the United States, which recasts structural problems, like racial and economic inequality, as individual failures.

'At risk' is not a neutral, technical term but one that is riddled with ideological assumptions regarding education inequality. Positioning children and their families as 'at risk' is "implicitly racist, classist, sexist, and ableist" (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995, p. 3). This discursive frame is rooted in blaming families for children's education outcomes. As

Pokalow (1995) and Folbre (1994) highlight, this approach shifts attention away from those who benefit from the grossly unequal distribution of wealth in the United States and whose interests would be jeopardized if a more just system were created. Polakow (1995) powerfully articulates how the 'at risk' label "form(s) part of an all encompassing web of privilege and power *at risk* of unraveling if the politics of distribution and the poverty discourse were to be reframed" (p. 264). Folbre (1994) similarly highlights how the distribution of 'risk' in our society is a political choice, stating:

> we could do a much better job taking care of children and other dependents. There are probably great potential gains to us all from doing so. But members of some groups within society would suffer losses, particularly in the short run, and the greatest potential beneficiaries are those with the least power- children and women. (p.2)

Achievement Gap: The Making of a Crisis

Minnesota's widely referenced 'worst in the nation' achievement gap constitutes another example of policy actors applying a deficit lens to justify ECEC reform. Here, the academic achievement of BIPOC students and students whose families are economically under-served are measured and portrayed as behind that of their peers who are white and have economic stability. The following table provides examples of how policymakers articulate these so-called 'gaps' between children's academic performance:

Table 2

Policy actors' use of 'gap'

Achievement gap	Close Gaps by 5 (2017, 2021), Dayton (2014, 2016), Early Care and Education Crisis work group (2018), Think Small (2018), Walz (2019c)
Readiness gap	Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory Council's (2004)
Learning gap	Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory

	Council's (2004)
Preparation gap	Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory Council's (2004)
Opportunity gap	Close Gaps by 5 (2017, 2021), Dayton, Early Care and Education Crisis work group (2018), Think Small (2018), Walz
Graduation gap	Close Gaps by 5 (2021)

Policy actors' focus on identifying and remediating alleged gaps between students exemplifies the state's concern regarding children not 'becoming' in the ideal or desired way. This deficit frame is disproportionately applied to children who experience racialization and poverty (Brown, 2019). Policy actors' focus on addressing gaps in achievement, readiness, learning, or preparation between students are rooted in and reinforce racist assumptions regarding the root causes of racial disparities in education (Nxumalo, 2019; Nxumalo & Adair, 2019; Tager, 2017). As Ladson-Billings (2006) argues, the 'achievement gap' is a fabrication that obscures the real social problem: the rampant "education debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5) that perpetuates racial disparities. Here, Ladson-Billings (2006) refers to how Black students are systematically under-served and discriminated against within American institutions, including the public schools.

Some Minnesotan policy actors, such as Close Gaps by 5 and Governor Walz, refrain from directly reducing unequal educational outcomes to individual failure by highlighting the 'opportunity gap'. This approach recognizes that Black students are disproportionately under-served in comparison with their white peers and is identified by Kendi (2019) as a more antiracist approach to representing education inequality than the 'achievement gap'. I argue that while the use of 'opportunity gap' may potentially reflect

a shift toward a more social-justice oriented rendering of the problem of educational inequality, it has two limitations. First, opportunity gap is a form of nominalization, obfuscating who the actors are in the statement. The state should be explicitly named as actor in this statement: as in, the state fails to provide children with adequate opportunities for educational success. However, policy actors' failure to implicate the state as the root of this problem leaves discursive space for families to continue to be scapegoated for children's alleged lack of preparation or opportunities. Through this nominalization, policy actors also fail to name the state as responsible for creating and addressing this problem of education injustice.

Second, policy actors' discursive shift from framing 'the problem' as achievement gaps to opportunity gaps is limited if they focus on *access* to opportunities, such as ECEC, without addressing the bias and injustice embedded within these so called 'opportunities'. This approach overlooks the role that public education, including ECEC, plays in perpetuating, not remediating educational inequality. Instead of offering rich, inclusive opportunities for all students, public schools can be sites where belonging is tenuous for students whose identities are not read as conforming to "White American normativity" (Shirazi, 2017, p. 6). This marginalization and the ensuing harm begin with children's earliest experiences at school (Gilliam et al., 2016). Nxumalo and Adair (2019) detail research that highlights how BIPOC children and families face discrimination and a lack of adequate support, opportunities, and representation in ECEC settings. For these reasons, access to ECEC alone is insufficient in addressing education inequality. Instead, it also the kinds of opportunities that children and families have access to that must be

transformed in order to cultivate greater justice in ECEC (Adair & Colegrove, 2021; Nxumalo & Adair, 2019).

Making families and communities part of the problem

As ECEC is considered an investment, policy actors not only frame children through a deficit lens but also their families and communities. Rolnick and Grunewald (2003) provide two examples of this in their Minneapolis Federal Reserve paper. First, they state:

> Current ECDPs include home visits as well as center-based programs to supplement and enhance the ability of parents to provide a solid foundation for their children. Some have been initiated on a large scale, such as federally funded Head Start, while other small-scale model programs have been implemented locally, sometimes with relatively high levels of funding per participant. (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003, p. 7)

In this passage, Rolnick and Grunewald's (2003) use of the terms 'supplement' and 'enhance' position parents at a deficit. Parents' alleged deficits are then addressed by the intervention of the state vis a vis Early Childhood Development Programs (ECDPs). Here, ECEC is not a public good or a basic entitlement for children and families. Instead, it is framed as a necessary solution to parents' assumed limitations. In this way, ECEC programs are not recognized as a basic entitlement for parents or a means to advance gender equality but instead, become a means for the state to surveil and regulate parents (Bundy, 2012).

In another passage from Rolnick and Grunewald's (2003) paper, they apply the deficit framework to children's social environments and family structures. The authors caution that ECEC programs today may not deliver the same return on investment that they did in the past, since: "Problems facing children 30 years ago were different from the problems facing children today. Single parenthood, parental drug use, neighborhood

crime are higher in many areas of the country than they were 30 years ago" (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003, p. 9). In this passage, Rolnick and Grunewald (2003) refer to children's communities and family structures as 'problems'. Instead of portraying children's caregivers, homes, and communities as important sources of learning, strength, healing, and resistance (hooks, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b; Moll, 2019; Moll et al., 2005), they are pathologized.

Both Close Gaps by 5 (2021) and MSRBAC (2004) claim the risks posed by students' alleged lack of school readiness is intensifying as a result of 'demographic change' in Minnesota. Close Gaps by 5 (2021) states, "The groups that are most likely to fall into achievement gaps are some of the fastest growing segments of the population" (p.1). In a similar vein, MSRBAC (2004) state, "the proportion of kids experiencing this preparation gap is likely to increase with Minnesota's changing demographics" (p.ii). In the latter example, it is unclear what or who MSRBAC (2004) is referring to by "changing demographics" (p.ii). However, Close Gaps by 5 (2021) does provide insight regarding who they are referring to and ultimately scapegoating when they reference demographic change and the risk of worsening achievements gaps. In describing the alleged 'achievement gaps' in Minnesota, Close Gaps by 5 (2021) states:

> When it comes to 8th grade math, Minnesota has the largest gap in the nation between white and black students, as well as between white and Hispanic students. Minnesota has the 2nd worst gaps in the nation in 4th grade reading and math between black and white students, and the 5th worst gaps in the nation in 8th grade reading between low-income and non-low income students.
>
> Comparing high school graduation rates of white and black students, Minnesota is the 3rd worst state. The same is true of the graduation gaps between low-income and non-low-income children. Between white and Hispanic students, Minnesota is the worst state in the nation. For Native Americans in Minnesota, the graduation rate is lower than for both black and Hispanic students. (p.1)

These passages construct BIPOC students as 'problems' that needs to be fixed through education. Du Bois (1903) writes, "To the real question. How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word" (p.2) and adds that "being a problem is a strange experience..." (p. 2). Here, Du Bois (1903) highlights how the American social order is rooted in whiteness and the myth of white supremacy, as it is "the normalizing structures of whiteness that make such a question possible" (Owen, 2007, p. 109). Yosso (2005) describes how this deficit approach, which frames children and families as 'problems', serves as "one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in US schools" (p.75). It assumes that children and families "are at fault for poor academic performance because: (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) parents neither value nor support their child's education" (Yosso, 2005, p. 75). Policy actors' fixation on identifying children's alleged deficits and gaps distracts from their own complicity in building institutions that measure and position four year olds as 'lacking'.

Articulating the stakes of the problem: Risky childhood and 'moral panic'

In the previous section I explored how children 'at risk' of 'poor' performance in the early years are framed as a concerning policy problem. In this section, I examine how Minnesota ECEC policy actors establish the stakes of this problem by highlighting the ensuing collective risks that children's 'poor' performance in the early years may mean for the state. This construction of childhood holds that children, particularly children who are racialized and economically under-served, pose a potential risk if they do not receive the correct interventions from the state to regulate their development. Here, children shift from being 'at risk,' to posing 'a risk' to the future public good and safety.

Minnesotan ECEC lobbying organization Close Gaps by 5 provides an elaboration on how investment discourse frames the individual and social costs of early "achievement gaps", caused by "opportunity gaps". Close Gaps by 5 (2021) refers to these alleged gaps as a "crisis" facing Minnesota. To support this claim, Close Gaps by 5 (2021) offers the following argument:

> The groups that are most likely to fall into achievement gaps are some of the fastest growing segments of the population. Therefore, if our leaders don't act to close the gaps now, all Minnesotans will suffer the consequences for decades to come.
>
> - Our Economy Will Suffer. Children who fall behind in the early years too often don't graduate from high school. This leaves them unqualified for many of the jobs of the future. If Minnesota doesn't have the educated workforce it needs to compete globally, our economy, and all who depend on it, will suffer.
> - Our Communities and Taxpayers Will Suffer. Economists tell us that children who fall into achievement gaps are more likely to generate lifelong government costs related to remedial education, unemployment, social services, health care, law enforcement and prisons. If Minnesota doesn't have self-sufficient, law-abiding citizens, it will tear at the fabric of Minnesota communities and put a heavy burden on taxpayers.
> - Our Children Will Suffer. Most importantly, Minnesota children who fall behind and aren't able to catch up are robbed of an equal opportunity to pursue the American Dream. Because they lack educational qualifications needed for good jobs, they can't take advantage of all of the opportunities America has to offer. (p.1)

In the above passage, Close Gaps by 5 (2021) not only frames children's alleged deficits as a risk to their individual future, they are also portrayed as a threat to the state's future social and economic prosperity. While Close Gaps by 5 (2021) does not explicitly state what the American dream is, they imply that it is rooted in securing "good jobs" (p.1) in order to "take advantage of all the opportunities America has to offer" (p.1). This reflects an entrepreneurial understanding of citizenship, whereby the benefits of full citizenship are conditioned on participation in paid labor (DeJaeghere, 2017).

What these policy actors fail to acknowledge is that this 'American Dream' is rooted in what CRT identifies as untenable notions of meritocracy and equal opportunity (Berman, 2020; Del Real Viramontes, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Berlant (2011) argues "meritocracy" (p. 3) is part of a "set of dissolving assurances" (p.3) within "liberal-capitalist society" (p.3). hooks (2000) further shares how the notion of "The rugged individual who relies on no one else is a figure who can only exist in a culture of domination where privileged few use more of the world's resources than the many who must daily do without" (p. 214).

Being 'at risk' and becoming 'a risk' are overlapping subjectivities, which constitute a mode of governance rooted in racialized "moral panic" (Hall et al., 1978, p.16). Here, I draw on the following definition of moral panic, offered by Cohen's (1972):

> Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests… socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; … Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic is passed over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and longlasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself. (p. 28)

I argue that in framing BIPOC children's alleged academic 'under achievement' and lack of school readiness as a potential source of future social and economic unrest, Minnesota ECEC policy actors are cultivating/engaging in a racialized "moral panic" (Hall et al., 1978, p.16).

In their *Early Education Reform Blueprint*, MELF (2011) makes a similar claim regarding the social and economic risks associated with 'poor performance' in ECEC, stating:

> Minnesota is not doing well on the early learning front. Research consistently shows that only half of Minnesota children are arriving in kindergarten prepared to succeed. Too many who start behind never catch up, and eventually drop out of school. That's a tragedy for those kids. Every child should start kindergarten prepared, so they have an opportunity to pursue the American dream. And beyond the human tragedy, it's also a fiscal and economic tragedy. When kids fall behind and ultimately drop out of school, it leaves Minnesota without the educated workforce it needs to compete in the global marketplace. It also costs taxpayers billions in expenses related to unemployment, social services, supplemental education, health care, law enforcement and prisons. (p.2)

Like Close Gaps by 5 (2021), MELF's (2011) also references the burden that children's academic failure poses to 'taxpayers'.

In Minnesota four year olds who are measured as already 'behind' in the race to a pre-determined, economically productive future are then cast by ECEC policy actors as potential threats to the state's future. While a dominant understanding of children portrays them as innocent and in need of adult protection, the above passages elucidate how this presumption of innocence is not equally afforded to all children (Lee, 2001). Instead, childhood "for many children, is not the safe, innocent and protected childhood, which adults fondly mythologize" (James, 1996, p. 315). As Lee (2001) argues, children whose "activities, movements and associations contradict the standard image of a becoming" (p. 68)" are often regarded as "ambiguous" (p.68) and seen as "threatening the legitimate social order" (p.68). Lee (2001) further argues, "in the age of uncertainty, the weight of adult problems of maintaining social order has come to rest on poor children" (p.69) who are "blamed for social problems and… treated as a well-spring for social disorder" (p. 69). Applied to the context of ECEC in Minnesota, this blame

manifests as policy actors scapegoating racialized and economically under-served children, who already experience marginalization, for the state's future, imagined social and economic problems.

Making Children the Answer to 'their problems': Responsibilized Childhood

Another implication of policymakers' pervasive use of investment discourse to justify public expenditure on ECEC as a means to develop productive future citizens is its responsibilization (Rose, 1999) of children. This assumption positions children as responsible for securing their future well-being through their labor and performance in pre-K. Drawing on Foucault's techniques of governance, Rose (1999) developed the concept 'responsibilization' to describe how the state increasingly expects political subjects to be personally responsible for securing their own needs and welfare and to reduce their reliance on the state for social security or support. In this dissertation research, I engage this concept to highlight how the burden of responsibilization is not equally applied to all children but instead, disproportionately leveraged against children who are already subjected to marginalization as a result of racialization and economic injustice.

A dominant ideological principle underlying investment discourse is the value of personal responsibility. In this way, ECEC is legitimated through moral evaluation, which is "legitimation by…reference to value systems" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92). Through the CDA conducted for this dissertation research, I found that Minnesota ECEC policy actors employ metaphor as a rhetorical strategy to subtly advance the value of children, specifically, children who are labeled 'at risk', becoming adults who are personally responsible for their future. Again, it is important to note that the 'at risk' label

is rooted in racist assumptions (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). Fairclough (2003) states that discourses can be "differentiated by metaphor, both in its usual sense of 'lexical metaphor', words which generally represent one part of the world being extended to another" (p. 131) and "'grammatical metaphor'" (p. 131). Minnesotan ECEC policymakers employ both types of metaphor to privilege investment discourse in legitimizing ECEC reform.

First, they adopt the grammatical metaphor, nominalization, to reinforce investment discourse and its assumption of personal responsibility. Fairclough (2003) defines nominalization as a "grammatical metaphor which represents processes as entities by transforming clauses (including verbs) into a type of noun" (p.220) or "a noun-like entity" (p. 13). Nominalization is a tool for "generalizing and abstracting" (Fairclough, 2003, p.220) that "exclude(s) social agents in the representation of events" (Fairclough, 2003, p.220) and "backgrounds questions of agency and causality, of who or what causes change" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 26). The following table provides examples of how policymakers in Minnesota's ECEC reform adopt nominalization by using the term 'start' as a noun instead of as a verb as they rationalize ECEC initiatives:

Table 3

Policy actors' use of 'start'

Governor Tim Pawlenty, 2006 state of the state address	Pawlenty requests that the legislature pass his recently proposed ECEC initiatives "to help make sure our youngest get a better start in the education race" (p.6).
Governor Mark Dayton, 2017, state of the state address	Dayton claims that state funding for pre-K means "more Minnesota children are getting the better starts they need today for their better tomorrows" (p.7).

Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory Council (2004), Policy Task Force Report, *Winning Start: A Plan for Investing Wisely*	"This growth in child numbers will be important in filling job vacancies created by baby boomer retirements, provided they are educationally equipped to meet the more knowledge-intensive job criteria needed to sustain Minnesota's quality of life. Providing a good start for kids age zero to five is only going to become more important going forward" (p. 4).
Bill proposed by Minnesota House DFL on February 13, 2020	The name of this bill is: Great Start for All Minnesota Children Act
Rolnick and Otis (2021), We need to fund the next Minnesota Miracle: Early childhood education, Op-ed in MINNPOST	"Given the right start, every child has huge potential to succeed in school and in life" (para.2).

Minnesotan policymakers are not the only ones who frame ECEC as offering children a positive 'start' in life. For example, many programs/organizations aimed at supporting children's education include this nominalization in their name. These include but are not limited to ECEC programs such as Head Start in the United States, Best Start in Ontario, and Starting Strong in the United Kingdom, as well as ECEC reports, such as the OECD's (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) "Starting Strong" report.

In nominalizing the term 'start' in relation to ECEC, the above statements make it unclear what subject is acting. The texts seem to imply that it is the state conducting the action in the statements, as the entities taking responsibility for children's futures and providing them with opportunities for success through ECEC. In this sense, the nominalization of 'start' functions as a grammatical metaphor for equality of opportunity. However, children, and specifically, children who are perceived to be 'at risk', are actually the ones performing the act of starting in the statement. It is important to name that implicit within this metaphor is the assumption that some children are behind and 'at

risk' of not having a strong start. Although the texts imply that it is the state acting to support and take responsibility for children's future success and well-being, albeit narrowly defined, the responsibility for children's future grammatically lays with the children themselves and their labor/performance in the present. Policymakers' nominalization of 'start' works to reinforce the assumption of personal responsibility, which underlies investment discourse. This value fails to recognize the systemic problems that lend to unequal outcomes, including racial and economic injustice.

Policy actors' use of the word 'start' to rationalize ECEC reform also connects to a lexical use of metaphor. The way that policy actors use the word 'start' in the above-examples frames ECEC as a race that children compete in for their futures. For instance, in the statement provided above, Governor Pawlenty (2006) plainly refers to "the education race" (p.6). The use of this metaphor is more subtly implied by MELF (2011). MELF (2011) rationalizes ECEC's value by claiming "half of Minnesota children start kindergarten behind, and too many never catch up" (p.15). By framing education as a "race", policy actors position children in competition against one another for their future opportunities.

Policy actors' claim that ECEC provides children and implicitly, 'at risk' children, with a 'better', 'winning', 'great', or 'right' start reflects the liberal values of equal opportunity and meritocracy. In addition, the 'race' metaphor conjures the neoliberal value of personal responsibility, as children (alongside their families) are expected to perform the act of starting. These values reflect "neo/liberal discourses– meaning they draw on both liberal and neoliberal ways of thinking and practices" (DeJaeghere, 2017, p.24).

I now apply CRT and critical ECEC scholarship to explore the implications that policy actors' use of the 'start' metaphor holds for racial justice in education. First, as previously outlined, underlying policy actors' emphasis on equal opportunity through their use of the 'start' metaphor is the assumption or rather, expectation, that children will ultimately be personally responsible for securing their own welfare (Bundy, 2012). This constitutes a neoliberal vision of equality, which is very different from an understanding of equality oriented towards addressing systemic barriers and seeking equal outcomes (Bundy, 2012). However, this approach fails to recognize or account for how children are unequally positioned in the education 'race' as a result of racial, economic, and gender injustices. An emphasis on equal opportunity may be appealing to policy actors as it relieves them of the burden of addressing pervasive systemic injustices, securing present well-being, or forging equal outcomes (Bundy, 2012; Gill-Peterson, 2015; Morabito et al., 2013; Moss, 2014). By committing to "offering a 'head start' or a 'sure start' to the poor and needy" (Moss, 2014, p. 68) policymakers can then blame "individual, familial or cultural failings" (Moss, 2014, p. 68) as the source of ongoing inequality. This approach conceals the reality that ECEC "does not and cannot possibly ensure a genuinely equal start in life, since so many other factors are at play, not least the capacity and will of advantaged families to keep well ahead of the game" (Moss, 2014, p. 68).

In addition, embedded within the 'strong start' metaphor is the assumption that children are participating in a meritocratic ECEC system. In other words, if the state provides Black children who are economically under-served with a 'strong start' vis a vis access to quality ECEC programs, then they will be more likely to be academically successful. However CRT highlights that this notion of meritocracy underlying core

social institutions, including ECEC, is false, as children's 'merits' are not equally recognized and rewarded within this system (Berman, 2020). Instead, as previous scholarship has argued, ECEC assessments of readiness and academic assessments of achievement are positioned to privilege the knowledge and experiences of white, middle-class students (Adair & Colegrove, 2021; Brown, 2019; Dudley-Marling, 2019; Kendi, 2019; Nxumalo & Adair, 2019; Pérez, 2019; Tager, 2017).

Children as the answer to everyone's problems: Instrumentalized childhood

Children as Saviors

Minnesota policy actors not only render children responsible for their own futures through their labor in pre-K, they also position them as responsible for securing Minnesota's collective future. To explore how children are positioned as saviors, it is useful to draw on the concept of 'futurity' (James & James, 2012). Futurity sheds light on how children come to symbolize and hold responsibility for the future (James & James, 2012). Here, "children are not only future adults (as workers, consumers, parents, citizens, voters etc.), they are also the future generation and thus they are a form of social capital that represents 'the future' itself" (Lee, 2001, p. 58).

Two examples of how policymakers render children responsible for the state's collective future come from Governors Dayton and Walz. In his 2018 state of the state address, Dayton states: "In addition to our moral responsibility to ensure that every child receives a world-class education, there is another important reason to make these additional investments. Because our future depends upon them" (p.7-8). Then, in 2019 Walz introduced an executive order "Placing Children at the Center of Government",

which re-established Minnesota's Children Cabinet. In describing this initiative, Walz (2019a) provides the following statement regarding children's social role:

> Children unite us. They are our future, and the overall wellbeing of our state depends on the success of our youngest Minnesotans. To ensure Minnesota is a top place to live, our state needs to focus on preparing the next generation of Minnesotans to work and lead in a rapidly changing world. (p. 1)

In these statements, Walz (2019a) and Dayton (2018) connect children's performance and labor in their early years to the future prosperity of the state. Instead of the future being open, ripe with possibility, and determined by children's emerging interests and needs, Dayton (2018) and Walz (2019a) frame the future as precarious and position children as responsible for safeguarding it. It has become normalized, even celebrated, to burden children with overcoming society's deepest inequities through their performance in pre-K. Grumet (1986) highlights the implications of framing children as "redeemer(s)" (p.91) who are tasked with nothing short of "absolv(ing) us from racism, poverty, drugs, and pollution" (p.90). Grumet (1986) argues: "The vision of the child leading and healing a troubled world has never left us. We meet it regularly in our assumption that by educating our children we are preparing 'tomorrow's leaders'" (p.88). Rather than making children responsible for the future or acting as though the future is a gift adults bestow on children, Minnesota policy actors could benefit from taking responsibility for addressing the real and present threats to children's futures, such as economic and racial injustices. Here, my intention is not to argue that children are inherently passive or in need of adults' protection. Instead, children become acutely vulnerable when adults in power make decisions that fail to consult them or consider their most basic present and future needs.

Children as the Youngest Capital

Alongside positioning children as the state's 'future', Minnesota policy actors also frame ECEC as a means to cultivate a skilled, future workforce and build a robust economy. Here, children and their education become instruments to serve future labor market demands and bolster Minnesota's economic competitiveness. This approach to legitimating ECEC reform constitutes a form of "instrumental rationality" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 101), which "legitimates practices by reference to their goals, uses and effects" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 101). Perhaps the most explicit example of this instrumental rationale is offered by MELF (2011). In justifying ECEC as an investment in Minnesota's economic productivity, MELF (2011) states:

> When kids fall behind and ultimately drop out of school, it leaves Minnesota without the educated workforce it needs to compete in the global marketplace. It also costs taxpayers billions in expenses related to unemployment, social services, supplemental education, health care, law enforcement and prisons. (p.2)

MELF (2011) further argues, "economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis estimate that every $1 of investment in helping low income kids access high quality early education yields about $16 in benefits to society" (p.3). They go on to state: "For this reason, (MELF) leaders sometimes refer to low-income children as 'high-return' children, because helping them succeed delivers an especially high return-on investment (ROI)" (MELF, 2011, p.3). This economic-centered narrative disregards children as full beings, with their own education priorities. Instead, it reduces children and their education to a means to serve corporate interests and economic productivity.

In an interview with the Georgetown Public Policy Review (2013), Rolnick describes how he became a seminal but reluctant figure in Minnesota's ECEC reform. In describing his role as the Director of Research for the Federal Reserve Bank of

Minneapolis, Rolnick describes his participation in a group that was committed to learning about the economy. Rolnick is quoted as saying:

> And it just so happened we invited a man who was the executive director of an organization called Ready for K. I'm listening to his talk, and he's promoting early childhood education. But there was no economics behind it; he was basically making a moral argument that we should help these kids out, especially our most vulnerable kids who are challenged in school right from the beginning. I told the executive director that they should somehow be making an economic case for what they are doing, and I thought they probably could. As I now tell people, that was my mistake because they agreed with me, they asked me to come on the board to do the research. I tried to explain that my expertise was pre-Civil War banking and I knew absolutely nothing about early childhood education. But the founders of this organization, former governor of the state Al Quie and a former mayor of Minneapolis Don Fraser started calling me up and recruited me, essentially. It was hard to say no to these guys. (Georgetown Public Policy Review, 2013, para. 19)

Similarly, Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank Economist, Grunewald, claims: "It's helpful to take an issue that typically would be considered a social issue or a moral issue and bring economic analysis to it" (Weiner, 2019, para 21). Both Rolnick and Grunewald privilege an economic-oriented rationale for ECEC above emphasizing its social or moral value. The effect of this practice is to undermine an understanding of ECEC as a basic entitlement and public good.

Framing ECEC as an economic concern is not unique to economists, as it has also been adopted by politicians. Politicians instrumentalize children and their education through their application of modality. Fairclough (2003) defines modality as the connection that sentences or clauses establish "between author and representations- what authors commit themselves to in terms of truth or necessity" (p. 219). Fairclough (2003) describes how modality is identified by the presence of "'modal verbs' ('can, will, may, must, would, should', etc.)" (p. 168), as well as "modal adverbs…, participial adjectives…(and) mental process clauses…" (p. 170) and through the use of "hedges" (p.

171). In each of the passages outlined below, politicians engage in 'hedging' in regards to framing the social value of ECEC. In doing so, they minimize their commitment to a child-centered or moral rationale for ECEC and reinforce its economic benefits. I now turn to highlight these examples.

In response to a questionnaire from MinneMinds during Minnesota's 2018 gubernatorial election, Walz (2018) states,

> Minnesota's history of investing in education is one of the most significant components of our historic economic success, and something that we are consistently identified as a leader. Closing these opportunity gaps isn't just a moral imperative; it's an economic necessity as our workforce demands are ever increasing. (p.1)

Here, the word 'just' hedges Walz's (2018) commitment to ECEC as a moral imperative.

In a similar vein, after being elected as Minnesota's Governor, Walz (2019c) wrote an op-ed describing how in the recent legislative session Minnesota kept "preschool doors open for 4,000 of Minnesota's littlest learners to keep them on track to reach their full potential" (para. 4). Here it seems the purpose of ECEC is for students' to reach their full potential. However, Walz's (2019c) commitment to this more individual-oriented rationale for ECEC's purpose and value is tempered by this statement: "Disparities in our educational system based on geography, race or economic status hold back not only our students, but our entire state from reaching its full potential" (para. 3). Dayton (2017) makes a similar case for public expenditure on ECEC. After describing the impact of voluntary pre-K on a Minnesota family, Dayton (2017) states: "In addition to our moral responsibility to ensure that every child receives a world-class education, there is another important reason to make these additional investments. Because our future depends upon them" (p.7-8).

This discursive frame for ECEC is also found outside of Minnesota. For example, in 2009 former Canadian Prime Minister, Paul Martin, and former New Brunswick lieutenant-governor, Margaret Norrie McCain, co-wrote an op-ed in the *Globe and Mail* newspaper, stating: "Early learning and child care are moral issues, but let there be no doubt that they are also among the most important economic initiatives a government can put forward" (McCain & Martin, 2009, para.9). The politicians' commitment to ECEC as a moral issue is minimized through their strong modal statement regarding ECEC's economic benefits.

In the above passages, policy actors hedge their commitment to ECEC as a social or moral obligation to support children's well-being and forge equal opportunity. To theorize the implications of this discursive move, I draw on a core tenet of CRT, "interest convergence" (Bell, 1980. p.523), which holds that justice and rights for Black people are supported when they converge with the interests of white people and particularly, white people who hold economic and political power. Bell (1980) describes how white people in power may support judicial or policy decisions that seem to advance racial equality but ultimately "secure, advance, or at least (do) not harm societal interests deemed important by middle and upper class whites" (p. 523). Dixson and Rousseau (2005) highlight how a second tenet of Bell's theory posits that "even when the interest-convergence results in an effective racial remedy, that remedy will be abrogated at the point that policy makers fear the remedial policy is threatening the superior societal status of whites" (p. 69).

I argue Minnesota ECEC policy actors' privileging of an economic rationale for ECEC reform reflects an appeal to "interest convergence" (Bell, 1980. p.523), whereby addressing the racial achievement gap and forging education opportunities for Black

children are portrayed as converging with powerful economic interests. As Ladson-Billings (2013) articulates, 'interest convergence' "is about alignment, not altruism" (p. 35). In the above passages, policy actors make explicit that while supporting children's access to ECEC could be regarded as altruistic or in their words, 'moral', they are careful to also note that it aligns with economic interests. In Minnesota, economic policies have disproportionately benefited white people, as Minnesota has one of the greatest wealth gaps in the United States (Myers & Ha, 2018). As Myers and Ha (2018) describe through their concept of the " Minnesota Paradox" (p.17), "Minnesota is one of the best performing states in the nation on many social and economic indicators but has one of the worst racial gaps in almost all major indicators of social and economic well-being" (p. 17). Minnesota policy actors engage modality to privilege an economic rationale and in doing so, offer assurances to the state's white, economic elite that their interests will not be threatened and can even be advanced through ECEC reform.

Policy actors' use of modality to privilege an economic rationale for ECEC reform also signifies how they envision the state's identity (Fairclough, 2003) and the state's responsibility in relation to children and families. Minnesota policy actors' centering of an economic rationale for ECEC suggests that corporate interests are privileged at the expense and invisibilization of forging racial justice for Minnesota children and families. This occurs as the above policy statements fail to acknowledge that the current system of racial capitalism (Nxumalo, 2019), relies on and reinforces inequality. Racial capitalism is a concept first developed by Dr. Cedric Robinson (1983) in his work, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Melamed (2015) engages 'racial capital' to argue, "capitalism is racial capitalism" (p.77). Melamed

(2015) further explains the function of racism within a capitalist system, stating: “Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups” (p.77) and “racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires” (p. 77). Nxumalo (2019) applies this discussion to the context of ECEC, articulating how racial capitalism is served by ECEC policy discourses that positions BIPOC children at a deficit and then subjects them to education practices which deny them equal access to the kinds of education opportunities that their white peers receive.

Grunewald, economist and co-author of the seminal Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank paper on ECEC as an investment, offers an example of the implications that reducing children to human capital holds for their political/social status. Grunewald states: “I sometimes jokingly say that you don’t even have to like children to achieve this high rate of return because it simply makes good business sense to make these early investments” (Weiner, 2019, para. 21). Grunewald’s statement invites critical questions to be raised regarding his positioning of children and their relationship with policymakers and the state. What does it mean if policymakers “don’t even have to like children” and yet are permitted to make decisions with significant implications for their everyday lives? This statement demonstrates a complete disregard for children’s basic dignity and humanity. Grunewald offers a dehumanizing view of children by reducing their education to an economic intervention and their status to unlikeable yet exploitable capital. His words are particularly noteworthy when one considers them in the broader context of Minnesotan ECEC policy discourse discussed in this chapter, where children are routinely framed through a deficit lens, and within a broader social context which

positions children as substandard citizens. Finally, Grunewald's claim to be joking is a rhetorical strategy which allows him to establish children's inferior political status, assert his hyper-capitalist argument regarding their social value, all the while providing him with an 'out' if this statement is ill-received. Children, like adults, are worthy of dignity, and consideration when represented by policy actors.

Invisibilized and silenced children

An assumption regarding childhood that Minnesota ECEC policy actors employ is that adults are best positioned to know, represent, and protect children's interests (Lee, 2001; Moss, 2014). Fairclough (2003) argues: "Just as there are choices in the representation of processes, so also there are choices in the representation of social actors. Social actors take on different roles in relation to participation in clauses" (p. 145). In this section, I examine instances where Minnesota ECEC policy actors fail to position/recognize children as social actors in their rationalization of ECEC.

The silencing of children in texts is particularly noteworthy when policymakers directly refer to children's experiences or interests in regards to ECEC and yet, children's perspectives are absent. Governor Dayton provides an example of this in his 2017 state of the state address. After articulating the benefits of ECEC, he engages mythopoesis (Van Leeuwen, 2007) through telling the following story about the Armstrong family:

> But don't take my word for it. To hear Janice and Milen Armstrong talk about the gains their four-year old daughter, Jannah, has made since beginning voluntary pre-K is to understand what early education means for Minnesota families. Before their daughter, Jannah, began pre-K, her parents took turns staying home to care for her.
>
> But her limited interactions with other children were starting to affect her physical skills, vocabulary, and emotional development. Janice and Milen believed that Jannah could benefit from high-quality child care, but they couldn't afford the cost.

> However, since Jannah, began attending free pre-K, five days a week, she has blossomed. Her vocabulary has increased tremendously, her motor skills are improving, and she has made great friends at school. She will be ready to start Kindergarten this fall.
>
> Having Jannah in school has also given more freedom to her parents. Janice has returned to school part-time, and is applying to nursing programs for the fall. Thank you, Janice and Milen, for sharing Jannah's success with all of us. The Armstrongs' story illustrates what voluntary pre-K can do to help young children and their families, throughout our state. Why wouldn't we want to provide those better opportunities for everyone? (p.8)

Dayton's story offers what Van Leeuwen (2007) refers to as a 'moral tale', in which "protagonists are rewarded for engaging in legitimate social practices, or restoring the legitimate order" (p. 105). Van Leeuwen (2007) describes how:

> In stories about going to school for the first time, for instance, children must face the trauma of leaving the security of home, but then, after negotiating a number of obstacles, they overcome this trauma and experience a happy ending of one kind or another. (p.105)

While Jannah is the protagonist of the story, she is silenced. Dayton (2017) prefaces this story with "don't take my word for it". However, since he is the sole narrator, the audience has no choice but to engage with his narration of this family's story. Dayton (2017) makes it clear that Jannah's progress through participating in pre-K have been reported by her parents. Meanwhile, Jannah's direct perspectives on pre-K and its meaning in her life are not included in the text. The erasure of Jannah's perspective reflects a common experience for children, who are regularly spoken for by parents or educators (Matthews, 2007).

Dayton's (2017) narration of Jannah's pre-K experience and silencing of her perspective are particularly noteworthy when one considers the ideological work this story is doing, as Jannah is being positioned as a neoliberal subject. Fernandes (2017) refers to as a "political economy of storytelling" (p.10), which "involves the deployment

of stories in the processes of subject-making" (p.11). In the above story, Dayton (2017) discursively positions Jannah and her family as neoliberal subjects, or "active individuals asking to 'enterprise themselves', to maximize their quality of life through acts of choice" (Fernandes, 2017, p. 11). In this passage, Dayton is engaging what Fernandes (2017) refers to as a kind of "curated storytelling" (p.11), which "produc(es) subjects who are guided by…upward mobility, entrepreneurship, and self-reliance" (p.11). Dayton's (2017) story also reflects how investment discourse positions children "both as an emblem of the future and as a potential barrier to mothers' employment in the here and now" (Adamson & Brennan, 2014, p. 47). In this way, it is not only Jannah who is being formed as a neoliberal subject but also her parents and particularly, her mother, who pursues more formal education as a result of Jannah's participation in pre-K.

Two further examples of how adults serve as translators of children's interests in policy discourse are set forth by ECEC advocacy organization, Think Small, and by Governor Walz. In the 'About' page of their website, Think Small (2021) states: "We think every child is unique, and each child's situation is different. We think their success depends on the adults in their lives—parents, early childhood professionals, policymakers and other influential people—making the best choices for children" (para. 3). In this passage, children are not represented as agentic, decision-makers but instead, passive recipients of adults' choices on their behalf.

In establishing the Children's Cabinet, Walz (2019a) at first seems to recognize children as key informants regarding their experiences and needs. Walz (2019a) states that the Cabinet "focuses on a broad range of issues and challenges, informed by

children, family and community priorities" (p.2), including "Child care and education (beginning with early childhood)" (p.2). Walz (2019a) further claims that the Cabinet:

> will be informed by and engage with children and families, the state's partners and administrators who serve them, and other community organizations and leaders. This engagement will include dialogue with existing state advisory bodies focused on work related to the Children's Cabinet. (p.3-4)

At first, the phrase "engage with children" seems to imply that children are being directly consulted to inform the Cabinet's work in the areas of learning, accountability, and action. However, Walz (2019a) fails to state if or how the Cabinet directly consults children and instead, implies they gain an understanding of children's interests through consultation with organizations serving children and families.

Discursive Shifts

Applying the Comparative Case Study approach, I engaged the transversal axis of analysis to explore if and how investment discourse changed over time and as it was employed by different policy actors. The most noteworthy result of this analysis was the persistence and consistency of investment discourse as it is applied by a range of policy actors, with diverse interests, responsibilities, and affiliations. In one of my research memos I noted that I came to think of investment discourse as a kind of 'script', with a set of talking points that policy actors would engage. These consistent assumptions and arguments have been detailed throughout this chapter: including the notion that childhood is a high stakes period, positioning children at a deficit and responsibilized, and framing ECEC as a means to advance equal opportunity and economic prosperity. However, one shift I noted was regarding whether policy actors proposed addressing the 'problem' of children's alleged lack of achievement and readiness through targeted or universal access to ECEC, which I will now describe.

Access: Universal or Targeted

Generally, the policy texts included for analysis in this dissertation research prioritized targeting funding for ECEC to 'at risk' children. This commitment remained relatively consistent across time and tended to be prioritized by non-governmental advocacy groups and public-private partnerships, such as Close Gaps by 5, Think Small, MELF, and MSRBAC. This persistent commitment to advocating for targeted funding is striking, particularly as Reynolds's (2007) review of research has demonstrated that both universal and targeted ECEC programming yield significant benefits and that "the positive effects of early education on school readiness and performance have been found across all levels of socioeconomic status" (Reynolds, 2021, p. 1).

Two policy actors who have diverged from this emphasis on targeting to instead promote universal access are Governors Dayton and Walz. Governor Dayton was a particularly staunch advocate for a universal system of pre-K, as securing political support and funding for universal pre-K was one of his leading political priorities. However, Dayton's push for a universal program was ultimately unsuccessful, and instead a targeted approach vis a vis Early Learning scholarships for students framed as 'at risk' became the overarching policy. Walz's support for universal pre-K is also noteworthy, as it has shifted over time. During the 2018 gubernatorial race, Walz expressed his support for universal pre-K (Walz, 2018) but since, he has seemed to walk this commitment back, instead focusing attention on expanding access to ECEC and further supporting Early Learning scholarships, which will now be discussed.

Material Effects: The Minnesota Model

While this chapter has been dedicated to exploring the discursive construction of children's subjectivity through Minnesota ECEC policy actors' use of investment discourse, I will now turn to briefly highlight the material effects of this discourse. Pursuant of this aim, I articulate how the 'Minnesota Model' becomes the technical answer to the political problem of children's alleged lack of readiness and achievement. The 'Minnesota Model' was introduced as a pilot program in 2006 by the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF), an organization made up of business leaders from across Minnesota. Its aim is to boost school readiness rates in the state (Close Gaps by 5, 2017). Close Gaps by 5 (2017) describes how this model has three key components, which include implementing a quality rating system, targeting funding for 'at risk' populations, and "consolidat(ing)" (p.11) or "better coordinating" (p.11) Minnesota's multiple streams of funding for ECEC. I will now briefly describe two of these techniques, quality and targeting, which have had a significant impact on Minnesota ECEC reform.

Quality

The first technique of the Minnesota model is 'Parent Aware', which is Minnesota's Quality Rating and Improvement System. Each state has adopted or intends to adopt its own system (Minnesota Department of Human Services 2019). The stated aims of Parent Aware are to support families to identify quality ECEC options for their children, help strengthen the quality of current ECEC programs, and support children to have access to ECEC programming that will ready them for their futures (Parent Aware, 2022). According to the Minnesota Department of Human Services (2019), Parent Aware

uses “an objective assessment” (para. 3) to give programs a score of one to four stars. Parent Aware’s assessment “measure(s) if and how child care and early learning professionals are using best practices that are most predictive of kindergarten readiness” (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2019, para.3), including but not limited to health, wellness, relationships with children and families, and individualized assessments for students. While Parent Aware is ‘voluntary’, parents are only permitted to use Early Learning scholarships, described in the next section, at Parent Aware rated programs.

Targeting

The second technique that forms the Minnesota Model is targeting funding to “increase access to high-quality early childhood programs for 3- and 4-year-old children with the highest needs to improve school readiness” (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021, para.3). This is pursued through implementing Early Learning scholarships, which are aimed at assisting families with “pay(ing) for high-quality child care and early education to help (their) child get ready for school” (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021, para.2). As previously noted, these scholarships can only be used for programs that participate in Parent Aware. To qualify for a scholarship, families must meet income and additional eligibility requirements.

After engaging with Minnesota ECEC policy actors’ focus on the alleged gaps in readiness and achievement in the state, and the focus on ‘at risk’ children, it is understandable how the Minnesota Model becomes the logical answer to this framing of the problem. However, as this chapter has argued, this representation of the problem is rooted in racist assumptions, which frame Black children who are economically under-served through a deficit lens. Ultimately, investment discourse lends to policy decisions

in Minnesota, such as targeted funding, which fail to recognize ECEC as a basic entitlement or public good (Moss, 2014).

Conclusion

This chapter explored how Minnesota's ECEC policy actors draw on investment discourse to represent the purpose of public funding for ECEC and how they represent childhood and education equality. Minnesota policy actors' assumptions regarding childhood reflect ideological beliefs regarding the state's responsibility for and relationship with children. In this chapter, I argued that Minnesota policy actors' use of investment discourse frames childhood as a high stakes and risky period, and represents children through a deficit lens in conjunction with responsibilizing, instrumentalizing, and invisibilizing them. Under the investment frame, Minnesota policy actors highlight children's alleged deficits and gaps in order to rationalize their access to education and care. Drawing on investment discourse, Minnesota policy actors also task children with immense responsibility for securing their individual future, along with safeguarding Minnesota's collective economic and social future, all the while silencing children's perspectives. This chapter also detailed how Minnesota policy actors engaged the following discursive mechanisms to privileged investment discourse as they justified ECEC reform: nominalization, modality, collocation, and all four types of legitimation, including authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis (Fairclough, 2003; Van Leeuwen, 2007).

The discursive techniques that have been explored in this chapter contribute to the legitimation and continuity of the racial inequality that happens in and through ECEC. I drew on three core tenets of CRT, including "whiteness as property" (Harris, 1993, p.

1714), “interest convergence” (Bell, 1980, p.523), and resistance to the plausibility of liberal ideals of meritocracy and equal opportunity (Berman, 2020; Del Real Viramontes, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). I engaged these concepts to argue that Minnesota ECEC policy actors’ articulation of the causes and solutions to education inequality are rooted in racist assumptions, which serve to perpetuate racial inequality in ECEC.

The narratives of risk, deficit, vulnerability, and responsibilization that I have detailed in this chapter are all means by which policy actors define children to intervene in their education in pursuit of economic growth. The policy narratives of ‘risky’ and deficient children that have been described in this chapter reflect a racialized “moral panic” (Hall et al., 1978, p.16) that serves to scapegoat BIPOC children and families who are economically under-served for Minnesota’s education disparities. This is not a policy discourse that aims to protect and serve the interests of children. Instead, what is being protected is ensuring Minnesota’s business leaders have access to a future workforce. Far from representing educational change toward a more just and equitable future, this kind of ECEC policy rationalization protects the interests of an elite business class.

When policy actors predicate access to ECEC for BIPOC children and families and children and families who are economically under-served on their ‘deficiency’ and ‘riskiness’, one must ask how equality and justice are being served? The answer is that they are not. Investment discourse legitimizes and maintains the status quo: one where Minnesota is home to some of the deepest racial disparities in the United States (Myers & Ha, 2018).

It is not inevitable or unavoidable for policy actors to render children, their families, and communities into problems in order to justify their access to ECEC. Instead,

this approach to legitimating public funding for ECEC is a discursive choice and as this chapter has argued, a choice that is rooted in racist assumptions regarding education inequality. Alternative approaches recognize ECEC as a basic entitlement and a public good (Moss, 2014). While Minnesota ECEC policy actors fixate on children's alleged deficits which must be fixed, a more just approach would advocate for recognizing all children as 'rich' (Malaguzzi, 1993) and their families and communities as powerful sources of knowledge and resistance (hooks,1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b; Moll, 2019; Moll et al., 2005).

Chapter 5 : Parenting and educating amidst high stakes pre-K

The implications of investment discourse on ECEC transcend the realm of policymaking, as they make their way into parenting and education. In this chapter I shift attention from Minnesota ECEC policy discourse to explore how the purpose of pre-K is negotiated in practice by a pre-K teacher, Rose, and two parents, Ruby and Hazel, who each had a child who recently attended pre-K in Rose's classroom (the Rainbow classroom). Both parents also participated in the parent-education component of the Rainbow program. I begin this chapter by outlining Rose's pedagogical approach to pre-K. I explore Rose's complex role as a pre-K teacher, as she attends to students' needs, prepares them for kindergarten, and supports their social-emotional learning. I examine how the two following frameworks influenced her practice: the Pyramid program and Conscious Discipline® (Bailey, 2016). After outlining Rose's education practice and priorities, I explore how two parents from the Rainbow classroom, Ruby and Hazel, represent their children; describe their experiences with their pre-K program; and offer beliefs regarding the benefits and purposes of pre-K.

This chapter proposes two central findings. First, I highlight the alignment between parents' priorities for pre-K with Rose's pedagogical goals for the Rainbow classroom, as all three participants emphasized the importance of pre-K in cultivating social-emotional learning and school readiness. Second, this chapter highlights how Rose, Ruby, and Hazel all align with certain aspects of investment discourse, while also questioning its dominance as a policy frame, its contradictions, and its limitations in regards to capturing the most pressing priorities for children's education. In presenting these findings, I argue the conditions of high-stakes and heightened academic

expectations for ECEC, which are born out of investment discourse, make parenting and educating challenging to navigate.

Introducing the Participants

Rose self-identified as a white, middle-class, woman. During our conversation, I learned that Rose immigrated to the United States in her twenties. She also explained that race is 'complicated' for her. Rose shared that her husband is Black and her children are bi-racial. Rose also shared that she practices addressing her biases. When I asked Rose how she identifies in regards to race she shared that she is white but then added: "I'm white until I open my mouth", when people hear her accent. When we discussed Rose's background, she described feeling lost when she tried to navigate her daughters' ECEC enrolment. Rose explained that she never thought she would go back to school nor had she planned to be a teacher but she had such a wonderful experience with her children's ECEC teacher that this inspired her to consider teaching as a profession.

Ruby self-identified as a Black, middle-class, woman. She has two daughters and worked providing care for an elderly woman. Ruby has a bachelor's degree in Kinesiology and mentioned "I do nothing with it… absolutely nothing". Ruby was committed to her current job in part due to a sense of responsibility for caring for her client at an important period in their life. Another benefit of this position was that Ruby could bring her youngest daughter with her to work instead of having to put her in childcare. However, Ruby wanted to eventually go back to school for nursing. When I asked Ruby about how she spends her time, she shared: "when I'm not working I'm, you know, spending time with my kids" and further shared, "kids, work. Yeah. That's, that's it. *Laughs.* That's how I spend a lot of-- that's all my days". For one of our interviews,

she spoke with me from her car, outside of her work. While we talked, her daughter sat in the back seat and we would pause from time to time for Ruby to give her snacks and provide entertainment.

Hazel self-identified as a white, middle-class, woman. Like Ruby, she also has two daughters. Hazel worked as a school psychologist and in response to COVID-19, she was working remotely. She shared that there was "a good balance of like kind of family-work dynamic in our house". Hazel's family liked to play games together, and personally, she liked to do yoga, run, bike ride, and spend time with friends and extended family. During one of our interviews, Hazel reflected on how her position in educational psychology may make her biased in regards to her understanding of where children were at academically in relation to their peers. This focus seemed to be something Hazel was interested in challenging, at least in regards to the priorities she held for her own children's early education.

Rose's Pedagogical Priorities for Pre-K

Social-emotional learning

One of the most important pedagogical goals that Rose held for her pre-K students was supporting their social-emotional learning. Social-emotional learning typically refers to building skills to recognize and cope with emotions, as well as to connect and communicate with others, and develop fulfilling relationships (Blewitt et al., 2021). Rose explained how in recent years she had transitioned away from "teaching just letters and numbers to really focusing on social-emotional skills," including "problem solving, making friends… interacting with peers…self-regulating" and "kindness". Rose was inspired to pursue this pedagogical change as he observed students' difficulty

interacting with one another. She explained, “We saw in general as a center more challenging behaviors… and we noticed that kids come and when we don’t have electronics in the classroom, uh, they didn’t really know to, how to play together…and share and take turns”.

Rose shared that in response to the challenges she was seeing in her classroom, she pursued further training. Through this process, she came across Conscious Discipline®, which had been part of their school’s curriculum but had been “pushed to the side”. Conscious Discipline® is a framework for supporting students’ social-emotional learning that Rose adopted in the Rainbow classroom. Rose described how a few years ago, she began implementing Conscious Discipline®, along with a second approach to support social-emotional learning and build partnerships with families, called the Pyramid Program. Rose reflected that implementing these changes had a positive impact on her classroom. I will now turn to outline both of these frameworks and explore how I observed them inform Rose’s practice.

Conscious Discipline®

Conscious Discipline® is a framework for supporting teachers’ and students’ social-emotional skills that was developed by Dr. Becky Bailey. Bailey (2016) describes stress and trauma as a “hidden or invisible epidemic” (p. 8) in American children’s lives, which contributes to “behavioral problems” (p. 9) and have deleterious consequences for their “health, learning, social-emotional development and brain development” (p.9). Bailey (2016) highlights abusive practices in families and the conditions of poverty as sources of trauma and stress for children. Bailey (2016) also states “Stress and trauma cross all ethnic and economic lines” (p.9), which notably obfuscates the violent impacts

of racism. Bailey (2016) draws on research from Harvard's Center on the Developing Child to advise that despite the pervasiveness of outside stress and trauma, caregivers play a crucial role in reducing the negative impact on children. It is from this premise that Bailey (2016) proposes Conscious Discipline® as a framework for "systematic change in schools" (p.11).

Conscious Discipline® aims to provide teachers with tools to recognize and effectively process their own emotions so they can serve students' needs and support them to develop social-emotional skills and strategies that enhance resilience (Bailey, 2016). Bailey (2016) envisions Conscious Discipline® as a framework to replace the "unconscious, traditional, compliance model of discipline" (p. 14) with a "conscious, relationship-based, community model" (p.14). Traditional disciplinary approaches center on control, exercised primarily by the teacher, as well as promote rules, and compliance from students (Bailey, 2016). This contributes to students feeling "belittled, shamed or rejected" (Bailey, 2016, p. 19). In contrast, Bailey (2016) frames Conscious Discipline® as a disciplinary model that emphasizes students' empowerment and assumes that "changing ourselves is possible" (p. 15), "connectedness governs behavior" (p.15), and that conflict is inevitable and instructive. Conscious Discipline® is rooted in three principles, which include problem-solving, safety, and connection (Bailey, 2016). I now turn to explore each of these principles and how I observed Rose apply them.

Problem-solving

Rose adopted a four-step approach to problem solving in the Rainbow classroom. The steps include: identifying the problem; thinking about solutions; thinking about what will happen if the solution is pursued and taking into account considerations of safety and

fairness; and then trying out the solution. Rose had this process outlined on a chart displayed in the classroom and encouraged students to apply it to solve problems on their own, including negotiating their relationships with one another. Rose also acknowledged when students put the steps into practice. During my conversations with students, they mentioned ways they solved problems with one another, particularly in regards to sharing toys. While students were encouraged to solve problems independently, they were given the space to do so with support. I noted a moment when a student seemed particularly overwhelmed after trying to solve a conflict with a peer and their teacher said sometimes they may need a teacher's help and that this is ok.

Safety

The second principle of the Conscious Discipline® framework holds that for students to be able to learn, they need to first feel physically and emotionally safe (Bailey, 2016). As a result, Conscious Discipline® outlines practices that can support students to feel safe in their learning environment and reduce their stress. I will explore how Rose applied some of these practices in the Rainbow classroom.

One strategy from Conscious Discipline® that Rose applied to support students to feel safe was to create structure. Each day followed a similar schedule and students generally seemed to know what to expect. Many students expressed confidence and pride in orienting me to their routine. After a few days of observations, I commented to an assistant teacher that the students seemed to have an easy time transitioning from one activity to the next. She indicated that Rose had the day so well planned that transitions were quite relaxed and everyone generally had a sense of what to do and what was coming next. I also mentioned to Rose that I was surprised that students did not have

more difficulty transitioning from different activities. Rose indicated that this took time and practice and she noted that teachers tried to provide activities that students could reasonably engage with in the time allotted.

While there was a set routine, there was also variation. Students participated in different activities during their curricular rotations, new dramatic play props were routinely introduced, and they engaged with new books and songs. Students would also note and adjust their play in response to their changing interests, and changes in their environment. For instance, one day I walked around the playground with a student named Violet and we noted all of the ice that had formed since a recent cold spell. The structure that Rose and the other teachers provided seemed to not only reduce students' stress, but also create opportunities for them to be present, enjoy, and even marvel in small changes in their environment.

Other strategies that Rose adopted to support students to feel safe were creating a 'safe place' and teaching students calming strategies, both of which are proposed by Conscious Discipline® (Bailey, 2016). Rose created a 'safe place', which was an area in the corner of the classroom with pillows, books, stuffed animals, and it had a canopy over it to create some privacy. The 'safe place' also displayed a list of calming strategies students could engage, which focused on breathing techniques and muscle relaxation. They included: s.t.a.r, where you smile, breathe deeply, and, relax your body; balloon, where you breathe and imagine filling a balloon; pretzel, where you form a pretzel with your body; and drain, where you engage in muscle relaxation by pretending your hands are a faucet releasing water/tension (Bailey, 2016).

In addition to the ‘safe place’ and calming strategies, Rose supported students to practice recognizing and naming their feelings. For instance, each morning Rose asked students to share how they were feeling and why. Rose also had students author a book about themselves and their families that included details about different feelings they have and activities that align with their feelings. While students generally seemed content in the Rainbow classroom, of course stressful situations arose. One event and shift in routine that Rose regarded as a potential source of stress for students was the second and upcoming ‘Parent day’, when caregivers would join the classroom for part of the morning. During my observations, many discussions during circle time were dedicated to preparing students for this event. Rose and the students reflected on how last “Parent day” had brought up difficult feelings for many students, especially when caregivers had to leave. They also explored how students may feel and brainstormed strategies that may help make this “Parent day” easier. One strategy they came up with was to take time to say goodbye and remember to give hugs to caregivers before they left. On “Parent Day”, Rose and the students gathered for circle after caregivers had left to discuss their experience. Many students seemed to feel this second “Parent Day” had gone better, while some students shared that they still felt sad when their caregivers had to leave. One student was quite upset and decided to take time for herself in the ‘safe place’.

Connection

The third principle underlying the Conscious Discipline® framework emphasizes the importance of building classroom communities centered on connection and belonging. Bailey (2016) argues that connection is the basis for students’ motivation to learn and “directs the flow of information in the brain” (p.21). Bailey (2016) further

advises that teachers can cultivate connected classrooms through “encouragement, choices and empathy” (p.21) and supporting students to “begin caring about themselves and others on a deep level” (p. 21).

Cultivating Belonging. Rose took steps to create a classroom environment that reflected the students that inhabited the space. Rose had books and toys in the space that reflected the racial and cultural diversity of the classroom. One day while I was observing, Rose was looking into purchasing dolls wearing hijabs for the classroom. Some of the students and an assistant teacher in the classroom wore hijabs and Rose seemed to want to create a classroom environment and curriculum that reflected the racial and cultural diversity of the people in it. Having dolls that reflect students’ racial and ethnic identities is an important practice to cultivate inclusive classrooms. It is also important for educators to observe students’ play with racially and ethnically diverse dolls, to take steps to emphasize respect for human difference, and address biases that may arise through play (Escayg et al., 2017; MacNevin & Berman, 2017; Sturdivant, 2020).

Nurturing Relationships. Rose adopted many strategies to support students to cultivate relationships with one another and develop their social skills. During our conversation, Rose highlighted teaching “kindness” as one of her central pedagogical goals. Rose encouraged students to notice when other students were ‘out of the group’ and how to take steps to reconnect or invite them into the group. Rose gave the students space to negotiate their relationships with one another, however at times she would intervene to provide guidance. She often discussed the importance of paying attention to other people’s bodies to understand how they may be feeling. She had students

participate in an activity where one student would put two pencils up to their eyes and point the pencils at an object and then other students would guess what they were looking at. This activity was meant to support students to build awareness of others' body language.

Practicing Empathy. One instance when I observed Rose support students to consider and empathize with peers' needs occurred during lunchtime. At lunchtime students would sit at tables, sometimes with a teacher present and sometimes on their own. Rose encouraged the students to chat and provided suggestions of questions they could ask their peers; including asking what everyone did the previous evening. When I joined students for lunch, they generally seemed to talk about pets, what they would do after school, their lunches, and my pregnancy. One day during lunch a student seemed to find the classroom too noisy and covered her ears. Rose, noted to the students that one of their peers was covering their ears and perhaps finding it too noisy. She encouraged the students to lower their voices while they chatted. This inspired many students to cover their ears and make requests for the volume to continue to be lowered. Eventually, Rose reminded the students that it was important to still be able to enjoy one another's company and chat and if they continued to lower their voices, this would be difficult. In this instance, Rose reinforced to students that the purpose of lowering voices was not to regulate and exercise power over peers' behavior and bodies, but to empathize with and respond to one another's needs.

Analyzing Conscious Discipline®

I now turn to analyze the possibilities and limitations of Conscious Discipline® for cultivating a more justice-oriented ECEC practice. This dissertation adopts the vision

of justice outlined by FEOC scholar, Dr. Joan Tronto (2013). Tronto (2013) posits an understanding of justice as ensuring everyone's care needs are met. The emphasis that Conscious Discipline® places on empathy and attentiveness to one's own and others' emotional needs, strategies to support students' relationships, and to recognize how one's feelings and experiences of stress are embodied all seem to prioritize care in education. Conscious Discipline's® (Bailey, 2016) emphasis on cultivating inclusive classroom communities where all students feel they belong also holds value for building more just ECEC settings.

Despite these benefits, Conscious Discipline® has a number of limitations in terms of envisioning a more caring, just ECEC system, beginning with its alignment with achievement-based understandings of ECEC's purpose and social value. This is reflected through Bailey's (2016) rationale for the overarching benefits afforded by Conscious Discipline®. Bailey (2016) argues that Conscious Discipline® is effective in eliciting a number of positive outcomes, including "increasing student academic achievement" (p. 18) and "increas(ing) student academic readiness" (p.18). The intrinsic value of care, belonging, and relationships, are lost when support for students' social-emotional learning and well-being becomes a means to a different and ultimately, neoliberal end. Conscious Discipline® also fails to acknowledge that changes in individual behavior are not the answer to much deeper, systemic injustices in and beyond education. Instead of continuing to develop technologies to enhance resilience, why not address the conditions that cause students to need to be resilient in the first place? There are limits to the possibilities of 'resilience' and 'empowerment' to support students' wellbeing, particularly amidst poverty and racism, which continue to induce stress and trauma.

Conscious Discipline® can easily fall into a discourse that assumes educators and students can or should 'breathe' their way through racial and economic injustice, as well as the intense demands of the high-stakes, accountability culture surrounding schooling (Brown, 2021). While this framework may offer strategies to help students and teachers cope, it ultimately risks adding to the burdens already placed on them and further entrenching racial disparities in schooling.

Pyramid model

A second framework that Rose applied in the Rainbow classroom is the pyramid model. This is another approach to supporting young children's social and emotional development. It was developed by The Center for the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning and Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Youth /Children. The program seeks to "address disparities in discipline practices, promote family engagement, use data for decision-making, and foster inclusion of children with, and at risk for, developmental delays and disabilities" (NCPMI, 2021, para. 4). Rose shared that three years prior to our interview, the Rainbow pre-Kindergarten program began implementing the Pyramid approach. She described it in the following way:

> it's about building relationships, like the base of pyramid is building relationships with parents, teachers, between staff, and then the middle part is teaching social skills, and the top of the pyramid is the kids who need more intervention from a specialist, like social workers and stuff like that. So it's just supporting kids on all the lever- levels…in terms of social-emotional development.

Rose seemed to place particular importance on the family engagement aspect of the Pyramid Program. Fox and Swett (2017) describe the emphasis that the Pyramid model places on "family engagement" (p.85), stating:

> At every tier of the Pyramid Model, practitioners and programs should consider what strategies might be used to welcome and support diverse families; how to create opportunities to learn from families; strategies for partnering with families to promote child outcomes; and providing the supports and services that families might need to promote their child's skill development. (p. 86)

Parent Communication and Involvement

In line with the pyramid program, Rose valued communicating and involving parents in their children's education. Rose provided context for the value she placed on communicating with parents toward the end of our interview. When I asked if there was anything else that would be helpful to know about her experiences and background with regard to ECEC, Rose shared:

> Um, my personal background is that I don't come, uh I was not born here, I came here in my twenties and…having kids and being new to education I am very aware about how I communicate with parents, with foreign parents or multilingual parents. I just constantly find a new way to communicate…and to share information and to share the results of the kids' assessments and whatever, because I knew nothing when I was a mom. I didn't know how preschool works. I didn't know about scholarships, I didn't know about curriculum, I didn't know about signing up… I try to be a resource for parents because… and I don't assume that if I send some paper or flyer that they're going to read it and know what that means. I try to connect with different ways. I use the Rainbow ap (pseudonym) that translates automatically to different languages… or to share information I use emails, phone calls, language line, interpreters, um, just to have multiple ways to communicate with new parents or with foreign parents or with multilingual parents.

While Rose prioritized communicating with parents and supporting their awareness of details regarding their children's education, she also expressed challenges regarding negotiating curricular aims. During our conversation, Rose reflected:

> we had a hard time selling this teaching social skills to parents to be honest with you, like they wanted the letters and numbers, that's why the kids go to preschool, they wanted kids to read, uh and I was like they're not ready like we're not doing the formal reading instruction, we're doing lots of literacy activities but we're not gonna teach the kids- sit down with the kids and teach them to read in preschool that's just not our goal….

Later, Rose shares:

> But selling teaching the social skills was sort of- was really tough to parents but I think now, now they get it…. And they're invested and they know more. Administration is saying- sending something, uh, about it in the newsletter and I'm trying to include some information in the newsletter a little one pager things for parents.

In the above passages, Rose provides insight regarding how curriculum is negotiated with parents. It is particularly noteworthy that Rose uses the term "selling", which seems to reflect a dynamic where parents are more like consumers, engaging with the product of their child's school, than democratic actors in public education. In this frame, the teacher becomes a sales person, 'selling' their pedagogical goals for students. Rose's comment also mirrors Tobin et al.'s (2013) research examining parents' and educators' views regarding the purpose of ECEC, as they found parents prioritized academic skills development and children's readiness for school. Meanwhile, educators tended to emphasize the importance of play-based learning and were resistant to heightening academic standards and expectations for ECEC.

When I asked Rose about parents' priorities for their children, she gave the following response:

> …from what I'm hearing from parents they like, um, they like that their kids have a place to spend a quality time with quality uh toys and materials. Um, I'm sharing lots of things that we do throughout the day… and so they see pictures of the things that we're doing and they're just impressed with the toys. They're like I'm buying stuff that they wouldn't think of buying…

Rose further shared that parents were "grateful" that their children were "motivated to learn through fun activities…that they can play together with those items, that they're taking turns with games and toys, um, and that they're making friends".

I also asked Rose if she thought that parents' priorities regarding their children's education had changed as a result of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. Rose felt that one change was the increased value parents placed on their kids' opportunities to socialize, stating: "they're happy that their kids can just play". The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social life may have created an aperture for reimagining the purposes of pre-K, even if momentary. Perhaps the demands and constraints of the pandemic led some parents to placed increased value on the possibilities for their child's pre-K to offer joy and friendship amidst uncertainty and hardship. The next section highlights how this focus on children's present well-being and opportunities for play reflects a paradigm shift, if only temporary, as much focus in pre-K is placed on supporting children's future preparedness for school.

Kindergarten readiness

During my time observing the Rainbow classroom and in speaking with Rose about her practice, I was struck by the careful balance she drew between attending to students' present interests and needs, while also preparing them for the demands of the near future: kindergarten. These often competing pedagogical concerns must be understood in the context of what Brown (2021) describes as a socio-cultural shift in regards to how the purpose of ECEC is conceived in the United States. Brown (2021) delineates how kindergarten has shifted from a focus on children's holistic development and care, to a 'race', where children must gain the knowledge and skills necessary to perform on standardized assessments and tests. While Brown's (2021) research focuses on kindergarten, he argues these changes are also occurring in pre-K.

During our conversation, Rose explained how she worked to prepare students for the expectations they would face in kindergarten by supporting their development of academic, social-behavioral, and fine and gross motor skills. Rose shares:

> …I do teach, um literacy skills as well, emergent writing, um, I want the kids to know how to write their name by the end when we finish, I want them to know most of the letters, um, most of the sounds, uh, I want them to know print concepts because that's something that I know the kindergarten teachers assess them when they come in, um, and re-telling stories, beginning, middle and end, who are the characters, what's happening in the story, what are the problems in the story, um, tho- those literacy skills. And then math too, um, the expectation is to know, to recognize the numbers one to thirty by the end of the pre-school but I also want them to count with 1, 1 up to 20. I want them to know shapes and patterns, simple patterns… I work on motor skills too because they are doing so much writing in kindergarten and first grade, so like fine motor skills. I want them to really have a good, um pencil grip, strong fingers so I do lots of sensory play, play dough, building and all of that I really do through play.

Rose also led the students in exercises and stretching while they were in circle, such as doing a super hero pose to help them get 'strong for kindergarten'.

Rose provided insight regarding her prioritization of readying students for kindergarten. During our conversation, Rose mentioned that the expectations for kindergarten are really high in her district. I asked her to elaborate on this comment. Rose shared that when the pre-K teachers used to meet with the kindergarten team they sought guidance on what kindergarten teachers "want from the kids coming in". Rose stated "self-regulation was the biggest part for them. Like, if they can regulate, if they can wait, if they can entertain themselves for a period of time and stay with the activity that's really helpful". In this school district, these 'high' expectations were not just reserved to kindergarten and were actively sought by parents who had recently fought for all students to have access to gifted programming in high school. In this next section, I shift focus

from Rose's pedagogical goals to explore the ECEC experiences and priorities of two parents from the Rainbow classroom.

At the end of our conversation, I asked Rose if there was anything else she wanted to share in regards to her thoughts or experiences with ECEC. Rose reflected how her experience immigrating to the United States from an Eastern European country in her twenties, navigating an American ECEC system for her children, and learning English have made her prioritize supporting multilingual families and students who are English language learners. She also shared that she focuses on teaching vocabulary to students, stating:

> I always have vocabulary with pictures, for all of my books….so the kids will have the pictures and vocabulary…and they can follow along and learn visually and by hearing new vocabulary because I know that's important for-for multiple language kids too, for all the kids.

Rose provided further insight regarding this goal and her own personal experience of navigating the complex relationship between language, race, and identity in the context of the United States. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter when I asked Rose how she identifies in regards to race she reflected, "White. But it's- I always say that I'm white until I open my mouth", referring to her accent. In this way, Rose's lived experiences provided a pathway for her to empathize with some of her students' experiences learning English in an educational and social context that often fails to recognize multiple languages as an asset, instead perceiving multilingual students through a deficit lens.

In the next section, I shift from exploring Rose's pedagogical goals for her pre-K students to focus on how parents, Ruby and Hazel, understand the purposes and value of

ECEC for their children and families. I preface the description of their ECEC priorities with an exploration of how they describe their children.

Parental Portraits of 'Rich' Childhood

When I interviewed Ruby and Hazel regarding their families' experiences with pre-K, I asked them to describe their daughters, who participated in this research and attended the Rainbow classroom the previous year. These descriptions disrupt the image of children as instruments of future capital, offered by Minnesota policy actors, as Ruby and Hazel illustrated the 'richness' (Moss et al., 2000) of their daughters' identities and lives.

Hazel provided the following depiction of her daughter, Indigo:

> she's very much like your typical first child and like she's a rule follower and pretty like, uh, rigid and likes to do things her own way. Um, she's pretty…. she's always been pretty, um… articulate…talks about everything, her feelings, her day, um she's just very like chatty, um, I'd say she's a healthy mix between like an extravert and introvert, um, loves being around people but at the same time can get a little bit socially tired and then like will rejuvenate by doing her own thing or just playing with her sister or one of us. Um, what else? Together, we as a family, like I already said, love to play games… she loves art, really into art right now um, loves books, reading, um, and just kind of like rough house play together, wrestling with dad, and running around playing tag and, yeah.

In this passage, Hazel outlined Indigo's important relationships, competencies, and the particularities that make Indigo a unique, complex being. Later Hazel described Indigo's personality as "pretty easy going" and shared that "she's social and like she can go into a new situation and she'll be fine, um, like, she doesn't get anxious, like, she separates really well".

When I asked Ruby to describe her daughter, she also reflected on her relationships, capabilities, and personality quirks. Ruby gave the following description of, Lavender:

> Um, she is very…energetic, you know, outspoken, um she will definitely tell you like what is on her mind, her likes, her dislikes. Um, she's very caring. Um, there's almost four years between her and her sister and so at first I thought it was going to be like a difficult transition for her having another baby in the house and then she was getting all the attention, so I was, I was really scared there actually because she's just so attached to her father and myself, um, but she really surprised me with just how, how open and how warm she was to her little sister.

Ruby further discusses her daughter's experience with school, stating:

> (she) really likes school, she likes you know the amount of time she's able to spend with her classmates, um not only her classmates, she has a main teacher and two aides, and she really loves spending all of the time that she can with them.

With pride in her voice, Ruby shared that Lavender's kindergarten teacher described Lavender's efforts to help her classmates, including assisting other students with getting ready to go outside. Instead of positioning Lavender as simply a recipient of care, which is a common perception of young children, Ruby spoke of how Lavender actively engages in care-taking (Cockburn, 2005).

The way Ruby and Hazel describe their daughters counters the deficit-oriented view of children offered by Minnesota ECEC policy actors. Ruby and Hazel portray 'rich childhoods' (Moss et al., 2000), highlighting daughters who are competent, whole beings, and emphasizing their roles as big sisters, their strengths, and what brings them joy.

Parent Priorities in ECEC

Like Rose, Ruby and Hazel each emphasized the importance of their children learning skills to navigate social and emotional experiences. Also like Rose, Ruby and Hazel highlighted pre-K's role in readying their daughters for their future schooling, particularly through instilling the behaviors and academic skills that would prepare them for this transition.

Social-emotional Learning

Turning first to Ruby, she expressed an appreciation for how pre-K provided her daughter with space and support to develop and navigate relationships with other kids. She shared:

> You know in the beginning she was always—she had a hard time dealing with like other students not wanting to like play with her and it wasn't necessarily them not wanting to play with her but she wanted, *clears throat*, them to do what she was doing. It was hard for her to kind of join a group and just say 'hey' you know, like 'can I play?' It was always 'do you want to play with me', 'do what I'm doing?'

Ruby explained that prior to pre-K, Lavender had been an only child, and was often surrounded by adults who typically agreed to play what she wanted. As a result, Lavender had not had many opportunities to negotiate play with other kids before starting at the Rainbow pre-Kindergarten program. Ruby described how they would sometimes go to parks and "hope" that other kids would come for Lavender to play with. Ruby reflected how at first Lavender would typically play with the adults in the Rainbow classroom but through "redirecting" and learning strategies to join groups and initiate play, things changed. Ruby shared:

> …once spring started to come around we started to see some growth where she was approaching different groups that were already doing an activity and then trying to find a way to play with them and then if she wanted them to play what she was playing you know after she at least joined them, say "hey do you guys want to join us now?" which was really big cuz then we saw improvement when we'd go to the playground…Or when she would play with her cousins it wasn't a matter of 'do what I want to do'. 'Let's come to an agreement of what we should all play'…Which is really big. *Laughs.* Yeah.

During our conversation, I shared that this made so much sense and I recalled that when I joined the classroom, I noticed Lavender often wanted to play or chat with me.

Like Ruby, Hazel also expressed an appreciation for the social-emotional learning her daughter experienced in the Rainbow classroom. Hazel emphasized this at multiple points during our interviews. For instance, at the beginning of our first interview, Hazel shared that Rose and the Rainbow pre-Kindergarten program's focus on social-emotional development was "super like impactful for Indigo and important to us". Hazel also shared the importance of the social-emotional learning in the Rainbow classroom as it aligned with her future goals for Indigo. She stated, "I would say my biggest hope for Indigo is to just become like a kind, loving, accepting person, um, a hard worker obviously" and "that she grows up happy, and healthy, and kind". I asked Hazel how she saw pre-K potentially aligning with these goals and she shared, "the exposure to kids her age", the "structure", and "teachings of learning how to problem solve… conflict resolution and social interaction, all that social development stuff I think is really important".

Hazel and Ruby both reflected on how the benefits of social-emotional learning were not just reserved to school. In response to my question about how pre-K went for her family, especially in reflection that it was a uniquely challenging year in regards to navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, Hazel responded:

> Yeah, I thought it was amazing. Um, again, going back to that social-emotional um education piece, um just that was so wonderful. Like Indigo would come home and you know it would be like "well use one of the calming strategies that you learned in teacher Rose's class", you know, and she'd be like "I'm going to do my balloon" and then do it.

Here, Hazel describes how the social-emotional curriculum in the Rainbow classroom positively impacted Indigo at home.

Both Ruby and Hazel found the social skills their daughters learned were helpful in supporting their relationships and play with other children outside of school. For

instance, Ruby shared that the social skills Lavender learned in the Rainbow classroom helped her at the playground and when she played with cousins. Similarly, Hazel shared that Indigo "bringing home… those social-emotional problem solving skills, bringing those home and being able to utilize them when stuff happened at home, or like on play dates, or when she hung out with her friends is super beneficial too".

I gained insight regarding why Indigo's social-emotional learning in the Rainbow classroom held such importance for Hazel when I asked her to elaborate on what aspects of her identity may have shaped these priorities. She shared:

> Um… gosh… well if you want to get like real *(laughs) real* deep, um I didn't have that so much in my childhood, um, I grew up in a pretty, pretty dysfunctional home um, and I wasn't taught those skills. I was not taught like social problem solving or yeah, um none of that was a part of my childhood and then my husband grew up in a very healthy home and definitely had all of those um, like development, healthy development in all those areas, um so I think being married to him and seeing him as a dad, has-- like he and his family have just helped me-- and friends I guess too, like have helped me learn how important those things are in life cause I have had to learn from like not… not learning those skills as a child, I've had to learn them in my adulthood and then it has come with challenges for sure, um, so I think just like my experience has made me realize how important it is for her to learn those at a young age, um, and that's, that's why it has become a value in our family. I mean I would say a lot spurred by like it being a value already in my husband's family… And him bringing that positivity along… Um, has helped quite a bit, if that makes sense.

In this passage, Hazel explained how she wants her daughter to have support and opportunities that she did not have but could have benefited from.

The significance that Hazel and Ruby place on their daughters' social-emotional learning is also reflected in Brown's (2021) research, which highlights how parents wanted their children to have opportunities to develop social skills and friendships during kindergarten. I argue that the meaning and value that Ruby and Hazel ascribe to their daughter's social-emotional learning in the Rainbow classroom offered an example of

subtly subverting the abstracted, hyper-rational, and individualized logic of investment discourse. In the above passages, Ruby and Hazel share ECEC values and priorities that are rooted in context, unique lived experiences, and ultimately, that are deeply personal.

School Readiness: ECEC as a "building block"

In addition to valuing the social-emotional learning that their children engaged in through the Rainbow classroom, both Hazel and Ruby saw pre-K as a means to support their children's readiness for school. In discussing the benefits of pre-K for her daughter, Hazel shared that she appreciated "the structure of her classroom", which she saw as offering a helpful "precursor to kindergarten". Hazel elaborated by saying: "Like, you get used to the school setting, you have a locker, you know, like you have your schedule for the day, you have your routines, um so I really appreciate that about the pre-k program too". Later in our conversation when I asked Hazel if there were any other benefits of Indigo's pre-K experience, she shared: "the learning of school routines and expectations obviously are super important and beneficial to her, as well as I think in her kindergarten and upcoming years, um." I asked if she was referring to support for transitioning into kindergarten and school and Hazel responded, "Yeah, the classroom environment, and respect for authority and um, learning that there is a routine in classroom…Classrooms, and schedules and um, you know learner behavior I think is really important too".

Ruby shared that even if Lavender had not received a scholarship to attend pre-K, her family would have found a way to make it work because it was "so essential". Ruby outlines why it was important for her that Lavender attended pre-K before kindergarten, stating:

> I couldn't imagine sending her to a classroom with like one teacher, she has like twenty something kids in a classroom, and my daughter has never been to a

> classroom or even knows what to expect… how to act, you know, like I couldn't imagine. That would be so difficult, not only for the teacher, but like for her, she'd just be so lost…

Ruby sheds light on the stakes of not being ready for kindergarten and its potential implications for children's future academic success. She describes schooling as "kind of like this building block" where each grade builds off of content that was learned in the previous year. Ruby articulates how by kindergarten, if students are "unable to… learn… what they're supposed to learn" or if they only partially learn the content and if "they just keep moving forward, then there are going to be other interventions that are going to be needed later on in life to kind of get them where they need to be. Otherwise you just never catch up". Ruby then explains how ECEC fits into this "building block", stating,

> Having preschool be, um, as essential as kindergarten… you're setting them up for success, you're able to build them at such a young age and then…once they get to kindergarten… they already have some sort of layer already there… as opposed to just being thrown in at kindergarten and then kind of being expected to build off of that…

Ruby points out that this is difficult when students' "foundation was never really built". Ruby concludes by describing how pre-K can be "like a buffer" and can "kind of fill in the gap really young to where… like they won't be so behind".

Ruby's statements reflect some alignment with Minnesota ECEC policy discourse, as she articulates the high stakes of early childhood, which sets the stage for children's future academic success. It is understandable that Ruby's reflection does not express much faith in the education system to meet her child where she is, given the emphasis policy actors in the last chapter placed on molding children to conform to the standards and expectations of schooling. As a Black parent with a Black child, Ruby's

perspective must also be read alongside a policy discourse that positions Black children and families at a deficit when describing education performance and outcomes.

When I asked Ruby about what she wants and imagines for Lavender's future I gained further insight regarding the emphasis she placed on Lavender developing what she saw as the foundational knowledge and skills to be successful in school. Ruby shared:

> *Sighs.* I want her to be well rounded. I want…her base knowledge to be built to where she can choose any path and she won't feel like she's behind in that subject. You know if she wants to study math, I want her to feel like she has, you know, her base knowledge was built enough to where she can build off that. I want her, I want her to be successful, you know, I want her to feel like she's had the support, you know, from kindergarten all the way through to where she can do what she wants to do…I want her to have the same opportunities as you know the next child, you know as far as, you know, when she's applying to colleges, you know, preps, and things that I can do outside of just the basic public school system and what they have offer. I want her to feel like she's been-- she's had the opportunities to get to where she wants in life... Yeah.

It is noteworthy that Ruby again uses language in this passage that echoes policy actors' depiction of ECEC in Minnesota. First, she subtly engages the metaphor of education as a 'race', as she uses words like 'behind' to describe children's education performance. Ruby's emphasis on the importance of developing a 'base knowledge' also aligns with policymakers' representation of ECEC as offering children a strong 'start' in their academic journey.

Additionally, Ruby engages the idea of schooling as affording her daughter "opportunities to get to where she wants in life". This also seems to echo policy actors' emphasis on ECEC as a means to cultivate opportunities for all children. However, Ruby's personal narrative regarding her own schooling adds nuance to her views regarding the promises of education. As I shared at the outset of this chapter, Ruby

reflected that while she has a bachelor's degree in Kinesiology, she is "do(ing) nothing with it".

Based on the literature on parents' priorities for their children's ECEC, I anticipated that Rose and Ruby would likely emphasize the importance of their children learning pre-academic skills, such as literacy and numeracy, in pre-K. Hazel and Ruby seemed to place different importance on the academic skills their children were learning and the academic progress they demonstrated. Turning first to Hazel, she mentioned academic skills after discussing social-emotional learning. When I asked about additional priorities she had for Indigo's pre-K experience, she said: "Um, the academic piece, you know those academic skills, the kind of foundation…". At another point Hazel shared that one thing that could have been improved about Indigo's pre-K experience would have been a bit more focus on academic skills development. However, this did not seem to be a central concern for Hazel, as she also mentioned that her younger daughter was in a childcare center that focused more on academic skills development and she shared that she appreciated Rose's prioritization of social-emotional learning. In other words, while Hazel wanted her daughter's pre-K to include some academic skills development, she seemed to place greater importance on social-emotional learning.

Like Hazel, Ruby aligned academic skills development with preparing her daughter for her future schooling. Ruby took pride in her daughter's academic skills, sharing that in kindergarten "she's starting to read, like read an actual book, pick it up". She differentiates Lavender's performance from other students, sharing that they know other children outside of their school, including cousins and family friends who are the same age as Lavender or in first grade but "'we're not there'". I read this comment as

Ruby reflecting on what other parents say to her regarding their children's performance. In my experience of parenting, this feels commonplace: for parents to comment on other children's abilities and reflect back on their own children and where they are in relation to their development. I know I certainly find myself doing this. The use of 'we' is particularly noteworthy (and also commonplace), signifying parents' embeddedness with their children's academic performance and success. These patterns reflect social norms that position parents, particularly mothers, as personally responsible for their children's education outcomes (Bundy, 2012). Ruby's comments also reflect an ECEC policy discourse that places immense pressure on children and families to perform and threatens grave costs for 'getting it wrong' in the early years of a child's life.

Ruby, Hazel, and Rose all seemed to frame school as something students need to be 'ready' for, which provides insights into the kind of institution they expect their children to be entering. Instead of institutions centered on care, which are ready to receive and support students however they show up, Ruby, Hazel, and Rose portray kindergarten as a place that students have to prepare for and mold to fit the expectations and demands. Their narratives do not construct a view of children's future schooling as centered around their holistic development, which is how they have largely described pre-K. Instead, future schooling seems to be perceived as sites where children conform to the expectations and prove themselves behaviorally and academically in order to avoid negative consequences, including future doors closing. It is understandable that parents, and educators, aware of the kind of institutions their children/students are headed to and the expectations they will face, would want them to be prepared and align their priorities with readying them for this next step (Brown, 2021). My daughter is two years old and I

already think about getting her ready for school. My question is not whether or not this is a reasonable priority but it is it a fair one? In other words, is it fair for this burden to be placed on children, their families, and educators?

Parent Education and Community

Both Ruby and Hazel mentioned the benefits of the parent-education component of the Rainbow program. Hazel shared that this "was super beneficial for… myself and our family", and valued "learning about the topics that they would present about" and "having that community of parents to, um, share with". Hazel also describes "the expectation of the parenting component to come in and play for a little while before the parenting class was really great too. To have that kind of forced, um, one on one time with Indigo and like see her space and get involved in that environment, obviously that was really beneficial too". Here, Hazel used the word 'forced', which implies an element of coercion and also potentially raises questions around equity, as not all parents may feel comfortable or have the time off of work to come into their child's school. I asked Hazel for her thoughts on the policy frame which emphasizes the role of access to ECEC in reducing the achievement gap. She responded:

> I mean I think it's really valid and important and I would not argue with that, uh, stance, at all. I do think it's really important. I think for, um, disadvantaged groups or individuals that, um, parenting component in pre-K is probably super, super, super important and beneficial, um, and if that happens at an early age then I think that is just, that could be like dramatically life changing.

In this passage, Hazel reflects the deficit discourse adopted by Minnesota ECEC policy actors, as she assumes that the parent education component of the Rainbow program would be 'super, super, super important and beneficial" for parents from "disadvantaged groups". This reinforces a discourse which positions parents who experience

‘disadvantage’ at a deficit and in need of intervention regarding their parenting, as opposed to naming the need to rectify the conditions that disadvantage families in the first place.

Like Hazel, Ruby also valued the parent education component of the Rainbow program. Ruby described how she initially chose to participate in the monthly parent education programming to “regroup with the other parents”. She shared that “as a parent you have questions when you see things that your child is doing, whether it be developmentally, like just all aspects, and you’re like, ‘is this who my child is supposed to be?... Are they behind, are they ahead?’” Ruby further reflects on her experience participating in parent education, stating:

> You know, so that once a month parenting, once you hear the other parents share their input on things that are going on at home, um things that are going on with their kid, how it’s affecting them, uh, current behaviors that they’ve kind of picked up maybe like since school started…or you know, things that they’re improving on, it’s just nice to hear other parents, um, from kids that are close to your child them being in the same classroom, and just kind of where they are, it, it gives you reassurance, you know, that like “hey, my child’s kind of going through this, but they’re going to phase out of it” or like “hey, we didn’t go through this but we’re going through this you know so, like we may not have similarities here but definitely here’ and giving um their… take on how they went through it, what they did, um, how it worked, how it didn’t work- um, so it was a nice…

Ruby explained that she had tried other parenting groups, which had not worked for her. However she appreciated the Rainbow program’s group and felt she had developed a relationship with other parents. She describes the Rainbow program’s parent education meetings as a space to commiserate and empathize with other parents, as well as to raise and normalize the questions and challenges that come with parenting and pre-K.

Ruby also shared that the Rainbow pre-Kindergarten program seemed to reflect and support multicultural learning. For instance, the school held ‘family nights’ to build

community and they were “culturally aware of things that were going on um, as far as like Ramadan, Eid, um, the Chinese New year”. In addition, Ruby mentioned that when she participated in parent education on a weekly basis when her daughter was in a two-year old program, the parent educator would say “ ‘please, if you speak another language in your home, speak to your child in that language… and that’s something that I truly do remember engrained in us, ‘Speak your language at home, speak your language at home, they’re going to learn English, they’re going to go to school’”. Overall, Ruby seemed to find a sense of community in the parent education and family programming offered by the Rainbow pre-Kindergarten program. However, she also described feeling “timid” in the class and receiving comments from other parents or grandparents about her age. She shared: “I definitely learned a lot but I was just, I was definitely doing my best to make sure she was….getting what she needs and deserves I guess”.

Ruby’s reflection on her experience in parent education provides insights regarding the social effects of these programs. On the one hand, Ruby’s narrative highlights the potential benefits of opportunities for parents to learn from one another’s experiences, connect, commiserate, and engage with different parenting strategies that may be helpful. On the other hand, Ruby’s description of these parenting classes as a way to explore questions she had about her daughter’s academic performance (“‘is this who my child is supposed to be? Are they behind, are they ahead?’”) reflects the high stakes of parenting and raising a child in the “Kinder-race” (Brown, 2021, p.5). Ruby’s narrative invites further questions to be raised about an education system that provokes these concerns: who decides who children are supposed to be? Who decides what ‘behind’ or ‘ahead’ looks like and for what ultimate end? In the next section, I elaborate on how my

conversation with Ruby highlighted the 'complexity' of parenting and making education choices for children.

The complexity of parenting

My conversations with Ruby highlight the implications of an ECEC policy discourse that places immense pressure on children and families to perform and promises grave costs for 'getting it wrong' in the early years of a child's life. I gained further insight regarding Ruby's experiences navigating parenting when I asked if there are other aspects of her identity that she wanted to share and felt are important for me to understand about her. Ruby responded:

> Um, you know, I had Lavender young. I had her during my undergrad. I was twenty when I got pregnant and then twenty one when I had her, um and so I felt like I was doing more in my opinion I would say, I was doing a lot, I was doing what my niece would say 'the most'… because I didn't want to- you know just being so young, when I was in the parent education class… everyone had a good ten years on me, minimum, the other parents, and so I didn't feel like I needed to prove something but I just wanted to get the point across that I was, I was competent enough to be a parent because that definitely gets challenged when you're so young… And just to kind of show that yes, I may be young but- I'm definitely young- but I'm doing my part to make sure that my child doesn't miss out on anything meaningful at a very young age, um, like my family would say like "why are you trying to enroll her in school so young? She's barely even- she's not even three. She's barely potty trained". No, she wasn't even potty trained when we started. She wasn't and so it was, everyone just felt like I was just doing the absolute most, and I was just trying to tell them like 'hey there's a lot of things that you guys didn't have the opportunities to do'…

Ruby further reflected:

> there's so many things you don't think of, when you're raising, at least when I was raising Lavender, I just figured like 'hey you know, she's fed, she's clean, she's happy', then it's like, 'whoa! What about all these things that we're supposed to be learning…supposed to be working on?' It really opens your eyes to like how complex parenting is. You're, you're always striving to do the best you can and incorporate so many things, and you're just kind of like 'am I forgetting something? Am I not doing this? Should I be doing more of this?' You know, it's kind of just trying to find that balance of what is important to you…like the things you want to teach your child. You can only teach so much at certain

> ages so it's like just making sure you reinforce those things that are important to you that um, that you want to like instill in them.

Ruby also shared:

> I felt like I may be young but I do have the knowledge, I know the language, um there shouldn't be a reason that I, that I shouldn't give Lavender the same opportunities as like other parents who are older than me that have way more knowledge than I do, that have a lot more experiences than I do.

Additionally, Ruby emphasized the value of Lavender's pre-K teachers, stating: "she was able to be taught a lot more than even I would be able to teach her if I was at home". Ruby also described needing to "teach (her)self and be able to teach Lavender".

Ruby's insights reflect the pressure and added labor that many parents and particularly mothers experience as they try to provide their children with the kind of education opportunities that they believe, and that policy actors claim determine children's future success in school and life. As I read our conversation, I was struck by moments where Ruby expressed uncertainty, as well as doubt regarding the knowledge she could provide for Lavender, although I can certainly relate, given my perception of Ruby as such a thoughtful, supportive parent, who was navigating a lot of responsibilities. I argue that Ruby's narrative needs to be read alongside a Minnesota ECEC policy discourse that seems intent on soliciting parents' concerns, in part by framing BIPOC children through a deficit lens. By comparison, Hazel, who self-identified as white, seemed to view the role of educators in her daughter's learning differently than Ruby. When I asked Hazel about the benefits of Indigo attending pre-K for their family, she highlighted the 'mental and social stimulation' Indigo was receiving in the Rainbow classroom and shared: "having someone else do it… instead of us was

great". Absent from Hazel's narrative was the kind of questioning or concern regarding whether she was doing enough for Indigo to prepare her for a successful future.

Ruby also reflects on her mother's experiences navigating ECEC choices for her, which is meaningful in regards to Ruby's own priorities for Lavender's education. Ruby shared:

> my mom was only here for about six months, in America, before she, um, had me, and so there wasn't-- she didn't have that knowledge as things to do as far as getting us enrolled in school really early, um like I went to preschool for sure but that was mostly from the guidance of like um, who was it, I think it was like my doctor and they put you, they get you somebody like on WIC.

Ruby then contrasts her mother's experience navigating ECEC with her own, sharing:

> I felt like I may be young but I do have the knowledge, I know the language, um there shouldn't be a reason that I, that I shouldn't give Lavender the same opportunities as like other parents who are older than me that have way more knowledge than I do, that have a lot more experiences than I do…

In the above passages, Ruby captures the labor that parents undertake to cultivate education opportunities for their children.

When reflecting back to Minnesota ECEC policy actors' description of how crucial the first years of life are in 'determining' a child's future and the deleterious personal and social consequences of a less than 'ideal childhood', it is no wonder that Ruby feels such pressure to ensure her daughter has opportunities for future academic success. This seems particularly unjust when one considers that the promises of education often do not deliver. This is suggested by Ruby's own higher education experiences, as she describes "do(ing) nothing" with her higher education degree. While Ruby wants to go back to school, part of the reason she values her current employment is because she can bring her youngest daughter and avoid paying for childcare, which in Minnesota is incredibly expensive.

Ruby's narrative is reflective of Shirazi's (2020) and Vavrus's (2021) engagement of Berlant's (2011) concept of "cruel optimism" (p.1) to articulate the ambiguity and tensions of relying on education as a means to pursue a more certain or just future. Shirazi (2020) highlights Berlant's (2011) explanation of how this optimism encompasses "a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (p. 2). Berlant (2011) further clarifies that "optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving" (p.2). Applied to Ruby's narrative, although higher education had not translated into a career path aligned with Ruby's degree, she sustained a belief in the importance of education opportunities, starting with pre-K. I want to be clear that this analysis is in no way intended to be a critique of Ruby's continued belief in the possibilities of education. Rather, I aim to highlight the complexity and tensions that parents face as they invest faith, effort, and resources into an education system that often fails to deliver and routinely subject children and families to discursive and material harm. Yet, what choice do parents really have?

Negotiations of Investment Discourse

In this final section, I explore how Ruby, Hazel, and Rose negotiated investment discourse as a rationale for ECEC's purposes. During interviews, I gave a brief description of the investment rationale to each participant and then asked for their insights regarding this way of framing ECEC. While all participants articulated support for aspects of investment discourse, including the economic rationale for ECEC as

offering a return on the state's investment in children's education, they also expressed reservations and signaled limitations of this dominant discourse. I now turn to explore these discursive negotiations.

Hazel saw investment discourse as a reasonable policy frame. However she also expressed reservations as to whether it captured ECEC's importance and potential benefits. In the following excerpt, I ask Hazel for her view on the dominance of investment discourse for policymakers.

Alex: "... do you see any like limitations with that way of justifying pre-K? So this idea of it as like an investment to build the future workforce, like does anything about that feel like a limitation to you?

Hazel: Like, would preschool limit… like paying for preschool, is that what you're saying? Would paying for preschool kind of –

Alex: No, like, like this idea of, of framing or justifying pre-K as being valuable cuz it builds a future workforce and it reduces social spending, like, does anything about that argument kind of feel like limited or problematic to you?

Hazel: Um, that's a great question …I guess I feel like even for kids where that might not happen, even for kids where…they still might struggle…or still might need public support in their adults years, pre-K is still very important for them—

Alex: Mmm

Hazel: --and I guess it probably ties back to being less dependent than they would be otherwise, that's probably a very, very valid point. Um, but yeah, it does seem like there are so many benefits, that that, what you described doesn't encompass all of the benefits probably.

Here, Hazel implies that there are benefits for children to attend pre-K, such as the impact on their future development and wellbeing that extend beyond economic returns.

Like Hazel, Ruby's reflection on the individual and social value of ECEC aligned with aspects of investment rationale. Ruby's comments express an alignment with Minnesota ECEC policy actors' representation of early childhood as a high stakes period,

which lays the foundation for children's future academic success. This is reflected in the following passage, where Ruby describes the importance of early education:

> sometimes I feel like, when kids, when kids aren't where they're supposed to be, um grade wise, for their age, you know if they're not where they're supposed to be, typically you know they just kind of move forward, they just kind of move forward to the next grade, to the next grade, and then it's like their foundation was never really built.

Ruby engages the ECEC as a 'race' metaphor again, stating: "they're not quite there at kindergarten and they just keep moving forward, then there are going to be other interventions that are going to be needed later on in life to kind of get them where they need to be. Otherwise you just never catch up".

Ruby also initially showed support for the policy frame representing ECEC as a means to build a future labor force. However, as I followed up and prompted Ruby's potential critiques of this discourse, it seemed her support for this frame was tenuous. I asked Ruby if she saw anything problematic about the investment frame for ECEC or if she was "on board." She was hesitant and responded, "I want to say I'm on board but I feel like it's a trick question." I could tell she sensed I had my own reservations regarding investment discourse. Souto-Manning (2014c) cautions that researchers should refrain from imposing their personal beliefs regarding what can be considered 'critical'. Instead, Souto-Manning (2014c) advises that researchers are better served seeking participants' own critical insights. This recommendation generally informed my approach to engaging with the participants in this dissertation research. However, in the interaction described above, I decided to state my critical reflection on investment discourse in the hopes this may invite Ruby to share critical views she may hold. I told Ruby about my concerns about the priority investment discourse placed on ECEC as a means to build a

future workforce and to address broader social problems. I further shared that I worried this discourse was "put(ting) a lot of responsibility on young children", mainly to "fight against all of these bigger social barriers". After sharing my perspective, I asked Ruby for her thoughts. Ruby reflected: "I feel like, you know, I feel like preschool is just one tiny step… into like much bigger issues". In the following excerpt from our conversation, she elaborates on this perspective:

> I don't think universal preschool is going to… set us up to have a better, a better economy in the future, or anything, I just feel like, I feel like you're more setting up these kids as individuals…as opposed to like a whole—I feel like we can't think about it as 'hey, we're gonna be helping society', like yes, they will be contributing to society but like, in a way that they want to". , not thinking about it as 'hey, we're going to be investing all this money in all these little kids and once they get to a certain age, you know our economy is going to be this, and they are going-- we're gonna have so many people in the workforce'.

She further states, "I feel like it should be looked at more like 'hey, we are going to be affording these kids an opportunity to be who they want to be". Here, Ruby is not necessarily stating how she thinks ECEC currently operates, but instead, how its purposes should be imagined: as a means to support students to fulfill their unique paths and goals. Ruby also stated strong support for universal pre-K, contending: "… I feel like it should be … a thing where everybody should be able to send their kid to a preschool without having to worry about how they're going to pay for it, regardless of their income."

Through my conversation with Rose, I gleaned insights regarding the tensions and challenges that educators face as they seek to support their students, uphold their pedagogical priorities and values, while also grappling with the high expectations their students will likely face in kindergarten. When I inquired about Rose's perspective on Minnesota policymakers' justification of ECEC as an investment, she stated: "Like I agree, like what I said about the connection to reading and needing less intervention in

elementary years…I believe it comes from early childhood…" While Rose saw this view of ECEC as offering a return, she also highlighted the contradictions of this policy frame as a result of the constraints placed on ECEC practitioners. Rose noted one limitation of investment discourse is that policymakers "don't want to pay early childhood teachers the same as other teachers." Rose further shared that the constraints on teachers' ability to provide high quality programming have worsened with the COVID-19 pandemic, as teachers are "paid hourly" and "everything is cut".

While Rose was critical of the increased and narrowing academic expectations for ECEC, she also seemed to recognize a need to prepare her students to face these expectations once they reached kindergarten. As previously outlined, Rose used play-based activities to support students to develop the skills they would need to face the assessments and expectations that awaited them in kindergarten. Rose discussed her focus on supporting students' numeracy, fine-motor, and early literacy skills, all of which they would be assessed in kindergarten. Rose's emphasis on school readiness aligns with policymakers' investment discourse. However, Rose provided additional context regarding why she prioritizes supporting students to develop these skills, as she discussed how students "start reading basically in kindergarten," and "they are doing so much writing in kindergarten and first grade."

While Rose seemed to view readying students for kindergarten as a core purpose of pre-K, she also expressed concerns regarding the implications of this focus, the demands it puts on children and educators, and its effects on ECEC practice. For instance, Rose told me that the kindergarten teachers she collaborates with "don't like the curriculum that was given to them and… think it's like a first-grade level, what used to

be first grade". Rose also shares that kindergarten teachers "were devastated, they don't have time for dramatic play. Maybe it happens like once a week for thirty minutes or something like that". Rose's insights reflect research on trends in ECEC, which finds higher academic expectations being placed on some of our youngest students (Brown, 2021). For instance, Bassok et al.'s (2016) research found that kindergarten teachers are adopting an increased focus on "literacy and math" (p.15) alongside "a concerning drop in time spent on art, music, science, and child-selected activities, as well as much more frequent use of standardized testing" (p. 15).

Rose also shed light on how these increased expectations for pre-K and kindergarten perpetuate disparities in ECEC. Rose shared: "So the kids who didn't go to preschool or have really low skills, they just get lost and um, they have to spend a lot of time finding tutoring for them or people who can really catch them up." Rose expressed her opposition to these heightened demands that were being placed on herself, her colleagues, and their students, as she stated: "I think that kindergarten should still be kindergarten and have the kids play more."

An aspect of investment discourse that Rose agreed with was the notion that access to ECEC is a means of advancing equal opportunity for students and addressing the 'achievement gap' in Minnesota. In the following excerpt, Rose shares her thoughts on this policy frame.

Rose: Yeah, uh, yeah the, the achievement gap is real you know and it's still um the biggest, in Minnesota, I think it's the place where the achievement gap between white kids and Black boys is the biggest in the country for whatever reason that is. I think that the kids that don't have-- and this year we also don't have transportation. I don't know if you remember how diverse my class was last year?

Alex: Yeah.

Rose: It's because we had scholarships and we had a van service that would bring kids to school. This year when we don't have uh, um, when we don't have vans, most of the kids who cannot, who don't have parents who drive or have just one car, they don't get preschool, um because there's no way to bring them to school so that's part—

Alex: Mmm

Rose: --that plays into the achievement gap as well. I have one, one child of Color this year in my whole class.

Rose seemed to accept the legitimacy of the policy frame that there is an achievement gap in Minnesota between Black students, particularly Black boys, and white students, and sees this as something ECEC can help address. It is noteworthy that Rose does not cite racial injustice as the source of this gap. Instead, when Rose references the gap in achievement between Black boys and white students as the biggest in the country she states, 'for whatever reason that is'. Rose indicates that removing services, like the van service that brought kids to her school, has meant there is less racial diversity in her class. Here, Rose is highlighting how she sees reduced services disproportionately impacting BIPOC students and in turn, reinforcing education disparities in the state. While Rose took steps to create an inclusive classroom, and shared that she was working on exploring her biases, her comment regarding the achievement gap indicates the need for a deeper interrogation of the structural injustices that continue to position Black children at a deficit.

Conclusion

The experiences and insights offered by Rose, Ruby, and Hazel reflect the challenges and complexities of parenting and educating amidst precarious conditions, competing demands, and high stakes for pre-K. Unlike previous research regarding how educators' and parents' values regarding ECEC conflict (Tobin et al., 2013), parents

Ruby and Hazel seemed quite aligned with the pedagogical goals that Rose held for the Rainbow classroom. Rose, Ruby, and Hazel all emphasized the importance of pre-K as a space for children to socialize and play with their peers, as well as to learn important social-emotional skills to support their relationships with others and personal well-being. Additionally, all three participants valued pre-K as a space for children to learn the social-behavioral and academic skills that would support their transition to kindergarten, and their ability to meet the future demands of schooling, which Rose noted are high in the Rainbow pre-K program's district. Each participant seemed to view investment discourse as a logical frame, while also destabilizing its dominance: by questioning its logic, its consistencies, and its ability to reflect the most important priorities for ECEC.

As Fernandes (2017) argues, dominant discourses routinely find their way into the narratives we tell about our lives and the meaning we ascribe to them. However, Fernandes (2017) also invites us to ask: "Under what conditions do stories reproduce dominant relations of power, and when can they be subversive?" (p.3) and advises attention to moments where stories "go off script" (p. 12). While many of the ECEC priorities and values that Hazel, Rose, and Ruby held aligned with aspects of the Minnesota ECEC policy discourse described in chapter four, there were also notable moments of departure. I argue that the meaning and value that Ruby and Hazel ascribe to their daughter's social-emotional learning in the Rainbow classroom offered an example of "go(ing) off script" (Fernandes, 2017, p.12) or subtly resisting the abstracted, hyper-rational, and individualized logic of investment discourse. Additionally, Rose shared how because of her experience immigrating to the US and struggling to navigate ECEC for her children, it is important to her to prioritize communication with parents. Ruby reflected

on her experience as a young parent and her mother's experiences navigating ECEC as a recent immigrant, as she described her commitment to support her daughter's educational opportunities. Ruby's insights and concerns powerfully capture the complexity and labor of parenting in a society where the stakes of a child's early education performance are so high. It is deeply unjust to have an ECEC system that positions parents to feel as though they have to do "the most", as Ruby puts it, in order for their children to have a viable future. This is especially true given that education is not the "magic charm" (Pieterse, 2002, p. 1034) that policy actors claim. The injustice is further compounded when one considers how in chapter four, I highlighted policy actors' co-option of ECEC's social value in the service of Minnesotan business interests and labor market demands.

Chapter 6 : Experiences of Childhood in Minnesota Pre-K

In this chapter I shift attention away from adults' assumptions regarding childhood and their translation of children's supposed interests to highlight students' perspectives regarding what matters to them in pre-K. Here, I address this study's fourth research question: What are pre-K students' priorities in ECEC, and what might their views contribute to ECEC policy reform? I draw on data from three weeks of participant-observations of twelve students in their pre-K classroom, as well as semi-structured conversations with eight of these students to explore their experiences with and priorities in pre-K.

Conversations with students were conducted at a table in the hallway outside of their classroom. I began our conversation by inviting students to draw their classroom. As students drew, I shared that I was new to their classroom and was interested in learning 'what was important to know about their classroom'. Our conversations generally focused on discussing important and favorite places and activities, as well as what younger students should know before coming to pre-K. While I was only part of the Rainbow classroom for a short time, through playing with students, expressing a deep interest in their ideas and an eagerness to learn about their classroom, even this short time led to rich insights regarding their experiences and priorities in school.

As Mayall (1996) articulates, "Children's lives are lived through childhoods constructed for them by adult understandings of childhood and what children should be" (p. 1). Adults' attempts to perceive and translate children's interests can have the effect of misrepresenting (Dockett & Perry, 2005) and silencing children (Lee, 2001). As a result, research adopting the new sociology of childhood (NSC) is advised to "seek

children's unmediated voices and to pass those unmediated voices on to a wider audience" (Lee, 2001, p. 133). Drawing on NSC, in this chapter I highlight and reflect on the insights that students shared with me to elicit engagement with their experiences and priorities (James, 1996). However, I do not see this representation as "unmediated" (Lee, 2001, p. 133). Throughout the research process, from the way I engaged in conversations with students to my approach to analyzing their insights and developing arguments that I then present in this dissertation, I have mediated the knowledge that students shared. Thus, I am informed by James's (1996) wisdom that "to claim to write from 'the child's' perspective, is not to make claims to reveal the authentic child but, more humbly, to provide a rendering of what childhood might be like" (p.315).

In this chapter, I apply my conversations with students and observations of their class to explore "what childhood might be like" (James, 1996, p. 315) in the context of a suburban pre-K classroom, situated in the greater- Minneapolis area of Minnesota. I describe how pre-K students' narratives of their classroom highlight a different set of priorities regarding pre-K from those of policymakers, as they navigate being away from home, classroom rules and processes, new activities, and complex emotions and relationships.

I conclude this chapter by applying NSC's emphasis on the benefits of engaging in research with children (Marshall, 2016; Matthews, 2007; Mayall, 2002). I suggest that engaging children's insights regarding their schooling invites critical questions to be raised about Minnesota ECEC policy actors' taken-for-granted assumptions regarding childhood. I argue that engaging pre-K students as complex social actors and knowledge producers regarding their schooling destabilizes policymakers' reductive framing of

children both at a deficit and yet, tasked with immense responsibility for the future. This move is significant, as it shifts children from being represented as objects of education policy decisions, whose interests are protected by policy actors, to agentic beings with their own education priorities. As this chapter argues, Minnesota policy actors' representation of children's education as an investment in their future capital jeopardizes the education opportunities that children regard as valuable.

Valued Places and Activities: The importance of art and play

A prominent theme that emerged through students' narrations of pre-K involves reflecting on meaningful places in their classroom and school, and the activities that students do in those place. These reflections challenge the vision of ECEC offered by investment discourse, which reduces ECEC to a set of technologies to render a high return vis a vis a competitive future workforce and reduced need for social spending. Instead, the pre-K students I spoke with described a place where they spent their time exercising, playing, pretending, creating, and grappling with their new environment and community. When asked about favorite places in the Rainbow classroom, students often highlighted activities they enjoyed doing in those places. The activities students most commonly spoke about during our conversations were participating in dramatic play or artistic activities, going outside to the playground, or going to the gym.

Twice a day, for approximately twenty-five minutes, students went outside to the large playground or to the gym, depending on the weather. Both art and dramatic play were activities that students visited during a curricular rotation, which lasted between forty to forty-five minutes, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Each student had a unique schedule and would spend approximately ten minutes at each center and

then rotate to a different one. During each of these curricular rotations, students also had about twenty minutes to engage in dramatic play. For art, students would sometimes work on their own individual projects, using paint for example, and sometimes they would participate in a teacher- led art project, such as making bracelets. The classroom's dramatic play area had clothes for dress up, a doll house, and rotating props, such as a bakery, an ice cream shop, and a post office/ letter writing station, where many students loved to color and write notes. There was also a carpeted area at the front of the classroom that was used for circle and dramatic play time. This area had puzzles, books, cars, trains, roads that the students could build, blocks, and other toys for the students to play with. While centers involved participation in activities that the teacher had planned, and were sometimes teacher-led, students typically had more freedom to explore in dramatic play and art. Dramatic play offered a time for students to engage in play with one another, whereas at the centers, students generally focused on more individualized activities, although group work was sometimes involved.

The Rainbow classroom's lead teacher, Rose, described how she adopted a play-based curricular approach. The emphasis on play in the Rainbow classroom was also reflected by many of the students that I spoke with. This is exemplified through my conversation with Indigo. I began our conversation by stating: "I'm new here. What do you think would be helpful for me to know about your classroom?" Indigo responded: "Um, that we play a lot." When I followed up on what kinds of things Indigo plays she shared "bakery" and "dress up". Later in my conversation with Indigo I inquired about a place she enjoys in the classroom and she stated "the sensory table" and when I asked what happens there, Indigo shared, "We can play."

Olive explained that when she was three, she was in a different teacher's classroom but now she is in Rose's classroom. I asked, "So what do you do in Rose's class now that is different?" In response, Olive exclaimed that Rose's class is "SO much fun!" When I followed up on what is fun, Olive shared: "art and dramatic play". Olive mentioned dramatic play three separate times during our conversation. I also asked "Where are the important places in your classroom? Can you draw an important place in your classroom for me?" In asking this question, I was informed by Barnikis's (2015) research with young students, which highlighted how inviting students to map out their classrooms can invite valuable insights regarding how power and decision-making are negotiated within the space. I was particularly interested in how students would interpret this question and if they would highlight spaces they found meaningful or that they perceived to be meaningful to their teacher. Olive responded, "Place, like, ohh, there is dramatic play is kind of… great". Then, when I asked what Olive's favorite place in the classroom is she again answered dramatic play. When I asked why, she shared: "Because I like coloring".

Figure 2: Olive's drawing of the Rainbow classroom

Turquoise shares the following description of places that she like in the classroom:

Alex: …. What is a place in the classroom that you really like?
Turquoise: Mmmm, art.
A: Ooo, can you draw that for me?
T: Pictures. This is my ____ (inaudible) paint brush.
A: Oh wow.
T: I'll be painting on a, on a paper sheet.
A: Oh I see that.
T: ___ (inaudible)
A: Oh wow, what are you painting?
T: A… princess.
A: What's another place you like in the classroom?
T: Mmm, mm, dramatic play.
A: Ohhh.
T: It has a bunch of toys. This is the table where you play at the doll house. This is the house _____ (inaudible). Those are the windows, this is the door.

Figure 3: Turquoise's drawing of the Rainbow classroom

Lavender identified art and centers as an important place in the classroom.

Meanwhile, she identified dramatic play as her favorite place in the classroom. In the following excerpt from our conversation, Lavender explained why she enjoys dramatic play:

Alex: Mm. So you're going to draw dramatic play. Why do you like dramatic play?
Lavender: Because it has a doll house and the first thing, the first thing in dramatic play I love is the doll house.
A: Oh, why do you love the doll house?
L: Because, because, because everybody fights over being the mom.
A: Oh really, that's something that everyone wants to do?

L: Yeah. And this is gonna be the carpet.
A: What happens at the carpet?
L: Um, you put them on it, you put some toys on it later, you can put some toys on it, and these, and it has tables too.

Figure 4: Lavender's drawing of the Rainbow classroom

For Lavender, dramatic play seemed to provide a space for her to negotiate her relationship with her peers and play with potential future adult roles, such as being a mom. While Lavender did not state why being 'the mom' was such a coveted role, it is possible that it was valued as a way to engage in care-taking and nurturing behaviors, or alternatively to be positioned as a kind of authority figure in play. Either way, through Lavender's narrative the future becomes something students can play with as opposed to something to intensely labor for, as is often the frame that policy actors provide.

In addition to dramatic play as a valued place, students also identified the gym and outside as places they liked. Coral shared: "I like the gym because we get to run around and go on bikes". During our discussion of places that Olive likes, she shared: "Outside because it has the bikes like the gym". She also shares that she likes the slides and that the "swings are SO much fun".

Almost all of the activities that students highlighted as 'important' or their 'favorite' were child-led, free spaces, such as dramatic play, outside, the gym, and art. Only one student mentioned 'centers' as an important place, which typically involved engaging in activities that were more teacher-directed. This finding contrasts with the future-oriented vision of ECEC offered by Minnesota policy actors, who value ECEC as a means to ready children for school. This finding is also different when compared to Barnikis (2015) research, who highlighted how "teacher-organised spaces dominate(d) the children's conversation about their experiences in their current classrooms" (p.300).

The emphasis on play that students in the Rainbow classroom shared echoes Einarsdottir's (2005) findings from research with children at an ECEC program in Iceland. Einarsdottir (2005) also found that children regarded play as important and particularly, engaging in activities and play that were freely chosen by the students. Additionally, Pelletier's (2013) research with students participating in Full Day Kindergarten in Ontario. This research found that students enjoyed attending kindergarten and particularly valued play. Brown's (2021) research with kindergarten students found that they would like to reform ECEC to include more time for play. Tatlow-Golden et al.'s (2016) research, found that students' discussion of activities in their classroom focused on play and art. While in Tatlow-Golden et al.'s (2016) study play was a key topic, it did not always receive positive associations, as students also reflected on negative peer interactions when discussing play. However, in the context of this dissertation research, students from the Rainbow classroom rarely spoke about play negatively. Instead, students referred to dramatic play as a favorite or important activity.

While adults commonly refer to children's play as their 'work' and emphasize its role in supporting their learning, the students I spoke with seemed to understand dramatic play as intrinsically valuable. In other words, they did not describe play as a means to a different ends but saw it as an end in itself. Johnson and Wu (2019) note that "defining play is illusive" (p.80) but play typically involves the following features:

> a) accompanied by positive affect; (b) freely chosen; (c) under the primary control of the young child; (d) motivated by the play itself; (e) ones for which the meaning is primarily determined by the young child; (f) nonliteral and dynamic; (g) in need of relaxed circumstances or a less stressed mental frame; and (h) reciprocally related; that is, play actions and play thoughts build on one another. (p.80)

This list provides insight as to why students may have regarded play as intrinsically valuable. Johnson and Wu's (2019) features of play identify how playful activities are aligned with children's own agency, freedom, and "relaxed circumstances" (p. 80). Perhaps students valued play as a time when they did not have to perform but instead, could engage in activities of their choosing and that brought them joy. The students' prioritization can be read alongside a policy landscape both in the state and nationally (as reflected by Brown, 2021) that is intent on placing increased academic demands on them. While their teacher sought to protect their time for play, it is possible that the students were aware of these demands and valued play as a space that resisted these pressures.

The heightened academic pressures that policy actors place on pre-K threaten children's opportunities for dramatic play, which was an activity that students regarded as important. Rose, the Rainbow classroom's lead teacher expressed that the academic expectations that administrators hold for pre-K and kindergarten translate into a reduced time for play. Thus, investment discourse lends to ECEC practices that conflict with pre-K students' priorities at school.

Important Classroom Processes, Routines, and Rules

When I asked students what was important to know about pre-K, they discussed behaviors, routines, norms, and rules. Violet oriented me to the processes for students arriving to school and having lunch. In the following excerpt, Violet narrates how students arrived to school: "First, we go to school; get off lunch bag and bottle; put folder; balance beam; hand wash; alligator, tracing, butterfly, bicycle, bear, rolling". In this passage Violet describes how students put away their belongings and then participate in activities to help them develop their gross and fine motor skills. Violet also described how "after the lunch we read a book, get a partner, get a nice place to sit and read." In addition, Violet told me about phrases that Rose, her teacher, would use to get students' attention or indicate they needed to transition to a new activity. These phrases included Rose saying, "macaroni cheese", and then students chanted, "everybody freeze". Many of these phrases came from books that the students were reading in class.

In addition to discussing important routines and processes in the Rainbow classroom, students outlined the ways they conducted their bodies and behavior to conform to classroom norms and expectations. Sometimes students highlighted behaviors they should adopt as they participated in classroom activities. Violet told me that during group circle time, students "raise hands to tell, like that" and demonstrated how she would raise her hand to indicate she wanted to participate in the conversation. Olive emphasized the importance of rules during our conversation, as it was the first thing she spoke about when I asked about their classroom.

Alex: … So I'm new here so what is helpful to know?
Olive: Rules.
A: There's rules?
Interrupted for about 30 seconds by students walking by.

A: That is very helpful to know. So there are rules in the classroom. What kind of rules? What's an important rule in the classroom?
O: "Please stop".

In this passage, Olive highlights how rules can serve the purpose of helping students navigate interactions with their peers.

Students placed particular emphasis on how they should orient their bodies to keep themselves and their peers safe. This topic seemed to come up especially when I asked about knowledge that would be useful for younger kids who are starting pre-K, as reflected in the following passage from my conversation with Jade.

Alex: So if you were talking to a younger kid before they start pre-K what would you tell them is important to know?
Jade: Sharing is one thing.
A: Sharing, OK?
J: Wait, sharing is one thing and the other is be safe.
A: That's a good one.
J: Watch where you're going, otherwise… blood, be calm, and… no hitting.

Like Jade, Coral also highlighted ways to relate to other students as important knowledge for children entering pre-K, including ways to avoid hurting others.

Alex: What should younger kids know before they start pre-k?
Coral: Helping others, no pushing.
A: Why?
C: Because you'll get hurt. I think maybe no hitting, no pushing no kicking because you don't want anything to get hurt.

When I asked Indigo about helpful knowledge for starting pre-K, I framed the question slightly differently since I knew she had a younger sister.

Alex: And then what do you think younger kids should know, so like you have a little sister right? What should your little sister know before she starts pre-k?
Indigo: To be quiet and to be safe.
A: To be quiet and to be safe? Those are helpful things. When is it important to be quiet?
I: In a classroom or a movie theater or a show or something.
A: Yeah, in a classroom or in a movie theater or show? Are there times when it's OK to be loud in the classroom. Yeah? What are those times?
I: When, when, when, when, when um, we, we are in a room…

I followed up with Indigo about her insight that it is important to be safe and she responded: “Walking feet, eyes watching, listening ears”. Here, Indigo is referring to some of the different sayings that Rose and the students used to describe how students’ should conduct their bodies. Turquoise shares similar insights in this passage from our conversation:

Alex: … I’m new here, what is important to know about your classroom?
Turquoise: Uh, walking feet.
Alex: Walking feet is important to know? Why is that important to know?
T: Uh, so you don’t run.
A: Oh, Ok.
T: Walk.
A: You walk. In your classroom?
T: Uh huh.
Alex: What else is important to know?
T: Mmm, I look and so you don’t trip.
A: Mmm. Ooo, what are you drawing there? Tell me about that.
T: So this is him walking the feet… Uh, walking feet.
A: Walking feet is important to know? Why is that important to know?
T: Uh, so you don’t run.
A: Oh, Ok.
T: Walk.
A: You walk. In your classroom?
T: Uh huh.
A: What else is important to know?
T: Mmm, I look and so you don’t trip.

My conversations with Jade, Coral, Indigo, and Turquoise reflect an emphasis on ways for students to conduct themselves that are intended to keep bodies safe and free from harm.

Students’ emphasis on rules and ways to regulate their body in line with classroom expectations aligns with previous research engaging children’s perspectives on their schooling (Barnikis, 2015; Brown,2021; Dockett & Perry, 1999, 2004, 2005). These findings reflect Dockett and Perry’s (2004, 2005) findings through the Starting School

Research Project, as well as Barnikis's (2015) findings from research regarding children's negotiations of different ECEC environments. Both Dockett and Perry (2005) and Barnikis (2015) asked students participating in their studies what children who are new to their classroom or starting school should understand. In response, students emphasized the importance of rules and being aware of the rules. In Barnikis's (2015) research, a student shared that it would be important for children to "listen to the teacher" and another student states that children need "to learn the rules of the class".

I argue that students' emphasis on rules and regulating their bodies in line with classroom expectations could be read in two ways. First, one could interpret these insights as a reflection of children's awareness of the hierarchical power structures within their learning environment (Barnikis, 2015; Dockett & Perry, 1999). Applying a Foucauldian theorization of discipline, Raby (2008) argues classroom rules are "frequently presented as fostering responsibility, respect and self-discipline, yet rules are top-down and hinge on mute obedience" (p. 77). Barnikis (2015) argues that "Classroom rules, which foster unquestioning compliance, uphold the authority of the teacher in order to maintain 'control' of the classroom and do not foster children's critical and reflective thinking" (p.300) and that these types of rules reflect a "lack of critical thought and democratic practice" (p.300). In this way, rules can be interpreted as part of a system that governs children and positions them as subject to the decisions of adults.

In the context of the Rainbow classroom, rules did not seem to be employed in this kind of hierarchical and uncritical way. Extensive emphasis was placed on supporting students to problem solve and negotiate their relationships with one another. The students I spoke with also did not explicitly state the author of rules in their

classroom, as was the case with Dockett and Perry's (2004) research, where children identified that educators decide the rules. There was only one instance where Lavender reflected this kind of hierarchical structure of power and decision-making, as Lavender shared that it would be important for younger kids to know that "the teachers tell the kids what to do". Students also did not always indicate why the rules were important, although at times this reflected my own oversight, as I did not always follow up to inquire why a rules were important. However, often students aligned rules with safety.

In reflecting on students' discussion of rules, I suggest another interpretation regarding why they may hold meaning for students is because they offer a strategy to protect their bodies and negotiate their relationships with one another. Students' emphasis on rules related to protecting their bodies and other students' bodies from harm offered one area of potential alignment between policymakers' accounts of childhood and students' experiences, as both seem to highlight an element of risk. However, children did not portray their entire future as at risk, like policy actors, but instead, they focused on protecting themselves and their peers in the present moment.

Applying the feminist ethics of care, students' emphasis on rules that aligned with keeping bodies safe could be read as attempts to practice care. First, students' concern for other students' bodies reflects an emphasis on relationality, as they use rules to identify and take steps to respond to others' needs (Held, 2005; Noddings, 2010). It is noteworthy that Noddings (2010) highlights how within a framework of care and empathy, a focus on 'rules' should be approached cautiously, as "a highly developed capacity for empathy almost eliminates the need for rules" (p. 149). However, it seems that as young children learn about ways to identify and take care for their peers' bodies and needs, as well as

their own, strategies to guide their behavior may be helpful and are clearly valued by the students.

Second, students' prioritization of rules to protect their bodies can also be understood as aligning with self-care, which is deeply embedded in our relations with others (Ward, 2015). As I listen to my two year old daughter navigate relationships with students in her class and negotiate her body alongside other young bodies, I am struck by her emphasis on 'rules'. For instance, during dinner I usually ask my daughter about her day 'at school', to which she often responds with the phrases, "don't push friends" and "James (pseudonym) no push CC (my daughter)". When I think about the experience of being pushed and how jarring this must feel, I can relate to a desire for rules to negotiate these interactions and protect one's body. Observing my daughter's emphasis on strategies to protect her body and guide her interactions with other students has invited me to consider childhood as deeply embodied (Cockburn, 2005). It seemed that students in the Rainbow classroom may regard 'rules' as tools to protect their bodies and feel safe as they interact with other students.

Spaces and Strategies to Navigate Complex feelings

Many students expressed that they valued having space and strategies to recognize and work through their emotions. One space that supported students to process their emotions was the Rainbow classroom's 'safe place', where students could go if they felt sad or upset. This 'safe place' was a small, draped area in the classroom with pillows, blankets and a sign with calming strategies. On my second day of observations, Lavender highlighted the 'safe place' as she led me in an informal tour of the Rainbow classroom. Lavender told me that sometimes she would visit the 'safe place' when she missed her

mom. During my conversations with students, six out of the eights students that I spoke with highlighted the importance of the ‘safe place’.

Three students featured the safe place in their drawings, including Coral, in Figure 1, Indigo in Figure 5, and Jade in Figure 6.

Figure 5: Indigo's drawing of the safe place, pictured in the bottom, right.

Figure 6: Jade's drawing of the space, pictured on the right.

When questioned about why the safe place was an important place in the Rainbow classroom, students spoke about the different feelings that they process while in the safe place. This is represented through the following conversation with Jade:

Alex: … And what are the important places in your classroom? Will you draw them for me… some important places in your classroom? And you can use these markers too.

Jade: I need….this color.
A: Ok.
J: But I need like a wood... uh, I mean, like, Ok.
Long pause while Jade *is drawing.*
A: So what are you drawing here? What is this important place?
J: Um, after I'm finished drawing I can tell you.
A: Ok, that sounds good.
About 10 seconds pass.
J: K, done. It's the safe place.
A: Ohhh Ok, so that's right there right?
J: Mhmm
A: So why is that an important place?
J: Because when you feel mad or sad or shy you can go there and calm down.

Like Jade, Indigo and Coral identified the 'safe place' as somewhere they could go to calm their bodies. Coral saw the safe place as important "because it helps you calm your body down" and is somewhere you take "deep breaths". Similarly, Indigo shared that the safe place is important "Because it calms you down" and because you can "do lots of calming strategies (Indigo), which include "breathing" and "balloon". Like Indigo, Olive shared strategies associated with the safe place, which include: "Stars… stars, reading, balloons, and pretzels." Violet shared: "If you're sad you can go there… if you're stressed." The techniques that Indigo and Olive describes are part of the Conscious Discipline® (Bailey, 2001, 2016) framework that Rose adopts in the Rainbow classroom, previously outlined in chapter five. As a reminder, Conscious Discipline® emphasizes strategies to support both students and teachers to recognize and process their emotions, as well as to support students' problem-solving and relational skills (Bailey, 2001, 2016).

During my observations, I saw students use the "safe place" when they were feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, or when they simply wanted a quiet, separate place to process their feelings. I never saw the safe place be used as somewhere a teacher sent a

student for disciplinary purposes. Violet shared that the safe place was also somewhere to go “if you’re stressed”. Initially when Violet said this I thought: stressed? What is there to be stressed about in pre-K? However, through reflecting on my time in the Rainbow classroom, I observed the students enjoying school but also that it could be stressful to be away from home, navigate a new environment and relationships, while also learning new skills and concepts. I now realize that my response to Violet reflects a commonly-held assumption that unlike adults, children do not experience complex emotions, which could not be further from the case. Instead, “school elicits a range of emotions” (Tatlow-Golden et al., 2016, p. 110) for young children.

One example of when I observed a student using the safe place occurred on Parent Day. During Parent Day, students’ parents and caregivers joined the Rainbow classroom to participate in activities. Leading up to parent day, a number of group/circle conversations focused on anticipating this day. While students were excited for Parent Day, there was also significant conversation regarding how the previous Parent Day had been emotionally challenging, especially since many students felt sad when their parents left the Rainbow classroom. After the Parents left the classroom on the Parent Day that I observed, Turquoise was feeling quite sad and having a hard time participating in the group circle. She decided that instead of engaging in circle time, she wanted to go to the ‘safe place’. In this instance, the ‘safe place’ seemed to be a resource to help Turquoise cope with a complex emotional experience.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I checked in with Rose and shared preliminary findings from my conversation with students from the Rainbow classroom, including the emphasis that students had placed on the ‘safe place’. Rose was encouraged

but not surprised by the emphasis that students placed on the Rainbow classroom's 'safe place'. Rose shared that because she understood how important the safe place had been for students in her classroom, when the Rainbow classroom shifted to remote learning at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the first things she had the students do was create a "remote safe place" in their learning environment.

In addition to the 'safe place', a second classroom resource that seemed to support students' emotional learning was a book they had authored about themselves and their families. The book detailed activities that the students enjoyed, pictures of their families, and reflected how students navigate feelings, such as what they find helpful when they are feeling angry and what makes them happy. When I first joined the Rainbow classroom and shared that I wanted to learn about what was important in pre-K and their classroom, students recommended that I consult this book. Students' continued to emphasize the importance of this book, as throughout my time observing the Rainbow classroom they would refer me to it. While they did not share why they felt this book was meaningful for me to see, I gleaned insights regarding its importance through our interactions with it. For example, one day I found myself looking through the book with a student and slowly others joined. Eventually a large group of students had formed around us, with many students asking me to turn to their page. They seemed to revel in having details about themselves read aloud. Perhaps the fact that the book was authored by the students gave them a sense of pride. It seemed that students particularly enjoyed looking at pictures of their families. As I participated in the Rainbow classroom I noted that there were times students felt sad or stressed, particularly as they missed their loved ones. The

book seemed to offer a way for students to connect to their loved ones and also themselves when they experienced these emotions.

Negotiating relationships

In addition to valuing strategies to cope with their emotions and center themselves, students also described ways to interact with their peers. Students shared ways they kept their peers' bodies safe and reflected on how they behave in relation to their peers. Coral shared some of the important norms for interacting with members of the classroom community, which included: "being nice, not pushing people, I know you have to be nice." During my observations in the Rainbow classroom, I often noticed students turning to one another for comfort. In one of my observation notes, I remarked: "I notice how kind the students are to one another- how often they pat each other on the back, give a hug or encouragement". When I spoke with Rose about her goals for the students through pre-K she shared that she sought to teach them kindness.

In one instance I saw Jade get frustrated by an interaction he was having with a classmate who did not seem to want to play with him or play what he wanted to play. I could tell Jade was frustrated because he clenched his fists, his body seemed to tense up and a scowl formed on his face. Moments later, I saw Jade notice two other students nearby and he calmly walked over to them and asked for a hug. They each gave Jade a hug and he joined them to play. While young children are often positioned as only the recipients of care, this interaction highlights the important role that students can also play for one another as care providers (Cockburn, 2005).

Another way students discussed negotiating their relationships with one another was through access to toys and the potential conflict that may emerge when multiple

students want the same toy. Students highlighted strategies to mitigate conflict over toys, which included trading, taking turns, and sharing. Violet explained "If someone needs a toy, they want a turn, get a timer, when the timer is done, kids get a turn." Jade also provided sharing and trading as useful strategies to negotiate access to toys. I followed up to ask why sharing is helpful to know about and he said: "So, um, because if the other person wants the same thing as the, the other person wants, as the other person has, um, we um, the other person can say, can, can I please have that toy? And then the, and then he will say, um, after I'm done or yes". I followed up to ask what else is helpful to know about pre-K and Jade answered: "trading". When I asked why, he shared "because if the other person wants the same thing as the other, wait, so um, if, if the other person wants the same thing as the other person has they can like, um, sort of trade the other toy to the other person".

During our conversations, two students shared insights about the power relations in the Rainbow classroom, specifically in regard to their teachers and me. Garnet expressed that "you can't be little like me". When I first introduced myself to the class and explained that I would be joining their classroom to learn from them about pre-K, one student looked puzzled and said, "but we're just kids." In the following passage from my conversation with Lavender, she reflects on her positionality in the classroom and relationship with teachers:

Alex: Tell me about your classroom.
Lavender: I pretty don't know about my classroom.
A: Well, what do you think about your classroom? What can you tell me? I'm new here.
L: I'm pretty new here too.
A: Are you?
L: Mhmm.
A: So since you've been here, um, what have you learned about your classroom that you think would be helpful for me to know?

L: I'm pretty new here _____ (inaudible) classroom.
A: Ok, would you like to draw a picture of it?
L: *Nods.*
A: Ok, great. So you can choose any colors you like.

While Lavender enthusiastically drew her classroom and answered my questions, I sensed she continued to question the idea that she could be regarded as a knowledge producer regarding the Rainbow classroom. Later in our conversation, Lavender provided further insight regarding her views on knowledge production regarding pre-K:

Alex: So what about younger kids who are younger than you, what should younger kids know before they start Pre-K?
Lavender: Mmm.
Alex: What's important to know?
L: That the, the teachers tell the kids what to do.
Alex: Oh, Ok. What kind of things do the teachers tell the kids to do?
L: I don't know, like anything.
Alex: Oh.
L: Like anything in their brains them think of.
Alex: Will you say that one more time?
L: Like everything them think of in them heads
A: Oh.
L: I mean in them brains.
A: Do kids also have their own ideas of what to do?
L: Yeah …

Lavender's comments reflect a power structure where teachers are the ones who engage in knowledge production and decision-making.

I also noted moments where students sought to regulate one another's behavior. I now turn to highlight an example of how this came up in the Rainbow classroom. At lunchtime students would sit at tables, sometimes with a teacher present and sometimes on their own, and were encouraged to chat among their group. While Rose gave the students suggestions of questions they could ask their peers, including asking what everyone did the previous evening, the students' conversation generally seemed to flow freely and based on their own interests. They talked about pets, what they would do after

school, their lunches, and when I was present, students often had questions about my baby/ pregnancy, since I was nine months pregnant when I was observing and participating in their classroom. One day during lunch a student seemed to find the classroom too noisy and covered her ears. Rose, noted that a student was covering their ears and perhaps finding it too noisy so she encouraged the students to lower their voices. This inspired many students to cover their ears and make requests for the volume to continue to be lowered. Eventually, Rose reminded that it was important for students to still be able to enjoy one another's company and chat and if they continued to lower their voices, this would be difficult.

Knowledge and Skills

In addition to identifying students' priorities, I noted their omissions. As a result of policymakers' prioritization of school readiness and due to the overarching "schoolification" (Van Laere et al., 2012, p. 527) of ECEC in the United States, I expected that students would discuss learning knowledge and skills as important features of pre-K. However, during our conversations, this topic rarely came up. In fact, only two students mentioned knowledge and skills, which they brought up when I asked "what is important for younger kids to know before starting pre-K?' In response to this question, two students mentioned knowledge and skills. In response to a question about what her younger sister should know before starting pre-K, Indigo at first spoke about ways to be safe and how it is important to be quiet. Then, she shared: "Mmm, to learn how to crawl and to write letters and numbers". When I asked Violet what younger kids should know before they start pre-K, she shared "They know kinda numbers, sounds, ABCs ." Next, she clarified what she knows, stating: "I know sounds, ABCs, numbers, I know letters, I

know how to write my name. I think in my brain". During another conversation I had with Violet while sitting beside her for lunch, she shared that she goes to an after school 'tutoring' center and that she received 'one million percent' on a test, which she seemed to take great pride in.

These findings are reflective of previous research on children's perspectives regarding ECEC, which also found that children placed little emphasis on knowledge and skills as important as they begin kindergarten/school (Di Santo & Berman, 2012; Dockett & Perry, 2004). In this way, students' views on what is important in pre-K depart from that of policymakers. Unlike policymakers who prioritize children learning the academic content and skills that will prepare them for future academic success, students from the Rainbow classroom valued strategies to negotiate relationships, stay safe, and cope with new experiences and feelings.

The Emancipatory Possibilities of engaging children's insights regarding school

Drawing on the NSC, in this section I reflect on my experience conducting research with pre-K students. I argue engaging students' perspectives regarding their schooling highlights two emancipatory possibilities for ECEC policy discourse and practice. By emancipatory possibilities I am referring to forging greater freedoms both in regards to students' political status and subjectivity within ECEC, as well as in reimagining ECEC's purposes. First, I argue engaging children's insights regarding their schooling offers opportunities to destabilize the taken for granted assumptions regarding childhood posited by policy actors in the previous chapter. Where investment discourse routinely positions children as 'passive' and at a deficit (Moss, 2014), I engage the findings from this research to position children as social actors and knowledge producers.

Second, I explore how confronting the experiences of real, young beings who are grappling with a range of emotions and developing relationships highlights the limitations of a discourse that responsibilizes and instrumentalizes them.

Envisioning children as social actors and knowledge producers

The first emancipatory possibility of consulting children regarding pre-K is that it can destabilize the deficit lens that policy actors leverage against students. NSC instructs that seeking children's perspectives regarding their education is both ethically and "epistemological(ly)" (Marshall, 2016, p. 59) valuable. Children have an intimate understanding of their needs and interests, which adults cannot fully anticipate. As a result, "education policy creation and agenda setting that does not allow for children's participation will inevitably be incomplete and misinformed" (Marshall, 2016, p. 59). Consulting children regarding their education is also valuable, "Not because they are more 'natural' or 'creative' in any simplified, romanticised or primitive sense, but simply because they are not yet completely stuck within orthodox thought"(Olsson, 2013, p. 251) . In this next section, I highlight moments where students' challenge assumptions regarding what matters in school. I also reflect on how I navigated students' own assumptions regarding their role as knowledge producers.

Reflective of Marshall's (2016) argument, the students that I spoke with shared priorities and experiences in the Rainbow classroom that I had not anticipated, yet deeply enriched my understanding of pre-K. One example of an insight that I had not anticipated was the emphasis that students placed on the "safe place" as one of the most important places in their classroom. Another insight from my conversations with students that I expected but was struck by the degree of its importance was the value that students

placed on activities associated with creativity and exploration, such as art, playing outside, and dramatic play. Here, one sees incongruences between children's priorities and the rising emphasis on more academic instruction, less time for child-directed activities (Bassok et al., 2016) and ultimately, the "schoolification" (Van Laere et al., 2012, p. 527) of ECEC that follows the pursuit of high returns.

NSC also holds that engaging children in research can elevate their social status (Marshall, 2016). When I tell people that part of my dissertation research involves engaging in conversations with students about pre-K, I am often met with responses like "aw!" or "cute!" These reactions seem to reflect a prevalent assumption that disregards children as knowledge producers or agentic participants in research. I have tried to use these moments as opportunities to disrupt this commonly-held assumption by sharing the rich insights I gleaned from my conversations with students.

My conversations with pre-K students also offered opportunities to explore their assumptions regarding children's capacity for knowledge production. As I began participating in their classroom and asking for their insights about pre-K some students questioned their role as viable knowledge producers regarding their schooling. For instance, when Rose and I first introduced the project to the students and shared that I would be asking for their perspectives on pre-K one student stated, "but we're just kids!" This hesitancy also came up in my conversation with Lavender. She shared that art and centers were important places in the classroom and when I asked to learn more she suggested I consult Rose, her pre-K teacher. I also asked Lavender what younger kids should know before they start pre-K and she answered: "That the, the teachers tell the

kids what to do". I followed up by asking: "Do kids also have their own ideas of what to do?" And Lavender responded: "Yeah…"

I found these moments of negotiating students' roles as knowledge producers and participants in this study meaningful for two reasons. First, these interactions highlight how just like adults, children may adopt assumptions regarding their subjectivity and status as social actors that invite critical exploration. As dominant social institutions normalize adults' power over children and position children as unequal, it makes sense that children may question or even be uncomfortable with being regarded as knowledge producers (Punch, 2002). I sought opportunities to subtly question some of their assumptions regarding their roles and capacities by demonstrating that I valued their perspectives regarding pre-K. In this regard, engaging the students in this research offered a pathway for students to imagine and enact new subjectivities and relationalities. Second, while their hesitancy to recognize themselves as knowledge producers makes sense, it also invites questions to be raised regarding children's positioning in the context of high-stakes pre-K. With less intensive academic expectations placed on pre-K students and educators to prepare for the demands of kindergarten, perhaps there could be more space to support children to recognize themselves as knowledge producers, with thoughts that deserve engagement and curiosities that warrant exploration.

Another way that students negotiated their role as social actors in this research was through the terms of their participation. For instance, about four minutes into our conversation, Turquoise asked, "Can we be done with this?" I said "sure" and we ended our conversation and went back into the classroom. As I approached students to participate in a semi-structured conversation in the hallway during their dramatic play

time, some students would eagerly join, while other students would tell me ‘not right now’. I followed up to see if this meant students did not want to participate or if they would like me to approach them to participate at a different time. All the students I asked indicated it was the latter. Other students would tell me they wanted to participate in the conversation but first they wanted more time for their activity. In this case, I would play with the student and then when they were ready, we went to the hallway for our conversation. I realize now that dramatic play was a time that many of the students really valued and recognize that they were protecting this time for themselves.

Figure 7: Violet's drawing, a note for her mom.

Figure 8: Garnet's drawing of herself and the Rainbow classroom.

Recognizing Children as real, complex beings

A second emancipatory opportunity that this dissertation research highlights regards how consulting children's views about school can subvert their subjectification as responsibilized and instrumentalized through policy discourse. This is achieved through the anthropological stance of 'seeing the strange in the familiar'. The strangeness of investment discourse is exemplified through the competing visions of pre-K offered at the beginning of this dissertation research. Governor Walz (2019b) envisions pre-K as a place where children labor to avoid prison in the future. Meanwhile, Coral describes pre-K differently, as a place where she, a four year old, runs and rides on bikes, visits the safe place for calm and deep breaths, washes her hands, and eats her lunch.

By considering children's priorities in pre-K, such as their emphasis on play and ways to stay safe, share toys, and process their feelings, one is reminded that policy actors are making decisions for real, young, complex human beings. It is four and five-year olds who are being responsibilized with laboring against systemic inequality and building a strong economy through their performance in pre-K. In offering this argument, I am cautious to avoid engaging the common and demeaning assumptions that children are essentially vulnerable and in constant need of adults' protection. Rather, I argue that when adults are faced with children's present needs, priorities, and experiences in pre-K, the assumptions underlying investment discourse become less taken for granted and rational, and their dehumanizing and instrumentalizing qualities are laid bare.

Students' narratives reframed pre-K from the abstracted, human capital machine that policy actors often describe, to a dynamic space where young students learn and grow. The experiences of childhood that I observed and that students described from the

Rainbow classroom reflected the philosophy of Loris Malaguzzi, founder of Reggio Emilia and ECEC scholar. Malaguzzi (1993) envisions children as "rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and most of all, connected to adults and other children" (p.10). Recognizing children as complex, emotional, relational, young beings who receive and engage in care (Cockburn, 2005; Held, 2005; Noddings, 2010) provides a powerful contrast to an instrumentalizing and responsibilizing policy discourse, which positions them as future capital (Moss, 2014).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I contrasted policymakers' representation of children and their education with the insights I gleaned from students' narrations regarding what matters to them in pre-K. My conversations with students, engaging with their drawings, and participating in the Rainbow classroom, cultivated opportunities to explore alternative priorities regarding ECEC from those of policymakers. The policy texts examined in chapter four framed pre-K's role in preparing children for their future academic success and participation in the labor market. They also framed ECEC as a means to address the alleged achievement gap and forge equal opportunity for students from marginalized backgrounds. Ultimately, the Minnesota ECEC policy texts included in this dissertation research offered a demeaning frame of children and their education.

Meanwhile, the students that I spoke with from the Rainbow classroom offered a vision of pre-K as a community inhabited by dynamic individuals who have their own priorities and needs. As highlighted in this chapter, the pre-K students described their classroom as a place where emotions and relationships are navigated and fostered. They outlined the important places and activities in their classroom, emphasizing the value of

opportunities to play and do art. They also oriented me to important classroom practices and norms, including the routines that structured their day and the rules that kept them safe. They also highlighted the strategies they used to negotiate their relationships with peers, particularly in regards to playing with toys, and identified strategies to process emotions and feel safe. Here, they highlighted the importance of their classroom's safe place.

By highlighting students' experiences and priorities, it is possible to subvert investment discourse's dominance as a rationale for ECEC. I draw on these findings to argue that rather than reflecting students' best interests, investment discourse translates to ECEC practices that actually undermine students' priorities and risks alienating them from their education. As the students' teacher, Rose, highlighted, and the literature on ECEC makes clear (Brown, 2021), children are facing higher and higher academic expectations in the early years, which translates to a loss of time for play. These changes in ECEC practice are reflective of the dominance of investment discourse, which places heightened pressure on students to learn academic skills in ECEC that will support them for future success on academic assessments (Brown, 2021). However, the students I spoke with valued opportunities for 'dramatic' or free play. These findings are meaningful, as they challenge policy actors' ability to claim that they are engaging investment discourse to advocate for children's best interests.

In the following chapter, I conclude this dissertation research. I begin by summarizing and comparing the findings outlined in this chapter with the findings from chapters four and five, exploring how policy actors, two parents, and a pre-K educator represent the purposes of pre-K. Then, I apply these findings to offer recommendations

for future policy discourse and policymaking, as well as for ECEC practice, with particular focus on implications for parents and early childhood educators. Finally, I imagine possibilities for future research and reiterate the emancipatory possibilities that may emerge when children are consulted regarding their education experiences and priorities.

Chapter 7 : Conclusion

In chapter three, I described how inspiration for this research emerged from a feeling in the pit of my stomach in response to the way politicians have become comfortable with describing children and their education. Eight years ago, I puzzled at how policymakers in my home of Ontario, Canada were justifying the dissemination of universal, Full Day Kindergarten. Ontario's most significant education initiative in decades was positioned as a means to generate a future labor market and build a robust economy. Children had been reduced to future human capital. Moving to Minnesota clarified that this discourse and its economized, reductive way of imagining children and their education is not just reserved to Ontario, but rather it is reflective of a global policymaking strategy. It is from my initial discomfort with the way politicians were talking about four and five year olds and their education that this dissertation research emerged.

Over the past eight years, beginning with my masters research project and now with this study, I have sought to understand how investment discourse is perpetuated in ECEC policy and practice, and what possibilities exist to resist it. Through engaging in this research, the initial pit in my stomach has transformed into feelings of anger and hope. The anger comes from engaging with Minnesota policy actors' routine portrayal of ECEC as a means to address the state's alleged 'achievement gap' between Black and white students, and generate future social and economic prosperity. This discourse places unfair burdens on the backs of children, as it forces them to labor for their own future well-being along with the state's social cohesion and economic viability. It is also is rooted in racist assumptions regarding inequality within and beyond education. On the

other hand, in light of my interactions with the pre-K students from the Rainbow classroom, I believe more than ever in the transformative possibilities that can emerge when children are consulted about their priorities in education.

In this dissertation's final chapter, I harness this hope and anger to examine this dissertation's key findings and potential ways forward. This concluding chapter has two central aims. First, I reiterate the answers to the research questions that this dissertation explored and summarize the key findings. I draw analytical connections from these findings to argue that investment discourse and its iteration in the context of Minnesota is detrimental to cultivating more just ECEC policy and practice for children and families. Additionally, I draw on data from this study's school-based research to argue that Minnesota ECEC policy actors' privileging of investment discourse is often disconnected and at times in direct conflict with students' priorities and needs. Furthermore, this discourse places added burdens and stresses on educators and parents, who are already tasked with the immense responsibility for their student's and children's futures.

In the second section of this chapter, I highlight implications of these findings for future ECEC policy, practice, and research. In this section, I identify pathways of resistance to the dominance of investment discourse among Minnesota ECEC policy actors. Next, I provide recommendations for ECEC practice, including for parenting and education. Finally, I offer recommendations for future research, specifically comparative education research that engages the perspectives of children.

Summary of Key Findings

In chapter four, I addressed this study's first two research questions. I asked: How does Minnesota's ECEC policy coalition privilege investment discourse in rationalizing

public funding for ECEC, and what are its tangible effects? I also asked: How do Minnesotan ECEC policy actors represent childhood through their use of investment discourse to rationalize ECEC reform? What assumptions regarding childhood and children's relationship with the state do policymakers perpetuate? I now turn to reiterate key findings in response to these questions.

In taking up the above questions, I examined how Minnesota policy actors engaged the following discursive mechanisms to reinforce an investment-based rationale for ECEC reform: nominalization[5], modality[6], collocation[7] (Fairclough, 2003) and all four types of legitimation, authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis (Van Leeuwen, 2007), which are outlined in Table1. In addition, I identified the following six assumptions regarding childhood undergirding Minnesota policy actors' use of investment discourse: 1) Childhood is a high stakes period that determines the future; 2) children are positioned at a deficit 3) responsibilized 4) instrumentalized 5) silenced/invisibilized, 6) and as 'risky'. Each of these subjectivities fails to recognize children as full, complex beings, let alone citizens. I applied CRT's concepts of "whiteness as property" (Harris, 1993, p. 1714), "interest convergence" (Bell, 1980. p.523), and critiques of meritocracy and equal opportunity (Berman, 2020; Del Real Viramontes, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to this analysis. I employed these concepts to argue that underlying Minnesota ECEC policy actors' engagement of investment discourse are racist assumptions regarding the causes of unequal outcomes in education, which frame BIPOC children and their families through a deficit lens.

[5] Nominalization is a "grammatical metaphor which represents processes as entities" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 220).
[6] Modality reflects "what authors commit themselves to in terms of truth or necessity" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 219).
[7] Collocation is "regular or habitual patterns of co-occurrence between words" (p. 213). (Fairclough, 2003).

Chapter five addressed this study's third research question, as I explored how two parents, Ruby and Hazel, and a pre-K educator, Rose, explain the purposes of ECEC and negotiate investment discourse. In this chapter, I highlighted the alignment between the parents' priorities for pre-K with Rose's pedagogical goals for the Rainbow classroom. All three participants prioritized supporting students' social-emotional learning in pre-K, while also placing importance on readying children for future schooling. Additionally, I explored how Rose, Ruby, and Hazel each agreed with aspects of investment discourse, such as their emphasis on school readiness, and alignment with ECEC as a means to advance equal opportunity and/or reduce the 'achievement gap'.

Their narratives also complicate and trouble the investment-based rationale for pre-K. When I described investment discourse to Rose, Ruby, and Hazel and asked for their thoughts, each participant seemed to see this rationale as a reasonable and even valuable policy frame. However, they also each destabilized its dominance in unique ways. Rose highlighted how the current conditions of ECEC that she works within undermine achieving the kind of social and economic returns that policy actors claim ECEC can generate. Rose also questioned the heightened expectations placed on her students, as well as the constraints on curriculum, including a loss of time for play. Ruby expressed skepticism that children's academic performance can change the current economic system and critiqued the value of children's education being reduced to economic ends. Hazel reflected that investment discourse did not seem to capture the most important benefits of ECEC for children.

In chapter five, I also argued that the narrations of pre-K's purposes as articulated by Rose, Ruby and Hazel, subvert the dominance of investment discourse and its

implications for ECEC practice. This is achieved as the participants' narratives highlighted the labor, pressures, and contradictions that parents and educators grapple with as they endeavor to prepare their children and students for success in the "Kinder-Race" (Brown, 2021, p. 5). Drawing on the work of Ball (2003), Takayama (2009) states "education has become a key mechanism for middleclass families to colonize the unforeseen future in today's rapidly changing class structure" (p.59). All three participants framed pre-K as a place for students to learn and practice the behaviors and skills they will need for Kindergarten and future schooling, suggesting a lack of faith in the K-12 system to meet students where they are. Rose's narrative demonstrates the challenges of providing high quality, accessible, needs-oriented ECEC programming in a context of unrealistic expectations and inadequate support. This inadequate support includes but is not limited to cutbacks, poor pay, and reduced professional and learning opportunities. Meanwhile, Ruby's narrative sheds light on the complexities and anxieties of parenting young children when the stakes of pre-K are rendered so high.

Chapter six addressed this study's fourth and final research question: What are pre-K students' priorities in ECEC, and what might their views contribute to ECEC policy reform? I drew on data from participant-observations of twelve pre-K students in the Rainbow classroom, as well as data from semi-structured conversations with eight of these students which explored their perspectives regarding pre-K. I outlined how these students narrated what matters most in pre-K. They highlighted important places in their classroom, prioritized opportunities for play and creativity, oriented me to the norms and practices that helped them navigate their new environment and relationships, and explained their strategies to grapple with emotions and stress. The students' narratives

highlighted alternative ways of imagining pre-K's purposes by articulating the importance of attending to their emotional needs, the activities they find meaningful, and the strategies that help them feel safe and build relationships.

Engaging students' priorities also helps deepen one's understanding of the stakes of investment discourse in regards to ECEC practice. For instance, while students valued opportunities to engage in play and creative pursuits like art, their teacher, Rose, reflected the demands on educators to reduce time for play in pursuit of teaching academic skills. This shift is reflective of a broader trend of heightened expectations (Brown, 2021) and the "schoolification" (Van Laere et al., 2012, p. 527) of ECEC, aimed at enhancing students' academic achievement and in turn, generating high returns on the investment in children's education. Thus, investment discourse threatens the kind of activities that the children in the Rainbow classroom find the most meaningful, potentially alienating them from their earliest experiences in education.

I concluded chapter six by highlighting how students' priorities regarding pre-K subvert core assumptions underpinning investment discourse, which include its deficit-oriented frame, alongside its responsibilization and instrumentalization of children. In contemporary accounts of ECEC, children typically appear as little more than objects of targeted state educational intervention. Through my training as a doctoral student, my work in ECEC, and my experience negotiating access to engage in research with children, I have witnessed persistent resistance to the idea that children are reliable producers of knowledge, who can offer meaningful insights regarding their lived experiences. These findings challenge this assumption. By foregrounding students' present emotional needs and experiences, these findings resist investment discourse's

dehumanizing frame of children and their education as instruments for future economic progress. In the following section, I apply the findings from chapters four, five, and six to articulate implications and recommendations for policy, practice and future research.

Implications and recommendations for policy

Resisting Investment Discourse

I now turn to explore where these findings leave us in regards to engaging investment discourse as a policy discourse to rationalize ECEC reform. In other words, is investment discourse salvageable? Moss (2014) provides a nuanced critique of rationalizing ECEC policy as an 'investment'. Moss (2014) writes that while investment can be defined as *"to lay out for profit" (p.78),* it can also be defined as *"to give rights, privileges or duties" (p.78).* Moss (2014) argues that in the latter approach, investment can be understood "as part of a relationship of hope, obligation and incalculable hospitality, not a relationship of calculable exchange. This is investment in potentiality, in that which cannot be known in advance" (p. 78). In this way, Moss (2014) does not see "investment" as a "lost cause" (p.78), and leaves the possibility open that it may eventually "be reclaimed" (p.78). However, Moss (2014) has ultimately elected to "forego" (p.79) investment due to its alignment with neoliberalism, its economized understanding of education's value, and predilection for "increasingly governing the child in the interests of an unexamined life in an unexamined future" (p.79).

I agree with Moss's (2014) analysis of the risks of engaging investment discourse and his decision to avoid it in pursuit of more emancipatory possibilities for ECEC. However, based on the findings from this dissertation research, and drawing on the work of other critical ECEC scholarship (Brown, 2019; Nxumalo, 2019; Nxumalo & Adair,

2019; Tager, 2017), I disagree with Moss's (2014) openness to the possibility of "reclaim(ing)" investment discourse (p.78). Here, I aim to reinforce why it is necessary, in pursuit of a more just vision of ECEC, to not only "forego" (Moss, 2014, p. 79) investment discourse but to reject it outright. As this dissertation research demonstrated, Minnesota policy actors' use of investment discourse to justify ECEC reform renders children and families, particularly those who are economically under-served and from racialized backgrounds, into 'problems' in order to justify their access to basic entitlements, like education and care. This is achieved in part by engaging deficit-oriented language to describe children's education performance and cultivating a racialized "moral panic" (Hall et al., 1978, p.16) regarding the implications that alleged 'achievement gaps' and lack of school readiness among Black children and children from economically under-served backgrounds hold for Minnesota's future economic success and social cohesion. These narratives not only aim to govern the futures of children and their families (Moss, 2014), they do so in a way that is dehumanizing, alienating, and ultimately violent.

As Vavrus (2021) and Shirazi (2020) articulate through drawing on Berlant's (2011) work, there is a cruelty embedded in the promise that with the right labor, as well as careful planning and negotiation, education promises the 'good life' and the means to overcome rampant inequality and injustice. In Minnesota, this "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1) is being cultivated in the youngest students and serves as a political distraction from the urgent needs to address systemic inequalities in the state. For these reasons, investment discourse needs to be replaced with a rationale for ECEC

policymaking that recognizes and seeks to address systemic barriers to equality and justice in education.

Envisioning alternative policy rationales for ECEC

Now that I have argued that policymakers who are committed to more justice-oriented visions of ECEC should reject investment discourse as a policy rationale, I will explore what an alternative policy discourse for rationalizing ECEC could look like. I begin this discussion by articulating how more a justice-oriented policy discourse to rationalize ECEC reform must avoid portraying ECEC as the single answer to our deepest social problems, including racism and poverty. The growing support for ECEC as a means to address unequal education outcomes for BIPOC children and to reduce poverty reflects an individualized understanding of inequality: its cause, and its remedy. A more social-justice oriented policy discourse will acknowledge that "there is more to poverty than a deficit of skills" (Pieterse, 2002, p. 1034) and without implementing comprehensive structural change, "the conservative cliché that the poor are to blame for their fate" (Pieterse, 2002, p. 1034) is likely to persist. Although education is held by many to be "today's magic charm" (Pieterse, 2002, p. 1034), the economic benefits of education may only be reaped if the labor market permits. Ultimately, the individualization of systemic problems risks suppressing more comprehensive political discussion and action to address the root causes of economic (Morabito et al., 2013) and racial injustice (Kendi, 2019). Instead, more justice oriented policy discourse should acknowledge ECEC programming has limited capacity to advance education inequality without aggressive efforts to address the racism, classism, and gender inequality, which

are embedded in ECEC practice and policy (Brown et al., 2010; Bundy, 2012; Dudley-Marling, 2019; Nxumalo, 2019; Pérez, 2019).

Recent critical ECEC scholarship identifies how the Feminist Ethics of Care (FEOC) can provide discursive possibilities to subvert the dominance of investment discourse and envision more caring, just relations in and through ECEC. Langford (2019) highlights how the FEOC offers a framework for "questioning and contesting the dominance of neoliberal and technocratic discourses in ECEC that exclude narratives of care" (p.2). Powell et al. (2020) turn to the FEOC to argue there is a need for "discursive resistance" (p.162) against the persistent devaluing of care work in Ontario's ECEC policy discourse. Powell et al. (2020) argue that advocates are essential to this effort through shifting perceptions among politicians and the public regarding care's socio-political value. Moss (2014, 2019) also turns to the FEOC as a framework for cultivating ECEC systems that reflect human beings' intrinsic relationality and interdependence, and seek to support children and adults as caring beings. Moss (2014) sees the FEOC as challenging neoliberalism's "relational ethics of calculative exchange and contractual proceduralism" (p. 106). In his more recent work, Moss (2019) contends that the FEOC can help bridge the divide between care and education in ECEC and assert care's value. Langford et al. (2017) also articulate the need to overcome this divide and draw on the FEOC to argue for centering care's value in ECEC policy debates. Cumming et al. (2020) contend that the FEOC care offers a foundation for "reconstructing the discursive landscape" (p.105) in ECEC policy and practice by addressing the disregard for educators' wellbeing.

Tronto (2013) provides a vision for how the FEOC can facilitate reimagining education's purpose. Tronto (2013) contends, "currently, education seems to meet the needs of 'the economy' for workers" (p.135). In contrast, a democratic caring approach to education emphasizes "the need for individual development and developing the skills both to care and to care about being a citizen in a democratic society" (Tronto, 2013, p. 135). Thus, Tronto (2013) offers a framework for future ECEC policy discourse that aims to move beyond neoliberalism to imagine more democratic, caring possibilities for children's education.

Engaging the work of Williams (2010) sheds deeper light regarding the elements of a more just and caring ECEC policy discourse. Williams (2010) argues that unlike investment discourse, a care-based policy discourse prioritizes "equality, empowerment of service users, universal access to financial support and collective services, time to care, independence and autonomy, social rights, quality and choice in care and care recognition" (p. 5). This framework also emphasizes how access to ECEC is central to providing support to parents and should be recognized as a basic entitlement for both parents and children (Williams, 2010). Additionally, a more justice-oriented policy discourse must acknowledge the role of access to ECEC in advancing gender equality within family structures and the labor market by redistributing the responsibility for care labor and making the conditions of care work more just (Williams, 2010).

Finally and most importantly, ECEC policy actors must interrogate and resist the racist assumptions that have been used to explain and attempt to remedy unequal outcomes in education. For instance, as Kendi (2019) and Ladson-Billings (2006) have argued, policy actors should stop referencing an alleged 'achievement gap' and instead,

focus on highlighting and addressing the 'opportunity gap' and the myriad ways in which Black students are under-served. Policy actors should also be explicit about placing blame for inadequate opportunities on the state and not on families. Additionally, I urge policy actors to reject language and assumptions that portray Black children through a deficit lens and instead, recognize that all children hold meaningful, complex identities and boundless potential (Dudley-Marling, 2019). Here, I am inspired by the words of Weldon Irvine, sung by Nina Simone in 1969, who demonstrates what it means to regard children, specifically Black children, with respect and hope:

> In the whole world you know
> There's a million boys and girls
> Who are young, gifted and Black
> And that's a fact
> You are young, gifted and Black
> We must begin to tell our young
> There's a world waiting for you
> Yours is the quest that's just begun

Any policy discourse that fails to regard children with this basic dignity cannot claim to be in pursuit of equality, opportunity, or justice and certainly cannot claim to be acting in children's 'best interests'.

In addition to offering recommendations for future ECEC policy discourse, I also seek to highlight three recommendations for policymaking. I argue that Minnesota should move swiftly to provide universal pre-K for all children and families, as well as affordable childcare options. A robust set of policies are also needed to end poverty in Minnesota and the United States. Here, it is imperative that Minnesota addresses its racial wealth gap (Myers & Ha, 2018). At the federal level, efforts to mitigate child poverty may include continuing and expanding the child tax credit. Additionally, the United States is in dire need of paid parental leave. Allowing children and families to remain

economically under-served and under-supported is a callous political choice that must end. Finally, a systematic approach to examining and addressing racial inequality in Minnesota's education system is essential to the pursuit of justice.

Implications and recommendations for practice

In providing recommendations for ECEC practice, I am mindful to avoid further burdening parents and educators with added labor and pressure. They are already tasked with so much, and my hope is that that these recommendations reflect an ethic that is "for teaching" (Noddings, 1986, p. 227) and in support of parenting. I support Tager's (2017) recommendation that educators should critically assess and reflect on the expectations they hold for their students by asking: "Are they based on White middle class discourse?" (p.108). For parents who are navigating education choices for their children I recommend reflecting on and identifying their own values and priorities for their child's schooling and perhaps ECEC's social value. This may provide a helpful foundation to explore the ways in which their values may be different from ECEC curriculum at their child's current or prospective program.

I now reflect on recommendations for ECEC practice generated from the key findings that emerged from my conversations with students regarding their priorities in pre-K. As outlined in chapter six, many of the pre-K students I spoke with identified the importance of opportunities for play and to engage in creative pursuits. I recommend educators engage children regarding their priorities in school and seek to reflect their priorities in their curriculum, as well as their classroom norms and practices. As Brown (2021) argues, "teachers and administrators must ensure that all children feel cared for, see themselves as learners, and are learning things that matter to them and their families"

(p. 152). Drawing on the New Sociology of Childhood, this research has argued that it is important that adults avoid assuming they are fully aware of and meeting children's care needs and educational priorities (Marshall, 2016; Mayall, 1996). Instead, it is important to cultivate routine opportunities to consult students regarding their experiences, needs, and priorities regarding ECEC.

Students also highlighted the importance of the 'safe place' in the Rainbow classroom, where they would process feelings and implement calming strategies. These findings hold implications for both parents and educators as they consider how to support children's learning both within and outside of schools. I recommend that early childhood educators, and those who are responsible for children's education and care, including parents and other caregivers, consider exploring, alongside children, how they can create a safe, supportive learning environment. This may include creating a 'safe place' in the classroom or in remote learning settings.

While I have sought to approach the recommendations posed thus far with a spirit of possibility and invitation, this final recommendation breaks from this spirit. This recommendation is not a suggestion but rather an appeal to parents, educators, and anyone making decisions about or discussing children's education. For anyone who finds themselves describing educational inequality by referring to the achievement gap, word gap, and any other language that positions children and their families as 'lacking', I appeal to you to stop. These ways of framing children's education performance, and particularly Black children and children from economically under-served backgrounds, are rooted in deficit-oriented and racist assumptions (Brown, 2019; Dudley-Marling, 2019; Kendi, 2019; Pérez, 2019; Nxumalo, 2019; Nxumalo & Adair, 2019; Tager, 2017).

I also echo Tager (2017), along with Nxumalo and Adair's (2019) appeal to educators and districts to stop using 'school readiness' to describe and attempt to classify students' status as they enter school and to reflect on the racist assumptions undergirding this framework. Labeling students as 'not school ready' is disproportionately applied to Black children and children who are economically under-served and has deleterious consequences for their future education opportunities (Tager, 2017).

I know firsthand how it is possible to believe that using words like 'achievement gap' and 'school readiness' are helpful and even necessary to advocate for justice in ECEC. In my first semester of my doctoral program, I wrote a series of papers for an Education Policy course detailing the importance of 'school readiness' for economically disadvantaged children. Through a process of unlearning, support and guidance from my Advisor, Dr. Roozbeh Shirazi, and through engaging with the work of critical ECEC education scholars (Adair & Colegrove, 2021; Brown, 2021; Nxumalo, 2019; Nxumalo & Adair, 2019; Tager, 2017), I recognize now that I was wrong.

As I outlined in the introduction, Nxumalo (2019) powerfully argues that these deficit-oriented descriptions of children and their education are reflective of what Tuck (2009) has termed, "damage centered research" (p.413) or "research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation" (p. 413). As I proposed in the introductory chapter, this dissertation research sought to engage Nxumalo's (2019) proposal that "questioning the material and discursive effects of recirculating deficit discourses might bring needed attention to different kinds of stories than the ones that re-circulate narratives of damage" (p. 413). The story this dissertation has sought to tell is that Minnesota's children and families are

not the problem that access to ECEC must solve. Instead, the problem is policy actors' routine use of a discourse that dehumanizes children, evokes racist assumptions, burdens parents and educators, and jeopardizes students' own priorities for pre-K.

Possibilities for future inquiry

In outlining possibilities for future inquiry, I first turn to explore opportunities for future CCS research on ECEC policy and practice. In the research discussed in this dissertation, I applied the CCS approach (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) to compare how students, parents, and a pre-K educator, experienced pre-K. Additional opportunities to engage CCS research include further examining if and how students see their education priorities diverging from their parents' and educators' priorities. Questions to pose to students to explore this line of inquiry include: Why do you come to pre-K? Does your family want you to come to pre-K and if yes, why? What do your teachers and family want you to learn and do in pre-K?

For this dissertation research, I had hoped to invite students to discuss and draw their ideal or 'dream' pre-K classroom. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was only able to complete the first of three intended interviews with students and did not get the opportunity to ask engage in this inquiry. However, in future research I aim to ask students, parents, and educators to imagine their dream pre-K. This may forge opportunities to compare differences and similarities regarding the priorities that these social groups hold for pre-K. As Giroux (2013) argues, the neoliberalization of social life can function as a kind of "disimagination machine" (p. 263), which "undermine(s) the ability of individuals to think critically, imagine the unimaginable, and engage in thoughtful and critical dialogue" (p. 263). Appadurai (2000) also notes that there is a

"split character" (p.6) to imagination amidst globalization. Although "it is in and through the imagination that modern citizens are disciplined and controlled—by states, markets, and other powerful interests" (Appadurai, 2000, p.6), imagination is "also the faculty through which collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge" (Appadurai, 2000, p. 6). Applied to this research context, inviting parents/caregivers, educators, and pre-K students to imagine their dream pre-K may raise critical insights regarding what is missing in the current ECEC system. In other words, from a place of imagining possibilities, recognition of unmet needs might emerge and from here, opportunities for solidarity and resistance, as both Appadurai (2000) and Giroux (2013) suggest.

Another possibility for future research is to create a focus group for parents/caregivers and one for educators to engage with and critically unpack Minnesota ECEC policy discourse. In this dissertation research, I described investment discourse to parents and a pre-K teacher and then asked for their responses. Perhaps additional opportunities for critical reflection could be generated by having participants directly engage with policymakers' words and representations of children and their education.

A future opportunity to engage students' critical insights regarding ECEC is to ask what questions they have regarding their schooling. This could involve an adaptation of Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater's (2011) questions: "What surprised me? (p.87), "What intrigued me?" (p.87) and "What disturbed me?" (p. 87). Applied to research with children, these questions may include: what surprised students about pre-K? What did they really like or think was interesting about pre-K? What did they dislike or would they like to change? This may be pursued through focus groups, which seek to generate and

explore the questions that students themselves have about their education. Additional questions for students in focus groups may include: What activities do they wish they had more time for? What topics do they want to learn about or activities do they wish they could engage? As I imagine future research with children regarding their schooling, I am reminded of Eagleton's (1990) hopeful reflection on children's propensity to question hegemonic assumptions regarding their social world:

> Children make the best theorists, since they have not yet been educated into accepting our routine social practices as 'natural,' and so insist on posing to those practices the most embarrassingly general and fundamental questions, regarding them with a wondering estrangement which we adults have long forgotten. Since they do not yet grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things differently. (p. 34)

Conclusion

To end, I will come back to where we began: with a child who matters to you. I invite you again to picture this child. Does investment discourse, and the way it is articulated by Minnesota policy actors, measure up to your hopes for this child and the kind of possibilities you imagine for their education and care? With my daughter and the students from the Rainbow classroom in mind, my answer is a resounding, no.

As the findings from this dissertation demonstrate, Minnesota ECEC policy actors engage investment discourse to place the problem of educational inequality on children and families, and specifically children and families who experience racialization and who are economically under-served. Minnesota policy actors' engagement with investment discourse has also led to a material loss of resources and support for children and families, as it has been used to justify targeting funding for ECEC instead of implementing universal programming. This dissertation research has also demonstrated the implications that the dominance of investment discourse holds for ECEC practice in

Minnesota, as it places high demands on children and educators and undermines children's own priorities in pre-K.

For too long, investment discourse has dominated policymaking and elided more social justice-oriented possibilities for ECEC. Minnesotan children, families, and early childhood educators deserve a renewed approach to ECEC policy reform: one that is built on a thoughtful engagement with their diverse needs and interests. Beginning this work requires acknowledging that thus far, the policy discourse surrounding ECEC reform in Minnesota has been uninspired and unjust. It also requires acknowledging that policy actors have centered the perspectives and priorities of economists and Minnesota's business community, while failing to engage those who are most intimately affected by ECEC policy decisions: children. Any commitment to do better for Minnesota's children must include consulting them regarding their care needs and priorities in ECEC. It is from this place of reckoning that the possibilities of co-imagining a more emancipatory future for ECEC might emerge.

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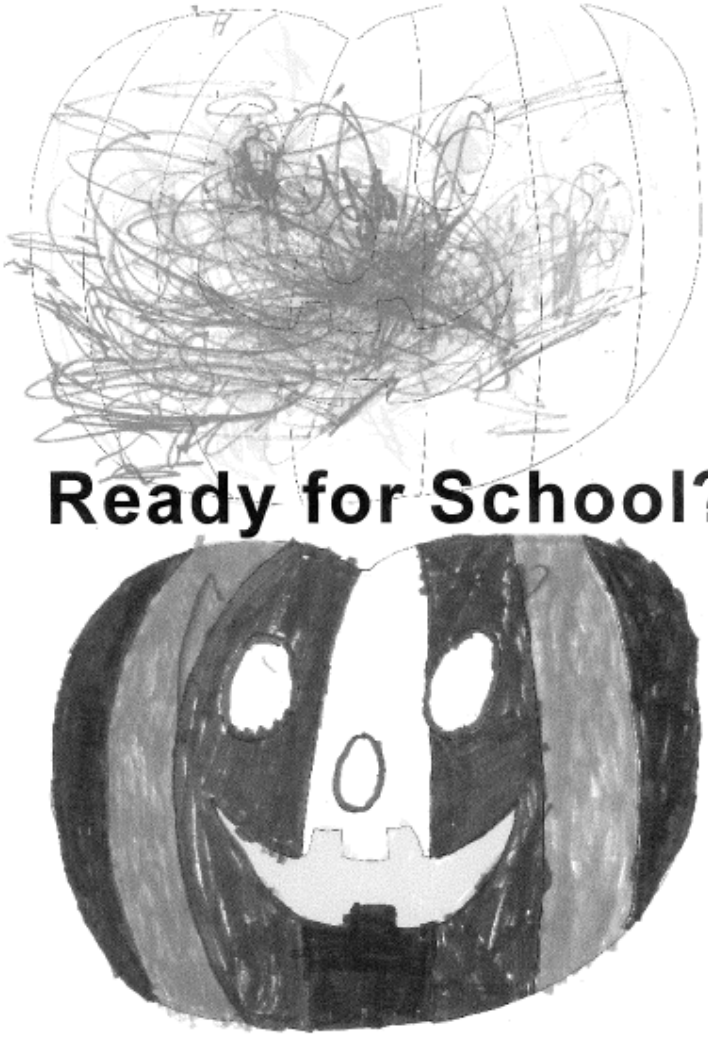
Appendix 1

Policy texts included for analysis

Author and Date of Text	Title
Close Gaps by 5 (2017)	Minnesota Model for Early Learning
Close Gaps by 5 (2021)	Early Education Issue Brief: Minnesota's Achievement Gaps Crisis
Dayton (2011)	State of the State Address
Dayton (2012)	State of the State Address
Dayton (2013)	State of the State Address
Dayton (2014)	State of the State Address
Dayton (2015)	State of the State Address
Dayton (2016)	State of the State Address
Dayton (2017)	State of the State Address
Dayton (2018)	State of the State Address
Minnesota House DFL (2020)	Great Start for All Minnesota Children Act
Early Care and Education Crisis work group (2018)	A roadmap for action: Addressing Minnesota's achievement gaps and quality early care and education shortage.
Georgetown Public Policy Review (2013)	Investing in innovation: The economic case for early childhood education.
Hottinger (2005)	Senate bill establishing MELF
Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (2011)	Early education reform blueprint.
Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory Council (2004)	Winning start: A plan for investing wisely.
Pawlenty (2006)	State of the State Address
Rolnick & Grunewald (2003)	Early childhood development: Economic development with a high public return
Rolnick & Otis (2021)	We need to fund the next Minnesota miracle: Early childhood education.
Think Small (2018)	Theory of Change.
Think Small (2021)	About Think Small
Walz (2018)	MinneMinds Questionnaire
Walz (2019)	Executive order establishing the Children's cabinet
Walz (2019)	Inaugural Address
Walz (2019)	Let's make Minnesota the Education State (for all), Letter to the Editor
Weiner (2019)	Rob Grunewald's passion: Early childhood learning and its powerful economic development outcomes.

Appendix 2

MSRBAC (2004) "Pumpkin Report"



MINNESOTA SCHOOL READINESS BUSINESS ADVISORY COUNCIL: POLICY TASK FORCE REPORT
December 9, 2004

Appendix 3

A typical day in the Rainbow classroom

Students arrived to the Rainbow classroom between 9:00am and 9:15am to begin their day at school. Violet, a pre-K student, articulates students' arrival routine: "First, we go to school; get off lunch bag and bottle; put folder; balance beam; hand wash; alligator, tracing, butterfly, bicycle, bear, rolling". Here, Violet describes how students put away their belongings, and complete a series of activities to support their gross and fine motor development. Once these tasks were complete, students chose to engage in an activity, such as reading, working on a puzzle, or playing with cars and trains. At around 9:30am students formed a circle on the carpet for their first 'group time'. Unlike some ECEC classrooms I have participated in, students did not have designated spots and instead, chose where they sat. They seemed to move their bodies quite freely but generally stayed in the same area in the circle. Rose stood at the center of the circle and the assistant teachers sat with the students. They sang the "hello song", and students shared how they were feeling as they began the day. Rose also used the SMART board to introduce curricular activities.

From 9:45am to 10:15am, students completed their morning curricular rotation, which included engaging in dramatic or 'free' play, doing projects (typically art or writing projects), and participating in three center-based activities. Students received individual schedules, with each type of curricular activity represented by a shape that they could move to reflect their current activity. Some students were quite engaged with their schedules and enjoyed explaining them to me, while others did not seem to use their schedules and instead, followed the teacher's verbal directions. When it was time to

transition to a new activity, Rose would get the students' attention with a phrase. For instance, Rose often said: "macaroni cheese" and then the students called out "everybody freeze". Once the first curricular rotation was complete, students briefly rejoined a circle to discuss the weather and the day of the week. Then the SMART board selected students to perform different tasks, such as holding the door open. After circle time, the students used the restroom if needed, and then played outside or in the gym from 10:30am to 11:00am.

After visiting the gym or playground, students came back to the classroom and sat down for lunch from about 11:00am to 11:30am. Many students brought their own lunches and students who were on the free/reduced lunch program had their lunch bags waiting at their table. As students finished their lunch, they would pick a book or quiet activity to do on the carpet. Then at 11:30am, it was time for group story time. The students discussed key vocabulary in the story and Rose read the story at the front of the class. Students often had their own copies of the texts to follow along. After, they discussed the story. Around 11:50am, students began their second curricular rotation, which was very similar to the morning routine. Then, at 12:30pm students formed a circle on the carpet for their final group time. At around 12:45pm students used the bathroom and visited their lockers, putting their school items away and getting ready to go outside or to the gym. After going outside or to the gym, the school day was finished and students were picked up by caregivers or their after-school childcare.