

# Celebrating Our Collective Wisdom: Responding to the 21st Century

Summary by Kathleen Kummer with plenary panel members

The plenary panel Celebrating Our Collective Wisdom: Responding to the 21st Century at the 2024 conference brought together early childhood educators across generations, locations, and diverse ways of knowing and being in early childhood education to share and celebrate our collective wisdom. The panelists brought experiences that ranged from working with infant-toddler, preschool, three- to five-year-old programs, and inclusion programs, as well as positions as instructors, program managers, pedagogists, and leaders in early years programs. The panel included educators who began working in the field over 40 years ago, educators at the beginning of their careers, and students.

This gathering was an opportunity for early childhood leaders (past, present, and future) to inspire through their stories, learnings, and hopes for a better future for young children.

Below is a summary of the panelists' responses to four questions.\* I hope that you will lean into the points that are different from your own as an opportunity to open up possibilities and conversations. Consider bringing these questions from the plenary and the panelists' responses to your centre to continue this dialogue with your colleagues.

This gathering was an opportunity for early childhood leaders (past, present, and future) to inspire through their stories, learnings, and hopes for a better future for young children.

## **What is one of the most significant challenges we face in creating more liveable worlds for children, families, and educators?**

Melissa Harris noted that adapting to all the changes has been a challenge and, at times, overwhelming. Yet, it is the role of the educator to learn and unlearn in response to current conditions and engage in practices that respond to the changing needs of children and families.

Danielle Davis noted that she sees the impacts of colonization, white supremacy, and capitalism in her work with children, families, and educators. She is deeply concerned with the current ways in which young children continue to experience the violence of racism and colonization. Further, Danielle is troubled that young children are in a world that values an individualist capitalist culture that has created many of the challenges of the 21st century, such as climate change, housing, and food insecurity, inequities, and genocide.

For Melanie Boucher, the burnout rate of early childhood educators is one of our most significant challenges. She asserts that this crisis directly results from the rapid expansion of spaces without the appropriate support to ensure there are fully qualified early childhood educators to work with the children being enrolled in those spaces. Further, Melanie takes issue with the lack of incentives (e.g., an increase in pay for education assistants becoming certified educators). She argues that the lack of fully certified educators is a recipe for more certified educators leaving the field.

Darcy Shultz asserted the need for educators to engage with the challenging issues that exist in the everyday lives of children and families. To create more liveable worlds, we as educators need to pay attention to the worlds of children. She called us to consider how we are collectively working together to respond to the current conditions of children's worlds. For example, Darcy

\*Please note that responses have been paraphrased and panelists didn't respond to all of the questions.

challenges us to dismantle a curriculum that prioritizes readiness, or that seeks to mould children into neoliberal subjects. Or to consider how our practice allows difference and diversity to flourish. Are we including others, or are we asking others to adapt to assimilate into our programs?

Ward Nakata stated that one of the most difficult challenges is making space in our busy lives to keep us informed and connected in our thinking paradigms, living alongside children and our peers, and then balancing that with our own individual lives.

**Looking back, what might you wish you had known as you entered the profession or that you would like to share with new educators and future educators (students)?**

Melissa shared that when she first entered the field of early childhood education, she wished that she had

known how critical it was to feel connected and supported by professional organizations like ECEBC or support groups like Indigenous Early Years Kinship. Melissa revealed that building relationships and connections and discovering her pathway has been a journey of learning to unlearn and speak only in ways her ancestors would.

Danielle wishes that she had understood that being with children is the role of an educator. She explained that we often feel that to be good educators, we need to be busy cleaning, guiding, and asking questions. Yet, Danielle explained, we need to pause, listen to children, and respond thoughtfully in ways that show them we are paying attention to their ideas, thoughts and theories. When we rush around, we are unable to listen carefully and reflect, and we are at risk of asking careless questions or making careless comments.

Melanie invited student-educators and all educators to recognize that

professional learning is an ongoing process. She reminded us of the importance of being open to diversity, new knowledge, and understanding.

Ward spoke about the power of relationships. He reminded us that when we have strong relationships we create the possibilities to influence our peers and children. The stronger the relationships, the stronger the influence. Your influence has the power to create change.

Aryanna Chartrand realized early on in her journey in ECE that student-educators need to be present in spaces outside of the centres. She hopes that we can work to embolden many more student-educators to engage in the politics of education. There needs to be an emphasis on the professional and ethical responsibilities held by student-educators. One of her ongoing research interests is considering how recruitment of ECEs relates to our collective commitments to truth, equity, and reconciliation. She called on all of us to support



*Plenary panel members: left to right: Darcy Schultz, Gloria Albarracin, Natalie Lucas, Danielle Davis, Melissa Harris, Aryanna Chartrand, Melaine Boucher, Debbie Thompson, and Ward Nakata.*

---

student-educators in embedding these pillars in their practice.

**What is the collective work we need to do as educators to ensure that our profession flourishes in the 21st century and that we can meet the diverse and complex needs of children and families?**

Melissa expressed that we, collectively as educators, need to “learn to unlearn history” (referencing keynote speaker Candace Linkletter to meet the complex needs of children and families. She called us to listen to learn with an open mind and heart and remember that families are an important part of our everyday work.

Danielle continued by asserting that it is essential that educators work in conditions that nurture collective dialogue and work to co-create the spaces that children deserve. Within our day, there should be space and time to unpack what is happening in our centres so that we can collectively reflect, think, and respond as ethical professionals.

Darcy called all of us to work to ensure that the role of the educators is understood as complex, necessary, and critical work. For her, this means that we need to critically analyze recruitment and retention strategies to ensure that they are sustainable and are not simply Band-Aid solutions. Darcy is concerned that many of the students in her ECE program will not continue in the field once they graduate. For example, she feels that it is disheartening for students completing their studies for a certificate to practice, diploma, or degree to know that a person with one course can be hired to practice as an educator.

Ward invited us to continue with our own education and learning to inform our practices. He stated that he would love to see more educators embrace new ways of being. Ward encourages all of us to be curious about new ideas, take risks, and be proactive in our relationships with others.

Aryanna responded to this question by reminding us that if we, as educators and student-educators, aren't showing up and speaking out, someone else will speak for us. She continued by stating that incredible things are possible if we all get involved, but what are the long-term consequences if we do not? Aryanna called for us to address the current issues of rapid space expansion, the deskilling of our profession, and the wages and benefits of educators. She asked how we are to recruit and retain student-educators without meaningfully including them in the creation of a sustainable system. For Aryanna, this means providing guidance and support and being involved with the work of ECEBC, Early Childhood Pedagogical Network, BC Aboriginal Child Care Society, the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC, and others. This means meeting local MLAs, MPs, and other decision-makers and staying informed. With provincial and federal funding commitments, platform promises, and policy production, this is a critical time to hold decision-makers accountable.

Natalie Lucas shared that collectively, we need to change society's perceptions of the role of early childhood educators. She stressed the importance of how we as educators need to disrupt the image of educators as merely a service for parents to care for children while they are away from their children.

Natalie reminded us that we need to be present and active advocates for children and our profession on committees, boards, town councils, and other tables to be part of the decision-making process. We need to show up as professionals to speak to the early childhood education system that we know is possible and that children deserve. We should speak to funding issues, policy, and so forth as a universal child care system is being developed. Natalie shared an example to remind us that early childhood educators are responsible for advocating for children to have a voice in how they spend their days in programs and what happens in those programs.

Deb Thompson continued this line of thought by recommending that we should be concerned with pedagogy as a profession. She asserted that in the current context of early childhood, governments must pay attention to both affordability and accessibility. However, it will be impossible to adequately address the issues of affordability and accessibility without attending to “quality.” She thinks of quality beyond a universal ideal that can be measured. Moving beyond a simplified notion of quality, consider quality as a concept that refers to the concerns of care and education. This understanding of quality attends to pedagogy or the “bringing up of children.” Deb asserts that ideas offered by scholars such as Gunilla Dahlberg and Peter Moss are necessary in the 21st century to reimagine early childhood education. Pedagogies in children's spaces require political engagements and ethical commitments. Specifically, we should insist on better education for early childhood educators, well-planned spaces for children, and open, flexible, local pedagogies.



Aryanna Chartrand

**What are your hopes and dreams for the children of the 21st century who are part of early childhood education system programs?**

Melissa hopes for a world where every child matters and has the right to quality and affordable early childhood education. She dreams that in northern BC, a beautiful part of the world, children are in programs that incorporate the land and tradition into the curriculum in meaningful and relevant ways.

Danielle hopes that early childhood education can be more than a place for children when their parents work. Her ultimate dream is that centres can be places where young children, families, and educators can flourish as collective communities.

Melanie hopes that we can nurture in children the disposition to take the time to breathe and rest, to be open to experiencing the beauty and, at times, the heartache of life, to appreciate themselves for their



Darcy Schultz

unique individuality as humans, and to know that their communications, feelings, and ideas are heard.

Darcy hopes for a more inclusive world where each person is welcomed for who they are and where differences can flourish.

Veronica Patchini Ketchabaw closed the plenary by pulling together the wisdom shared as an invitation for all delegates to consider for their practice with young children, families and in the “delicate, complex, situated pedagogical practices necessary to educate young children in the 21st century” (ECEBC, 2022). She noted that each panellist focused on the politics of education, the importance of the early childhood educator’s role in pedagogical work, and the necessity for us to collectively work together to create the possibilities for more livable worlds for all.

**Plenary Panelists**

*Gloria Albarracin is an Early Childhood Pedagogy Network pedagogist based in the unceded territory of the Lheidli T'enneh, now known as*

*Prince George. As a two-time immigrant and a mestiza born and raised in Honduras, Gloria brings a unique perspective to her work. Through her pedagogical approach, she seeks to explore alternatives to established practices in early childhood education and expand our understanding and allow for multiple possibilities for belonging in difference.*

*Melaine Boucher has been an early childhood educator for 21 years and holds certificates in both infant and toddler and special needs. She is a true believer in creating a strong foundation in early learning support for early educators through connection with one another to lean on and learn from together. Melanie is privileged to be a facilitator for the Kamloops Peer Mentoring Community of Practice alongside wonderfully empowering ECEs.*

*Aryanna Chartrand is an early childhood educator of Cree, Black, and settler ancestry and is currently an MA student in international education policy analysis at Stanford University. Her areas of interest include reconciliation in ECE, teacher education, and public policy.*

*Danielle Davis is an early childhood educator, college instructor, mother, partner, and woman who is often described as spicy. She thanks her grandparents for that description. Her interests and research are in community care, decolonization, and anti-racism.*

*Melissa Harris is a Gitksan early childhood educator driven to inspire past, present, and future early childhood educators. Her passions are outdoor learning, living and growing on Tshimshan land, and incorporating the world around us into culturally relevant curriculum.*

*Natalie Lucas is an early childhood educator and workshop facilitator with a special needs certificate and Child and Youth Care diploma. She was drawn into the profession from her experiences as a mom of four children. Growing up in the Doukhobor culture, experiencing the effects of attempted assimilation, Natalie believes all children need to feel safe, be heard, and know that their culture is accepted. This became foundational in guiding her current practices that are child-led, democratic, and honour the culture of the land.*

*Ward Nakata is a passionate educator dedicated to nurturing young minds through innovative and inclusive learning experiences. With over 35 years of experience in this sector, Ward remains on a life-long journey of personal growth and advocacy in helping support early childhood educators throughout BC.*

*Darcy Schultz is a student and new educator in the field of ECCE. Her passion is to consider the rights of the child and the complex and ever-shifting conditions to think about*



*Melissa Harris*

*how we can sustain an ethical and responsive pedagogical practice. Darcy is eager to seek ways of nurturing a strong collective and to advocate for the importance and full breadth of this field.*

*Debbie Thompson is the associate director of Children's Programs at UBC Child Care. She has worked*



*Kathleen Kummen*

*in various roles in early childhood education as an educator, coordinator, college instructor, and manager.*

ECEBC would like to thank the panelists for their participation and thank Emily Mliczko, Kathleen Kummen, and Veronica Patchini Ketchabaw for organizing the panel for the conference.



## **Transitions and Honouring Educators**

If you know an ECE who you would like to see recognized for their work in their community, please contact us. We would like to recognize and celebrate educators who contribute so much to the field of early care and learning.

If you know an ECE who is retiring or has recently passed away, please let us know. We would like to recognize and honour them in the journal.

Contact Barbara Johnston at [barb@westcoasteditors.com](mailto:barb@westcoasteditors.com)