

# Out of the shadows: An epistemological examination of family childcare in Canada

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**Abstract:** This paper critically examines the current knowledge base of family childcare through an epistemological lens. A brief literature review highlights what is known about family childcare, and standpoint theory is used to illustrate how I first became aware of the issues in the current system as a former family childcare educator. Then, an examination of the gaps in knowledge resulting from the current approach to knowledge creation in family childcare is outlined, with human ecology and social constructionism proposed as ideal paradigms for more holistic knowledge creation. Finally, a brief proposal for research designed to create a more informed path to understanding family childcare is offered to answer the question: What are the experiences of family childcare educators in Canada, and which supports and services are required to meet their unique needs?

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## Introduction

Oaklan Reid Cunningham was dropped off at a family day home on Thursday, October 6, 2022. It was a day that began like any other during the past month that he had been in Kyra Backs' care, and ended as a day that will be burned forever into the memories of Oaklan's family. That afternoon, Shonda Desjarlais, Oaklan's mother, received a phone call asking her to come to the hospital in High Prairie, Alberta. Her baby had just died. Kyra Backs has now been arrested in the homicide of Oaklan Cunningham, and is being charged with second-degree murder (Gibson, 2022).

Oaklan's story illustrates one of the most pressing challenges in Canada's society today: the lack of access to affordable, quality childcare. In Alberta, for example, licensed care is only available to 34% of children under the age of six (Buschmann, 2022). As a result, many parents and guardians must seek alternative care arrangements, which may vary considerably in quality and stability (Breitkreuz et al., 2019). Oaklan died while being cared for in one such unlicensed space.

Across Canada, many parents and guardians struggle to find affordable, quality childcare (Breitkreuz et al., 2019). While access to childcare has many benefits including economic growth, supporting optimal child development, and easing parental burden, parental choice in selecting childcare is limited by the number of spaces available (Macdonald, 2018). Although childcare regulations in Canada are determined by provincial or territorial governments rather than federal regulations, and as such have variations in licensing requirements, in general licensed spaces must meet and maintain high standards including educational requirements, limits on group size, staff ratios, and ongoing supervision and monitoring for quality. In addition, many regions only offer parental subsidies for children attending licensed childcare programs (Government of Alberta, n.d.; Government of Manitoba, n.d.; Government of Northwest Territories, n.d.). As such, licensed spaces in childcare centres, preschools, and home-based childcare, or family childcare, are highly sought-after.

However, a high number of Canadian families live in childcare deserts, or regions lacking access to licensed childcare, where three or more children exist for each licensed space (Macdonald, 2018). These

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deserts can leave families with no other choice than to place their children into unlicensed care, in the absence of support, monitoring, or requirements to meet minimal standards of quality or safety. While some family childcare educators who run their programs privately, without being licensed, voluntarily choose to meet or exceed licensing standards, many do not. As a result, children cared for in low-quality unlicensed spaces are at risk. The areas of lowest childcare space coverage are in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and Brampton and Kitchener, Ontario, with just one licensed space for every four to five children, and across Canada around “44% of all non-school-aged children ... live in child care deserts” (Macdonald, 2018, p. 5). In High Prairie, Alberta, where Oaklan lived, there is only one licensed childcare space available for every four children (Macdonald, 2018).

The recent *Early Learning and Childcare Agreements* in Canada seek to remedy the current lack of licensed care by increasing access to affordable, quality early childhood education (Government of Canada, 2022). In Alberta, the federal-provincial agreement is aimed at increasing the number of licensed spaces by 42,000 in the next five years, with most of those spaces aimed at family day homes, in settings also referred to as family childcare (Government of Alberta, 2022a). However, the current body of knowledge about family childcare has critical gaps in understanding of these unique settings. As a result, the systems in place to support family childcare are misinformed and incomplete. Creating more family childcare spaces in a system which is based on incomplete views of these unique settings will perpetuate the challenges faced by educators. To create a more effective system, a holistic knowledge base that amplifies the voices of family childcare educators is required.

This paper critically examines the current knowledge base of family childcare through an epistemological lens. A brief literature review highlights what is known about family childcare, and standpoint theory is used to illustrate how I first became aware of the issues in the current system as a day home educator. Then, an examination of the gaps in knowledge resulting from the current approach to knowledge creation in family childcare is outlined, with human ecology and social constructionism proposed as ideal paradigms for more holistic knowledge creation. Finally, a brief proposal for research designed to create a more informed path to understanding family childcare is offered to answer the question: What are the experiences of family childcare educators in Canada, and which supports and services are required to meet their unique needs?

## Literature Review

Family childcare programs are relied on as a source of childcare for many families like Oaklan’s. People living in remote or rural areas of Alberta, like High Prairie or Driftpile Cree Nation, where Oaklan’s family lives, have limited access to childcare because populations are often too small to support large childcare centres (Malik et al., 2018). Home-based family childcare programs fill in this gap, because educators offering childcare in these programs care for a small group of children in mixed age groups out of their own home. These settings are markedly different from centre-based care settings, and as such the abilities and needs of family childcare educators are distinct.

Family childcare offers many benefits to families, including a home-like environment, more flexible hours, individualized support for children, and the ability for siblings of different ages to be cared for together (Hallam et al., 2017; Lanigan, 2011). Additionally, family childcare programs are often easier to access and more affordable than centre-based care (Jeon et al., 2018). Importantly, the dynamic of having just one educator means that strong relationships can grow over time, providing the opportunity for secure attachments with children and more collaborative relationships with parents (Doherty, 2015; Ruprecht et al., 2016).

Family childcare educators find their work satisfying and fulfilling (Swartz, 2013), which provides strong internal motivation to offer high-quality early learning and care (Forry et al., 2013; Hooper et al., 2021; Porter et al., 2016). However, they face challenges including isolation, lack of access to continuing education, and balancing many roles including caregiver, business owner, parent advisor, child development expert, and program administrator (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Cella, 2020; Gerstenblatt et al., 2014). Family childcare educators are also often treated with a lack of respect, and viewed as less

professional than educators working in other settings (Faulkner et al., 2016; Gerstenblatt et al., 2014). These challenges are exacerbated by working out of their own home, which calls for strong boundaries, self-care practices, and maintaining work-life balance (Cortes & Hallam, 2016; Fernandez et al., 2018; Mimura et al., 2019).

As they work alone and care for mixed age groups in their own home, family childcare educators require different support and continuing education opportunities than educators working in other settings (Jeon et al., 2018; Tonyan et al., 2017). Yet, most of the supports available are geared toward educators working in large childcare settings, lack knowledge of the unique experiences of family childcare, and lack the ability to provide the targeted support that family childcare educators require (Bromer & Weaver, 2016; Faulkner et al., 2016; Jeon et al., 2018). There is also a significant lack of information about effective family childcare practices and policies (Sisson et al., 2019; Tonyan et al., 2017). Family childcare is routinely excluded from the research, leading to a lack of knowledge about how to best support family childcare educators in offering high-quality childcare (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Bromer & Pick, 2012; Figuero & Wiley, 2016; Schaack et al., 2017). Few specialists working with family childcare educators have any experience in family childcare themselves, yet this is a unique population requiring specialized training and support (Abell et al., 2014; Bromer & Weaver, 2016; Lowenberg, 2016).

The gap in knowledge of family childcare is even more prominent in the Canadian context, as most of the current research is situated in the United States or abroad. One of the largest Canadian studies on childcare, *You Bet We Still Care*, states that the survey “did not include family child care providers” (Flanagan, 2013, p. 3). The lack of attention being paid to the unique field of family childcare in Canada may explain why targeted wraparound support systems for family childcare educators have been created in the United States (Porter et al., 2016; Porter & Bromer, 2019), but no known national organizations focus specifically on the needs of family childcare educators in Canada. Though targeted support systems in the United States have been shown to increase quality of care, intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and intention to remain in the field (Porter et al., 2016), in Canada the focus of early childcare support is broad and diffuse. The failure of the Canadian childcare system to recognize and address the unique needs of family childcare is a pressing concern because creating more family childcare spaces in a system not targeted for their needs will fail to provide long-term solutions for the current crisis of lacking childcare.

### **Researcher Positionality and Standpoint Theory**

I ran a day home with a licensed agency in Edmonton, Alberta for ten years, in a system that allows family childcare programs to operate privately, with minimal oversight and support, or by contracting with a licensed family day home agency (Province of Alberta, 2021). I was informed that, by joining an agency rather than operating privately, I would gain higher status as a professional due to meeting requirements for quality care including current first aid and police security checks, ongoing program planning and professional development, and monitoring by the agency. Becoming contracted with a licensed agency also includes the opportunity for more support, in the form of regular visits from a day home consultant and ongoing opportunities for continuing education (Government of Alberta, 2022b). But when I found myself largely excluded from the group of educators deemed to be professional (i.e., those working in large childcare centres), and struggled with the inadequate support provided, I realized that the body of knowledge informing Canada’s childcare system failed to include my perspective. To learn more about the struggles I was facing, and to contribute to a system more informed and targeted to the unique needs of family childcare, I closed my day home in 2019 and began full-time studies at the University of Alberta. I learned that my experiences were not anecdotal, or limited to my own subjective perspective, but strongly backed by research as shown above.

Standpoint theory clearly illustrates the realizations that I had as an educator in the minority group of family childcare working within a system targeted to the dominant perspective of large childcare centres. Standpoint theory posits that social identity guides knowledge acquisition and allows development of conceptual resources (Toole, 2022), and describes how marginalized or less powerful people, like family childcare educators, have the potential for a more holistic view of a situation precisely because of their

disadvantaged position (Nielsen, 1990; Toole, 2021). Out of necessity to survive, those in subordinate groups must be aware of their own circumstances as well as the views of the dominant group, which are epistemic features that “make it more likely that a belief is true” (Toole, 2021, p. 338). However, the dominant group’s view, in this case the large childcare centres that the current Canadian early learning and care system is geared towards, may be “partial and perverse” (Nielsen, 1990, p. 11), as it is in their best interest to maintain the status quo.

Standpoint theory outlines the epistemic advantages held by marginalized groups for creating a more holistic view of a situation (Doucet, 2018), as “exclusion is the place (or displacement) from which privileged vision is possible” (Sweet, 2020, p. 930). Epistemic privilege, the concept that more precise knowledge is likely to be created from marginalized social locations, can be used to challenge epistemic inequalities that arise from excluding the lived realities of certain groups, like educators working in family childcare settings (Sweet, 2020). However, standpoint theory calls out the long-documented issue of dominant groups ignoring or devaluing testimony from marginalized perspectives, a widespread practice called epistemic quieting or epistemic smothering which results in testimonial injustice rising from sociopolitical power imbalances that marginalized groups cannot afford to ignore or devalue (Wu, 2022). The practice of devaluing and ignoring testimony from marginalized perspectives can be upended with allyship, when someone who is viewed as informed, knowledgeable, and trustworthy amplifies marginalized voices, and where testimony can be uptaken “if dominant members of academia verify it” (Wu, 2022, p. 6). As many scholars argue that fully informed research must be grounded in lived experience (Code, 2006), and knowledge must be embedded in the contexts surrounding an issue (Doucet, 2018), my positionality as a researcher who ran a family childcare program with a licensed agency for ten years provides a strong starting point for imagining a new and more holistic way of generating knowledge about the experiences of family childcare educators in Canada.

The struggles I faced as a family childcare educator can be further defined by exploring the epistemological approach to knowledge creation, and considering how the scientific method has influenced what is known about childcare. This epistemological examination of childcare sheds light on current gaps in the research and can be used as an opportunity to outline more holistic ways to create knowledge by drawing day home voices out of the shadows, which would benefit both family childcare educators and the systems that support them.

### **An Epistemological Exploration of Family Childcare**

Epistemological approaches to research guide scientists to consider how the current knowledge base was created, and according to what sociopolitical contexts, values, assumptions, and beliefs (Breitkreuz, 2022). A holistic consideration of the gaps of knowledge created by current epistemologies can thus lead to more fully informed research, with heightened potential for accuracy when considering the complexities, interconnections, and embeddedness of living systems (Capra, 2008; Straus, 1990). Historically, however, the scientific approach to knowledge creation has relied on a rigid system of generating facts, using empiricism as a frame to determine how we decide what counts as knowledge (Franklin, 1990; Katzav & Vaesen, 2022). The traditional scientific method aims to create objective facts by using replicable research methods and relying on researchers’ ability to bracket their own values and perceptions (Olalla, 2009), yet this narrow scope of fact creation has resulted in other ways of creating knowledge being seen as secondary, substandard, or invalid, and even treated with suspicion and scorn (Rigdon, 2022; Tarnas, 1991).

Issues with scientism’s objectivist, positivist, and reductionist approaches came to light with growing awareness that science is a sociopolitical endeavor where values and beliefs drive what is researched, in what ways, and which questions are asked (Basen, 2022; Katzav & Vaesen, 2022). Thus, there is no true objectivism, as the process of knowledge creation is infused with and guided by researcher values and beliefs (Mann, 2008; Rigdon, 2022). Positivism is also problematic, as it lays claim to an absolute truth that leaves little room for other explanations or points of view (Daly, 2007; Restivo, 2022). Reductionism reduces complex systems into more manageable data sets, or variables, which may lead to oversimplification or skewed representations of research results due to manipulating or even erasing

certain variables or outliers (Breitkreuz, 2022). Additionally, the scientific approach to knowledge creation has resulted in research focus being placed on some topics to the exclusion of others, and little attention paid to the implications and consequences of knowledge creation (Pinto, 2019; Tarnas, 1991).

### **Discussion of Epistemological Challenges within Childcare Research and Policies**

Currently, there are two main epistemological challenges in the existent body of literature on family childcare. First, family childcare is often seen and treated the same as large childcare centres, resulting in the family childcare educator perspective being frequently overlooked (Cortes & Hallam, 2016). This reductionist approach makes data easier to manage and support systems easier to design, but minimizes and dismisses the unique working conditions of educators in family childcare programs. As a result, current childcare systems overlook the specific needs of family childcare educators, and offer support that is not targeted or effective given their unique working conditions (Doherty, 2015; Jeon et al., 2018).

The second epistemological challenge is that family childcare is routinely excluded from the research (Bromer & Pick, 2012; Figuero & Wiley, 2016). Not including family childcare perspectives may arise from researcher beliefs that these educators are the same as any other, or the commonly held societal perception that family childcare programs are less valuable or professional than large childcare centres (Faulkner et al., 2016). As a result of the assumptions guiding researcher beliefs and values, and the current approach to knowledge creation in the childcare field, family childcare educator voices and experiences are being excluded from the research, shadowing the unique abilities and needs of educators operating family day homes (Figuero & Wiley, 2016).

Further complicating these epistemological challenges is the issue that most research on family childcare is based in the United States, and thus is embedded in different sociopolitical, economic, and geographical contexts (Porter & Bromer, 2019; Porter et al., 2016). If the systems of knowledge and support for childcare are not being evaluated by including the perspectives of educators working in family childcare programs, or do not include a Canadian frame of reference, a fully informed view of our childcare system cannot be obtained. Amplifying the voice of family childcare educators in Canada, and drawing them out of the shadows by intentionally including their perspectives, would greatly strengthen the current body of knowledge on this topic and increase understanding of how best to support family childcare educators.

Exploring the existent literature base and epistemological challenges of family childcare as outlined above begins to answer the research questions, 'What are the experiences of family childcare educators in Canada, and which supports and services are required to meet their unique needs?' Family childcare programs are an essential resource in Canada, with many benefits to families, children, and the economy. However, they face unique challenges, including isolation, role balancing, and lack of respect. In addition, because family childcare educators are an under-researched population, most of the available supports fail to meet their needs. Delving into the epistemology behind research creation, which includes power dynamics, oversimplification, and gaps in research focus, helps illuminate how these challenges came into being, as research drives the creation and implementation of childcare policy and regulations. Below, social constructionism and human ecology are positioned as ideal knowledge paradigms to direct further research and policy creation that includes the perspectives and needs of family childcare educators, rather than minimizing or ignoring them as evidenced within the current Canadian childcare system and knowledge base (Doherty, 2015; Figuero & Wiley, 2016).

### **Social Constructionism and Human Ecology as a New Way Forward**

The scientific approach to knowledge creation in the field of early learning and childcare in Canada has resulted in a skewed view of the situation, as the needs and perspectives of family childcare educators have been left out. If creating a stronger childcare system requires more family childcare programs to meet the needs of families currently living in areas with little or no access to licensed care, more knowledge is needed about the experiences of these educators and which supports best enable them to thrive. Social constructionism and human ecology are showcased here as ideal knowledge paradigms to drive fresh research with the goal of creating a more holistic view of the situation, and a system better equipped to

meet the unique needs of family childcare.

The knowledge paradigm that would be most useful in considering family childcare is social constructionism. Social constructionism is rooted in the understanding that reality is co-created through people's interactions, and that all meaning is created in the subtle spaces between an objectively perceived external reality and the subjective process of making meaning (Daly, 2007; O'Connor, 2022). Collectively, society creates meaning together, and if the perspectives of family childcare educators are included in the knowledge paradigm from which understanding of the childcare system is created, rather than being left in the shadows, a more holistic and informed metaview may start to occur (Doucet, 2018).

Social constructionism is located at the midpoint of the knowledge paradigm spectrum, which is bracketed by positivism at one end, using purely objective ways of knowing, and by postmodernism at the other, which relies on subjective knowledge creation (Daly, 2007; Restivo, 2022). As described above, using an empirical approach to knowledge creation that relies largely on positivism or objectivism creates gaps in understanding of family childcare. However, postmodernism is also problematic, because if all viewpoints are true, no definitive claims can be made, no knowledge can ever be certain, and researchers are left without a clear path forward (Daly, 2007). Social constructionism is an ideal knowledge paradigm because it balances objectivist and subjectivist approaches to knowledge creation, where interactions create meaning and facts rely on contextualization.

The qualitative approach to research often used in social constructionism gives the opportunity to explore the diverse voices and views of family childcare educators, leading to rich descriptions of their experiences and nuanced understanding of their unique needs (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012; Daly, 2007). Qualitative research is ideal because quantitative approaches, including surveys and observation scales, may lack the ability to capture the nuances of family childcare educators, as many quantitative studies are created based on the differing contexts of large centre-based childcare programs. Recent research has called attention to this, as quality care looks different in a day home setting. For example, relationships are a primary component of quality in family childcare, but are often not measured in standard tests (Hooper et al., 2021).

Using a framework of human ecology would also strengthen the existent knowledge base on family childcare, as many of the incongruencies and gaps in the existent body of research stem from issues rising out of the scientific approach (Basen, 2022). The traditions of scientism result in narrow, deep specialization, with siloed knowledge that frequently does not consider or account for the interconnections present within complex living systems (Shmuel et al., 2022; Straus, 1990). In contrast, human ecology posits that complex problems require collaboration and an interdisciplinary approach (Miller et al., 2007). Human ecology recognizes that people and their environments are integrated parts of the whole, and that each part of the system influences other parts, and the system in its entirety (Miller et al., 2007). Human ecology offers a more holistic, ecological worldview to exploring complex systems by shifting thinking from parts to whole, from structure to process, and from objective to epistemic science, where there can be approximate knowledge but no absolute truths (Capra, 2008).

The generalist specialist approach used in human ecology (Straus, 1990), with strengths outlined by Jia et al. (2022), would strongly benefit the study of family childcare. Generalists need to have specific knowledge of individual topics as well as an understanding of the entire system, and the ability to zoom in and out of each aspect while analyzing the interconnections throughout (Straus, 1990). Generalists apply themselves broadly, resulting in significantly increased engagement with diverse viewpoints, while specialists have a narrower focus and tend to engage within their own communities (Waller & Anderson, 2019). Additionally, generalists offer pathways for collaborative communication enabling specialist knowledge to mobilize and increase gains from divergent areas of expertise, as "specialists' knowledge without context cannot be made valuable and that context can only be offered by generalists who can connect the work of specialists with the rest of the world" (DaJung et al., 2022, p. 71). Because childcare is a complex living system experiencing rapid change like the new spaces being created across Canada (Government of Canada, 2022), the generalist approach used in human ecology is offered here as a strong

foundation for analyzing this topic and creating a fuller picture of the childcare system.

Knowledge about diverse topics such as parental need to access childcare, choice, or lack of choice in accessible care, and quality of care can be connected through human ecology's generalist specialist approach. The research questions posed here, exploring the unique abilities and needs of family childcare and which supports are required for children and educators to thrive in these distinct settings, further add to the understanding of the childcare system, and can be gathered using social constructionism as a lens. Together, social constructionism and human ecology would strengthen the study of family childcare, guiding a holistic exploration where many viewpoints could be considered, and all parts of the system as well as their interactions could be examined

### **Final Discussion and Direction for Future Research**

Family childcare educators are being left out. They are left out of research, left out of decision-making, and left out informing the creation of childcare licensing regulations and policies. The Canadian childcare system, thus, is one in which decisions are being made about us, without us. My own personal experiences, along with a review of the existent literature, showcase the lived realities of family childcare educators, including the strengths and challenges that come with working in a unique environment. Exploring the epistemological approach currently driving research, which to date largely excludes family childcare experiences and needs, perpetuates a system that fails to fully support the very people most needed in the Canadian childcare landscape. Licensed family childcare programs are required to fill in the gaps of early learning and childcare evidenced by childcare deserts across Canada, and vulnerable children like Oaklan Cunningham are falling through those gaps with devastating consequences.

Change is needed to provoke a more informed and supportive system of childcare. Research is needed that focuses on the experiences and needs of family childcare educators, rather than minimizing or excluding them. Finally, educator voices need to be amplified to help create a system that is informed, targeted, and better able to meet the needs of educators, children, and families. Canada needs more licensed family childcare programs for the early learning and childcare system to thrive, and family childcare educators need to be better understood and supported. Examining family childcare experiences and existent research, alongside the epistemological forces driving that research, have shown the gaps in our knowledge and policy base, and given some direction on how best to proceed.

Social constructionism and the generalist approach of human ecology are ideal for further exploring the topic of family childcare, and can be used as a lens to guide a Canadian study to answer the research questions: What are the experiences of family childcare educators in Canada, and which supports and services are needed to meet their unique needs? My personal experiences and research to date lead me to believe that creating a system specifically designed for the needs of family childcare educators would better support their abilities and needs. I propose a research study that would begin with focus groups across Canada to learn more about family childcare educator experiences and needs, alongside an evaluation of their current capacity within the childcare field. Then, drawing on the examples of targeted support systems shown to be effective in the United States (Porter & Bromer, 2016; Porter et al., 2019), and leveraging both internal and external policies and practice (Woodman, 2022), a study would begin with two groups of family childcare educators: one working within the Canadian childcare system as it stands, and the other receiving informed, wraparound supports. A qualitative evaluation of educator experiences and abilities via interviews or focus groups would be conducted at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the study to explore the experiences of family childcare educators, while also determining if the new system provided improved support for their unique needs and abilities. The evaluation would aim to increase educator capacity, stability, and longevity in the field.

Simply creating more family childcare spaces will not be a long-term solution for Canada's early learning and childcare system if family childcare educator voices are not amplified, and their needs not adequately supported. Addressing systemic issues including lack of respect, lack of informed and targeted continuing education, and lack of understanding of the abilities and needs of educators working in these

unique environments is necessary to build a strong and sustainable childcare system. More research is needed, using different epistemological approaches, to further the knowledge base on family childcare educators and answer the research questions posed here.

## Conclusion

An epistemological examination of family childcare has described how the current knowledge base has been created, and where issues or gaps within the research are evident. Exploring the contexts surrounding this issue has shown that bringing Canadian family childcare educator voices out of the shadows, particularly during a time when more licensed family childcare spaces are being created, is critical to ensuring that those spaces receive the informed, targeted support required to offer high-quality early learning and childcare. Social constructionism and the generalist approach of human ecology are recommended for a more holistic examination of family childcare embedded in the Canadian context, where educator voices are amplified and their viewpoints considered. By critically examining what is known, along with exploring avenues where further knowledge can be created, a stronger, more fully informed system that supports the unique contexts of family childcare can result.

## Declarations

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