Radical Love and Hope: Reimagining Early Childhood Policy and Activism from the Margins

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Abstract

This paper offers a feminist reconceptualization of activism in early childhood education and care by centering early childhood educators' lived experiences and everyday engagements with policy. Rejecting narrow, institutional definitions of activism, the paper foregrounds a feminist methodology grounded in critical autoethnography and relational knowledge-making. Drawing on the author's experiences as an AECEO CARE Collective lead, they examine how educators are systematically excluded from policy design while simultaneously regulated by workplace policies that render advocacy and resistance unsafe. Educators' political silence is shown not as incapacity but as an outcome of precarity and structural constraint. In dialogue with bell hooks' theorization of love as an ethical and political practice, this article argues that love functions as a feminist praxis of resistance. Love-based collectives emerge as methodological and political sites through which racialized educators build policy literacy, collective voice, and political agency, reimagining possibilities for activism within fragile and contested policy landscapes.

Keywords Early childhood educators; Feminist activism; Policy; Collective resistance; Early childhood education and care

Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is unfolding within a present marked by authoritarian regimes, escalating violence, forced displacement, environmental collapse, and economic precarity that have intensified the vulnerabilities of children, families, and early childhood educators (ECEs). Within these intersecting crises, ECEC emerges as a deeply political site shaped by, and responsive to, broader struggles for justice. Against this backdrop, it is important to recognize that activism in ECEC has long been a force for change and transformation (Powell et al., 2026; Richardson et al., 2023). Advocacy, resistance, and collective organizing have been central to the field's history. ECEs, families, unions, professional associations, and grassroots movements have repeatedly mobilized to contest market-driven models of childcare, demand public investment, and assert the social value of care work (Friendly & Prentice, 2009; Macdonald et al., 2015). This history reflects a movement shaped by both optimism and exhaustion, solidarity and tension, possibility and loss. The creation of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system would not have been possible without sustained pressure from childcare advocates and organizations mobilizing across federal and provincial contexts (Powell et al., 2026). CWELCC thus stands as a reminder that transformative policy change is won through grassroots struggle, coalition-building, activism, and advocacy.

It is within this context that this paper responds to calls for early years scholarship that center activism, relationality, and engaged praxis. I ask: How might racialized newcomer educators' practices of care, storytelling, mutual protection, and collective writing constitute forms of policy work when more visible forms of public advocacy are unsafe or inaccessible? I frame activism as "working for justice in/as relationship" (brown, 2017), and advocacy as the use of voice, position, or resources to advance the dignity and interests of others, particularly when those interests are ignored or marginalized,

encompassing both collective struggles for systemic change and everyday acts of resistance within early learning environments and communities. Policy is conceptualized expansively as "rules that tell people what to do" (Nagasawa et al., 2023, p. 1), including not only formal legislation (big P policy) but also informal norms, organizational practices, and cultural expectations (small p policy) through which ECEC is lived and experienced (Ball, 2015; Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014; MacDonald et al., 2015).

I enter this conversation as a racialized immigrant woman, early childhood educator, childcare activist, social justice scholar and CARE Collective lead. To make space for women like me within early childhood policy and activism, I think with bell hooks' (2001a, 2001b) theorization of love, arguing that love offers a critical (yet often overlooked) framework for understanding activism and policy in ECEC. For hooks (2001a, 2001b), love is an ethical and political practice grounded in care, responsibility, trust, respect, knowledge, and commitment. In times of polarization and precarity, love functions as a form of resistance that sustains hope, accountability, and collective survival. Using a critical feminist autoethnographic approach (Edwards, 2017), I examine my experiences as an Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario (AECEO) CARE Collective lead. By centering an activist praxis, this paper illustrates how love, community, and care provide the foundations for activism through which racialized newcomer educators reimagine the conditions of possibility in ECEC, even within fragile and uncertain policy landscapes that unevenly constrain who can engage in visible public advocacy and at what risk. It further argues that educators' relational practices of care, storytelling, mutual protection, and collective writing constitute forms of policy work, particularly under conditions in which more public forms of activism may be unsafe.

This paper moves from a broad policy context to an in-depth narrative analysis to examine love-centered activism in early childhood education. It begins by outlining the policy landscape shaping early learning and childcare in Canada and Ontario, before tracing the emergence of CARE Collectives within early childhood activism, with particular attention to the AECEO and the CARE Collectives initiative. The paper then introduces a feminist theoretical framework that centers love as praxis, situating care, power, and relationality as key analytic lenses. The narrative of a newcomer CARE Collective follows, illustrating how advocacy is reimagined through practices of love, care, and emergence. The discussion considers how love generates new activist imaginaries grounded in relational power and feminist resistance. The paper concludes by positioning love as an emergent and transformative form of activism within ECEC.

Landscape of ECEC Policy and Activism in Canada and Ontario

ECEC policy in Canada has been shaped through decades of sustained activism in a context of persistent policy absence. For much of the country's history, childcare was largely treated as a private, family responsibility rather than a public good, resulting in a fragmented, market-based system characterized by uneven access, significant regional disparities, and chronic underinvestment in both services and the workforce (Friendly & White, 2012; Richardson, et al., 2021). In the absence of a comprehensive national framework, childcare provision developed unevenly across provinces, relying heavily on parent fees, nonprofit and for-profit operators (Richardson, et al., 2021), and a predominantly feminized, racialized, and undervalued workforce (Abawi, 2021). This policy vacuum generated fertile ground for activism, as educators, parents, unions, feminist organizations, and community groups mobilized to contest the marginalization of care and to reframe childcare as "a public good/responsibility whereby all children and families have access to pedagogically enriching, meaningful learning/care experiences" (Richardson, et al., 2021, p. 5)

Across generations, childcare advocates worked to challenge neoliberal and capitalist logics that devalued care work. Despite limited federal and provincial leadership the field sustained a vibrant culture of resistance through professional associations, grassroots advocacy organizations, student movements, and community collectives (Menon, et al., 2024). Organizing occurred at multiple scales, from classrooms and training institutions to provincial legislatures and federal policy arenas, building solidarity and articulating alternative visions of care rooted in equity, public accountability, and decent work. This persistent organizing gradually reshaped public discourse and political priorities, contributing to a significant policy turning point with the federal government's commitment to ongoing investments in early learning and childcare through the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system.

CWELCC represents a landmark achievement for childcare activism in Canada. Reduced parent fees and expanded public investment signal a meaningful shift toward recognizing childcare as a collective responsibility and a public good. However, CWELCC is neither an endpoint nor a guaranteed success. Its implementation has revealed enduring structural challenges that underscore a central lesson of early years activism: policy gains secured through advocacy require ongoing vigilance, resistance, and mobilization to prevent erosion or redirection. In Ontario in particular, the system remains widely described as fragile, as affordability gains have not been matched with secure long-term funding, comprehensive workforce strategies, or realistic plans for system expansion (Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care [OCBCC] & Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario [AECEO], 2025). The long and living history of early childhood advocacy in Ontario offers both lessons and hope. Across periods of rapid change and slow incremental progress, ECEs have consistently organized to lead for their profession, support one another, and honor the children and communities they serve. Although Ontario has made notable progress on affordability under CWELCC, the future of the system remains uncertain. Audits indicate stalled space creation, anticipated funding shortfalls beyond 2026, and ongoing tensions in federal–provincial relations, particularly around the expansion of for-profit provision (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025).

Ontario's reliance on a market-based childcare system has produced deep inequities for ECEs, including low wages, limited access to benefits and pensions, demanding working conditions, and low levels of unionization (OCBCC & AECEO, 2025). While advocacy efforts led by ECEs and organizations such as the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario (AECEO) have resulted in greater public recognition of workforce issues and the incorporation of wage-related policies into CWELCC, these measures have not addressed the scale of the crisis. Reports consistently link educator shortages to poor compensation, limited professional respect, and unstable working conditions, while persistent data gaps hinder effective workforce planning (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025). Staffing instability continues to constrain space creation and quality, revealing the limits of system-building efforts that do not center decent work. These dynamics highlight both the transformative potential of early years policy and its vulnerability, reinforcing the necessity of activism that positions educators as political actors and care as a public responsibility rather than a market commodity.

Care Collectives as Emergent Strategy in Early Childhood Activism

The Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) has been a key actor within this advocacy landscape. Founded in 1950, AECEO emerged in response to the lack of regulation, training, and recognition in the early childhood field (AECEO, 2010). Over time, the organization has shifted its focus toward collective, educator-led advocacy that prioritizes decent work, public accountability, and systems change. In addition to advocating on behalf of educators, AECEO also works in relationship with ECEs, supporting them to articulate their own priorities and engage directly with policy

processes. This approach reflects a broader view of activism as a collective, relational practice that develops over time and aims to contribute to a more caring and just world (brown, 2017; Richardson et al., 2023). One of the primary ways AECEO enacts this activist orientation is through its CARE Collectives. CARE Collectives are local, educator-led groups that create spaces for ECEs to connect, build community, and organize around shared concerns related to policy, funding, and working conditions (Menon, et al., 2024; Menon & Johnston, 2026). Initially, these groups were envisioned through a more conventional framework as communities of practice, drawing on Wenger et al. (2002) to support peer learning, information sharing, and collective problem-solving. Early iterations focused on regional organizing for improved compensation and working conditions, alongside allied spaces where educators could deepen pedagogical conversations and exchange knowledge (Menon, et al., 2024).

Over time, however, the CARE Collectives evolved beyond traditional communities of practice. They became spaces grounded in care, relationality, and mutual recognition, welcoming educators in their entirety rather than solely in relation to their professional practice (Menon & Johnston, 2026). Emotions, precarity, anger, and hope were not treated as barriers to advocacy but as essential sources of political knowledge (Menon, 2022). In this evolution, CARE Collectives increasingly function as a form of emergent strategy (brown, 2017). Emergent strategy offers a framework for understanding how meaningful change unfolds through small-scale, relational actions that generate complex systems and patterns over time. brown (2017) emphasizes critical connections over critical mass, deep listening, trust-building, and imagination beyond dominant logics of competition, binaries, and linear outcomes. From this perspective, CARE Collectives are conceptualized as going beyond organizing tools or advocacy structures; they are dynamic ecosystems in which policy engagement, care, and collective imagination co-emerge. By centering relationship-building, mutual accountability, and responsiveness, CARE Collectives strengthen ECEs' capacity to participate in policy creation and system transformation while simultaneously embodying the just and caring worlds they seek to create. Crucially, this work is sustained through strategy and resistance, which centers an ethical commitment to one another and an insistence that care, dignity, and relationality matter in the struggle for change. In this way, CARE Collectives enact a form of political love: one that understands care work, solidarity, and collective liberation as deeply intertwined.

Theoretical Framework: Love as Praxis in Early Childhood Activism

This paper is theoretically grounded in bell hooks' ethic of love, which conceptualizes love as a radical, relational, and political praxis essential to struggles for justice. Rather than treating love as a private emotion or apolitical sentiment, hooks positions love as a rigorous ethical orientation that centers relationality, care, and commitment within conditions structured by racial capitalism, patriarchy, neoliberalism, and colonialism (hooks, 1994, 2000, 2001a, 2001b). This framework offers a critical interruption in ECEC policy and activism, which are often governed by neoliberal and capitalist logics that privilege efficiency, measurement, and professional compliance while obscuring relational care work, emotional professionalism (Osgood, 2006, 2010), and collective flourishing. Re-centering love as praxis challenges these dominant paradigms and frames activism as a relational practice grounded in community, responsibility, liberation, and transformation.

This theorization is especially salient for understanding early childhood activism led by racialized and newcomer educators, whose labor is situated at the intersection of gendered care work, racialized economic exploitation, and migration regimes. In Ontario, ECEC activism and advocacy have largely been led by white women and theorized through predominantly white feminist scholars (Macdonald et al., 2015; Richardson et al., 2023) and white theorists (Langford et al., 2017; Tronto, 2013). While this

scholarship has been integral to advancing policy change, legitimizing care as a political concern, and articulating a feminist ethics of care that moves across major and minor political spaces (Tronto, 2013), it has also limited whose knowledge counts as theory. As an immigrant woman of colour and childcare activist, I argue that making the politics of ECEC visible requires creating space to theorize from the margins with theories from the margins. This is both a political and ethical commitment: to foreground the voices, practices, and intellectual traditions of women of colour whose contributions to care, activism, and policy have been rendered peripheral.

Thinking with Black feminist scholars such as bell hooks and adrienne maree brown deliberately disrupts the whiteness of ECEC activism and theorization by centering women of colour as knowledge producers and political actors. hooks' conceptualization of love emerges from Black women's lived practices of survival, healing, and resistance, positioning them not only as subjects of oppression but as active producers of transformative knowledge. She describes Black women as "love's practitioners" (hooks, 2001b, p.93), emphasizing how acts of care, solidarity, and relational responsibility have long functioned as strategies of endurance and agency under conditions of violence and dispossession. In this sense, love becomes a political refusal of dehumanization and a commitment to collective well-being that exceeds individual interest.

For hooks (2001b), love is an intentional practice composed of interrelated elements—care, knowledge, responsibility, respect, trust, and commitment. Love requires action and choice; it is something one does rather than something one passively feels. Rejecting the framing of love as naïve or politically irrelevant, hooks argues that love provides the grounding necessary to confront injustice without reproducing domination or fear. Drawing on Freirean traditions that link love to liberation, she insists that movements oriented toward freedom must be rooted in love if they are to sustain ethical struggle over time (Freire, 1990; hooks, 2001b). Love thus functions simultaneously as method and horizon, shaping both how activism is practiced and what it makes possible. Three dimensions of love in hooks' work (Washington, 2024) are particularly relevant here: love as an active choice that emphasizes solidarity and accountability (hooks, 2001b); revolutionary self-love, especially for women of colour, as resistance to systems that depend on disposability and internalized inferiority (hooks, 1981, 1992, 2001a; Collins, 2000); and love as familial, understood expansively to include chosen and community-based formations through which ethical responsibility and belonging are learned and sustained (Washington, 2024).

adrienne maree brown's (2017) theorization of emergent strategy extends this framework by situating love explicitly at the center of organizing and social change. brown (2017) emphasizes that complex systems transform through small, relational actions grounded in deep listening, humility, and attentiveness. When love becomes central to organizing, movements shift away from domination, competition, and extraction toward collaboration, depth, and relationality. Liberation, from this perspective, emerges not through scale but through the strength and intimacy of relationships (brown, 2017). Together, hooks and brown offer a conception of love as activism that is relational, embodied, and political. Love is not separate from strategy; it *is* strategy. By centering love as feminist praxis, this framework makes visible the politics of ECEC policy and activism. It questions whose voices are amplified, whose labor is valued, and whose theories shape the field, while foregrounding relational care work, collective flourishing, and resistance to colonial, neoliberal, capitalist, and patriarchal logics.

Methodology

This paper adopts a critical feminist autoethnographic methodology (Edwards, 2017) to examine my experiences as a CARE Collective lead within the AECEO, in dialogue with the experiences of ECEs who participate in the collective. This inquiry emerged through

the documentation of our shared stories, collective discussions, activist practices and embodied moments of struggle that reflected the structural conditions shaping our collective. I was guided by the understanding that "to document is to refuse to agree to something, to refuse to stay silent about something" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 15). Positioned as both researcher and co-participant, I treat my positionality as a central analytic resource, intertwining my narrative with de-identified accounts of fellow educators while attending carefully to ethical, relational, and emotional responsibilities. The source materials for this inquiry include my meeting notes, reflective writing produced during and after collective gatherings, collective conversations, collaborative writing, visioning activities, public presentations, and relevant organizational documents generated through the CARE Collective's work. The inquiry spans over five years and draws on my engagement with approximately thirteen ECEs whose participation, roles, and levels of involvement varied over time. All educators whose experiences are represented provided recorded oral consent, and their contributions have been anonymized through the removal of names, workplaces, and other identifying details, with particular attention to minimizing the professional risks that may accompany their advocacy.

Grounded in feminist and collectivist principles, this approach understands knowledge as relational and co-constructed, positioning the collective as a site of resistance to dominant discourses of care, professionalism, and precarity in early childhood education. Through iterative writing, reflection, and thematic engagement with our practices of caring, organizing, and advocating, this study seeks not generalizable findings but a situated contribution toward policy and activist dialogue, particularly concerning equity for racialized educators working with newcomer communities. In line with Bishop's (2021) articulation of Indigenous autoethnography, I engage in ongoing reflexivity, continually asking who I am speaking for and to what end, and remaining accountable to contextual, cultural, and relational ethics.

Situating Love, Care, Power, and Relationship: A narrative of a CARE Collective

This section presents a narrative constructed through ongoing relational engagements and collective sense-making within a CARE Collective formed with ECEs working with newcomer children and families in Ontario. Drawing on my sustained involvement with these educators, as well as reflective dialogues within the collective, I offer a narrative account of how love, advocacy and activism emerged within conditions of precarity and constraint. This account situates educators' lived realities within a hegemony that maintains the status quo shaping ECEC, foregrounding how love, relational bonds, and everyday acts of resistance sustain both educators and the communities they serve.

Relational Care in Precarious Systems

Our CARE collective comprises ECEs who work with newcomer children in Care for Newcomer Children (CNC) programs. CNC programs are federally funded through Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and are intended to support immigrant and refugee families by providing childcare while caregivers participate in language instruction or other settlement services (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. (n.d.). Typically delivered through non-governmental organizations alongside programs such as Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC), CNC programs were developed in response to a well-documented gap in settlement services: the absence of childcare that constrained newcomer parents' access to supports (Childminding Monitoring, Advisory and Support (CMAS), 2013). Despite their central role in facilitating newcomer integration, CNC programs occupy a marginal position within Ontario's ECEC landscape. They remain outside provincial childcare systems and are largely invisible within dominant policy frameworks, including the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system. This policy neglect extends to the educators themselves. Although many CNC educators are Registered Early Childhood

Educators (RECEs) and members of the College of ECEs, they are often referred to as "child minders" or "CNC staff," terminology that diminishes professional status and obscures their qualifications (CMAS, 2013). Within an already feminized and undervalued sector, CNC educators, who are predominantly racialized women from immigrant and refugee backgrounds, are positioned at the bottom of care hierarchies.

My relationship with this collective began in 2006, when I first encountered the CNC program in my role as a faculty advisor supporting pre-service educators during field placements. Initially structured and time-limited, these visits evolved into sustained relational engagement over many years. Shared identities as people of colour, women from immigrant and refugee backgrounds, mothers, and ECEs created common ground, transforming institutional encounters into spaces of trust and reciprocity. Educators invited me into conversations that extended beyond pedagogy to include migration histories, workplace precarity, family responsibilities, and the emotional labour of caring for newcomer children and families. I remained attentive to power asymmetries within these relationships, centering intentionality, while working collaboratively to focus educators' knowledge, experiences, and everyday acts of love, care, advocacy, and resistance.

Precarious Labour and Deep Commitment

The educators' working conditions were marked by chronic insecurity. Their wages were low, benefits non-existent, and employment contracts renewed annually, forcing many onto employment insurance during program closures. Requests for wage increases were met with ultimatums that framed decent wage as a collective loss, any increase would necessitate staff reductions, pitting colleagues' livelihoods against one another. Advocacy was actively discouraged, with explicit threats of job loss should educators speak publicly about their conditions. These constraints were compounded by safety concerns related to program locations and bare-bones material environments. Educators worked with limited resources while navigating racialized and gendered hierarchies that rendered their care work simultaneously essential and expendable. Their precarious employment was entangled with broader regimes of racial capitalism, migration governance, and feminized care work. This precarity stands in stark contrast to the depth of care the educators provide. Working with newcomer families, many navigating housing insecurity, systemic exclusion, and the challenges of a new linguistic and cultural context, educators described their work as deeply relational, noting the rich multilingual and cultural resources families bring to early childhood settings. They often served as families' first point of social connection in Canada, supporting not only children but also parents in navigating healthcare systems, housing processes, and unfamiliar cultural norms. Their own migration histories fostered empathy and trust, enabling connections that extended far beyond formal job descriptions. Equally significant were the relationships among the educators themselves. Many continue to work together in the same program and have done so for over two decades. They described their collegial bonds as familial—sharing meals, celebrating milestones, supporting one another through illness and loss, and witnessing each other's children grow up. When asked what sustained them amid difficult conditions, educators consistently pointed to love. Love for the children, the families, and each other. Love emerged as a sustaining force in our conversations.

Organized Advocacy, AECEO and the Birth of a CARE Collective

Despite witnessing these inequities, I struggled with the ethical implications of making educators' challenges visible in a field that often punishes dissent. I was acutely aware of the power and privilege I held through my connections to academia, even as I questioned my own sense of belonging within an organization historically led by white women. Entering the AECEO as a racialized immigrant woman was fraught with

discomfort and ambivalence. At the same time, AECEO itself was undergoing a period of flux, actively seeking broader representation and new forms of engagement. Recognizing both my complicity within existing systems and my capacity to act, I chose to remain in this space, guided by accountability to CNC educators and a commitment to using my institutional access to build community. My involvement with the AECEO became a catalyst for the formation of a Newcomer Community of Practice, which later evolved into a CARE Collective. The collective underwent a significant shift, from a focus on professional learning toward the co-creation of a relational space where love, care, and community could emerge as forces for collective resistance and ethical action.

Advocacy Reimagined through Love and Emergence

For educators whose care work is shaped by racialized, gendered, and immigration-related precarity, and work environments that threaten their speaking up, overt forms of resistance carry tangible risks. We had to be creative, come together and rethink activism because we knew that not everyone can participate in highly visible actions such as rallies, petitions, or public dissent. That did not mean we were powerless. Our strategy came from community and relationships. Our grassroots advocacy emerged as relational, layered, and strategically adaptive. Participation in the CARE Collective itself came to be understood as an act of advocacy: a space where educators could speak their truths, imagine equitable futures, and affirm one another's worth in a system that systematically devalues both care work and racialized women's labour. One of the collective's early practices involved the co-creation of a shared vision board. As we brainstormed about how and what to create, I asked, "Why are we creating this vision board?" Educators responded that it would "reflect ourselves," provide "a visual reminder," and show "where we are and where we want to go." As images and words were added, the conversation moved toward the importance of working together and supporting one another mentally, physically, and emotionally. One educator reflected, "The vision board helped me focus on working together as a team, even though we came from different countries and have different cultural and religious backgrounds." This visual and dialogical process invited educators to articulate what they desired not only for their professional lives, but also for their personal and relational futures. Educators identified aspirations related to dignity, safety, belonging, fair compensation, and collective well-being, situating their care work within broader life trajectories. The vision board functioned as a political artifact, making visible desires that emerge from a collective imagining, love for self and love for one another that functioned as legitimate foundations for both flourishing and resistance.

Alongside this practice, the collective engaged in collaborative writing as a central mode of meaning-making. Educators wrote poems, reflective pieces, short narratives, and visual texts that documented their pedagogical work, relational practices, and everyday encounters with children and families. Initially, writing about pedagogy and classroom practice felt relatively safe, as such discourse aligns with sanctioned forms of professional knowledge. However, as trust deepened, the collective began to write about their lived experiences more explicitly, including migration histories, racialized workplace encounters, and the emotional toll of working within precarious conditions. In one reflective piece, an educator described the challenges of resettling in Canada while caring for her children and working toward independence as a racialized woman. With support from family and friends, she completed her ECE diploma and found purpose in working with newcomer children and families, writing that she was drawn to the field because she knew "caring and loving relationships are important for every child." Her reflection connected migration, care, and professional identity, making visible how lived experience shaped her pedagogical commitments. Writing thus became a method through which educators subtly disrupted dominant constructions of who an ECE is and what counts as professional knowledge. By presenting their stories at conferences, workshops, and collective spaces, educators sent both quiet and loud messages that they exist, that

their care work matters, and that their activism must be acknowledged. Even when names remained anonymized to ensure safety, their narratives circulated, interrupting erasure and insisting on visibility.

The collective also engaged in research partnerships that centered educators as knowledge producers rather than research subjects. During one research conversation, an educator explained that she was participating not only to speak about her own experiences, but also to create possibilities for educators entering the field after her. She questioned how change could occur if educators did not speak, especially within spaces that do not offer them safety and protection. Her comments also revealed the professional risks attached to such advocacy. Reflecting on her workplace, she explained, "I need to speak up because we want others to know what the problem is." Yet she also described being told that if educators advocated for decent wages, they could leave: "It's like we are nothing to them. We work hard to make sure the families and children are cared for, but still, they say you can leave whenever you want." Her account shows how advocacy emerged alongside fear, hurt, and employment precarity. Through participation in collaborative research, educators ensured that their stories would continue to be told beyond the immediacy of the collective space. Although anonymity was maintained to mitigate risk, the circulation of these narratives allowed their experiences to travel across institutional and disciplinary boundaries. Activism thus extended beyond individual participation to relational networks, partnerships, and shared authorship, enabling the collective's concerns to resonate within broader ECEC conversations.

Holding Together under Constraint

Discussions within the CARE Collective are often marked by anger, grief, and exhaustion, particularly in relation to wages, working conditions, and the continued invisibility of CNC educators within CWELCC and broader policy frameworks. These conversations, however, are equally characterized by love, care, humour, and community. Educators speak openly about the fear associated with public advocacy, recognizing that job loss, contract non-renewal, or reputational harm are ever-present risks. Our advocacy, under these conditions, is reconfigured, it resides in relationality, in the collective, and in togetherness. This narrative illustrates that our activism does not manifest as loud resistance or public confrontation. For the educators, positioned at the bottom of hierarchical ECEC structures, love and relational commitment constitute essential forms of flourishing and defiance. Our CARE Collective emerges as a relational space where love is practiced as a collective ethic that sustains educators, challenges erasure, and persistently insists on dignity and justice.

Discussion: Emergence, Relational Power, and Feminist Resistance in ECEC

This discussion theorizes the CARE Collective as a site of feminist activism grounded in love, emergence, and relational power. Drawing on bell hooks' Black feminist ethic of love (2001a, 2001b), adrienne maree brown's (2017) framework of emergent strategy, this analysis argues that love, when practiced collectively, relationally, and intentionally, functions as a powerful force for thriving, transformation, and liberation within ECEC.

Reframing Activism through Black Feminist Love

The CARE Collective invites a rethinking of activism in ECEC by theorizing love as a political praxis, a powerful force that fuels resistance, reclaims power, and generates pathways toward liberation under conditions of constraint. Read through Black feminist theorizing and the phenomenon of emergence, the narrative makes visible how hierarchies operate not only within care work, but also within activism itself. It questions: who is granted access to recognized activist spaces, who can speak openly without fear of reprisal, and whose resistance remains unseen or illegible within dominant frames.

Dominant conceptualizations of advocacy in ECEC continue to privilege whiteness, visibility, confrontation, and scale, often equating activism with public protest, policy confrontation, or macro-level engagement. MacDonald et al. (2015) framework of micro (silent), meso (small a), and macro (big A) advocacy remains influential; however, it reproduces hierarchies by positioning micro-level actions as professionally compliant and politically muted, while reserving legitimacy for visible, confrontational forms of resistance. Such frameworks fail to account for how power, risk, and precarity shape educators' capacity to engage in advocacy, particularly for racialized immigrant women. The CARE Collective fundamentally disrupts this hierarchy. For educators who are immigrant and refugee women of colour, mothers, and long-term contract workers, the constraints on macro-level advocacy are not a matter of political apathy or individual capacity. They are shaped by job precarity, threats of contract non-renewal, immigration insecurity, debt accrued through credential recognition, and responsibilities to dependent families. Under these conditions, public dissent can jeopardize livelihoods and long-fought-for stability. To interpret the absence of visible protest as disengagement is therefore both analytically inaccurate and ethically untenable.

bell hooks' theorization of love as political praxis offers a critical alternative. For hooks (2001b), love is an intentional, ethical practice grounded in care, responsibility, trust, and commitment. Love is active; it demands choice and action (Washington, 2024). Within the CARE Collective, love emerges as an organizing principle, a mode of witnessing, staying, and collective becoming. Advocacy is enacted through relational presence, mutual support, and community-building—through *being with* one another in ways that refuse erasure while minimizing risk. These acts, though often invisible, are neither passive nor apolitical. Rather, love becomes the force that sustains resistance, nurtures solidarity, and enables educators to carve pathways toward dignity and liberation within (and against) systems structured by inequity.

Emergence, Ecosystems, and the Power of the Small

A Black feminist reading of emergence deepens this analysis by shifting attention away from scale and spectacle toward the transformative power of small, relational practices. brown's (2017) concept of emergent strategy emphasizes that social change does not unfold linearly or solely through visible acts of resistance, but through everyday actions that, over time, generate complex ecosystems. Drawing on ecological metaphors such as fungi and dandelions, brown (2017) illustrates how life is sustained through underground networks, mutual nourishment, and persistence in hostile conditions. These systems rarely announce themselves, yet they quietly reshape the terrain on which they exist. The CARE Collective functions as precisely such an ecosystem. Under conditions of institutional invisibility and economic precarity, educators have cultivated dense networks of care that sustain not only themselves, but also newcomer children, families, and communities. Love circulates through this system as a generative and political force as an active choice grounded in solidarity and accountability (hooks, 2001a; Washington, 2024). Educators show up daily despite unsafe working conditions and unsustainable wages; they provide continuity for children navigating displacement and trauma; and they protect one another from isolation and burnout. These practices are deliberate refusals of erasure and disposability. This is an enactment of revolutionary self-love, particularly for women of colour, enacted in resistance to systems that depend on devaluation, extraction, and internalized inferiority (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981, 1992, 2001b). Within the collective, love becomes a sustaining practice that enables endurance, belonging, and collective imagination.

The CARE Collective's practices, such as vision boarding, collaborative writing, storytelling, and participation in research, materialize emergent strategy in action. These are not merely reflective exercises, but political interventions that create space for educators to imagine otherwise. Through these practices, educators articulated

aspirations for dignity, safety, joy, recognition, and collective well-being. Writing together, in particular, allowed love for self and one another to surface without immediate threat. As Mohanty (2003) argues, Third World women's writing operates as both self-preservation and resistance, (re)producing feminist political theory rooted in racialized and migrant experience. In the CARE Collective, storytelling became a method of theorizing, a strategy for thriving, and a mode of activism. As brown (2017) reminds us, complex systems transform through small, relational actions grounded in deep listening, humility, and attentiveness. When love becomes central to organizing, resistance moves towards collaboration, relational accountability, and the slow, powerful work of collective liberation.

Love, Visibility, and Imagined Communities of Resistance

Revolutionary self-love has long been theorized by Black feminist scholars as a necessary condition for activism, particularly for women of colour working within systems that rely on disposability and internalized inferiority (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981, 1992, 2001b; Washington, 2024). For hooks (2001a), love is not merely sustaining; it is insurgent. It names an ethical commitment to self and community that makes resistance possible when visibility carries risk and dissent is punished. Love becomes the practice through which marginalized subjects refuse erasure and reclaim the right to act politically. Read alongside brown's (2017) emergent strategy, love operates as an organizing logic that privileges relationality, imagination, and the power of the small. Activism, in this framing, does not depend on spectacle or public confrontation but on networks of care that allow people to remain in struggle. brown's emphasis on emergence aligns with hooks' insistence that love requires action and choice; together, they position love as the force that animates activism under conditions where conventional forms of protest are foreclosed. At the same time, in drawing on Black feminist theorizing, I do not treat the experiences of women of colour, immigrant and refugee women, or women from the Global South as interchangeable. Rather, I engage Black feminist traditions as historically situated bodies of thought while attending to the distinct racial, migratory, cultural, and geopolitical locations that shape educators' experiences and possibilities for solidarity.

As a collective of women who identify as being from the Global South, Mohanty's (2003) theorization of imagined communities offers an essential bridge between these frameworks. Mohanty (2003) does not propose a homogeneous subject, but an imagined community forged through shared political commitments to resisting racism, colonialism, imperialism, and racial capitalism. These communities are sustained through relational imagination, through the capacity to recognize one another as political subjects connected by structures of domination. The CARE Collective constitutes such an imagined community. Members do not share identical migration histories, national origins, or professional trajectories, yet we are bound by common conditions of dispossession within ECEC and immigration systems. The educators' simultaneous visibility and invisibility, as racialized women whose care work is essential yet routinely erased, produces a distinct feminist consciousness. It is from this contradiction that activism emerges. As Mohanty (2003) reminds us, radical politics often take shape precisely within these unstable and constrained spaces. Activism within the CARE Collective is enacted through relational practices that make presence visible without demanding exposure. Even when educators remained anonymous in public research and presentations, their stories circulated, and this circulation itself is a political act. Love holds the collective together while allowing narratives to travel outward, unsettling dominant policy discourses that render racialized ECEs invisible. In this way, love fuels activism by expanding the reach, endurance, and political imagination of resistance.

Policy, Power, and Love as Knowledge

This feminist reconceptualization of activism has significant implications for policy. Policy is often defined as "rules that tell people what to do" (Nagasawa et al., 2023, p. 1), yet such definitions obscure how policies are lived, resisted, and reworked in everyday practice. The CARE Collective educators remain almost entirely excluded from *big P* policy design and implementation processes, despite being the very people who enact, interpret, and absorb the consequences of these policies. Policies about ECEs continue to be made *about* them rather than *with* them. This exclusion reinforces claims that ECEs are ill-equipped for public advocacy (MacDonald et al., 2015). In addition to formal, *big P* policy exclusions, many educators are governed by *small p* policies within early learning settings that actively discourage (or render unsafe) any form of activism or advocacy. These everyday institutional rules, norms, and expectations shape ECEs' lived experiences by subtly (and sometimes explicitly) disciplining political expression, reinforcing compliance, and normalizing silence. It is precisely these quotidian policy conditions that the CARE Collective names, deconstructs, and pushes back against. The CARE Collective reveals instead that educators are deliberately kept in conditions that limit access to advocacy training, institutional support, and political legitimacy. Love-based collectives, particularly those supported by organizations such as AECEO, become critical spaces of resistance through which policy literacy, political agency, and collective voice can emerge. These insights point to the need for workforce policies that explicitly recognize CNC educators as part of the early childhood workforce and account for the distinct conditions under which they work. Policy processes must also include racialized newcomer educators as knowledge producers whose lived and professional expertise can inform the design, implementation, and evaluation of early childhood policy. Such inclusion requires us to not only include consultation but also delineate protections that make space for educators to speak about wages, working conditions, and inequities without fear of retaliation or job loss. From this perspective, love-based collective spaces are necessary infrastructures through which educators can build policy knowledge, exercise political agency, and advocate safely for change.

Love as Loud Resistance and Liberatory Praxis

Love provides the grounding necessary to confront injustice without reproducing domination or fear. Drawing on Freirean traditions that link love to liberation, hooks insists that movements oriented toward freedom must be rooted in love if they are to sustain ethical struggle over time (Freire, 1990; hooks, 2001b). Love thus functions simultaneously as method and horizon, shaping both how activism is practiced and what it makes possible. Most importantly, the CARE Collective demonstrates that micro-level advocacy is not silent. It is resonant. It reverberates through relationships, ecosystems, and futures. Love is the force that enables educators to remain, to repair, to imagine, and to resist under conditions designed to fracture them. These educators are cultivating environments in which they and the communities they love can thrive and flourish, much like the resilient organisms brown (2017) describes. In a global moment marked by xenophobia, resurgent nationalism, and the criminalization of migration, the continued existence and flourishing of newcomer programs is itself a political achievement.

Thinking with hooks (2001a), brown (2017), and Mohanty (2003) provides a feminist theoretical language for understanding love as activism. Love is strategy. Love is knowledge. Within ECEC, love is not separate from policy or politics; it is the ground from which just, livable, and liberatory futures must emerge. books (2001a) and brown (2017) offer a conception of activism that is relational, embodied, and explicitly political. Love is not adjacent to strategy—it *is* strategy. By centering love as feminist praxis, this framework renders visible the politics embedded in ECEC policy and advocacy. It asks whose voices are amplified, whose labor is valued, and whose theories shape the field,

while foregrounding relational care work, collective flourishing, and resistance to colonial, neoliberal, capitalist, and patriarchal logics.

Conclusion

This article situates love as a powerful organizing strategy in ECEC policy and activism. As bell hooks (2001a) reminds us, love is neither naïve nor soft. It is an ethical, and politically charged praxis, one that sustains movements, generates knowledge, and makes liberation imaginable in conditions designed to fragment community and exhaust resistance. Through a personal narrative of a CARE Collective composed of racialized early childhood educators from immigrant and refugee backgrounds, this paper has argued that love conceptualized through Black feminist praxis and emergent strategy, is a powerful force for activism in ECEC. Advocacy, as this paper demonstrates, does not only occur through visible protest or policy confrontation. It also emerges through relational practices that sustain educators, families, and communities under conditions of precarity, surveillance, and exclusion. Drawing on hooks' ethic of love, the CARE Collective illustrates how care, responsibility, trust, and commitment function as intentional political practices. Love enables educators to remain in relation, to one another, to children, and to families, while resisting erasure. brown's (2017) emergent strategy further illuminates how small, interconnected actions generate ecosystems of transformation. Like fungi and dandelions, these educators make their way through cracks in hostile systems, cultivating resilience and collective flourishing beneath the surface.

These experiences and insights challenge deficit framings of micro-level advocacy as silent or insufficient. Everyday practices of listening, storytelling, continuity, and mutual protection are not passive; they are acts of refusal that resist neoliberal logics of extraction and disposability. In a world increasingly shaped by division, nationalism, and anti-immigrant violence, reclaiming love as feminist strategy is both urgent and necessary. If love is not merely an emotion but a method of organizing, a source of knowledge, and a strategy for survival, how might centering love fundamentally transform the future of activism, policy, and power in early childhood education and care?

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