

"I eventually got used to it": Critically examining the use of video surveillance technologies in Early Childhood Education programs in Nova Scotia and Ontario, Canada, from the perspectives of Early Childhood Educators

**Brooke Richardson
Nidhi Menon
Lisa Johnston
Michelle Brooks**

Abstract

Over the last decade, video surveillance technologies have become increasingly common in childcare programs in Canada (and internationally). The authors express concern about how video surveillance technologies shape the experiences of and pedagogical/relational possibilities for educators, children and families in childcare programs. Merging feminist care ethics (Tronto, 2013) with Taylor's (2023) ethics of insecurity, and Foucault's concept of governmentality in relation to the discourse of the "good" early childhood educator, they pay attention to how a context of surveillance impacts relationships and interactions between educators and others, as well as the subjective experiences of ECEs. Through a qualitative thematic analysis of interviews with ECEs in Nova Scotia and Ontario (Canada), three overarching themes emerged: 1) video surveillance legitimizes and perpetuates a culture of distrust between educators and parents/families as well as between educators and their supervisors, 2) surveillance is internalized by educators in a way that encourages performativity along dominant notions of the "good" ECE, and 3) there is an eerie silence around the use of video surveillance technologies in professional and policy spaces. We explore the deeply ethical and political implications of these insights at a time when the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care plan continues to be rolled out.

Keywords

child care, early childhood education, financialization, surveillance, professionalism

Introduction

Salma's words capture a familiar scene in Entering the field of early learning and childcare, we never thought we would be writing a piece on the "digitalization of early childhood education". Caring about, for and with children felt then, and still feels now, so far divorced from the binary, codified world of digitalization. Yet here we are. For better or for worse, digital technologies are now mediating communication, relationships and our ontological existence in ways we never could have imagined twenty, ten or even five years ago – including childcare

programs. In this paper, we explore how video surveillance technologies are experienced by early childhood educators (ECEs) in two Canadian provinces – Nova Scotia (NS) and Ontario (ON) - where the use of these technologies appears to be on the rise. The insights we offer are immediately relevant as Canada continues to roll out the multi-billion-dollar Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care program (CWELCC). Whether CWELCC agreements address the historically and chronically low wages and poor working conditions of ECEs will determine the extent to which ECEs are further scrutinized under video

surveillance. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the Canadian childcare workforce relies heavily on migrants or non-permanent residents (approximately one-third as opposed to one-quarter of workers in all other occupations) (McCuaig et al., 2022). In ON, non-RECEs working in childcare are more likely to be racialized than RECEs (42.6% as opposed to 22.9%) (Akbari et al. 2024). While we do not have a representative sample, we do draw attention to how more marginalized participants experience the greatest surveillance.

As a research team, we approach this study from distinct yet intersecting positionalities within early childhood education. Brooke Richardson is a cis-gender, white, care activist, scholar and mother whose work bridges public policy, academic and practice early childhood spaces. Nidhi Menon, an early childhood educator, social justice scholar, and person of colour, brings a critical feminist lens informed by her work with newcomer children, families, and racially minoritized educators. Michelle Brooks, a white, cisgender woman and Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE), draws on her daily engagement with practice and critically reflects on her position as both privileged and atypical within the ECE workforce. Lisa Johnston, a white, working-class early childhood educator and critical scholar-activist, weaves philosophy of education with policy and pedagogy to argue for educators' time to think as an essential working condition. Together, we approach this study with a commitment to reflexivity, attending to how our social locations shape our interpretations of surveillance, care, and professional autonomy in early childhood settings.

It's important to recognize that, in a digital era, digital technologies are both inevitable and necessary components of early childhood settings. Digital literacy in 2026 (i.e.,

using a phone or tablet) is as basic a life skill as tying one's shoelaces. Within the body of literature that supports the use of digital technologies in ECE along pedagogical lines, there is a common caveat: educators' attitudes, confidence and technological support in incorporating these tools are fundamental to their success (Al-Abdullatif, 2022; Hong et al., 2025; Lindeman et al., 2021). While a substantial body of research exists on digital technologies in early childhood education, a more insidious yet pervasive phenomenon—video surveillance—remains largely overlooked in academic literature and early learning practice spaces. Flying under the radar at a regulatory and policy level, video surveillance technologies have, and continue to, become increasingly common in licensed childcare programs.

Although ECEs are typically aware of more conventional digital tools in their classrooms (e.g., iPads or phones), there is a notable absence of research and dialogue surrounding their perspectives on surveillance technologies. It is this silence and its implications for children, families, educators, and society that motivated this project. In our project we ask: How does the presence of video surveillance technologies shape educators' (and therefore children and families') experiences in the classroom? What are the implications of this at a public policy level?

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we examine the financialization of childcare alongside the rise of video surveillance, followed by an overview of the CWELCC program. We then outline our theoretical framework, drawing on feminist care ethics, an ethic of (in)security, and Foucault's concept of governmentality in relation to the discourse of the "good" early childhood educator. Next, we describe the study's methodology, including data collection

and analysis. We then present the findings, followed by a discussion that situates these findings within the broader theoretical and policy context. We conclude by outlining the implications of this study for policy, practice, and future research.

The Financialization of Childcare and the Rise of Video Surveillance

Childcare in Canada has historically been, and in many ways continues to be, operated through a market system (Ferns & Beach, 2015). Provincial funding formulas for childcare in NS and ON have spurred a growth in for-profit provision over the past several decades. Between 1992 and 2024, for-profit childcare increased markedly across Canada, rising from 30% to 52% nationally, from 24% to 44% in ON, and from 40% to 57% in NS, reflecting a broader shift toward market-based provision and the expansion of for-profit (including corporate) actors in the sector (Friendly et al., 2018; Friendly et al., 2025).

In addition, the childcare sector in both provinces has been deeply impacted by the rise of corporate childcare defined as, “Child care owned by a large corporate-type entity incorporated as a privately held company or publicly traded on a stock exchange” (Friendly et al., 2021, p. vii). Corporate providers are incentivized to differentiate themselves in a competitive market, often through the introduction of “value-added” services marketed to parents. One such emerging feature is the use of video surveillance technologies, particularly live-stream webcams, positioned as a means of enhancing transparency, trust, and parental reassurance.

It is critical to note the distinction between the two types of video surveillance

technologies used in childcare programs in Canada. The first, “closed circuit television” or CCTV, is what would commonly be known as a “security camera” where the video feed is sent to a specific monitor or closed system with limited access. Installing CCTV in childcare programs is legal, with the only policy guardrail being the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Document Act (PIPEDA). PIPEDA views real-time footage as “sensitive information” and requires that it not be located in private areas like washrooms (Government of Canada, 2026). Like many policies, however, there are no specific laws or regulations around installing CCTV in childcare centres or any mention of CCTV (or other video surveillance technologies) in licensing requirements.

The second type of video surveillance technology are live-stream video feeds (Richardson & Lehrer, 2024). Introduced by corporate chains in Canada, live-stream video surveillance is increasingly being used in childcare programs. As the name indicates, these are video cameras (“webcams”) that are placed in classrooms in childcare programs where the footage is live-streamed to a website. These feeds are intended for parents of children in the program to be able to login and see their child at any point in the day. As Richardson and Lehrer (2024) point out, the idea is that parents can still be “with” their children (virtually) throughout the day and not miss key milestones or moments – truly a market ploy preying on parental guilt and/or anxiety about leaving their children in someone else’s (even professionals’) care. In this way, video surveillance technologies are not neutral tools, but are embedded within and propelled by the logics of financialization, where care is increasingly packaged, marketed, and sold to families.

While the commodification of early care/education has long been problematized and

resisted (Richardson, 2017; Vandenbroeck et al., 2023), the current financialization of the sector is troubling, particularly when billions of dollars in public funds are being invested into the national publicly funded childcare program, CWELCC. Even more troubling is the emerging use of video surveillance technologies (particularly live-stream media feeds), in conjunction with a few key corporate childcare chains, as a key marketing strategy (Richardson & Lehrer, 2024). Webcams appear to primarily be used in corporate childcare centres, often positioned as an ancillary “service”. In some cases, parents are required to pay an additional fee to access the online video feeds. The existence of video surveillance in this way reflects a broader global shift towards the financialization of childcare (Gallagher, 2023).

Introduction of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Childcare (CWELCC) Program

Amidst this broader global trend toward the privatization, commodification and financialization of childcare, Canada experienced a major policy shift in 2020 with the announcement of more than \$30 billion into the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Childcare program (CWELCC) (Government of Canada, 2020). This first-ever national childcare program sought to reduce parent fees to \$10 a day and create 250 000 new childcare spaces by 2026. Since there are not enough non-profit providers to expand the system at the pace promised, for-profit and corporate childcare programs in provinces like NS and ON continue to receive significant public funding.

In terms of reducing parent fees, CWELCC has been a success across the country with many jurisdictions approaching or

achieving the \$10-a-day target (Government of Canada, 2025). However, these gains for families have not been matched by comparable improvements in the working conditions of ECEs. CWELCC’s goal of increasing licensed spaces and reducing the cost of ECE to parents cannot be meaningfully achieved without addressing the most foundational element of early childhood education: a well-compensated, well-educated, adequately supported workforce who have access to and opportunities for professional development, health benefits and planning time.

A lack of a workforce strategy reflects a broader and longstanding “professionalization gap”, whereby expectations placed on educators (e.g., increased documentation, regulatory oversight, and professional responsibilities) continue to rise, while compensation and working conditions lag behind (Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, 2017). Within this context, educators are asked to do more, with less, under increasingly scrutinized conditions. This dynamic has been conceptualized as “cruel professionalism,” where rather than supporting educators, these pressures often intensify surveillance, accountability, and performativity within their daily practice (Menon et al., 2024). The growing use of video surveillance technologies in childcare programs must be understood within this context. Adding surveillance to already under-resourced and high-pressure environments introduces another layer of monitoring and control, further complicating educators’ ability to exercise professional judgment and engage in authentic, relational care.

Theoretical Offering: Feminist Care Ethics and an Ethic of (In)Security

Feminist Care Ethics

It is important to situate our theoretical orientation. As authors, we are deeply influenced by Feminist Care Ethics, which emphasizes our “inevitable dependency and our inextricable interdependency” (Kittay, 2015, p.51). In contemporary capitalist, neoliberal societies, anything other than fierce independence—financial, psychological, or emotional—is often construed as a weakness, something that must be overcome through hard work and determination. “Free” market competition, which obscures structural inequalities related to gender, age, disability, and family status, promotes the idea that individuals and families are responsible for meeting their own needs, without obligation to others. Feminist care ethics, like other critical frameworks, challenges this logic by centering interdependency, between people and the material world, as fundamental to living a meaningful and fulfilling life. As Tronto (2013) argues, the purpose of economic life should be to support care, not the other way around.

An Ethic of (In)Security

An aligned concept guiding this study is Astra Taylor’s (2023) “ethic of (in)security”. Like feminist care ethics (FCE) theorists, Taylor argues that we are living in a time when individual competition, rather than compassion, care, and mutual vulnerability, motivate human behavior at the micro and macro levels (Taylor, 2023, p.49). What is particularly generative about Taylor’s (2023) ethics of (in)security in light of FCE and in the context of this paper, is its distinction between existential and manufactured insecurity. In line with FCE, and

as articulated by Kittay above, existential insecurity refers to the inherent vulnerability and interdependence of being human, “being vulnerable to physical and psychological illness or wounding; and, of course, from being mortal” (Taylor, 2023, p. 4). Regardless of time or place, an ethic of (in)security positions care as the meaningful response to this fundamental condition.

Central to this study is Taylor’s (2023) concept of manufactured insecurity – insecurity that “facilitates exploitation and profit and is anything but inevitable” (p.10). In contemporary capitalist, neoliberal, perma-crisis times, Taylor (2023) understands manufactured insecurity as “a core attribute of the [capitalist/corporatist] system - not an accidental side effect”. Manufactured insecurity, and the capitalist system it fuels, drives isolation, fear and desperation. As stated bluntly by Taylor “contented people buy less” (p.9). Consumer societies thus have a vested interest in making us feel more insecure than we are, particularly in ways that can be “resolved” through consumption - not only food and shelter but increasingly technologies like webcams that claim to facilitate connection/relationships. Furthermore, manufactured insecurity is subjective and insatiable; no matter how much we have, there are always others with more. There is no endpoint to manufactured insecurity, and as such, this unsustainable model of market-driven growth persists.

Finally, Taylor identifies the “security paradox”. This paradox occurs when “attempts to increase one’s own security lead to the heightened insecurity of other actors, stimulating strong counterreactions that leave everybody worse off in the end” (Taylor, 2.23, p.42). It is this security paradox that motivates this study, prompting us to ask whose (manufactured) insecurity is driving the uptake

of video surveillance technologies in childcare programs—and at what cost to children, families, and educators. In this way, manufactured insecurity does not operate only at the level of external pressures (e.g., markets, parents, corporations), but becomes internalized through everyday practices and expectations. As such, the same forces that introduce surveillance technologies into childcare settings also shape how educators come to understand and regulate themselves, linking an ethic of (in)security with Foucault's concept of governmentality.

Panopticon: Governmentality and the Discourse of the “Good” Early Childhood Educator

The increasing use of video surveillance in early childhood settings conjures images of Jeremy Bentham's (1787/1995) panopticon, an 18th century circular prison where all of the cells face inward around a single guard tower. While the prison guard has a direct line of sight on all prisoners all the time, the prisoners cannot see inside the tower (Foucault, 1995). Not knowing whether the guard was in the tower or not, prisoners would live their lives under the assumption that they were being watched at all times, though they never actually knew when the guard was looking (or not).

Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality, influenced by the panopticon, refers to the internalization of structurally and ideologically imposed ways of thinking that sustain status quo power relations. At a broad level, governmentality has been used to explain the “institutional control of the population” (Green, 2022, para. 3), whereby it is not only the formal laws or policies that govern our behavior but also how big ideas (i.e., neoliberalism) are internalized and drive the functioning of

society. While Foucault (1991) developed this concept primarily at a sociopolitical level, as a way of interrogating and disrupting hegemonic power relations at state and global scales (Murray Li, 2007), it is equally useful for examining micro-level contexts such as childcare programs.

The world of the ECE is shaped by hegemonic ideas/discourse of the “good” early childhood educator. Over forty years ago, Stonehouse (1989) observed that early childhood professionals were often understood as little more than “nice ladies who love children” (p.61). Twenty years later, Langford (2007) identified representations of ECEs in college texts as “possessing a single, normative identity” (Langford, 2007, p. 333) where the “good” educator is associated with the “personal qualities of passion, happiness, inner strength, caring and alertness to an individual child's needs and interests” (Langford, 2008, p. 82). Building on this work, Vintimilla (2014) highlights a “politics of niceness” where maintaining harmony and conformity is prioritized over engaging with the complexities of difference and diversity that characterize and enrich early childhood spaces.

The reality is that caring about, for and with young children, particularly in large groups in under-resourced settings is messy, difficult, emotionally and physically demanding work. Furthermore, we know from other disciplines that “being watched drives our hardwired survival mechanism into overdrive...You're in fight-or-flight mode, which is taxing on the brain” (Seymour as quoted by Makin, 2025). Educators in spaces with video surveillance are thus operating in an impossible context of constant display where “success” (i.e., happy children at all times) is simply unrealistic. In this sense, ECEs are set up for failure. Importantly, video surveillance can only capture visible,

outward behaviours and cannot account for the relational, emotional, and often invisible dimensions of care. As a result, educators may feel compelled to perform care in ways that are legible on camera, for example, smiling, maintaining constant pleasantness, or displaying affection, thereby reinforcing narrow, normative images of the “good” educator. In this way, surveillance intensifies the internalization of these norms, transforming care into a form of what might be understood as cruel professionalism.

Method

Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, we interviewed a total of 12 ECEs working in licensed childcare programs in ON and NS (6 in each province). Participants were recruited through the professional associations of both provinces (email to listservs and postings on social media feeds), hard copy posters in both Toronto and Halifax (mainly on university campuses) and through word of mouth. Participants were drawn from across each province, though the majority were located in Toronto and Halifax. The study was approved by Mount Saint Vincent University’s Research Ethics Board, file number 2024-136. An optional demographic questionnaire was sent prior to participants prior to the interview. In ON, demographic information was returned by five of the six participants. Three of the participants identified as Asian, one as Hispanic, and one as White. Only one of the demographic information questionnaires were returned in NS from a participant who identified as Black. It is worth further pointing out that within the ON demographics, half of the participants were new to Canada and working under the cameras was part of their first job experience.

Online interviews were semi-structured, with a formal interview guide used as a starting point and anchor throughout each interview. This project embraced an inductive thematic analysis approach to data analysis as conceptualized by Braun and Clarke (2022) and expanded upon by Ahmed et al. (2025). A bottom-up thematic analysis approach permits patterns in the data to emerge throughout the research process, without the researchers pre-emptively determining what could or would emerge.

Findings

Three overarching themes emerged from the data in relation to how video surveillance technologies were experienced by ECEs in NS and ON. First, the existence of the cameras appeared to play a key role in legitimizing and perpetuating a culture of distrust between parents/families and educators, as well as between educators and their supervisors/directors. Second, in line with the concept of governmentality, it became clear that ECEs internalized being watched and felt compelled to behave/act in particular, often inauthentic ways that contradicted their personal and/or professional values. Finally, it became apparent that there was a high level of fear or anxiety in speaking openly about the existence of the cameras and/or their experiences of it. This was particularly pronounced for marginalized (new immigrant and/or racialized) educators. A few examples of educators engaging in resistance to the use of surveillance are noted, though such acts were few and far between. Each of these findings is discussed below.

Theme 1: A Context of Relational Distrust

1.1. *Distrust Between Educators and Parents*

ECEs in ON and NS who had experienced working in programs with live-stream video surveillance technologies all described the technology as a barrier to genuine, authentic, trusting relationships with parents and families. An educator recalled parents calling their classroom (based on what they were viewing on the camera) and making demands like: “Why haven't you done this? or why did you do this in this way or that way?”. Another participant noted “it was rare that a day went by that you wouldn't hear the phone ringing and it was a parent complaining”. In all cases educators felt obliged to meet the parental demand - whether they agreed with it or not.

In one instance, a mother who was separated from the father of the child in her classroom, relied on the video feeds to “check in on what the child was wearing when the dad would drop them off”. The educator described feeling “stuck in the middle” of such mundane parental disagreements which ultimately compromised her relationship with both parents.

One participant shared her perspective of being both an educator in a room with cameras and a parent with a child in a centre with a webcam. She remarked: “as a caregiver I don't understand why somebody has to be watching me all the time through a camera.” This same participant, speaking from the perspective of a parent noted: “[webcams] puts more anxiety in me...rather than just trusting the person that I'm dropping off my child with that it will be a good day for them”.

When one participant was asked if they thought the webcams made parents happy, they

responded: “No, but they think it made them happy. That's all that matters. Like I don't think they would have understood that the cameras were making them more anxious.”

While producers and users of the technologies claim the video feeds build trust, and even relationships between parents and educators and children, we consistently heard the opposite sentiment across the board from educators. Stated simply by one participant reflecting on her time working in a centre with webcams: “relationships [between educators and parents/families] are not being built in trust”. Another ECE, who left a centre because of the webcams said frankly: “I can build trust with my families and the kids. I do not need a camera for somebody to view me 24/7”.

1.2. *Distrust Between Educators and Supervisors/Owners/Directors*

Both live stream and CCTV video surveillance also impeded trust between educators and their supervisors/directors. This was particularly the case when supervisors/directors were also the owners of the childcare program or working in the context of corporate care. Where supervisors/directors/owners had direct access to the footage (either CCTV or live-stream), participants felt they had to “be on your tip toes the whole time”.

One ECE in NS said she felt “less support instead of more support from her coordinators and directors [in programs with cameras], as the only times you see them is when you feel like you're in trouble”. Reflecting a traditional, paternalistic, education environment she went on to say “every time somebody [staff] was called to the office, nobody will come out with a happy face”. This participant directly tied

this experience to the use of video cameras in the classroom.

Another ECE noted that her supervisor used the camera to monitor interactions between educators and parents: “if an educator is having a conversation with a parent at the door and she [supervisor] realizes that it's going on for longer than like 3 minutes, she'll come down and kind of just linger and listen”.

The majority of participants felt that the closed feed cameras were “definitely used for surveillance over like security or safety”. As one educator put it: “if somebody thinks that to oversee your work, you need to work under a camera instead of being by your side and working as a team, then you know, I think that that creates just the wrong message.”

It is interesting to further observe an intersectional analysis, as half of the ON participants were both female, racialized, newcomers to Canada and working under the cameras was part of their first job experience. This rendered ECEs particularly fearful of speaking up or resisting the use of the cameras:

Yes. So, the thing is that I give you a little context here. I came to Canada in 2019, and this was the first job that I got in [name of childcare centre] and I didn't have any ECE registration or any previous experience at that time. So, I was a little paranoid as it is. This was the first job that I got, I just jumped into it and I was ever so scared to open my mouth because obviously this was the first thing that I had started in a new country.

Four participants, two in NS and two in ON, experienced the use of cameras while on a student placement. Reflecting back on their

experience, one educator recalls not knowing how to advocate for herself at the time:

...because I was a placement student, I didn't know how to advocate for myself that I don't want my image to be shared.

Perhaps more troubling is that three of these participants (one in ON and two in NS) who were in a student placement were not informed about the use of the camera prior to starting in the centre. As one participant stated:

...there was one incident where like someone had come to like fix the cameras and then I was like, oh, they have cameras here too. But nobody would talk about it. Nobody would make you sign anything. It was like this very, it's very strange, actually, that they've got away with doing this.

In two cases, the level of surveillance of educators by supervisors was particularly disturbing. A scenario arose in both NS and ON where two centre owner/supervisors had direct access to video footage from each classroom streamed to their personal computer and phone. One participant describes the near-obsession of her supervisor with the footage:

But the problem is he would put it on his laptop and watch it like a hawk, like he would be in his office and the cameras would be running 24/7. If he's not outside, like if he's not in our space, he's in his office watching.

A similar situation arose in NS whereby the supervisor would watch footage from his computer or phone and walkie-talkie educators to give feedback in real time.

So he was, like, just watching the cameras and would come over if things were- Not that anything bad ever happened...but like if he saw something, he would talk on the walkie-talkie and be like “Hey, don’t use that”.

All in all, it was rare for ECEs to question or resist the use of the cameras, though this was particularly true for newcomers and students who experienced the most intense surveillance.

Inspiring some hope, one educator described a situation in which her seasoned co-worker, in an act of defiance, started talking back to a supervisor through the camera (this camera was located in the lobby of the childcare program and had audio):

I had a coworker that was there for a really long time, and she would talk to him through the lobby one sometimes. She would go up and be like, “Can I have a banana” or something like that, and then he would walkie-talkie and answer.

1.3. *An exception? Cameras as a mechanism of building trust between educators and supervisors*

It is important to mention that there was one situation, in a marginalized community in NS, where a study participant, who was also a centre director, a Level III ECE (highest qualification in the province) and a member of the community in which she worked, insisted on having closed circuit cameras installed to protect “her” educators.

We are living in a time where we have to protect not just the children we’re working with, but protect ourselves as

early childhood educators, protect ourselves as staff. If somebody goes and says, oh, so-and-so stole that purse that was sitting on the counter, I got cameras. I can roll it back and we can see.

This centre director envisioned another situation in which an educator could be blamed for a mark on a child: “There were times like there might have been a child over there playing, and hey, all of a sudden there’s a mark. But that teacher I could see was there dealing with another child.” This participant at one point came directly out and said: “it [cameras] doesn’t just protect the child, it protects me as well.” While this participant’s motivation was well-intentioned, she reflected during the interview: “I guess too, maybe I’ve never asked staff like, how do you feel about being on camera?”

Theme 2: Governmentality and (in)authenticity

A sentiment that frequently came up in the interviews was that educators got “used to” video technologies. A participant in ON stated: “At some point you just forget that that’s there, but it’s still...it’s not.” An ECE in NS took this one step further to note an overall helplessness, or complacency in relation to the cameras: “I didn’t like it [being watched]. I eventually got used to it... you kind of become complacent”.

Perhaps what is most concerning about getting “used to” these technologies is how educators felt the need to enact hegemonic, normative ideas about who and how an ECE should be. It is here where the concept of cruel professionalism becomes particularly apparent, as educator’s professional ethics and values are compromised by what the cameras (and those watching them) see. It became apparent that the

cameras were being used to monitor aspects of care that not only felt irrelevant to the educator, but at times compromised the quality of care the educator could provide. As expressed by one participant:

...it [the camera] made you almost feel fake in a way. Like OK, now we have to put on a show cause so and so's mom needs to see them. And then you felt almost like you were disingenuous with the child. I'm gonna stand here and smile at you because I'm supposed to be interacting with you. And nothing happened naturally, which was, you know, which was definitely hard...it changes the relationship you have with the child.

Another educator recalled being particularly concerned about key moments in the day when parents told her they would be watching (i.e., at lunch time, during circle time, or for one parent, before leaving work at 4:30). Her response was to:

...make sure to have something happening at 4:30 because we know so and so's mom is going to be watching us...You make sure all the messy, crazy stuff is done before...So that when they do log on the chances of them seeing something nice is better.

Finally, it became apparent that several ECE participants found the presence of the cameras undermined their own professional judgement. One participant described always asking herself: "Am I doing this right? Does this look good to the camera?" Such self-surveillance also came up in relation to physical contact with the children: "So if I give a child a hug, I always make sure I always try to make sure that the hug was kind of on an angle so they could see."

There was one particularly disturbing situation in NS where getting "used to" the cameras was impossible because the cameras were motion activated.

It [the camera] followed you around the room and it could essentially go- do like full circles around the room. Like, it stayed in one place, but from the direction they had it, it could catch any angle of the room, and follow. It physically rotated...it had a little shelf on the wall and it would be on the stand and it like- It would rotate, like, up, down, side, side. It felt creepy.

This educator (a student at the time) went on to explain that the cameras did not pick up the movement of the children (they were not tall enough for the cameras sensors) but only the educators. At the time when this occurred the participant had been a student and felt unable to ask any questions of either the childcare centre or the post-secondary institution overseeing her placement.

Theme 3: Silencing Around Surveillance

3.1. Silence around the use of cameras

Related to the internalization and complacency of the surveillance was an overall theme of silence around the cameras. Often, participants were not told about the existence or use of the video surveillance, finding out only after they began working at the centres: "I was never told about the camera, I just eventually found out about it when one of the other workers there". Another participant similarly remarked: "My boss never told me about them. My coworkers told me about them."

One participant, who at the time was relatively new to the sector, had simply assumed that webcams were a part of every childcare program. That she should have to give consent to be video recorded had never occurred to her: “it [use of webcams] was just something that was assumed to be present and we were supposed to work with it so, there was no discussion as to do you give consent or anything like that. Nothing. Nothing of such sort.”

Once educators became aware of video surveillance, very few educators questioned their use. The majority of participants felt that to do so carried with it an undertone of guilt: “if you’re inquiring about it [the use of cameras], it’s like, what do you have to hide right?”. One educator described being “ever so scared to open my mouth”.

The fear of acknowledging and/or questioning the use of webcams was particularly pronounced for racialized educators. As noted by one white presenting participant who worked alongside new immigrant/racialized educators:

I think to say it bluntly, there was a little bit of racism that was happening, especially against newcomers....I find that she [the supervisor] often used the surveillance cameras to particularly monitor that demographic. She’ll call me in to watch back footage of other teachers...she explicitly made comments about “those guys” or even like mocking accents. It’s just. It’s been crazy.

This same educator noted how she felt a responsibility to stand up for her co-workers: “....it’s been tough, and I feel like the reason why I’ve held on to my role is because like I tried to advocate for the educators....I kind of felt like I had this duty to stay to protect these people.”

Shortly before the interview, this educator resigned from her position saying “I think it’s just come to a point where I’m like, I can’t do this forever.”

3.2 Acts of resistance to the silence

Inspiring some hope, a few micro-level acts of resistance to the surveillance technologies did emerge. For example, one participant remembered how she and her colleague would “whisper to each other about how much we hated them [the cameras]”. Another participant, acutely aware that the webcams did not have audio, noted how she and her colleagues would “complain about it to each other in the classroom...between ourselves, as room partners you know?” In one case, a participant recalled “most of the teachers that came in, they would flip the cameras so that the director couldn’t be watching”.

In some cases, educators coped with the discomfort of the cameras by poking fun or mocking them: “There was an older lady who like kind of joke in front of the cameras like she would dance in front of them to make it less awkward”.

Only one (ON) participant directly confronted her employer about the use of video surveillance technologies, though the attempt felt futile. She stated, “I did bring it up [concerns about video surveillance] to my employer, but it was a for-profit employer, and they weren’t interested in hearing it at all”. Other participants echoed similar sentiments, feeling that bringing up concerns about the cameras was futile. Others expressed concerns to critique the use of cameras had an undertone of her hiding something or doing something “wrong”: “it’s not that I was doing anything wrong, but we just kind of feel like we were”.

Discussion

It became clear that the use of video surveillance technologies in childcare programs was, as we suspected, a direct outcome of manufactured insecurity whereby the “security paradox” left the most vulnerable folks the most insecure. Installing video surveillance cameras had an overall negative impact on the ability of children, educators and families to build trusting relationships, instead leading to a high level of self-monitoring, self-doubt and fear on the part of ECEs. ECEs described a fear of judgment from both parents and supervisors via video feeds, prompting them to shape their practice around what was expected or “looked good,” rather than what they believed was meaningful—often reproducing hegemonic images of “happy,” busy children (Vintimilla, 2014). It is worth noting that most of the participants were reflecting on past experiences working in childcare programs with video surveillance, which allowed them to speak more openly with us. There arose very few – though very significant and inspiring – acts of resistance to the use of the cameras; dancing in front of the cameras, asking for a banana and directly confronting someone in leadership. Notably, these dynamics were not experienced uniformly across participants. An intersectional lens draws attention to how educators’ positionalities, including race, immigration status, and employment precarity, shaped their experiences of surveillance, fear, and self-monitoring. Those already positioned as more vulnerable within the sector appeared to bear a disproportionate burden of the insecurity produced through these technologies.

What this study makes clear is that the use of video surveillance technologies in childcare programs is a largely unquestioned “solution” to a problem that the market manufactured – uncaring conditions for children

and educators in ECE programs. Instead of addressing the conditions required for children, families, and educators to experience care as a fundamental human need (e.g., core funding, a well-educated and supported workforce, and smaller group sizes), a culture of manufactured insecurity—characterized by fear and distrust—has enabled the expansion of a burgeoning market in video surveillance technologies. Reflecting the security paradox, cameras in ECE programs, particularly cameras accessed by parents in real time, diminished space for educators to act with the agency and autonomy that reflected their own personal and professional goals. Performativity became normalized, or “gotten used to,” as educators shaped their practice around what they believed external viewers wanted to see, while childcare providers and technology companies capitalized on these technologies to enhance customer satisfaction, create a false sense of security, and drive enrollment and profit. It became a self-perpetuating insecurity spiral where the very things put in place to make people feel more secure actually comprises space for responsive, authentic interactions in real time.

Throughout the project, the research team consistently likened the experiences we heard from participants to prisoners of a panopticon (Bentham, 1787/1995; Foucault, 1995). The presence of video surveillance technology in childcare programs set a similar scene of fundamental distrust and suspicion whereby the parent or the supervisor acted as the “guard”, having a clear paternalistic hold over the educator. This fed into educators’ internalized governmentality (Foucault, 1991), where particularly racialized or new (student) educators were afraid to speak up about the use of the cameras for fear of being seen as “hiding something” or simply not falling in line with

dominant conceptualizations of the “good”, happy, passionate early childhood educator.

In a context where ECEs are poorly remunerated, experience sub-par working conditions, and there is little incentive for ECEs to increase their qualifications, the use of video surveillance technologies aligns with Menon et al.’s (2024) thinking about cruel professionalism – being watched constantly felt overwhelmingly punitive to ECEs who were the subjects of their use. Attending more explicitly to intersectionality also reveals how governmentality operates unevenly, as some educators, particularly racialized and newcomer participants, experienced heightened scrutiny and reduced capacity to resist or question surveillance practices. In this way, manufactured insecurity and surveillance not only discipline educators broadly, but also reproduce existing inequities within the ECE workforce.

It is difficult to imagine a context where other professionals – doctors, lawyers, social workers, accountants – would permit, or stay silent about, video surveillance in their practice. Yet, due to the persistent social devaluation of feminized care work alongside cruel professionalism in ECE, video surveillance has gone largely unacknowledged in childcare settings and public policy spaces across Canada and internationally. Doctors and lawyers are not subject to video surveillance in their offices because their work is socially recognized as professional, whereas the presence of cameras in ECEC classrooms may signal that care work is still treated not as a fully professional domain, but as a form of labour that requires monitoring. And as the findings illustrate, this monitoring may actually compromise quality care experiences for children, educators and families.

Implications

The implications of these findings are pressing as the federal Canadian government invests unprecedented funding to expand affordable access to licensed childcare nationwide. At the policy level, provincial and federal governments face strong pressure to rapidly increase childcare spaces while keeping costs low. Yet good care, care that addresses inevitable existential insecurity, is neither quick nor cheap.

ON and NS currently have Conservative Premiers who have not prioritized a well-compensated, well-educated workforce. Both provinces are also experiencing rapid corporate childcare expansion. Notably, one major Canadian corporate provider using live-stream video feeds acquired another chain of 11 centres in NS as this article was completed. The public policy implications are urgent. This study highlights the need for policy approaches that prioritize relational care, educator autonomy, and stronger workforce conditions over technological “solutions” to manufactured insecurity.

While we fully support CWELCC and a national childcare system in Canada, we caution that the hands-off funding approach of federal, NS, and ON governments toward corporate providers may enable ethically and professionally troubling care experiences for children, families, and educators. Video surveillance in childcare settings is not something ECEs should become “used to”. Finally, this study opens important avenues for future research, particularly regarding how surveillance technologies are experienced by differently positioned educators, how families interpret and use them, and how policy interventions might resist the normalization of surveillance in care settings.

References

- Ahmed, S. K., Mohammed, R. A., Abdulqadir, J., Nashwan, A., Ibrahim, R. H. A., Abdalla, A. Q., Ameen, B. M., & Mohammed, K. R. (2025). Using thematic analysis in qualitative research. *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health*, 6, 100198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.glmedi.2025.100198>
- Akbari, E., McCuaig, K., Schurter, M., Varmuza, P., Akbari, S., & Mudie, S. (2024). Knowing our numbers: A provincial study with a local lens on the early childhood education workforce in Ontario.
- Al-Abdullatif, A. M. (2022). Towards digitalization in early childhood education: Pre-service teachers' acceptance of using digital storytelling, comics, and infographics in Saudi Arabia. *Education Sciences*, 12(10), 702. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12100702>
- Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario. (2017). Professional pay & decent work. https://www.aecce.ca/professional_pay_decent_work_for_all
- Bentham, J. (1995). *The panopticon writings*. Verso. (Original work published 1787)
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.
- Ferns, C., & Beach, J. (2015). From childcare market to childcare system. *Our Schools/Our Selves*, 24(1), 53–61. https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2015/09/OS120_Summer2015_Child_Care_Market_to_Child_Care_System.pdf
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 87–104). Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (2nd Vintage Books ed.). Vintage Books.
- Friendly, M., Beach, J., Araram, G., Cossette, A., Hu, L., Lillace, J., & Forer, B. (2025). Interim space statistics: Early childhood education and care in Canada. Childcare Resource and Research Unit. https://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/Interim-Space-Statistics-2024-ECEC-in-Canada_0.pdf
- Friendly, M., Larsen, E., Feltham, L., Grady, B., Forer, B., & Jones, M. (2018). Early childhood education and care in Canada 2016. Childcare Resource and Research Unit. <http://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/ECEC-in-Canada-2016.pdf>
- Friendly, M., Vickerson, R., Mohamed, S., Rothman, L., & Nguyen, N. T. (2021). Risky business: Child care ownership in Canada past, present and future. Childcare Resource and Research Unit. <https://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/Risky-business-child-care-ownership-in-Canada-past-present-future.pdf>
- Gallagher, A. (2023). *Childcare provision in neoliberal times: The marketization of care*. Bristol.
- Government of Canada. (2020, September 23). Speech from the throne. <https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/campaigns/speech-throne/2020/speech-from-the-throne.html>
- Government of Canada. (2025). Toward \$10-a-day: An early learning and child care backgrounder. <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2025/03/toward-10-a-day-an-early-learning-and-child-care-backgrounder0.html>
- Government of Canada (2026). Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/p-8.6/>
- Green, J. (2022). Governmentality. EBSCO Research Starters. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/governmentality>

- Hong, X., Yang, T., & Han, Y. (2025). How does digitalization in early childhood education in China shape young children's learning? A scoping review. *Early Child Development and Care*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2025.2542547>
- Kittay, E. F. (2015). A theory of justice as fair terms of social life given our inevitable dependency and our inextricable interdependency. In D. Engster & M. Hamington (Eds.), *Care ethics and political theory* (pp. 51–71). Oxford University Press.
- Langford, R. (2007). Who is a good early childhood educator? A critical study of differences within a universal professional identity in early childhood education preparation programs. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 28(4), 333–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10901020701686609>
- Langford, R. (2008). Making a difference in the lives of young children: A critical analysis of a pedagogical discourse for motivating young women to become early childhood educators. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 31(1), 78–101.
- Lindeman, S., Svensson, M., & Enochsson, A.-B. (2021). Digitalization in early childhood education: A domesticated theoretical perspective on teachers' experiences. *Education and Information Technologies*, 26, 4879–4903. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10501-7>
- Makin, S. (2025, May 6). How being watched changes how you think. *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-being-watched-changes-how-you-think/>
- McCuaig, K., Akbari, E., & Correia, A. (2022). Canada's children need a professional early childhood education workforce. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. <https://ecereport.ca/en/workforce-report/>
- Menon, N., Johnston, L., Powell, A., Richardson, B., & Straker, A. (2024). (Care)fully reconstituting cruel professionalism with and for early childhood educators: How caring activism can resist uncaring conditions. *Early Child Development and Care*, 194(5), 1079–1092. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2024.2393150>
- Murray Li, T. (2007). Governmentality. *Anthropologica*, 49(2), 275–281.
- Richardson, B. (2017). Taking stock of corporate childcare in Alberta: Licensing inspection data in not-for-profit and corporate childcare centres. In R. Langford, S. Prentice, & P. Albanese (Eds.), *Caring for children: Social movements and public policy in Canada* (pp. 119–140). University of British Columbia Press.
- Richardson, B., & Lehrer, J. (2024). 'Big Sister' is watching: A feminist critical discourse analysis of texts supporting the use of live stream video feed technology. In U. Ward (Ed.), *Supporting ECE practice in difficult times*. Routledge.
- Stonehouse, A. (1989). Nice ladies who love children: The status of the early childhood professional in society. *Early Child Development and Care*, 52(1), 61–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0300443890520105>
- Taylor, A. (2023). *The age of insecurity: Coming together as things fall apart*. House of Anansi Press.
- Tronto, J. C. (2013). *Caring democracy: Markets, equality, and justice*. New York University Press.
- Vandenbroeck, M., Lehrer, J., & Mitchell, L. (2023). *The decommodification of early childhood education and care: Resisting neoliberalism*. Routledge.
- Vintimilla, C. (2014). Neoliberal fun and happiness in early childhood education. *Canadian Children*, 39(1), 78–88. <https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs.v39i1.15246>