Beyond the Deficit: Supporting Autistic Children in Our Classrooms

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Abstract

This action-research project explored the impact of a professional development workshop, “Stimming and More: Supporting Children with Autism,” on early childhood educators' understanding of autism and the educators’ classroom practices. The inspiration for this project came from my conversations, experiences, and observations at this Early Childhood Center, where I have worked since January 2023. Across education broadly and specifically related to early childhood, teacher preparation and training are centered on the “normal child,” or the white nondisabled, native English speaker, despite the vast diversity (across race, language, disability, and so on) in our schools and our classrooms. The lack of training and knowledge on supporting autistic children is an issue that is not unique to this center. Using my previous experience as an Instructional Assistant in an elementary school working primarily with autistic children, my experience at the center, Clark education, and additional learning, I designed and implemented this three-hour workshop. To analyze the impact of the workshop, I utilized three data collection methods: surveys, semi-structured interviews, and my informal observational data. Data analysis showed that the workshop was impactful in disrupting ableism through increasing educators’ knowledge, understanding, and empathy for autistic children. Additionally, the data showed some change in educators’ practices. Results of this project show the importance of caring relationships to the effectiveness of educator professional development. Finally, results show that empowering educators with specific knowledge and strategies for autistic children empowers educators in their ability to care and educate disabled children, which positively impacts the classroom environment and experience for all.

Introduction: Framing the Project

"The Right Way" - Confusion and Tension

In January 2022, during my gap year before coming to Clark, I worked as an instructional assistant (paraprofessional) at a third through fifth grade public elementary school. This experience was my first time in a position other than "student" in a school system: now I was suddenly a staff member and an educator. As an instructional assistant, I was assigned an official one-on-one student, Fred[1], and unofficially acted as a one-on-two as John followed Fred's schedule, shared an autism diagnosis, and also desperately needed his own one-on-one. Due to staffing shortages, I supported both students. Within the first month or so of working with Fred, a third grade student, confusion and tension was at the center of our relationship and my work. Fred is autistic and minimally speaking. Per his individual education plan (IEP), he was in general education classes with the support of a one-on-one. Additionally, he received push out services with a special education teacher along with speech and occupational services. As I started midyear, Fred had previously been working with another adult as his one-on-one. It was relayed to me by Fred's general education teachers and special education teacher, that Fred was previously not very engaged in academic work or the classroom environment. The substitute acting as Fred's support often did Fred's work for him, and did not challenge or support engagement within his classes and with his peers. Fred's teachers reported that he mostly "sat there" in class.

I was astounded by this and believed I had to reorient Fred's school engagement and academic expectations. I knew of his disability, autism, but believed that this required support and accommodation, hence the one-on-one, and not that autism meant one could not grow in

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[1] All names of children and educators, including research participants are pseudonyms.

their academic ability and that one should not be challenged. What I did not know was the extent of time and difficulty it would take for Fred and his teachers to make this shift.

Thus, within the first month or so working with Fred, confusion and tension was at the center of our relationship and work together. I was confused by how Fred and the educators who worked with him neglected academics and learning, what I believed to be the purpose of school. I was confused on how to reorient Fred's engagement in school. Tension existed between my expectations and personal understanding of schooling to Fred's experience. Tension between the limitations of his disability, and what I believe is the right and need to be challenged and to grow. In terms of our relationship, I was often confused by Fred in his actions, communication, and thoughts. Fred and I both were often confused by our communication. Tension between us was at a prime over expectations: my expectations vs. what Fred was used to doing (or not doing) at school.

During his general education classes, Fred would frequently leave his chair, walk around the room, or stand somewhere away from his desk. One particular day he was working on Dreambox, an online math program that all the students were instructed to do. The students did Dreambox daily and the lessons on Dreambox are designed for the level of each individual student. Fred left his chair and went to the corner of the room with a window which he looked out of. I called Fred back to his chair. He did not move or respond. I then walked over to Fred and explained that it's time for Dreambox. Fred continued to look out the window. I asked if there was something wrong. I asked, "Why don't you want to do Dreambox or sit at your desk?" Fred did not mutter a word or change his facial expression. I tried taking his hand and leading him back to his desk but Fred refused to budge.

I remembered Fred had an iPad in his bookbag (I was told it was for communication, but I never saw Fred use it). I brought the iPad over to Fred and said to him, "if something is wrong, tell me what is wrong" and "what's the problem with Dreambox." Fred did not touch the device, so I prompted again and placed the iPad right in front of his hands. Fred started typing on the device nonsense that iPad spoke aloud. I said "Okay but I asked what's wrong. It's time for Dreambox and to do work." Fred continued to make a repeated strand of random words. Confused and frustrated, I took the iPad away from Fred. Fred was not using the communication device the right way and to communicate what I wanted him to communicate, so I deemed he did not or should not use the device then. Again, tension between my wishes and expectations and Fred's.

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"Zoom Fossil" - Recognition and Connection

When I first started working with Fred[2]*, he did not talk much at school. He hardly responded verbally to questions from other teachers or me. However, there was one phrase he said a lot: "Zoom fossil." I continued to talk to Fred, even if I carried most of the verbal exchange, and continued to learn who he was, his interests, his actions, his personality, and what made Fred, Fred. I cannot recall exactly when, but after the first couple of weeks, when the relationship was just beginning, I started repeating "Zoom fossil" whenever Fred said it. I*

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[2] At some point, when Fred and I initially began working together, his mom came to school to observe him working with me. This was in part because Fred was not showing me his strengths and abilities that his mom knew to be true. She showed me that she also has expectations for Fred and showed me what he is capable of. She also gave me strategies and redirections to use with Fred. Fred's mom also expressed his love of beads, swimming, food, and bowling. She also shared that Fred is a very skilled speller and reader, as he learned to read at a young age. Her view of her child reinforced my assumption that Fred is capable and that when a strong relationship is built, Fred can better display his capabilities. With ongoing communication with Fred's mom, his primary caregiver, I learned more about him and how to better support and challenge him.

remember once I finally said it correctly, there is a special pronunciation; Fred looked at me with wide eyes and raised eyebrows. He noticed that I cared and was interested in what he had to say. This is when Fred and I's relationship shifted. He began to make more progress in school. My repeating of "Zoom fossil" translated to the day Fred repeated back to me the phrase I always told him when I dropped him off at his lunch seat. I said, "Have a good lunch, see you at recess!"

He said back, "Have a good lunch, see you at recess!" When he said this for the first time, I struggled to avoid screaming and dancing in celebration in the hallway. Then Fred and I began to have interesting elevator conversations [vocal stimming back and forth] about whatever Fred wanted to talk about, Luigi, being a lawyer, or challenging me to sound patterns. My repeating "Zoom fossil" built trust and connections, and opened the door for me to learn and see more about Fred, and how to better challenge and teach him."

Lessons from Fred

The first vignette reflects a common combination of ableism and well-meaning intentions in education. I had well-meaning intentions to support Fred in his academics. I had an ableist understanding of communication and what it means to be engaged in academics and with others. Ableism is seen in my prioritizing academics and failing to realize or prioritize building a relationship with Fred and learning to understand him and his communication in his own way. Ableism also manifests in my assumption that there is something "wrong" with a child, Fred, not wanting to do Dreambox. Additionally, this vignette is an example of harm, denying access to communication and rejecting Fred's communication, echolalia[3], as I did to Fred. The day this

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[3] Echolalia is the repetition of words, sounds, or phrases. Learn more at https://www.mywellnesshub.in/blog/understanding-echolalia-autistic-children/.

vignette occurred, I did not act knowingly or with the intent to do harm – this does not change the fact that what I did was wrong and harmful. This vignette occurred because of my lack of training and education on supporting autistic students. And this vignette occurred because I did not understand Fred on his own terms.

The second vignette shows the impact of recognition when I connected with Fred in his way, instead of waiting or insisting that he connect on my terms. What if I had never started to repeat "Zoom fossil"? The reason I started repeating the phrase was that I was desperate to connect with Fred and took a chance that repeating the phrase he often used would help. But what if I never took this chance and never showed Fred that I heard and recognized his communication, even if I did not understand it? “Zoom fossil” was my entrance into Fred’s world and the connection between us. “Zoom fossil” and its effects showed me the power and necessity of recognition and adaptability. I needed to recognize Fred for who he was and adapt my understanding and use of communication and language. “Zoom fossil” was the true start of connecting with Fred and the foundation for what became our strong, trusting relationship. What if I never learned to connect with Fred his way and only expected to connect and interact in the "typical" manner? I am unsure what the exact outcome would have been, but I am confident that we would not have made as much academic and social communication progress, and I might have continued to cause more harm.

Fred was my first student, and in the first year, even more so in the first month or two, I harmed him through stim suppression and not advocating/supporting his stims and sensory needs, so he could be regulated and academically engaged. I made many mistakes and choices that I would not make today. I was untrained and uninformed. One example is that I would take/put away Fred's AAC device, who, as a minimally speaking person, an AAC device is an accommodation and support for communication, because I thought he was not using it "appropriately" by stimming on it, stringing together "random" words, and playing them on repeat, as evidenced in the first vignette.

When I started, I did not know the power and purpose of stims, self-stimulatory behavior. I did not know the extent of harm it does when we make a child suppress their stims. I did not know how to support stims safely and the sensory needs of autistic children[4] in different school and classroom spaces. I did not realize that repeating words verbally or with an AAC device was a type of stim. I did not have the training or knowledge—I was ignorant of the impact of limiting or suppressing stims, and was causing harm in the process. I did not know what it truly meant to support autistic children. Fortunately, I started saying "Zoom fossil," and my learning began. While I am proud of the development of my acceptance and understanding of autism and my work in supporting autistic children, I still have a lot to learn, experience, and understand.

The vignettes show the beginning of my journey as an educator and in my work supporting autistic children. While personal experiences specific to one school and one student, the vignettes reflect larger issues: ableism and the lack of education and training of educators working with autistic children.

The Problem

I first experienced the implications of the lack of education and training on working with autistic children and ableism amongst educators, myself included, at the third-fifth grade school. These factors are far from unique to that particular school.

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[4] I mostly use identity-first language in this thesis. A large majority of autistic individuals prefer identity-first over person-first language, though this does not mean this is the preference for all people with autism. On the other hand, in the workshop, as seen by the workshop's title, I used both identity-first and person-first language. I used person-first language in the workshop to reflect the preference of many caregivers.

Starting at the beginning of the second semester of my freshman year at Clark University, I have worked at an Early Childhood Education Center in Worcester, Massachusetts. This center serves children from infancy through age 5 or 6 once they start Kindergarten. Since I started working, I have worked as a substitute teacher two to three days a week. In the first two years, I worked with all age groups; later, I became a more established member of the Infant/Toddler cohort. As a substitute, I worked in almost every single classroom and with almost all other childcare staff.

Throughout my time at the center and in its various classrooms, I have noticed the mistreatment of children with certain developmental delays/disabilities, particularly autistic children. Most of my coworkers care about all the children in their care. This does not negate the frustration, annoyance, misguided discipline, and restrictions they impose on particular children. As revealed in my opening vignettes, harm can still happen even with the best of intentions. At that time at the center, autism and neurodivergence were not widely understood nor accommodated. Similar to how I initially interacted with Fred, many teachers in my program would restrict stims and failed to understand the function of stims for neurodivergent and autistic children. Restricting stims and not embracing the whole neurodivergent child creates a stressful environment and experience for the child, in addition to the harm it causes, and potentially delays development.

The lack of education and training on stims is part of a larger problem at this site (and at many early childhood education sites). At least specific to the training of my colleagues, the early childhood courses at the local colleges are highly neurotypical-focused and structured, centering on typical development and outlining what is "atypical," the importance of developmental screenings to detect delays/disabilities, and a child's need for additional services.

Moreover, the focus on “atypical” development is generally only for the detection of delays/disabilities rather than support and accommodations. This lack of education became clear through direct conversations with my coworkers, learning about their early childhood courses, and my observations and experiences in the various classrooms over the past three and a half years. It is crucial to note that the number of children with developmental delays and/or disabilities that this site cares for continues to increase. At the same time, no classroom teacher is certified or trained in "special education" or working with disabled children. Several times, I have heard the phrase "they don't know how to play!" from various educators about different children. The children the educators are referencing play all the time: they stim play!

The other major aspect of the problem is ableism. Ableism is entrenched across society and at all levels of the education system (Beneke & Love, 2025; Lewis, 2022; Wong, 2022). Ableism is shown through expecting and forcing disabled children to comply with nondisabled standards and ways of being. Ableism is evident through the ideals of normalcy to which all are judged. Ableism is an educator's deficit view of disabled and neurodivergent children. Ableism is the belief that there is a “right” way to be and to do. Ableism in education and youth spaces is the non-disabled standard to which everything is based. Ableism is the intentional and nonintentional discrimination and harm against disabled children and people.

Furthermore, this project was inspired by the recent autism training for this site's childcare staff; I attended the training, too. In the "Autism 101" training, I noticed questions and comments that could use more answers and discussion, specifically on stimming, repetitive behavior, and how to support autistic children in our classrooms. The “Autism 101” training was general, not tailored to our site or the children we work with, and was designed and facilitated by a professor and practicing psychologist. While the “Autism 101” facilitator is highly trained and educated on autism, she does not have experience in early childhood education or the challenges of supporting autistic children in childcare centers. Similar to early childhood education courses, this training focused on detecting autism rather than on how to support and accommodate autistic children. My coworkers and I were disappointed in the training. Several coworkers shared they did not learn anything and that it was not helpful for what they experience in their classrooms. I was frustrated by its lack of relevant training and education, and by the fact that it did not clearly challenge ableist norms and practices of educators at the site. This project was my attempt to answer my colleagues' questions and facilitate the needed discussion and idea generation for our site and the children in our care. The goal of the project was to enhance the center and its educators' understanding and support of autistic children, thereby challenging ableist norms and practices that benefit all.

Attempt to Address the Problem

The problem I am concerned with, ableism, is a complex social issue that can not be entirely addressed and certainly not solved within an individual action. Therefore, this project is a start, not an entire solution, in addressing and challenging ableism at one specific childcare site, and expanding the relevant training of this site's educators. To begin this process, I developed a three-hour workshop, "Stimming and More: Supporting Children with Autism," which I facilitated for childcare staff on a Professional Development day in October 2025. During the workshop, I emphasized that my collaboration and support were ongoing; that the site's educators can (and I would love to) continue to ask me questions and advice on how to support the children in their class. I continue to observe specific children to help educators, offer strategies and tips, and answer questions.

As this problem of mistreatment and misunderstanding of autistic children is not unique to this center, but a problem across education and society, I will continue to address it throughout my career as an educator and as an engaged citizen. Upon graduation, I intend to work as a special education teacher. Special education teachers are frequently paired with general education teachers and work with and supervise instructional assistants. As I once was an instructional assistant, I know that, in most cases, they are untrained, and educator training, in general, is based on the nondisabled “normal” child. Therefore, it is highly likely that in my career, I will have to train other educational professionals. While this workshop will have to be adjusted to fit the needs and specifics of different sites, the core of its message will remain important and be valuable to reproduce. This project was my first attempt to improve educators’ practices with and beliefs about autistic children and to challenge the ableism that underlies them; this workshop has informed and improved my ability to do so.

Investigation of Research Questions

This project is action research. I am researching the impact of the workshop I facilitated during professional development. To assess the impact, I conducted an anonymous survey and confidential semi-structured interviews. The survey explored participants' understanding of stimming and of supporting autistic people generally. The survey also explored what aspects of the workshop were useful and relevant to their educator practices. The semi-structured interviews explored in more depth the impact, or lack thereof, of the workshop, and how participants continued to understand and utilize the workshop content several months afterwards. The interviews also explore more specifically educators’ classroom practices and attitudes towards children with autism. Together, I used the data collected from surveys and interviews, along with my informal observations, to understand what and how the workshop impacted educators' understanding of stims and supporting autistic children, as well as their classroom practices. As such, this investigation sought to answer the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. How does the supporting autistic children workshop impact early childhood educators' understanding of the function and value of stims?
2. How does the supporting autistic children workshop inform educators' attitudes towards autistic children?
3. How does the supporting autistic children workshop impact early childhood educators' classroom practices?

Statement on Ableism

There are many definitions of ableism. I use the definition of ableism by Talila Lewis, which *Beyond Compliance* uses as well:

> Systems of assigning value to people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normality, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in eugenics, anti-Blackness, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. This systemic oppression leads to people and society determining people's value based on their culture, age, language, appearance, religion, birth or living place, "health/wellness", and/or their ability to satisfactorily re/produce, "excel" and "behave." (Lewis, 2022)

Ableism is systemic and structural. The United States, its policies and systems, are designed for the able-bodied individuals, with the disability community at best as an afterthought and at worst advocated to be segregated and extinguished (eugenics). The dominant culture and attitude within the United States views disability as a burden, which influences the (lack of) accessibility, services, and treatment of people with disabilities.

Regardless of individual or household norms, we have all been conditioned within an ableist society. Ableism is deeply entrenched in everyone, including disabled people, especially if you are not aware of it and not actively working to dismantle or challenge ableist beliefs, or your internalized ableism. Eradicating one’s own ableism, similar to racism, is not an easy task. As you can be racist without intention, you can be unintentionally ableist. It requires ongoing dedication to the mission and critical self-reflection and awareness. To be anti-racist and anti-ableist is a journey and process and not a destination.

As a disabled person, I have only begun to eradicate my own internalized ableism along with my ableist beliefs and practices. This is important for me to state for the readers of this thesis. I am not removed from the work I am calling us all to; I am a part of it.

A goal of this project was to address and challenge ableism at the center. This project alone cannot completely eradicate ableism at the center or within each educator. Instead, I hope that this project is a step towards dismantling our ableist beliefs and practices, and inspiring and fueling educators to continue on their anti-ableist journey.

Review of the Literature

This literature review examines existing research on professional development on autism in early childhood educational spaces. The review is narrowed by the topic of this project, which is action research on a workshop, a form of professional development, for early childhood educators at a nonprofit community childcare center. The scope of the literature is narrowed to align with the context of my project. There is extensive literature on professional development for early childhood educators, and the need for professional development and highly trained professionals, including the need for autism specific PD. This literature is too broad in scope to be applicable to the specifics and goals of my project, beyond the literature suggestions for the need for continued education and professional development for early childhood educators. Additionally, literature exists that explores early childhood educators (ECE) and preservice educators' views on autism, their experiences with autistic children, and their perceived level of knowledge and skills to serve this demographic of children. There is significantly less research on professional development focused on autism for ECE professionals and the impact of professional development on supporting and improving educator practices. In what follows, I examine and contextualize the limited research on this topic and situate my project within it.

To find the existing literature, I used Clark University's library cross-database search. The primary searches that yielded the relevant literature were: "early childhood" and "autism" and "professional development" for 172 results, and "childcare" and "autism" and "professional development" for 36 results. Much of the literature showed up in both searches, including two of the articles discussed in this review. While the searches I used for the topic focus yielded many results, by reading and sifting through the literature, seven articles were found to be of relevance. I created the following set of criteria for determining an article to be relevant to this examination.

First, I verified that the literature focused on professional development specific to autism and/or autistic children. The scope of professional development could expand beyond autistic children to include other disabilities and developmental delays, but autism needed to be included as a focus. The scope of literature using this first criterion dramatically decreased. Second, the participants of professional development needed to be early childhood educators, not early childhood special educators, early interventionists, or other professionals, such as OTs. As an additional criterion, the literature was removed if the research site was a specialized center for children with disabilities or a self-contained classroom serving children with disabilities exclusively.

The final criterion for inclusion in this literature review is that the research site must be within the United States. Justification for this criterion is that this project is not within the field of international and comparative education. Furthermore, the context of schooling and childcare spaces is crucial to understand how these spaces operate and the training of professionals within them. Therefore, ECE depends on the broader educational system, beliefs about childcare and child development, and the laws, systems, governing body, and funding applicable to the field. My project is situated and conceptualized within ECE in the United States thus the literature needs to be within the US as well. A comparative analysis of professional development on autism and early childhood education from various countries would be interesting and fruitful, but is beyond the scope of my project, and therefore this literature review.

Using the above criteria, the literature was reduced to seven pieces of literature that explored the topic of professional development on autism in ECE spaces in the United States. These seven pieces of literature are all published within the past 20 years, ranging from 2008 to 2024. These articles all explore the effect of PD on supporting autistic children in early childhood. The literature can be grouped by the PD targeted audience (the site and child demographics), topical focus of PD, PD format, and assessment of PD. To conclude the literature review, the research findings across the literature are explored, as well as the holes in the literature and where my project fits in.

PD Targeted Audience

Across the seven articles, there is a variation of the type of sites involved in the studies as well as the children the professional development targeted. The type of educational setting the studies employ falls into three categories: private center-based settings, public school settings, and mixed settings, including both private and public sites. Two articles focused exclusively on center-based early childhood education (Feuerstein & Landa, 2020; Pfeiffer et al, 2022). Three articles used public education sites for their research (Engelstad et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2021; Gomez, 2023). Importantly, the educators involved in the study by Johnson et al. (2021) extended beyond early childhood education. Their research participants are public school educators teaching in inclusive classrooms from PK-5th grade. While the scope of participants extends beyond early childhood, this article is included because it still includes PK, and thus remains relevant in my small literature pool. All six other articles solely focused on early childhood educators and young children. Two articles included a mix of settings, both public and private, for their research sites (Gomez, 2008; Siller et al., 2023). Regarding the targeted children of the literature's professional development, three focused exclusively on autistic children (Engelstad et al., 2020; Gomez, 2023; Johnson et al., 2023). The other four articles focused on autistic children but included children with other similar developmental delays (Feuerstein & Landa, 2020; Gomez, 2008; Pfeiffer et al, 2022; Siller et al., 2023).

Topical Focus of PD

Across all seven articles, professional development included information sharing, as well as specific skills or interventions, but the focus of the PD varied. There are four categories of the topical focus of PD on autism in ECE in the literature: addressing and supporting social-communication challenges/delays, supporting behavior management, supporting peer engagement, and broad support of autistic children in the general education setting. Literature on PD for social communication challenges was most prevalent, with four of seven articles in this category. Three articles explored a variation of Early Achievements, a professional development program designed in a clinic or specific autism center for "improving social and language outcomes," by the Kennedy Krieger Institute (Feuerstein & Landa, 2020, p. 522). One variation is EA-CP, "Early Achievements for Childcare Providers" (Feuerstein & Landa, 2020; Pfeiffer et al, 2022). Feuerstein and Landa describe EA-CP as:

> A whole classroom-level intervention designed to promote children's meaning construction… [with] four intertwined intervention components to help providers transform book reading into an interactive book sharing experience by actively engaging children to embody story-related concepts via use of props and peer interaction. (p. 522).

The other variation is EA-ES, "Early Achievements for Educational Setting" (Engelstad et al., 2020). EA-CP focused on implementing strategies during book sharing, while in EA-ES, "teachers were first taught to do this in the EA booksharing activity and then taught to generalize use of the strategies to other contexts throughout the day" and with a specific focus on "strategically engineer the learning environment" (Engelstad et al., 2020).

Additionally, the article by Siller et al. (2023) also focused on social-communication development, using SEE-KS-EC PD. SEE-KS-EC is adapted from the original Social Emotional

Engagement-Knowledge and Skills intervention, which was designed for PK-12 public school educators. SEE-KS-EC is “adapted to target children with social-communication challenges in early childhood settings” and “aims to enhance AE [active engagement] across three domains: investment, independence, and initiation. These three AE domains were selected because each is likely to be impacted by social-communication problems” (p. 588).

The other three topical focuses each had one article in their category. Gomez's (2023) research is on PD to support the behavior management of autistic children. Gomez's research addresses disproportionate preschool expulsions of children with autism by using a training model for preschool educators “to improve self-efficacy through increased confidence, successful implementation [of interventions], and evidence of a reduction in behaviors” (p. 33). On the other hand, Gomez’s (2008) professional development focused on supporting autistic and related developmentally delayed children’s peer engagement in play, especially around cooperative participation and communication, and educators' use of prompting and praise to promote peer engagement. The final topical PD focus is a broad PD on supporting autistic children within the general education setting using research-based practices (Johnson et al., 2021).

PD Format

The format of professional development is categorized into single-action online PD, online PD with coaching, and in-person PD with coaching. The professional development Johnson et al. (2021) used was single action, as it only included the short online training. The authors did not share specific elements of their PD in the article beyond that “the training consisted of videos explaining social skills training and visual supports and how to implement these practices in the classroom setting" and shared information on autism and uniqueness of ASD learners (p. 13). Additionally, Johnson et al. is the only article that did not utilize coaching as part of its PD.

Two articles used an online professional development format with coaching. Siller et al. (2023) had a ten-week intervention consisting of four asynchronous online modules on how to promote active engagement during circle time, and three synchronous online coaching sessions with a research clinician. During the coaching sessions, participants reflected on classroom videos of their circle time and explored what worked and what opportunities there are for improvement. Gomez (2023) similarly used an online format with coaching, but the PD spanned a shorter term across a month. Gomez utilized the Training, Coaching, Tracking (TCT) model, designed by prior research. Phase 1 included three 45-minute virtual trainings on selected topics related to social skills for autistic children and challenging behaviors. Only two paraeducators (teachers and paraeducators were included in the research) participated in all three phases due to logistical constraints, according to Gomez (2023). Phase 2 used simulations of scenarios on social skills and challenging behaviors in classrooms. In phase 3, there were four coaching sessions and tracking of social skills interventions.

The articles that explore professional development on Early Achievements all used in-person workshops and coaching (Engelstad et al., 2020; Feuerstein & Landa, 2020; Pfeiffer et al, 2022). Feuerstein and Landa (2020) provided two six-hour-long workshops that taught EA-CP instructional targets and instructional strategies. The workshops consisted of a PowerPoint presentation, group discussions, role-playing activities, reflections, feedback, and educators examining videos of their use of EA-CP in their classrooms. Participants received weekly coaching throughout the 20-week intervention on using EA-CP during their classroom's story time, where the coaches observed the educator and then debriefed together afterward on the instructional strategies used and where improvement is needed. Pfeiffer et al. (2022) built on the prior implementation study by Feuerstein and Landa to adapt EA-CP. EA-CP is part of an ongoing study. Pfeiffer et al. used three six-hour-long workshops and eight weekly coaching sessions (2022). Similar to Feuerstein and Landa, Engelstad et al. (2020) professional development spanned 20 weeks, and included seven six-hour-long workshops and weekly coaching sessions. The workshop content focused on EA-ES in book sharing and other instructional activities, targeting social skills, and naturalistic developmental behavioral intervention strategies.

The article by Gomez (2008) was also an in-person professional development with coaching, but in a much shorter time frame than the EA's PD. Gomez designed a brief individualized training system, BITS. Gomez's BITS included three phases. In Phase 1, intervention strategies are reviewed and discussed, using four handouts on autism symptoms, child behaviors, common interactions during free play, teacher behavior being observed, and intervention strategies. Phase 2 consists of video demonstrations of strategies and scenarios that show peer engagement. Phases 1 and 2 were completed in 90 minutes. Phase 3 involved three 15-minute debriefing and feedback sessions, where the educator reflected and answered questions about the researchers' observations of teacher and child interactions during play. In all, four articles used in-person professional development with coaching, making it the most common PD format on autism in ECE.

Evaluation of PD

Across the literature, four prominent points of evaluation were found. Three articles measured teacher self-efficacy on the PD content using pre/post surveys (Gomez, 2023; Johnson et al., 2021; Siller et al., 2023). Five articles included children as research subjects (Engelstad et al., 2020; Feuerstein & Landa, 2020; A. Gomez, 2008; K. Gomez, 2023; Siller et al., 2023). Feuerstein and Landa (2020) used pre/post intervention child evaluations using the Mullen Scales of Early Learning, MSEL, and Social Communication Assessment in Book Sharing. Likewise, Engelstad et al. (2020) also used pre/post intervention child evaluations using the MSEL. Engelestad et al. also used video recordings of child behavior during a book-sharing activity at baseline, six times throughout intervention, and post intervention. A. Gomez (2008) and Siller et al. (2023) used video recordings of children looking for peer engagement, Gomez, and active engagement, Siller et al. at baseline and post intervention as well. Finally, for literature that included children as research participants, K. Gomez (2023) observed children's behavior and response to intervention strategies during coaching sessions. Furthermore, implementation fidelity of the skills and strategies taught by professional development was frequently used to evaluate PD (Engelstad et al., 2020; Feuerstein & Landa, 2020; A. Gomez, 2008; K. Gomez, 2023; Siller et al., 2023). Lastly, the article by Pfeiffer et al. (2022) is unique for its solo data collection method: focus groups on providers' perceptions of the PD and the implementation of strategies.

Research Findings

The seven articles had various key findings. The research by Johnson et al. (2021) found that training on research-based practices for working with autistic students improved self-efficacy ratings of general education teachers. This article supports that professional development for general educators on autism can support inclusive classrooms and inclusive education for autistic children to flourish. Feuerstein and Landa (2020) found that “the job-embedded coaching component of the EA-CP professional development program was key to providers’ implementation success. Providers’ implementation of the EA-CP intervention activated acceleration in social communication development of young children with developmental delays” (p. 531). This research highlights the role of coaching for educators on the impact of PD. Pfeiffer et al. (2022) reinforced the finding of the significance of coaching in EA-CP, as well as that EA-CP supports the educator's ability to enhance children’s development. Additionally, they also found that directors’ support is important for educators' implementation of EA-CP. This finding is particularly noteworthy as it calls attention to the logistical constraints and barriers that ECE educators face. Even when educators receive training and want to do their best for their kids and class, their classroom does not exist in isolation from the center/school and broader context. The article by Engelstad al. (2020) supports the findings of Feuerstein and Landa (2020) and Pfeiffer et al (2022). The research by Engelstad et al. (2020) also supports the importance of collaboration between Speech Language Pathologists and preschool teachers for children’s social communication skill development and growth. This finding highlights the need for greater collaboration and communication across the child’s support team and child development professionals broadly.

The research by Siller et al. (2023) focused on the implementation of the intervention and adherence to the research protocol, with preliminary findings on the intervention's impact. They found that the intervention resulted in social-emotional gains in the children involved, as well as “associations among key outcome measures (including active engagement, student teacher relationship, social-communication competencies)" (p.587). Their research focused on the implementation of the intervention and adherence to research protocol; thus, the findings are relevant specifically to the SEE-KS-EC PD. K. Gomez's (2023) research generally supports a degree of positive impact of the training model on the reduction of challenging behaviors, but the degree of impact and how the intervention impacted educators is less clear, as only two paraeducators completed all three phases. The most significant evidence is "Paraeducator 1 showed improvement in all areas in the sense of self-efficacy, illustrating that the TCT training model positively impacted self-efficacy and reinforced current practices that the paraeducator was trying to use in the classroom" (p. 82). While robust data on the entire TCT model is unavailable, Gomez's research supports the need for educator training to understand and respond to challenging behaviors of autistic children, which will help autistic children stay in the classroom. Lastly, A. Gomez (2008) found the "increase in prompting appeared to have an effect on child engagement as it also increased across all three children. Finally, all three teachers considered the BITS to be significant, socially appropriate, and useful with the target children" (p. iv). This research supports the need and benefit of training early childhood educators in supporting autistic children in the classroom, and that training can be effective in a condensed format. Altogether, the existing literature supports the potential for professional development for early childhood educators in better supporting autistic children, and emphasizing the current lack of, and need for support and further training around autism and autistic children in ECE spaces.

Need for More Literature: Where this Thesis Fits

As I found only seven relevant pieces of literature on this topic, there exists a great need for additional research and literature. More literature is needed on professional development related to autism, and specific to early childhood education centers. Early childhood education resources and funding are limited across the board; ECE spaces outside of public schools are even more limited. The same applies to the education and training of staff. Only two articles exclusively explored center-based childcare (Feuerstein & Landa, 2020; Pfeiffer et al., 2022). Additionally, there is a gap in research for professional development designed internally for a specific site, and not for widespread dissemination. None of the existing research on professional development discussed or emphasized stimming and sensory needs. Furthermore, more research is needed on the long-term impact of professional development in supporting autistic children, for educators and children. Additional research is needed on what aspects of professional development, beyond coaching, are influential in expanding educators' beliefs about autism and classroom practices with autistic children. Importantly, the existing literature did not speak to ableist practices and beliefs of educators. Only one article evaluates the role of identity in autistic children's experience and treatment; Gomez (2023) discussed the role of race, gender, class, and culture in children's access to and seeking of diagnosis, access and quality of services, and the role of intersectionality in understanding rates of exclusionary discipline of autistic preschoolers. This makes my research unique as ableism and DisCrit are central to my professional development's design and my exploration of its impact.

This project fills holes and expands on existing research in other ways, too. My research joins the work of Feuerstein and Landa (2023) and Pfeiffer et al. (2022) in its focus on center-based childcare. Also, my research is unique because I am both the researcher and workshop facilitator, as well as an educator at the site. Additionally, my research on professional development emphasized stimming and sensory needs, while providing additional information and strategies for understanding autistic children and supporting them at our site. Therefore, my research expands on the variety of topical focuses of professional development on autism. This topic is in great need of further research, just as our early childhood professionals across the country and in childcare spaces are in need of relevant professional development on autism. My research is one contribution to this area.

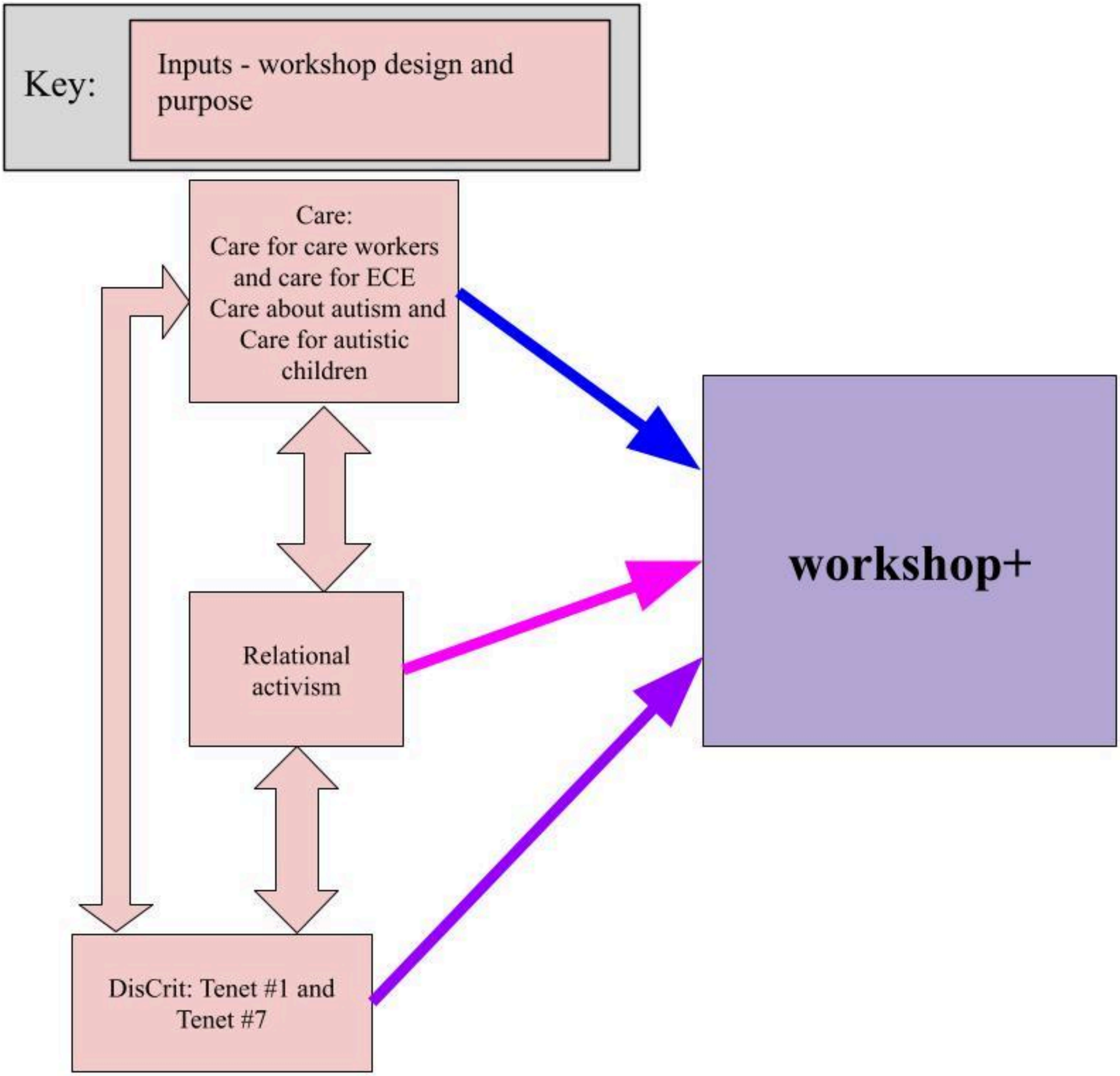
Theoretical Framework

> *"Because we have all been socialized, and likely professionally prepared, within an ableist society and educational system, moving beyond compliance necessarily requires both unlearning limited ways of being, educating, and relating, and learning new ways of being, educating, and relating."*
>
> *—Beneke, & Love, 2025, p. 162*

The above quote is from the book *Beyond Compliance in Early Childhood Education: Centering Disability, Freedom, and Belonging,* edited by Maggie Beneke and Hailey R. Love. This book is the most central theoretical and academic work that informed my theoretical framework. During the first semester of developing this project, Jie Park, my cohort's advisor and professor, recommended this book to me as a text to better understand and conceptualize the problem and how to address it. Prior to designing the workshop, I read and reflected on this book and its powerful content. This book helped give me words for and situate ideas that I believed in. This particular quote from this book is most salient to my project, its design, and purpose. This quote is found in the conclusion of the book. I also chose to share this quote during the workshop and the subsequent research interviews.

The above quote is the core of my theoretical framework. I have expanded upon the themes of this quote, as well as situating it in this specific project. Care, DisCrit, and relational activism inform the workshop's design and purpose. They are also the specific theoretical ideas and concepts that are salient in the investigation of my research questions and the workshop's impact. The diagram below shows the map of my theoretical framework.

How to understand the workshop, its design and purpose:



DisCrit

Beyond Compliance introduced me to DisCrit. DisCrit, originally termed by scholars Subini Ancy Annamma, David Connor, and Beth Ferri, is a theoretical framework combining elements of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disability Studies (DS). “DisCrit problematizes the ways that binaries between normal/abnormal and abled/disabled play out in a range of contexts” (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 9). This is why I resonated with this framework. My project and framework drew from two primary DisCrit tenets. These tenets are: “(1) DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy… (7) DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance” (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11). Disabled children of color and challenging notions of normalcy were at the forefront of this workshop design. This workshop was a form of activism, advocating for autistic children and supporting inclusive practices. This workshop sought to combat ableism and advance DisCrit ideology at the center, while recognizing the limitations of this project’s ability to do so.

Care

For care, Nel Noddings’ (2005; 2002) work was a significant source. Nodding conceptualizes care as a relation between the cared *for* and the carer. Noddings (2005) states that when you care:

> It does not mean that I will always approve of what the other wants, nor does it mean that I will never try to lead him or her to a better set of values, but I must take into account the feelings and desires that are actually there and respond as positively as my values and capacities allow.

The project's site is a place of care. More than that, my care *for* care workers, early childhood educators, and care *for* autistic children drove this workshop and my work at the site broadly. Noddings also theorized on caring-*about* that involves care that is indirect, distanced, conceptual, and in the public sphere. I designed this workshop because I care-*about* autism, specifically through a neurodiversity affirming lens. Noddings (2002) powerfully connects caring *for* and caring-*about*:

> caring-*about* can help in establishing, maintaining, and enhancing [caring *for*]. Those who care-*about* others in the justice sense must keep in mind that the objective is to ensure that caring actually occurs. Caring-*about* is empty if it does not culminate in caring relations (p. 23-24).

Caring-*about* autism and neurodiversity affirming practices fuels and enhances my ability to care *for* autistic children.

Relational Activism

"Relational activism" was coined by Sara O'Shaughnessy and Emily Huddart Kennedy in 2010 in "Relational Activism: Reimagining Women's Environmental Work as Cultural Change." Since then, scholars and activists have expanded the term beyond the environment. Relational activism "makes change happen through personal and informal relationships. . . . The aim of the relational activist is to compassionately change the bit of the world we can touch" (Dove & Fisher, 2019). In facilitating this workshop at a center I am connected to, I use my personal relationships to help address ableism at the center and support more inclusive, neurodiversity affirming practices. I used my relationships at the center to inform the workshop content and design to support an impactful workshop.

How DisCrit, Care, and Relational Activism Connect to Each Other

DisCrit, Care, and relational activism are separate inputs to the workshop, but they connect to one another. First, DisCrit connects to care. My care-*about* autism and care *for* autistic children is informed by DisCrit, especially tenet #1. I care-*about* DisCrit, and I care *for* the center and its educators. I believe that my care *for* my coworkers and care-*about* DisCrit can support workshop participants' engagement and enactment of DisCrit principles.

Moreover, relational activism connects to DisCrit, too. This is most evident through tenet #7 of DisCrit. Relational activism is a non-traditional activism form, which is supported by DisCrit, which "supports all forms of resistance" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11). Relational activism uses compassion, empathy, and connections to enact change. Through my relationships at the center, I modeled DisCrit principles, shared my journey with DisCrit, and used compassion and empathy, key components of relational activism, to support engagement and enactment of DisCrit principles at the center and with the center's educators.

Care connects to relationship activism, too. In Nel Noddings exploration of care, she conceptualizes it as a relation. Care enhances relationships on which relational activism depends. Furthermore, relational activism argues that relationships are a powerful mechanism to enact change. I believe that relational activism can foster caring-*about* through modeling caring-*about* to people we are in relationships with, and having compassion for others as they learn to care-*about* a specific topic. For my project, I hope that my relationships at the center can foster caring-*about* autism and neurodiversity affirming practices in the center's educators. When this caring increases, it enhances the care *for* our neurodivergent children.

Together, the three workshop inputs influence one another while informing the workshop's design and purpose. I believe the three inputs inform the workshop's impact and, therefore, my investigation of research questions.

Methods

Methodology

The methodology employed is action research. Action research is an appropriate fit for this project as I sought to explore the impact of the workshop, an action. Social Scientist Zina O'Leary defines action research as "research strategies that tackle real-world problems in participatory, collaborative, and cyclical ways in order to produce both knowledge and action" (2007, p. 2). Action research "works towards change as knowledge is produced" (O'Leary, p. 2). This is particularly fitting for this project as I not only sought to expand the knowledge of the educator participants, but also that the knowledge brings about change in their classroom practices, disrupting ableism, and supporting more affirming support of autistic children generally at the site.

Additionally, action research is often used in educational settings. Andrew Johnson (2019) defines action research as:

> In the field of education, it can be defined as the process of studying a school, classroom, or teaching‑learning situation with the purpose of understanding and improving the quality of actions or instruction. In this sense, it is the ultimate form of teacher reflection (p. 315).

In this project, I informally studied the site and its educators. I then developed an action to address a problem I observed and that many other educators and administrators at the site had expressed. Next, I researched the impact of the workshop, a teaching-learning situation, to understand if and how the workshop was impactful. I reflected on the data collected to improve and expand the workshop content and delivery as I continue my educational career. Data collected from educators'/participants' feedback is critical for measuring and analyzing the impact of this training. The reflections generated from this action research inform my teaching practices going forward, particularly how I train and advocate for better, neurodiversity-affirming practices and educational environments, as I plan to continue leading workshops on topics related to neurodivergency in other educational and youth-centered spaces. The comments and insight from the first educator participants are critical to improving the workshop's effectiveness moving forward.

Epistemological Stance

My epistemological stance is a socio-criticalist. This means that knowledge is socially constructed, and shaped by power dynamics. The claims I make about the workshop and its impact, and about supporting autistic children, are influenced by interactions and interpretations of the social world. I do not submit that the claims I make are absolute facts or objective knowledge. The claims reflect the context in which they were formed. By providing necessary context, the claims are valuable to others, for they know where the knowledge was formed and situated.

In regard to critical epistemology, this is important as it reflects the power dynamics that inform knowledge generation. As the sole researcher, I am critical and cautious in how I interpret and understand what the research participants share. No matter how cautious I am, the knowledge generated by the workshop's impact is tied to my interpretation and sorting of the data – it is not the absolute truth. Furthermore, on the subject of autism, this project sought to challenge dominant ableist knowledge and beliefs that were constructed predominantly in an ableist society and by actors who are ableist.

Site

The site of this project is a center-based childcare, which is a part of a larger non-profit organization focused on supporting women and ending domestic violence. Currently, this center has a director, an assistant director, an infant/toddler lead teacher, a preschool lead teacher, and a supervisor who oversees all of this organization's youth programs. There are two infant rooms, four toddler rooms, four preschool rooms, and two pre-k classrooms. There is a range of children in our care, with various languages and ethnicities, in our classrooms. This site serves many families from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Ghana. Other nationalities and ethnicities are represented as well. This site serves many families on vouchers; the state helps pay for childcare. Additionally, though this site is not disability specialized and does not have special educators, nevertheless we serve disabled and developmentally delayed children in each of our classrooms. Early Intervention workers and other service providers, especially in preschool, like Occupational Therapists, Speech Therapists and teachers from the local public school system, are at this site daily in some capacity.

Regarding educators, at this time, the site has many open positions and is very short-staffed. The staff is a mix of full-time and part-time staff with many substitutes. There are also two high school interns, ages 16 and 17, at the center. The staff is aged 18 to 70. The staff is almost exclusively women, with fewer than five staff out of the approximately 60 staff across my time at the center who were not cis women. There is significant staff turnover, especially among substitutes and new hires, which is common across early childhood education. The administration team has remained the same during my time at this site, except for the Preschool Director, who left in the Fall of 2025. Approximately half of the teachers who were at the site when I started working there still work at the center in some capacity.

The first time I worked in a classroom at this site was in January of 2023, the beginning of my second semester at Clark. In Worcester, this site is as much a part of my experience and belonging as Clark's campus is. In my first semester at Clark, it became clear I needed a job, both for financial reasons and for the dedicated purpose of having a place of belonging that was not at Clark. From the Fall, 2023 semester onward, I have scheduled my classes to prioritize two days with no classes to spend more time at the site to work with the children I care so deeply about. In the summers of 2024 and 2025, I stayed in Worcester and worked full-time at this site. My relationship and connection to this site, its children, and its staff have continued to grow from January 2023 through now. This site is one of my communities.

Participants

Twenty-seven people attended the workshop–thirteen infant/toddler and nine preschool/pre-K: classroom teachers, floats, lead teacher, and regular substitutes, three administrators, and two others: a high school intern and a substitute that doesn't fit in one group/works less frequently. Participation in the research aspect of this project was open to all non-administrators who were 18 years or older, as this project focuses on classroom and teacher practices. I focused on the educator's experience and understanding, not from the administrative lens. One of the high school interns attended the workshop but was not invited to participate because the research protocol submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board specified that all participants would be adults. At the time I designed the protocol, I was unaware that the site would have high school interns. Thus, 24 people were eligible to participate in the research. For the survey, I had fourteen participants sign the consent form and indicate interest. I received only six survey responses; as they are anonymous, I cannot determine which educators completed the survey. For the interview, ten workshop attendees consented. Two people no longer worked at the site when I conducted the interviews, so they were removed from the interview pool. I planned for six interviews, three from the infant/toddler cohort and three from the preschool cohort. Two participants from the infant/toddler cohort and two participants from the preschool cohort were co-teachers in the same classroom. I selected the first teacher from each classroom that returned the consent form to be interviewed. I interviewed six teachers in total, 3 toddler teachers and 3 preschool teachers.

There is some overlap between survey and interview participation, as participants could consent to both data collection methods. Five of the six interviewees consented to the survey too. I know two interviewees for sure completed the survey because they told me so, and using my insider knowledge I suspect a third interviewee also completed the survey but I do not know for sure. As the survey responses were anonymous, I cannot share details about the participants. I share demographic data about the interviewees in the following chart:

Participant Name	Age	Race	Years at the Center	Position
Rebekah	27	Hispanic	Less than 1	Toddler teacher
Taylor	30	White	10	Toddler teacher
Hannah	23	Black	2	Toddler teacher
Lisa	43	White	20	Previous preschool teacher, now preschool substitute
Christina	40	Hispanic	4	Preschool teacher
Natalie	41	White	12	Preschool lead teacher

Positionality

My positionality and relationships with this project's participants, my coworkers, have changed dramatically from when I started until now. I have earned the status of an insider who is a substitute for payroll purposes, but with administration and teachers, I have earned my place as "not really a sub," a statement shared by various educators and admin. As a substitute, I have worked in almost every single classroom and with almost every staff member. Classroom teachers and administration trust me. This past year, I have predominantly worked in the infant/toddler cohort. In this cohort especially, I am very much a part of the team and actively collaborate and support my coworkers. I have a supportive working relationship with the entire admin team. They trust me, and we communicate more than typically with substitutes.

While I am an insider, I have privileges and differences that specify my positionality. I am white and middle-class, which places me in a more dominant and powerful social status/class than many others. I am a younger staff member, but not the youngest. There are many staff within my age bracket of early to mid 20s. I have a greater educational background than many of my coworkers, and am privileged with a Clark education. Many staff are still taking classes because they require you to take courses if you do not have an associate’s degree or bachelor's degree in a field relevant to early childhood education. However, they typically take one class a semester, so the degrees take a long time to earn. The other crucial difference is that I am single and queer though I do not really discuss this at work, and I do not have and am not trying for children. I have only disclosed my queerness to a few co-workers; this is because I do not want to chance homophobia impeding upon my ability to work and support children in various classrooms, as I am already combating ableism. My queerness shows through how I present myself and how I discuss topics around dating, gender, and sexuality, but whether or not people recognize this is another story. This is a significant element that defines my positionality at this site: I am young, childfree, and do not have the responsibilities and commitments that connect most of the staff at this site.

Another relevant aspect of my identity is my neurodiversity and disability and how that translates to how I show up at the site. As a neurodivergent person, I do not naturally and certainly am not loyal to "standard social conventions." At the site, I lead with my weirdness and neurodivergent energy. I stim, I share and accommodate my sensory needs and preferences, and I use my body to regulate. In doing so for myself, I embody neurodivergency as a different way of being, not something that is "wrong" or needs to be eliminated. I do not subscribe to a "normal" way of being or interaction with the social world. In regards to my disability, chronic migraine, I use a cold cap, in addition to rescue medicine, to manage symptoms. I teach the children about my cold cap and my migraines explaining that my head has a "boo boo," and that the cold cap, which at the site and with the children is called a "cold hat," is like an ice pack. Chronic migraine also causes me to fluctuate in energy level and how much movement I can do. While I typically run and jump around, when the migraine is bad, but I'm still able to work, I am far less active. The children and my coworkers see neurodivergency and disability within myself, and that accommodations and recognition of difference are important and powerful to enable someone to embody their full capacity.

In regards to my world view, the core aspects relevant to this project are that diversity is beautiful and powerful, neurodiversity is natural, there is no one way of being, community is crucial, and children deserve a nurturing childhood and learning environment where their full selves are accepted. I view the world as dominated by systems of power and systems of oppression to which we must challenge and change.

My positionality as an insider informs the power dynamics in my project. As an insider who was the facilitator of the workshop, I made it a point that the workshop was not a lecture, and I started with recognizing the staff's lack of training on autism and disability and that they do what they know how to do, recognizing the challenges of our classrooms and the job we do. A complication of my positionality is how to be critical of the educators at the site, who are part of my community, and especially, critical of administration, as I will continue to work at the site after this thesis is published.

Data Collection

Data was collected from the anonymous survey and semi-structured interviews. I also reference my own informal observational data of my experiences and time at the center. The survey questions and interview questions are attached (see Appendix A and Appendix B). The survey responses were collected within a month and half following the workshop. Fourteen workshop attendees consented to the survey and six attendees actually completed the workshop. Two workshop attendees left the center soon after the workshop, and therefore did not have access to the survey which was sent to their employment's email. I highly suspect that the survey email was lost in participants inbox or simply forgotten about or people consented without an intention to follow through. The survey asked questions to explore the knowledge gained from the workshop, as well key takeaways, and what was helpful and not helpful about the workshop.

I conducted six interviews, three from the infant/toddler cohort and three from the preschool cohort. The six interviews were conducted three and a half months after the workshop. The toddler teacher interviews were completed on January 29, 2026, and the preschool interviews the following day. On each interview day, the three scheduled interviews were back-to-back. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. In the interviews, I explored what workshop content stayed with the participants further removed from the workshop date. The interviews explored participants' knowledge and practices gained from the workshop. Furthermore, the interviews explored participants' understanding and beliefs about neurodiversity and themes of my theoretical framework, and the workshop's purpose.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I first grouped the data by responses to related survey and interview questions and other data that fit within the theme of the particular question. I grouped the data into: types of stims; purpose of stims; challenged and expanded ideas and knowledge around autism; this PD compared to others; challenges to caring/supporting autistic children in the classroom; existing support/support team; other support, resources, training desired; ideas of normalcy as an ECE educator and at the site; what it means to support neurodiversity; and change in behaviors and classroom practices. These initial ten groupings helped me sort the data across surveys and interviews to uncover key findings and themes.

To analyze the impact of the workshop, I used the ten groupings I initially made when sorting through the data. In doing so, I found the first three impacts of the workshop. Using the two groupings about stimming specifically, I analyzed the understanding of stimming from research participants. For the workshop's impact on challenged and expanded ideas and knowledge around autism, and change in behaviors and classroom practices, I used the previously made, directly corresponding groupings to analyze these impacts.

To find related data to my theoretical framework, I looked through my initial 10 categories and the data I did not place into those categories, looking for themes of DisCrit, relational activism, and care. For DisCrit, I looked for references and examples of range of experiences and abilities of children; range of ASD presentation; normalcy; one or many views of children; differences among children; expectations and desires for/of children; thoughts on the quote by Beneke and Love (2025) of my theoretical framework (which I also read during interviews and the workshop; thoughts on workshop applicability to the quote; harm; how autism and autistic traits are discussed; deficit view of autism or children; wholistic view of children; celebrating children; othering; aspects of culture, race, and ethnicity; blaming children; where frustration and annoyance are placed (child vs. system/structures); impatience; judgemental comments; correcting others harmful language or attitude; ECE standards and developmental expectations; wanting to learn more and continue the conversation around ableism and belonging; educators priorities for children and their classroom; and how participants refer and describe neurodivergent children. Through this process, I identified evidence of DisCrit and ableism at the center and in participants following the workshop as another impact.

For care from my theoretical framework, I looked for references and examples of passion; empathy; compassion; understanding; patience; support for/of children; wanting to know more and do better; investment in workshop content; mentions of care for me; positivity about workshop and/or myself; educators concerns to support and do best for children; celebrating a child; advocating for a child/children; disclosure of their own or family members disabilities and neurodivergence; rights of children. I also looked for the use of language when referring to the center and the children, such as “my” and “our.”

For relational activism, I looked for references and examples of the role of insider knowledge; discussion of myself or what I shared; the workshop’s specific relevance to our center; comfort; trust. I also considered the state of my relationships with different participants and how that showed up in the data. In my analysis of the role of care and relational activism in the workshop, I identified caring relationships as the reason behind the workshop's impact, as well as an additional impact.

Overall, the three workshops' inputs, DisCrit, relational activism, and care, inform my exploration and conceptualization of the workshop's impact and investigation of research questions.

Theory of Change

Significant change is needed in our education system broadly, as well as within the practices of specific schools and educational spaces. There is no one way to make change in education–change is needed on all levels. I enact change primarily through relational activism. Broadly, I believe change can occur through an expansion of knowledge: when you know better, you can do better. While all knowledge has the potential to translate into action, abstract and theoretical knowledge does not translate into action as easily or thoroughly as practical knowledge. Therefore, I believe enabling people, in my case educators, with practical and relevant knowledge has potential for powerful change.

How knowledge is disseminated, and one's encounter with knowledge influences whether and how the new knowledge changes their understanding and/or actions. In making changes within a particular group of educators and/or at a specific site, I believe that change most effectively occurs when the changemaker(s) are in a relationship with and in community with those that they wish to change. Relationships build trust, and trust enables a person to be challenged and try something new. Being connected to the community you are trying to change deepens your understanding of it and how best to support change within that community. I believe that when you foster relationships and are in community with those you are training or educating, you gain greater authority and trust among participants, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of professional development and teacher training. Through my deep relations with the staff and center site, a level of accountability to act on themes and ideas of the workshop is present that would not be if I led the workshop and never saw the staff or center again. Furthermore, by being in community and having close relationships with the educators you are training, you gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and knowledge, which can be used to design a more purposeful workshop with a greater likelihood of achieving results. Building off of relationships and community is the role of collaboration – that collaboration in early childhood center spaces amongst staff leads to teacher growth. When we learn and act together, our center can change. This is the rationale for this workshop.

Findings

The Workshop

On October 10, 2025, I facilitated a three-hour workshop titled “Stimming and More: Supporting Children with Autism.” The workshop occurred on a professional development day. Regular staff, non-substitutes, were required to attend. All substitutes were invited via an email from the center's director, but not mandated to attend. Twenty-seven educators and childcare staff attended.

The day before the workshop I planned to print all the handouts and powerpoint slides. While I worked at the center the day prior, a coworker asked if I was getting a coworker a baby shower present. This is when I learned that my coworker who I often worked directly with, was having a baby shower in the morning before the workshop. It was important to me that I attend her baby shower and bring a gift in support. Therefore, after work the night before the workshop, I rushed around town to get a personalized gift. By the time I had finished work, gotten the gift, it was after 8pm. I stopped for take out, so I did not need to spend time cooking. Unfortunately at the take out place I got into a very minor car accident in the parking lot. This derailed my night plans, including my ability to print the handouts. I did my best to forget about the car accident so I could sleep and be fully present for the workshop the following morning.

I woke up in the morning filled with anxiety. I rushed to print the handouts that I could before arriving for the baby shower at 7:30am. Due to time constraints in the morning and the limited remaining funds of my printer allowance, I was unable to print everything, including the powerpoint slides. I accepted that I did what I could, and I would make it work. Once I got to the center, I brought up my workshop supplies, books and my personal fidgets, and a baby shower gift. Since the baby shower was directly before the workshop, I moved in and out of the shower, as she opened gifts and treats to gather supplies (fidgets and sensory toys and sensory materials from a toddler and preschool classroom), review my plan, and take breaths. I still was anxious and nervous, but did a good job of ignoring the chaos and stress of the night prior, until the workshop was over. As I fidgeted standing in the front of the room with the powerpoint open and my notes in front of me, waiting for everyone to return to the board room after a brief break from the babyshower, Taylor asked if I was nervous, to which I said "yes," and she responded with a supportive look, that she can tell and that "I got it."

Since I am an educator and insider at the center, I developed the workshop centered on my coworkers and the children we care *for*. The workshop focused on autism and autistic children, but a lot of the content is relevant to children with other developmental delays and/or disabilities. I used examples of dilemmas from the center, as well as questions and problems coworkers have mentioned, to inform the workshop content. While I facilitated the workshop, it was designed to be collaborative and to enhance everyone's knowledge, understanding, and classroom practices, including my own. This is why I asked to arrange the seating so we were in a circle, and not in rows reflecting a lecture format. I began the workshop by sharing all that I have learned from my coworkers about early childhood education. I stated that I recognize that everyone in the room has something to teach and brings their own experiences and knowledge, from which we can all learn. I made clear that the workshop was not intended to be a lecture and that I wanted it to be collaborative and for others to share, and that the more others talked, the less I would have to. I explained that the information I shared is informed by what I've learned from my experiences, what other educators have taught me, and additional research, but I do not have all the answers and am still learning. I shared my intention for the workshop with my coworkers: to expand their understanding and support the dilemmas they face in their classrooms and when working with autistic children.

I originally scheduled out the workshop and time for each point in the agenda (see Appendix C). This was not really followed; the workshop flowed according to participant engagement and discussion on various topics. After every section of the agenda and piece of content shared, I left space for participant input and questions. Several times after pausing on content, I was met with silence and what I took as awkward pauses, before moving on. On the other hand, the workshop foundations' discussion was very fruitful and had almost half of the room sharing input. This discussion around normalcy, supporting the whole child, ableism, and race and disability went much better than I had assumed. DisCrit was incorporated and made most clear in the workshop's foundations content and discussion. Examples of how DisCrit was part of this segment are through the exploration of how race/ethnicity, gender, class, and culture all influence views of disability, including seeking diagnosis, as well as the varied treatment of disabled folks across these factors. We also discussed racialized diagnoses such as oppositional defiance disorder. Due to the active engagement and the discussion points, we spent longer on the beginning segments of the workshop. I believe this adjustment to be beneficial to the impact of the workshop.

I used the bathroom breaks/intermission as a vibe check with participants. I underestimated how much information I had to share for many of the sections, as well as the amount of time for questions and discussions. Therefore, due to time constraints, I had to forgo the small group book activity. Instead, I briefly shared what the original plan was and that there was no time, and then described and showed each of the books the activity was going to use, and that participants were welcome to look at or borrow any of them. Natalie, the preschool lead teacher, ended up ordering many of the picture books for each preschool classroom. Another challenge during the workshop was technological difficulties with the projector and playing videos. This cut into the workshop time, as well as the stimming videos not being heard, as the speaker's volume was not working. Another adjustment to the workshop agenda is with the second-to-final segment “In our classrooms and on our playgrounds: supporting children with autism (and other developmental delays/disabilities)” where dilemmas were to be shared, I’d share my major piece of advice, and collectively we would create a list of accommodations and strategies to use. This segment did occur in the workshop, but was more spread out throughout the workshop, with participants asking questions and dilemmas being shared as we moved through workshop content. In discussions, other participants would offer accommodations and strategies they use based on a scenario or issue. However, there was no time to generate a list of strategies and accommodations together. When the time for the workshop was coming to an end, I emphasized the power of connection, specifically connecting with children on their terms and in their ways. I emphasized my respect and appreciation for the center and staff, and their participation in this workshop. I shared the typical dates that I work at the center, and that I am still around and available for questions, suggestions, or to be a sounding board.

At the conclusion of the workshop, attendees expressed applause and gratitude. Several participants shared comments reflecting a shift in mindset from frustration with autistic children to a more positive emotional investment and recognition of the children’s struggles and experiences. Christina made a comment along the lines of, “We really needed this,” reflecting the workshop's specific focus and attentiveness to this center. The administration team said I did a good job and thanked me, and I thanked them for the opportunity. I left the center tired, but on a positive note, feeling very pleased with how the workshop ran (despite the difficulties), the staff participation, and the energy/attitude in the room.

Impact of the Workshop

The “Stimming and More: Supporting Children with Autism in our Classrooms” workshop was successful in improving understanding of stimming; shifting and expanding attitudes and awareness of autism; impacting classroom practices, to some degree; and challenging ableist beliefs and practices, at least partially. Overall, the workshop was impactful for the center and workshop participants.

Referencing the moments of silence for participant input, I initially worried it was a sign of disengagement. I have since reconceptualized the silence and pauses as digestion of workshop material and the desire to hear and learn more. The interview with Natalie particularly helped reimagine the silence:

> I think it's because, like, they all just got so much out of it, and if you looked around the room when you were doing your training, like every single person was just captivated by what you had to say …it was like a movie that just didn't stop having action-packed parts or books that you couldn't put down. Like, we just couldn't stop listening to what you had to say because, like, I said, it related to at least one child in every classroom. And so I do, I think, I think everyone has just taken advantage of something that they got out of your training. (Natalie, Interview, January 30, 2026).

Natalie described my initial experience of awkwardness as a reflection of the audience's captivation. Furthermore, this quote speaks to the training’s relevance to the center and its educators, as well as the fact that the workshop, or at least some element of it, was taken and remained with each participant beyond the workshop’s conclusion.

The workshop's content was dynamic, as what was discussed and learned moved beyond the three-hour window. Immediately after the workshop ended, I was asked to observe children for Natalie, Hannah, and another participant. Various staff at the center have continued to ask me questions or for input around autistic children or children with developmental delays. Furthermore, as I still work at the center, I continue to advocate for and support our autistic children and children with developmental delays. I model stimming with the kids, recognizing their sensory needs and preferences, supporting communication via echolalia and with gestalts (chunks of language), and embracing neurodiversity throughout the center. Additionally, I worked with Taylor on understanding and supporting autistic children in her classroom prior to the workshop. My work with Taylor supported the workshop's potential and helped inform the content. Therefore, while the research centered on the workshop, it is necessary to reimagine the workshop to include not just the three-hour workshop window but also my existing and ongoing role and support at the center. I will now explore the specifics of the impact of the workshop and what happened at the center as a result. The data showed four key areas: understanding of stimming, expanded knowledge and challenged beliefs around autism, change in staff behaviors and classroom practices, and themes of DisCrit and ableism at the center and in participants.

Understanding of Stimming

Regarding stimming, the workshop expanded knowledge and awareness of stims, but there is still room to improve. The survey question: Do you know different types and examples of stims? showed results of Absolutely: 2, Mostly: 3, Somewhat: 1, Not at All: 0 (Survey data). During the workshop, I had asked for examples of stimming, and then shared a few more. I did not have as much time as I would have liked to share a more comprehensive list of examples.

The survey data reflects this. During the interviews, I asked for examples of stims they see in their classroom or in other spaces. Together the interviews shared: hand flapping, yelling, rocking back and forth, finger movements, humming, happy feet, banging head, fastly running back and forth, echolalia “copying her…like verbally,” crawling, making noise with specific movement, climbing, mouthing, and spinning (Taylor, Interview, January 29, 2026). This list reflects an improved understanding of different types of stims.

The workshop also supported understanding of the purpose of stimming. Prior to this workshop, many staff heavily struggled to recognize stimming and understanding the purpose and the role stimming plays. During the “Autism 101” training, the quantity of questions on stimming and comments reflected annoyance and disapproval with stimming, as well as my site observations of stim suppression and negative comments around stimming, showed this was a much needed area of improvement. The survey data supports improvement around understanding the purpose of stimming. For the question, “Do you understand the use of stims for regulation?” three respondents selected “absolutely” and three selected “mostly.” In the interviews when I asked what are some of the purposes of stimming, a variety of responses were shared: to help calm down, to regulate, distriction, self soothing, self calming, stay settled, coping mechanism, “make them feel better,” to regulate their nervousness system, feels good to them (Hannah, Interview, January 29, 2026). These responses reflect that stimming while largely used for regulation, has many purposes, and can serve people differently. The understanding of stimming for regulation helps educators support a stim-friendly classroom, as they understand the reason and importance behind it. Moreover, the lack of hesitation in sharing a purpose of stimming across the interviewees supports an improved understanding around stimming.

Another impact of the workshop is expanded knowledge and challenged beliefs about autism. The survey data showed this was a more substantial impact of the workshop than understanding of stims specifically. For the survey question: “Did the workshop challenge or expand existing knowledge or beliefs about stims and/or supporting autistic children?” Four respondents selected Absolutely and two respondents chose Mostly. The survey question with the most positive responses, five chose Absolutely and one chose Mostly, is: “Was the workshop helpful in providing you with ideas on how to support stims and different sensory needs in the classroom?” This reflects my priority in the workshop for its content to impact the classrooms and care and support for our children. I cared-*about* knowledge, but I really hoped it would translate to stim acceptance and supporting sensory needs of the children in our care. I wanted to help the educators in their ability to care and educate neurodivergent children. Since the workshop, I have noticed a stronger embrace of sensory needs and different sensory profiles, and a decrease in stim suppression or attempts to correct stimming into more “useful” and “typical” play.

Furthermore, data across survey responses and interviews supports greater awareness, increased knowledge, and challenged beliefs. One survey respondent shared that “let children or people stim” as part of her response of what was most helpful about the workshop (Survey data). During the interview Natalie shared that she learned that in the case of children stimming, “it’s not just things that I always thought were behaviors, aren’t just behaviors;” Hannah made a similar statement about a reimaging of purpose or intent behind children’s actions (Natalie, Interview, January 30, 2026). The “behaviors” references actions to be corrected or redirected; behaviors are not for regulation but to disrupt others or an environment. The ability to recognize when a child is stimming while understanding its purpose, reshapes how that child’s action is perceived and the response elicited from the educator and caregiver. When you understand the reason and intent behind children's action, you are able to more appropriately respond. Additional survey data supports this with responses about replacing an object or behavior, for safety or logistic constraints of the classroom, while still meeting the child's needs. This powerful shift I believe is to be shared by other workshop participants as well beyond research participants.

Expanded Knowledge and Challenged Beliefs About Autism

Additional survey and interview data show varying impacts of expanded knowledge and challenged beliefs around autism. Survey participants shared themes of being mindful, patient, understanding, observing kids in their classroom based on the workshop, trying different approaches when working with autistic children, recognizing attempts at communication, and that "No autistic child is the same. I will ALWAYS have questions!" (Survey data). Natalie shared in the interview that the workshop taught her that we should support and accommodate autistic children while holding high expectations and appropriately challenging them because they are "capable of learning" (Natalie, Interview, January 30, 2026). This point is a particularly valuable impact, and I am very grateful for this takeaway. During the workshop, we had discussed the importance of accommodating and challenging autistic children or children with disabilities. We discussed how not providing necessary accommodations and recognizing their disability and/or neurodivergence is harmful to the child and ableist. And at the same time, not challenging or pushing a child to grow and learn, is also harmful to the child and ableist. This idea is central to my educational philosophy and I believe that it is every child's right to be supported and challenged. Apart from this, interviewees shared themes of increased awareness of stimming and how autism or sensory needs effects and presents in a child, and easier identification of stimming and signs of autism.

One piece of data around the impact of expanded knowledge and challenged beliefs stands out. During the ableism discussion in the workshop, I shared statistics on social inequalities around disabilities. Connecting to DisCrit, I also discussed how disability and race intersect around disability services, societal treatment, rates of school expulsions, and the rate of disability diagnosis based on gender and race, including heavily racially influenced and defined diagnoses like Oppositional Defiance Disorder. Christina shared that this information and the discussion around it "was like eye-opening for some people" (Christina, Interview, January 30, 2026). Christina is the most experienced and knowledgeable participant about autism, and has far more and varied experience than I. That this workshop supported and expanded Christina's knowledge and beliefs about autism shows that the workshop had a range of relevance and supported, at least to some degree, every educator who attended.

Change in Staff Behaviors and Classroom Practices

The third impact of change in educator behaviors and classroom practices is not as concrete or a consistent impact across research participants. Nevertheless, it is clear that some change has occurred. As I stated previously, I have observed a decrease in stim suppression or attempts to correct stimming into more "useful" and "typical" play since the workshop. I have noticed an increase in recognizing children's sensory needs and supporting their sensory exploration and play. I have seen a positive change towards neurodiversity affirming practices and better support of autistic and neurodivergent children. However, the center has much room for growth and improvement.

The interviews also support a smaller, staff-contingent, and nuanced impact for educator behaviors. First, the staffing context of the center greatly informs the limited change in practices. The center's staff has a large number of substitutes–the center could not run without the subs. Additionally, the center experiences significant staff turnover across regular staff and subs; high staff turnover is common in early childhood education. Therefore, many current staff, including new classroom teacher hires and substitutes (except for one), did not attend the workshop. There is a strong separation of knowledge and skill set between regular staff and substitutes. Both my experience in classrooms and interview data show that this adds difficulty and frustrations for classroom teachers trying to run their class and care *for* their kids as best they know how, when the staff they are working with does not share the same knowledge and understanding of supporting neurodivergent children. The high staff turnover both reveals the impact of the workshop and reflects the need for ongoing professional development in this field. Staff turnover is a challenge for center-wide change and the center's ability to care *for* neurodivergent and/or developmentally delayed children.

The interviews showed that the workshop supported a more general change of educators' behaviors and classroom practices. Natalie shared,

> I think they're quicker to be comfortable asking for resources. I think they're getting a little more comfortable talking to parents. I think they're quicker to ask Worcester Public schools to come in and just take a glance at children, or come to you or come to me. And I think that's all been very positive. (Natalie, Interview, January 30, 2026).

As this excerpt shows, the workshop is not the only support available to educators. Therefore, when examining the impact of the workshop months later, I could not isolate the workshop entirely from the context of the center and other educator support and training that expressed similar ideas. When I asked Rebekah if the center had gotten better at letting kids stim, she said,

> I think it depends. I think if we've had a hard day, I've noticed them more likely to get frustrated if they see stimming and try to stop it, especially like with Harry... So it's not always, but I do, do I still see it? Yeah. For sure (Rebekah, Interview, January 29, 2026).

On a related note, when I asked Christina about autism acceptance and letting kids stim, she shared,

> I've seen here and there somethings, you know, I mean, obviously I try stuff in my classroom, but I've seen, like, um, other staff, you know, be more open to that, like, not idea, but, like, you know, of trying stuff, you know, for them or, um, but I do see, like, or hear, you know, staff. Like, I still see, like, some staff, like, making, you know, little comments, and I make sure I, you know, shut it down. Because I don't like that. (Christina, Interview, January 30, 2026)

Rebekah and Christina explain some change, but still, there are issues of ableism, stim suppression, and demeaning comments based on the kids' disability, showing much room to grow. Dismantling ableist beliefs and practices is not a simple transformation, as change occurs over time and through reflection and deliberate attention to the issue. Some elements of change in educators show they are on a transformative journey.

Regarding change in educator classroom practices, the data shows not a major transformation, but a step forward, trying new strategies, more open minds, a little more flexibility, and some embracing of sensory needs and stimming. An important observation I have made is in Natalie’s preschool class, which is filled with neurodivergent and developmentally delayed children, and their transition leaving the gym. Her class transformed from a dysregulated chaos with many children crying and fighting to a much more regulated group of children as they transitioned away from the gym. I cannot pinpoint the specific changes Natalie made, besides her transition song, but regardless, the change is evident in the expression of her class.

Additionally, there are two important contrasting data points around changing classroom practices. When I asked Lisa if anything from the workshop she implemented into her classroom practices she said, “No because I already know about autism and I had a student in my classroom” (Lisa, Interview, January 30, 2026). According to Lisa, she did not learn anything, or take anything away from the workshop, because she already knows about it. This was disappointing data to receive about the workshop’s impact. On the other hand, Rebekah who also has experience with autism, shared that the workshop was informative and a specific strategy she learned that "I have watched it work” (Rebekah, Interview, January 29, 2026). The strategy is changing tone in what you’re asking, using a singsongy voice, and rephrasing a question; the specific child in her class responds and engages significantly more using this strategy. This data suggests that Rebekah may have been more receptive to the workshop and that the workshop resonated more strongly with her than Lisa.

It is important to note that the data on changes in classroom practices is limited by my data collection methods. My data collection measures were all self-reported and more general than specific daily actions. I did not keep an observational record of specific moments in classrooms either. I can only report my general experience, which is also limited as I work part-time around my college obligations, and I can only witness when I am in the classroom or on the playground/gym. Furthermore, my observations of classroom practices could be influenced by my being in the room, as it could influence my coworkers' behavior.

Themes of DisCrit and Ableism at the Center and in Participants

The last two workshop impacts I explore are themes of DisCrit and ableism in the data. I designed the workshop with DisCrit tenets #1 and #7 as crucial inputs. These tenets are: "(1) DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy… (7) DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11) I hoped the workshop would inspire disrupted ideas of normalcy and compliance, and acceptance of difference and neurodiversity. I know this hope is not a finite destination, and it takes time to change hearts and minds, and most importantly, that change informs action. I also know that the workshop and my time at the center are very limited and in no way a comprehensive education or support system. I have so much to learn and grow in my ability to support autistic children, too. All in all, I knew that this workshop would not eradicate ableism at the center. Therefore, I explored themes of both DisCrit and ableism.

There is limited data on understanding or alliance with DisCrit theory and tenets after the workshop. This is because I did not ask any race-specific questions, or ask about the DisCrit tenets in the survey or interviews. This is partially because the large majority of children at the center are children of color. Instead, during the workshop and interviews, I read this quote, which supports DisCrit theory:

> Because we have all been socialized, and likely professionally prepared, within an ableist society and educational system, moving beyond compliance necessarily requires both unlearning limited ways of being, educating, and relating, and learning new ways of being, educating, and relating. (Beneke & Love, 2025, p. 162)

I will now explore data around the themes of this quote.

First, I asked all the interviewees if they saw how the workshop fit with the quote about learning new ways of being, educating, and relating. All six participants said yes without hesitation. I did not probe for specifics on how the participants thought the workshop aligned, but Rebekah specifically mentioned a moment of unlearning when I corrected the language Natalie used in the workshop to describe a child. Additionally, I asked participants to share their thoughts on the quote. Hannah expressed keeping in mind that “every child is different” and:

> I can see how, like, standards cannot be the best judgement on, like, a child and, like, their abilities because, like, each can, again, is different. And although they, some kids are able to do things, but they don't necessarily do it in a standard way. Like, in their own abilities. Like, as long as they're, like, okay, like safe, relatively kind. (Hannah, Interview, January 29, 2026)

Through the workshop content and increased experience with a child in her classroom that is developmentally delayed, Hannah’s perspective has shifted, with an increased acknowledgement that not all children are the same, and the importance to recognize and support each child in their own right. Lisa shared that “I think it's that we're being more aware of autism now” and a story of her correcting and educating her daughter who was annoyed at a child acting differently at a public event than societal expectations and standards, and “there's a reason why that child has [the device]. She's like, okay. Like, she had to understand” (Lisa, Interview, January 30, 2026). I appreciate the story Lisa shared about a moment where she was educating her daughter, and showing that there are more than one way of attending and participating in social or public events. Christina discussed unlearning from the past, such as around misrepresented or outdated data/information and harmful practices and treatments. Christina’s reflection ties to her personal and family experience as autism has been a part of her entire life, and she has experienced changes in understanding and treatments for autistic people.

Furthermore, Natalie stated, “it’s a loaded quote,” which she agrees with to an extent (Natalie, Interview, January 30, 2026). I do think the quote holds significant weight, but I would call it powerful. “Loaded quote” in my experience usually entails some degree of negativity, which is shown in the limit of Natalie’s agreement with the quote. When sharing her thoughts on the quote, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was immediately brought up. Natalie said she doesn’t necessarily believe in the law, and I agreed, expanding that I think it has harmed disabled children, which Natalie agreed on as well. I think it is interesting that the quote prompted Natalie to think of NCLB. While in the original language or justification of NCLB, there was some advocacy for disabled children, but in practice, NCLB does not enact the principles of this quote. One example is this quote and the authors behind it advocating against standardization, including excessive use and value placed on standardized testing. Natalie expanded on her reflections, sharing that “the real world does not function with people that cannot properly function to do their jobs. … every person has a right to be acknowledged for doing the best” (Natalie, Interview, January 30, 2026). Also, Natalie shared “that every child has the right to learn the same material…they should just be learning it in the way that they can best learn” (Natalie, Interview, January 30, 2026). The different components within Natalie’s response to this quote show the influence of an educational system within an ableist and capitalist society, and the work it takes to disrupt and move beyond ableist rhetoric and systems. Natalie’s response shows recognition of difference and that there is not a singular way of being or learning, and that as an educator, she tries to support each child in their way to an extent, but that “the real world” does and will not. I wished I would have asked a follow up question about what she thinks about the status of ableism in "the real world," and if/what change should occur. Natalie's response reflects as well that ideological and educator-based transformation is not simple or quick. Instead, throughout Natalie's interview and my observations, she displays examples of reflexivity of her own current and past beliefs and practices. This is especially clear through her acknowledgement of the limitations of her knowledge and that she "sometimes fear that I'm harming the child more than doing what I, you know, what's best practice for them" (Natalie, Interview, January 30, 2026). Reflexivity is powerful and aids transformation.

Relating to reflexivity is the role of unlearning. When Rebekah shared her thoughts on the quote, she emphasized the role of unlearning, the difficulty it takes to unlearn, and the need for the center to continue to work, discuss, and learn around themes of neurodivergency and disability acceptance. We both agreed on the challenge of disrupting ableism at the center and advocating for disability acceptance in spaces in our lives while having to combat the dominant, wider ableist society. The thoughts shared by the educators about this quote during the interview reflected varied levels of acceptance and different interpretations. Importantly, all participants recognize that there is no standard child and that we should recognize and support each child for who they are. There is significantly less consensus among educators about what it means to recognize and support each child, specifically at the center.

Other evidence of the themes reflected in this quote among the participants is the need for more training and education on supporting autism and children with disabilities. When Christina advocated for more training at the center, including substitutes, she said that:

> We should all be educated, but also like support each other and knowing in the back of our head, like, you know, the child cannot help but do this, or how can I help this child,

> you know, self-regulate. Like, because they're still learning. (Christina, Interview, January 30, 2026).

Christina's comment, similar to Rebekah's, points to the need to understand the why behind a child's action and communication, and education to support this crucial need. Rebekah and Christina are my closest allies in neurodivergency affirming practices, but all the participants shared some beliefs and practices that are neurodivergency affirming. When asked what it means to affirm neurodivergency, participants shared the need to be supportive and non-judgemental, acknowledge and respect children for who they are, that people have different needs, and to provide necessary accommodations. The workshop was centered on learning new ways of being, educating, and relating, with a goal of supporting educators' flexibility and use of new approaches and strategies, thereby disrupting ableist beliefs and practices. The surveys and interviews, and my observations, support that the center and its educators have made progress towards this goal, with a significant amount of work and improvement to be done.

Additional evidence supporting DisCrit theory in the data comes from Taylor's interview and my informal observational data. Aligning with DisCrit, Taylor shared that to be neurodiversity affirming, you also have to consider the child and family's culture. Taylor stated, "You need to respect everyone's culture" (Taylor, Interview, January 29, 2026). Relatedly, later in the interview, she shared that parents' view of Early Intervention and disability diagnoses like autism, "depends on their culture" (Taylor, Interview, January 29, 2026). I appreciate that Taylor brought up culture on this topic, as culture plays a significant role in how neurodiversity is understood, labeled, viewed, and treated.

I have observed elements of DisCrit in my time working at the center, too. One thing I really appreciate at this center is how they both value and incorporate the multiple languages of our children and their families. In early childhood education, some educators and programs view speaking more than one language as an obstacle and a deficit in young children's language development. In actuality, exposure and engagement with multiple languages support and enhance language development. At this center, multilingual learners are appreciated and celebrated. This is shown by labels used in classrooms, such as for toys and furniture, which are labeled in English and Spanish. Many of our children are native Spanish speakers. The educators at the center also incorporate multiple languages in their communication with children and their families. I have observed many educators, whether they are native speakers or not, use Spanish, Portuguese, and Twi in their classrooms. More generally, the center embraces the cultures of our families through family events, center decorations, and culturally and racially diverse books and dolls.

While there is some evidence in support of DisCrit at the center, unsurprisingly, ableist actions and beliefs of educators at the center are still evident following the workshop. For example, when staff are in a classroom that is having a challenging day, and their frustration is directed with words or indirectly with their attitude or energy, towards or about the children's neurodivergency or developmental delay, and implicitly about the child's lack of ability to comply with standards of the "normal child," a white, nondisabled, native English speaker. Another example is when staff fail or refuse to celebrate children's wins and attempts at communication. Other examples I have observed are the annoyance and disappointment when educators learn they are getting an autistic or developmentally delayed child in their class. This is not all the time or with everyone, but it is something the center needs to improve on.

The interviews provided examples of ableism too. When Lisa discussed already having training and experience working with autistic children, she elaborated by stating "Yeah, I've had a couple kids. Some of them would, if they were non-verbal, they would use, like physical touch and it would hurt other children" (Lisa, Interview, January 30, 2026). Lisa did not expand on her experience and in this statement she reflected first and only a deficit of autistic children. Lisa could have shared positive experiences with children or strategies she used to support autistic children in her class, instead she only highlighted that they hurt other children. This initial negative remark is ableist. Similarly, when I asked Hannah what factors make caring *for* autistic children challenging, she first shared factors within a specific child as a challenge that is "a little annoying" (Hannah, Interview, January 29, 2026). Hannah named the child as the problem, not lack of support or Hannah's lack of skills in supporting the child. When educators blame the disabled child for manifestations of their disability as the challenge, and not inadequate support, training, or resources, they are being ableist. On the other hand, when Rebekah answered the same question, she cited staff's ignorance, impatience, and frustrations as primary challenges. Rebekah included herself in examples of challenges when caring *for* autistic children and that she does not always know how to handle a situation. The contrast between Lisa and Hannah's response to Rebekah's is that Rebekah did not blame the child's disability, but educators' ability to respond and care *for* them.

Furthermore, in Rebekah's interview, she elaborated on the harm of educators getting angry and frustrated at a child. She discussed staff misinterpreting children's actions and the child's motivation behind it, and the resulting negative commentary by staff both directly towards the child and about them. Rebekah explained that she sees ableism at the center more explicitly, through comments and restricting stimming, when the staff have had a hard day or are already frustrated. Rebekah strongly advocated for the need for more information and discussion to address ableist assumptions, beliefs, and practices, specifically to help understand "our brains are different" (Rebekah, Interview, January 29, 2026). She explained that neurodivergent children "think differently, and I think it would benefit us and them so much if we just learned how to see that and understand that and figure out how to work with them" (Rebekah, Interview, January 29, 2026). This statement by Rebekah is extremely important because too often at the center and in society, we blame and punish people for their differences and disability, and their inability to conform to a white nondisabled "normalcy" is a problem that the child needs to fix.

Additionally, in Natalie's interview she referenced ableist societal expectations as a limitation to applicability of the quote from my theoretical framework. Natalie did not challenge that "the real world does not function with people that cannot properly function to do their jobs," or that the dominant ableist, racist, and capitalist framework needs to change (Natalie, Interview, January 30, 2026). Lastly in Christina's interview she shared how she hears some ableist comments from staff that she shuts down: "I still see, like, some staff, like, making, you know, little comments and I make sure I, you know, shut it down. Because I don't like that" (Christina, Interview, January 30, 2026). The comments reflect bias and stigma about neurodivergent children or children with development delays.

Earlier in this thesis, I recognized the center and the educator's growth. At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge when harm and stigma occur and where there is still needed change, which is why I included some evidence of ableism from anytime after the workshop. A positive finding of this data is that many educators recognized to some degree or another that they have ableist beliefs and practices, and have some degree of openness to change. My findings show not a complete transformation, but evidence of reflexivity in the participants as they wrestle with their own experiences and resulting bias, as well as reflecting on their current and past beliefs and practices. Regarding issues such as ableism, transformation is not simple but is a journey and requires time and openness to change. The center and its participants have, at least partially, embraced change and this journey.

To restate the findings, the research showed the workshop was impactful in four areas: understanding of stimming, expanded knowledge and challenged beliefs around autism, change in staff behaviors and classroom practices, and challenging ableism and engagement with DisCrit principles. At the end of Rebekah's interview, she shared, "I loved the workshop. I've talked about it outside of here. I've talked about it to Stacy [infant/toddler lead teacher]. I've, like, I thought it was so informative. I loved it so much" (Rebekah, Interview, January 29, 2026). I share this quote because it reflects the relevance and resulting impact of the workshop at the center. This research highlights the power of supporting educators in an area where they need and want support, and providing educators with tailored professional development based on the educators' needs and wants, which connects to the next section, the role of caring relationships.

The Role of Caring Relationships

Caring relationships are both how the workshop was impactful and another impact of the workshop.

The How Behind the Workshop's Impact

Across survey and interview data, the workshop's inputs of relational activism and care are fundamental means to achieve the impact. First, the influence of connections and relations with staff and the center site showed in survey and interview data in various ways. From the survey: what was the most helpful portion of the workshop: four relevant responses are "The facilitators knowledge;" "The knowledge that was shared to us from Ms Maggie;" "All of it, I did more enjoy when it was more on what we see in our classrooms;" "…bringing up our very own experiences with children …" (Survey data.) These responses reflect my relational activism and show that my insider position at the center was a major component of the workshop's benefits. Additionally, during Rebekah's interview, she brought up a moment where I corrected harmful language a staff member used in the workshop. When a workshop participant asked a question about a child, she used a particularly harmful and stigmatizing description of that child. In my response, I recognized the sentiment she was trying to convey, but explained that the language she used is harmful, and offered a reframe to her description of the child. After doing so, I answered the participant's question. Rebekah said, "And I really, really admired how you corrected the language that she was using" (Rebekah, Interview, January 29, 2026). This moment and my ability to productively correct the language are a result of my relationship with and care *for* the center and the staff in the room.

Across all six interviews, my connection to the center, its staff, and the children we serve was cited as a useful factor in the workshop and what was different about this professional development compared to other PDs. Lisa and Rebekah referenced the comfort and trustworthiness of the PD because of my insider position. All but Lisa shared that it was particularly beneficial that I knew the kids in the classrooms and the kids with autism or developmental delays. Taylor shared that the workshop was on "physically what we see here, so it was easier to connect… so like if we couldn't come up with a child to kind of like that, to, like, you were able to help us with that" (Taylor, Interview, January 29, 2026). My insider knowledge, with specific experience at the center as expressed by Taylor, informed an extremely relevant workshop. Natalie shared that "it definitely benefited the staff that they were talking to a peer who we did look at as an expert" (Natalie, Interview, January 29, 2026). My connections and relations with staff and the center site contributed to the success of the workshop, which is why the workshop was well-received and relevant to the educators.

My care and relationships with the staff and research participants informed data collection as well. I support my coworkers, and they support me too–shown by the research participation and overwhelmingly positive feedback. The relationships between us led to interviews that were more like conversations, and included moments of celebrating educators and children's growth. On the other hand, the interview with Lisa did not flow as much, felt more awkward, and is reflected in the answers. This reflects the not as strong relationship and connection with this staff member. This is a possible reason why the workshop was not as impactful on Lisa as on other participants.

Moreover, themes of care are shown throughout the data as a key factor for the workshop's impact. First, my care *for* the staff is reflected in the data. I cared that the workshop was relevant to the staff and would help them in their daily work. I cared that the workshop content and quality would encourage staff engagement. The data supports this by the positive feedback I received around staff comfort. As I stated previously, both Lisa and Rebekah referenced comfort. Rebekah shared:

> I like that you set an air of comfort from the jump. So you came in with fidgets. And I was so embarrassed and so nervous because I was the only one that got up and grabbed a fidget. But I don't know, like you definitely set the tone to even make me comfortable enough to go and grab one. (Rebekah, Interview, January 29, 2026).

This finding really reflects the power of deep caring for the staff.

The research on the workshop also showed the care that the staff has for me. One survey respondent shared in the space for additional comments/questions:

> The workshop was such a blessing, and the teacher as well… will go very far with the love and compassion that she has in this field. She did an awesome job. Was glad to be part of it. Thank you (Survey data).

At the conclusion of Natalie's interview, she said: "You make me so proud" (Natalie, Interview, January 30, 2026). These quotes really encapsulate the care and relationships between my coworkers and me, and the care between educators at the center in general. The care amongst my coworkers and myself is evident in the trust to discuss their own or their family members' disabilities during the workshop and interviews. The site is a childcare place, but care extends beyond the children.

Additionally, the workshop occurred because of care. In Rebekah's interview, she mentioned: "I do think they [admin] are helpful in the ways that this place in general seems to care when you, you know, talk about things and like even having you do that workshop" (Rebekah, Interview, January 29, 2026). This shows the center and its administration caring *for* its educators and neurodivergent and/or developmentally delayed children. Related to the administration support of the workshop, my care-*about* autism reflected in the workshop delivery: "you knew your shit. You were confident. You were passionate about what you were talking about" (Natalie, Interview, January 30, 2026). Without this preexisting care from the administration and me, the workshop would not have happened, or been designed so purposefully, and therefore would not have been impactful.

The role of caring relationships in the workshop's impact is evident throughout the data. Due to my care and relationships with the center, the workshop was highly relevant and specifically tailored to the center, which in turn contributed to a higher degree of trustworthiness among the participants. Caring relationships supported more authentic engagement and vulnerability in the workshop. Lastly, the role of caring relationships impacted the engagement and implementation of ideas, concepts, and strategies shared.

A Bonus Impact

Caring relationships are not just the reason why the workshop was impactful, but an impact of the workshop itself. The workshop and subsequent research highlighted and supported the educators and this center's care *for* autistic children and care-*about* autism. Throughout the interview and survey data, educators referenced "our classrooms" and "my kids." This use of possessive adjectives reflects the care the staff brings. The staff see themselves connected to and responsible for the children and families in their care.

Through my time at the center and in the workshop, I show my own care *for* autistic children, caring-*about* neurodivergency, and caring-*about* ableism. Therefore, due to our caring relationships, participants' care *for* me influenced their care-*about* autism and care-*about* ableism. As a result, this fueled educators' care *for* autistic children after the workshop through increased compassion and understanding, support of stims and sensory needs, and a desire for more training, resources, and support. In response to the survey question, "What was the most helpful portion of the workshop?" one participant stated:

> ... I also think that bringing up our very own experiences with children with autism in our classroom was helpful in seeing the different types of autism and the challenges that we as teachers face every day. To have a little more empathy and compassion for those children and teachers struggling to navigate in providing the best support for the children with autism. (Survey data).

It is important to call attention to “more empathy and compassion.” The workshop helped participants reimagine autistic children’s behaviors, communication, and intention, which produced more empathy, compassion, and care *for* autistic children.

Additionally, there were two particularly interesting moments in the interviews where educators expressed care. During Rebekah’s interview, she disclosed her own neurodivergency, autism, and said:

> I think that's why the workshop in and of itself meant so much to me. And to hear that somebody, like there are people who are caring to help these kids that are going to be growing up in a world that is like focused on neurotypical people. And so, yeah, being able to, one, be a part of the change and get to see it like actually playing out and happening… (Rebekah, Interview, January 29, 2026).

The workshop strongly resonated with Rebekah and what she cares-*about*. For greater context, at the time of the workshop, Rebekah was new to the center and had only been working there for a few weeks, so at the time of the workshop, we didn’t know each other very well or really have a relationship. Through her engagement with the workshop content and ongoing conversation, including her participation in the research, we built and grew a caring relationship. From the workshop as a springboard, Rebekah and I have formed a neurodivergence alliance, and by seeing pieces of each other in one another, especially passion and desire to make change around neurodivergence acceptance, we have been able to encourage and fuel each other in this ongoing work. And personally, I am very grateful that Rebekah joined the center and was at the workshop and did the research because her feedback has really encouraged me to keep going, and showed me that I am not alone in this mission. Lastly, this quote is powerful because it shows the potential of community-engaged work to build and grow community. Beyond Rebekah, as a result of the engagement in the workshop, my relationships with staff at the center were strengthened generally.

The second interesting moment is from Christina's interview. At the end of the interview, when I shared my plans to become a Special Education teacher, Christina shared that she also wants to explore that or another position working specifically with kids with disabilities. An impact of the workshop is that Christina and I connected over our care *for* disabled children. Christina shared:

> I know, like what my mom went through, um, what, you know, siblings or how, like what my brother went through, you know, back then with the resources. But like right now, we have like so many resources. And that I want to be able to help. You know. I like, I, I love working with children. You know, but like, specifically children, you know, like that, because it's like, I feel like I could help more. You know? And I know it shows. (Christina, Interview, January 30, 2026).

Christina cares deeply about caring *for* and supporting autistic children and their caregivers. Overall, the survey and interview data show that caring relationships are an impact of the workshop. We must use this care to fuel our actions and behaviors to continue to grow as a center and as educators, in our ability to support all children.

Altogether, this exploration of the workshop's impact shows the power of care and connection for moving towards neurodiversity-affirming practices at the center. My insider knowledge and relationships made the workshop more relevant and contributed to a higher degree of trustworthiness among the participants. The care between the participants and me supported the engagement in the workshop, especially with the difficult conversations around ableism. Caring relationships supported engagement and enactment of the workshop’s content and purpose.

Conclusion

This research explored the impact of the "Stimming and More: Supporting Children with Autism in Our Classrooms" workshop on early childhood educator's understanding of autism in young children and the educator's practices. The research focused on the workshop, but since I facilitated the workshop and continue to work at the center, the workshop includes my ongoing presence and support at the center. My thesis title is "Beyond the Deficit" for two main reasons. One is the connection to *Beyond Compliance,* which provided a driving theory for this project. The second reason is in doing this project I hoped to inspire and support educators to see beyond the deficit view of autistic children, and to see the wholeness and complexity in each child.

The workshop was designed to challenge and expand educators' views of neurodivergent and developmentally delayed children while supporting educators' ability to connect, care *for*, and support all children in their class. In the planning of this workshop, I knew it would not completely transform the center or the educators that attended, but I hoped it would make an impact. Overall, the workshop had a positive impact on the center and, more specifically, on the workshop attendees by increasing awareness and understanding of manifestations of autism in children, decreasing stim suppression, providing more relevant support for the needs of autistic children, and disrupting ableist beliefs and practices.

My findings expand and fill in a gap in existing literature. This thesis is only the third research study on professional development on autism exclusively for center-based early childhood education. Additionally, this research is the only one where the professional development was facilitated by an insider, someone with personal connections and relationships, at the research site. Moreover, this research emphasized ableism and incorporated DisCrit, which none of the existing seven articles did. My findings highlight the positive effect on engagement and utilization of workshop content due to its extreme relevance to the center and the trust in the training, because of the care and relationships between the center and me. Finally, my research expands on the need for professional development around neurodivergent and developmentally delayed children in early childhood education, and the power in caring and supporting our educators who care *for* our children.

Collective Analysis

Returning to the research questions, the workshop was impactful for early childhood educators by increasing their understanding of stims, shifting attitudes towards autistic children, influencing classroom practices, and thereby disrupting ableism. Participants reported greater awareness of stimming, deeper recognition of its purpose and value, and expanded knowledge of types of stims. Workshop content fostered increased compassion and empathy. I did not obtain enough data to fully support the impact on classroom practices, but the data I did collect suggests the workshop affected some classroom behaviors of educators, especially around a decrease in stim suppression. Educators tried new strategies, showed more flexibility, and paid more attention to children's sensory needs. Additionally, educators showed some understanding and engagement with DisCrit principles and some challenges to ableism. While progress was made at the center and among workshop attendees, much work remains to become a neurodivergent-affirming center. Care and relationships grew at the center and amongst participants and me as a result of the workshop, as well as being the driving forces that supported the workshop's impact.

This praxis project had a great impact on myself too. When designing and planning the workshop I imagined far more reluctance and push back from my coworkers and the center's educators. I was happily surprised by the engagement in the workshop and the feedback I received from it, both in the research and outside of the research. The center and its educators share a desire for change, and were grateful for my empowerment, via support and information, to make change. This project increased my professional confidence and my ability to support change within the spaces I work. Finally, this project further informed and supported my connection and community at the center. Through the workshop and the following research, I connected more deeply with my coworkers, especially in the neurodivergence alliance formed with Rebekah who particularly shared her passion and desire to change the center and society to be neurodiversity affirming. This project instilled hope in me and further fueled my attention and passion for supporting autistic children in childcare and educational spaces.

Limitations

The workshop was limited and not an extensive professional development program. The three-hour workshop was a contribution to the need for education and training on autism and children with developmental delays. Part of this project is my in person support at the center. Throughout this project, I have been at the center mostly two times a week. I would have liked to have spent more time at the center this past year, but was limited by my chronic migraine disability.

This data is limited as well. I did not collect formal data before the workshop, which means the change in educators beliefs and practices after the workshop is self-reported by the research participants and my informal observations. Additionally, I only collected six surveys and six interviews which is only a little over 20% of eligible participants. In hindsight, I wish I could have changed some of my interview questions and asked more follow up questions to certain responses. The interviews were limited by a thirty minute timeframe. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the possibility of bias in the data on the workshop's impact as the participants, my coworkers, may have filtered their responses to appease me and/or support this project.

Theoretical Implications

My findings expand on existing theories of DisCrit, care, and relational activism. When I initially created my theoretical framework, I had the framing concepts and theories separate. However, I have since learned and reflected on their interconnectedness. From what I read about DisCrit, it does not deliberately connect relational activism or care to its enactment. In contrast, I clearly found that caring relationships can significantly fuel the enactment of DisCrit principles and the challenging of ableism. The existing relationships and foundation of care between the workshop participants and me supported the engagement with DisCrit principles and wrestling with ableism. In other words, their care *for* me translated into caring-*about* DisCrit principles and combating ableism because they were important to me. Moreover, workshop participants cared *about* the workshop's content and neurodiversity because I care-*about* it, and the participants care *for* me.

My findings have additional implications for theories of relational activism and care. While care is often an element of relationships, the role of care is not always explicit. I found that care enhances the power of relational activism, and relational activism can reflect the care one has for people they are in community with. Additionally, this project emphasizes the power of care and relationships, for they fueled this project. Importantly, this insight is relevant beyond this specific project. I hope that this implication of the power of the role of caring relationships in making change can inspire others in their own work and passion projects.

I found more theoretical implications of care. In Nel Noddings' theory of care, she argues that caring-*about* can foster caring *for*. I found the opposite direction for care, that caring *for* enhanced caring-*about*. Participants' care *for* me supported their ability to care-*about* neurodiversity and ableism. Therefore, I extend Noddings' theory of care to be bidirectional. Relatedly, the workshop participants' care *for* me meant that they desired that my workshop and praxis project be successful, so they engaged more fully and embraced the lessons in ways they may not have had the workshop presenter or researcher been a stranger. Additionally, my research implicates the power and need to care *for* educators, who care *for* our children. Caring for educators must include listening to their needs and desires for support and training. When we truly care *for* educators, we support them to do their job the best they can. In caring *for* educators, we can increase their ability to care *for* children.

Lastly, a theoretical implication of this project that I am still wrestling with is when caring *for* and caring-*about* are in conflict with one another. For example, what actions or conversations do we make when caring-*about* an issue, challenges, and complicates our care *for* a person/people? If, and when, do we prioritize the act of caring-*about* a justice-related issue, like dismantling ableism, over caring *for* people in opposition to the ideal? If, and when, does caring-*about* a topic and caring *for* a certain demographic mean that authentic care *for* a different person/group is no longer possible? How and when does caring-*about* justice-related issues mean that certain relationships can no longer continue? Finally, how do I balance my care *for* children and care *for* educators, particularly when the educator is doing harm?

Practical Implications

This research has several practical implications for this center specifically, early childhood education broadly, and me. For the center, continued professional development, training, and discussion around supporting autistic children are needed. With high staff turnover in ECE, training like this workshop needs to happen more regularly. Even more so is the need for better training for substitutes, particularly on topics relating to direct care of children, such as this training. For a center to rely heavily on substitutes to staff classrooms, the substitutes need to be aware and equipped as educators supporting both the children and the lead teacher of the classroom. We all must keep learning. More broadly on professional development, this research suggests the need for PD on new content or topics that are designed to be relevant to this specific center.

Additionally, other support professionals who work in classrooms and with our kids, such as early interventionists, need to do their job and be neurodiversity-affirming. When early interventionists do their job and collaborate as a team with the child's teacher and family, amazing growth and support of the child occurs. On the other hand, it is challenging for educators caring *for* neurodivergent or developmentally delayed children and trying to support them the best they can when the EI is not attentively engaged with the specific child. Educators are one piece of a child's support network; change and care are needed across the network.

The workshop advocated for better support of autistic children and provided advice, knowledge, and strategies to do so. The research and workshop feedback show educators' increased awareness about autism and their ability to support neurodivergent children at our center. For educators to be able to do this, they must have the support of the center and the nonprofit organization it is part of.

Recently, the center has lost access to the gym at the organization. Toddler classes get one hour, and preschool classes get half an hour on the playground in the morning. During the winter and when it is raining, we used to use the gym instead. On the playground and in the gym are where children are able to fully engage in gross motor activities. In the classroom, you cannot run, climb, ride a bike/ride on a toy, or go down a slide. In the classroom, your movement and bodily autonomy are severely limited. This project advocates for supporting sensory needs, which includes gross motor activities. When the center is no longer able to use the gym and is relegated to a small aerobic room to share with all children's programs, we are not caring *for* and supporting the sensory and gross motor needs of all our children. I will not be surprised when children's "disruptive" behavior increases next winter, and neurodivergent children are less regulated, and teachers are more frustrated with them as a result. The loss of the gym is one example that highlights structural issues and roadblocks, and that educators are continuously restricted in their ability to support and care *for* their children in the way they know best. While this example of the loss of the gym is specific to the center, structural barriers in education are not unique to this center. Beyond individual educators and classrooms, the center must advocate and care *for* all our children, including deliberate attention and responsiveness to our neurodivergent or developmentally delayed kids. The nonprofit organization must support the center in this work.

For early childhood education generally, as seen throughout this thesis, my research, in addition to the limited existing literature, calls for more training, resources, and support for educators around neurodivergent children. Moreover, further research on professional development on autism with a focus on disrupting ableism for ECE, along with an increase in early childhood programs and educators receiving relevant PD, is very much needed. As argued in *Beyond Compliance,* the field of early childhood education, to care, educate, and support all children, must move towards neurodiversity affirming practices and away from the confines of "normalcy."

As for implications for professional development, though I found caring relationships to be the fuel behind this workshop's impact, I do not think this means that others cannot make a change in early childhood education or lead impactful professional development without the same level of caring relationships. I do believe that caring relationships can enhance any fight for change, including professional development. At this center, while my care and relationships developed over the past three and a half years, I do not think a multi-year-long investment is required to build and make change through caring relationships. I think care *for* an early childhood education site or school more broadly can be fostered through deliberate attention to the specifics of that particular school, its staff and child demographics, organization, how it functions, current knowledge and beliefs of its educators, and the areas of strengths and areas of needed improvement at the school. This knowledge can be acquired, at least partially, through specific communication with administrators and educators, and observing the site prior to the workshop or training. Understanding the site you are leading at a training is important to design a relevant and impactful training, but personal experience at the site is not necessarily required.

I also think caring relationships are more important when topics are more culturally and socially charged and complex, like ableism and racism, than topics about general teacher knowledge or skills. Moreover, I think the elements of caring relationships that were particularly fruitful from this project reflect themes of comfort, vulnerability, trust, how I showed up and presented myself during the workshop, and how I handled challenging or tension-based situations. While it may be more challenging to do so, it is possible for these elements to be produced without prior existing relationships with deliberate attention to how you present yourself, what you share, and the cultivation of the PD environment.

Even without specific experience at the site where you are leading professional development, you can show and foster care and connections through your related experiences. For example, if I were to lead a similar workshop at a different ECE site, I would start with prior communication and observation at the site, if possible. At the beginning of the workshop and throughout, I would connect with the site's educators through sharing my own related experiences and struggles working with children and in early childhood education. I would share my care for ECE generally, and that I now care for the workshop participants.

Finally, this project had practical implications for me. First, this project will be a reference for me as I continue on my educator journey. I will refer back to the experience of this project and the workshop's feedback to inform the content and how I lead future related formal and informal trainings. I also made growth in dismantling my own internalized ableism. Finally, through the development of the workshop and the workshop itself, along with the subsequent research, I learned more about autism, neurodivergency, disability, and how to enact and support neurodivergency affirming practices in childcare and educational spaces.

Beyond the Deficit!

We live in an ableist society where disability and neurodivergence are often and exclusively viewed from a deficit lens. Autistic children are seen for their "abnormalcy" and what they cannot do. And through this view, the wholeness, complexity, strengths, and joy of the child are obscured. Being trapped in the deficit mindset is a choice, and we can all choose differently. Moving beyond the deficit mindset does not mean we entirely ignore limitations or struggles, but that we recognize that no child exists only in the deficit. Beyond a deficit mindset, the idea of a “normal” child does not exist.

In removing ourselves from the confines of normalcy, we can truly listen and see people for who and where they are. Free from the constraints of what it means to be “normal,” each child can be seen and celebrated for who they are. To be seen and celebrated is no small act and is something all children deserve. When a child is truly seen, you can listen and engage more clearly and compassionately. My story with Fred encapsulates the power of truly seeing a child and connecting with them on their own terms, regardless of what is considered “normal.” The lessons from Fred and this project show that moving beyond “normalcy” and a deficit mindset is not just possible but allows our children and us all to be truly seen.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

Do you understand the use of stims for regulation?

[Choose One: Absolutely, Mostly, Somewhat, Not At All]

Do you know different types and examples of stims?

[Choose One: Absolutely, Mostly, Somewhat, Not At All]

Was the workshop helpful in providing you with ideas on how to support stims and different sensory needs in the classroom?

[Choose One: Absolutely, Mostly, Somewhat, Not At All]

Did the workshop challenge or expand existing knowledge or beliefs about stims and/or supporting autistic children?

[Choose One: Absolutely, Mostly, Somewhat, Not At All]

What did you learn about supporting children with autism from this workshop?

[Written Response]

What was the most helpful portion of the workshop?

[Written Response]

What was the least relevant or least helpful portion of the workshop?

[Written Response]

What questions remain for you about supporting autistic children?

[Written Response]

What suggestions do you have for future workshops?

[Written Response]

Additional comments, feedback, and/or questions (about this workshop or workshop content)

[Written Response]

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. What are the purposes of stimming?
2. Have you noticed different types of stims, in your classroom or in other spaces, since the workshop?
3. What, if any, knowledge, skills, and/or tips learned from the workshop, have you implemented in your classroom and in your teaching?
4. What does it mean to you, to support and affirm neuro-diversity in young children and in your classroom?
5. What other support, resources, and training would be helpful and beneficial to support neuro-diversity affirming classrooms and neurodivergent children?

I also read this quote:
“Because we have all been socialized, and likely professionally prepared, within an ableist society and educational system, moving beyond compliance necessarily requires both unlearning limited ways of being, educating, and relating, and learning new ways of being, educating, and relating.” *Beyond Compliance in Early Childhood Education* pg 162

Then asked: Do you see how this quote fits with the workshop’s purpose and content?

*I asked additional and follow up questions in all six interviews. The above questions are my guiding and main questions that I asked all interviewees. Additional questions varied per interview.

Appendix C

Workshop Agenda

I. Introduction (9-9:10)
II. Agreements (9:10-9:15)
III. Foundations (9:15-9:40)

Whole child approach
Hamilton's Charter of Rights of Children and Youth
Discussion: what thoughts come up from these two resources?
Share intention: Workshop to help in supporting the whole child approach and protecting the rights of children

Discussion:
What is normal?
What things/factors come to mind when you think of diversity?

Diversity is beautiful
Discuss: diversity is beautiful handout.
Different, not wrong

Discussion:
What is ableism?
Ableism in society, Ableist educational standards and practices.

"Because we have all been socialized, and likely professionally prepared, within an ableist society and educational system, moving beyond compliance necessarily requires both unlearning limited ways of being, educating, and relating, and learning new ways of being, educating, and relating." *Beyond Compliance in Early Childhood Education* pg 162

IV. Autism overview (9:40-9:50)

Overview slide (first what do we know about autism. Then my brief informational overview)
Self-advocacy statement (show on screen and printed hand out)
https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/about-autism/
Small group discussion: discuss similarities and differences between autistic children in your classroom (past or present). Other comments or connections about the self-advocacy statement and/or circle spectrum. What symptoms or aspects of autism have you noticed (and which ones the most) within this age range or in early childhood education spaces?

~~~~~~~~Break 9:50-10:00~~~~~~~~~

V. Stimming 10:00-10:15
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Video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9_T9kpoR6E
Slides
Discussion questions: beyond flappy hands, what are stims we have seen? When do we see stimming occur?

VI. Sensory 10:15-10:25
Slides
Discussion questions: What examples have we seen in our classrooms?

VII. Play 10:25-10:30
Slide
Discussion: different types of play, play that differs from "developmental norms," types of play we see autistic children engaging in
Strategies:
Imitate to connect
Child led play

VIII. Communication 10:30-10:40
Quick Discussion: Elements of communication and Different forms of communication
Language and speech delays
Slide

IX. Small group (then whole group share) : book connection/reflections 10:40-11:00
What stood out to you from the book? (it could be a quote, page, or message)
What did the book make you think about?
What connections to young children in our care?
What does the book say or show?

Books:
"A Day with no Words" by Tiffany Hammond
"Flap Your Hands: A Celebration of Stimming" by Steve Asbell
"Hello at the Farm" by Sherry Fry
"My Brain Is Magic: A Sensory-Seeking Celebration" by Prasha Sooful
"The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy with Autism" by Naoki Higashida
"Too Much! An Overwhelming Day" by Dakota Gutiérrez
"Wiggles, Stomps, and Squeezes : Calming my Jitters at School" by Lindsey Rowe Parker

~~~~~~~~~~~~Break 11:00-11:10~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
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X. In our classrooms and on our playgrounds: supporting children with autism (and other developmental delays/disabilities) 11:10-11:50

Dilemmas: pose dilemma (ask question or give a scenario), then collective suggestions or recommendations
Maggie's main suggestion: connection
Accomadations: generate list together
Strategies: generate list together

XI. Questions, Comments, Reflections 11:50-12:00

*Notes

For each topic:
What do we already know?
    Cumulative information, recognize patterns, context and connection

Participant knowledge shared at the beginning of each topic.
Then slides, then discussions/resources

Breaks are flexible as needed

Appendix D

Workshop Slides

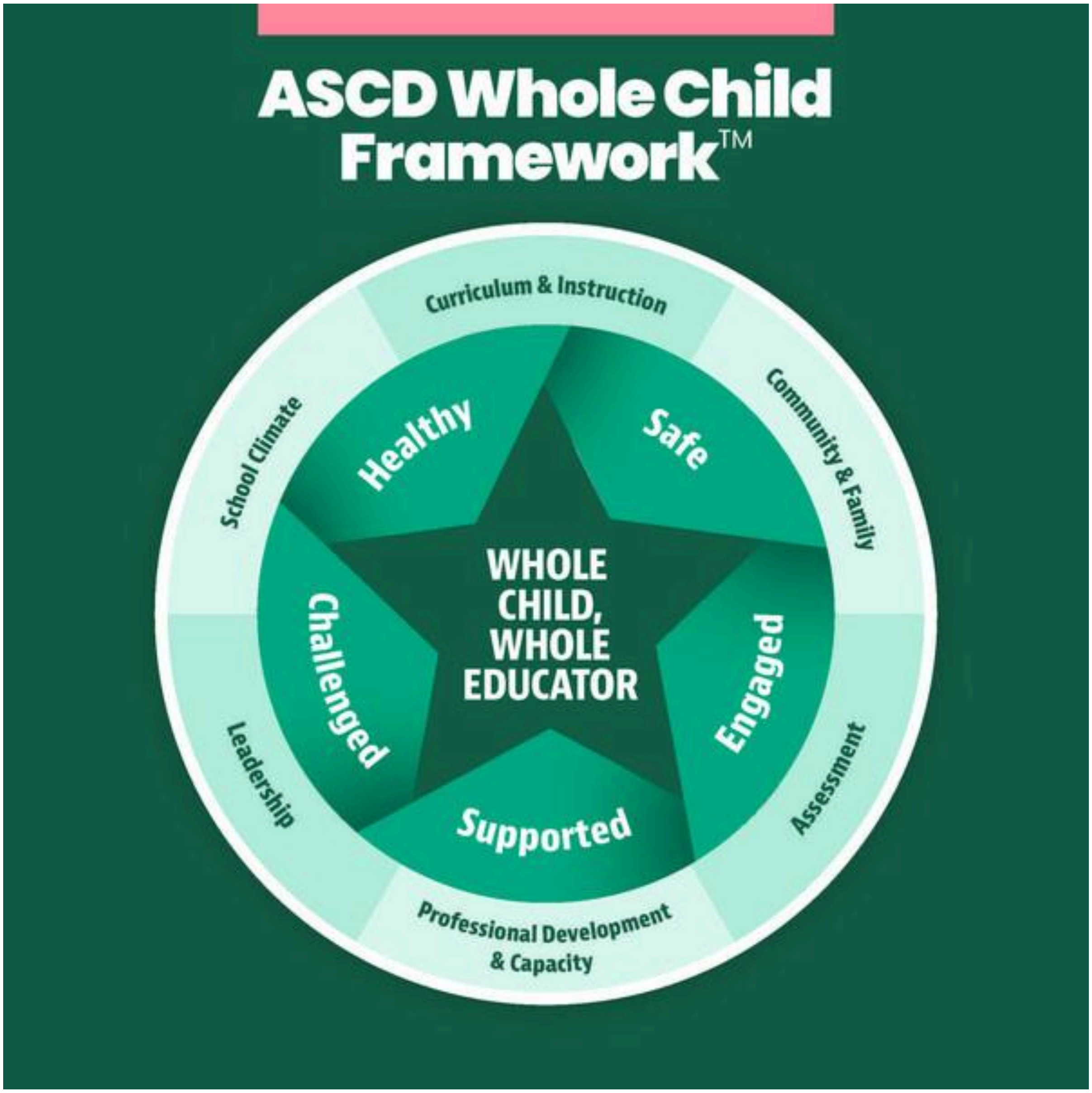
Link to Workshop Slides -

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/111oox2P02HSh-RwqsNi7z8jZZ3IMNYcLM3JkVwjsjqI/edit?usp=sharing

Appendix E

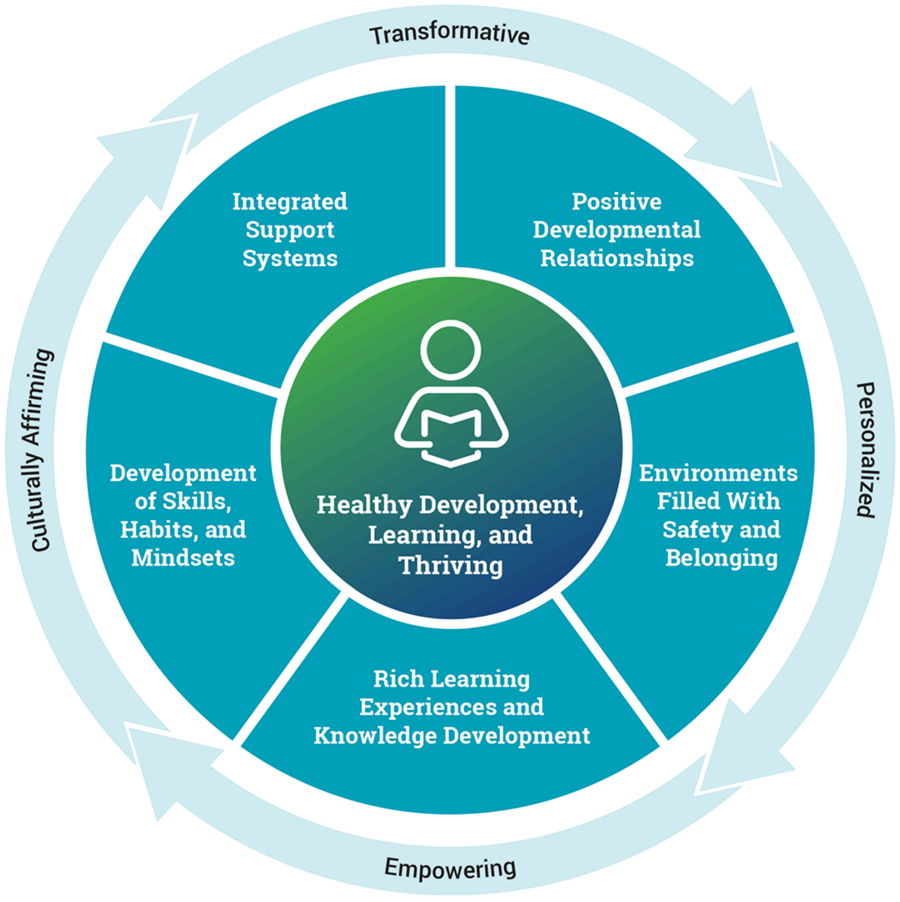
Workshop Handouts

https://www.ascd.org/whole-child



https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/topic/whole-child-education

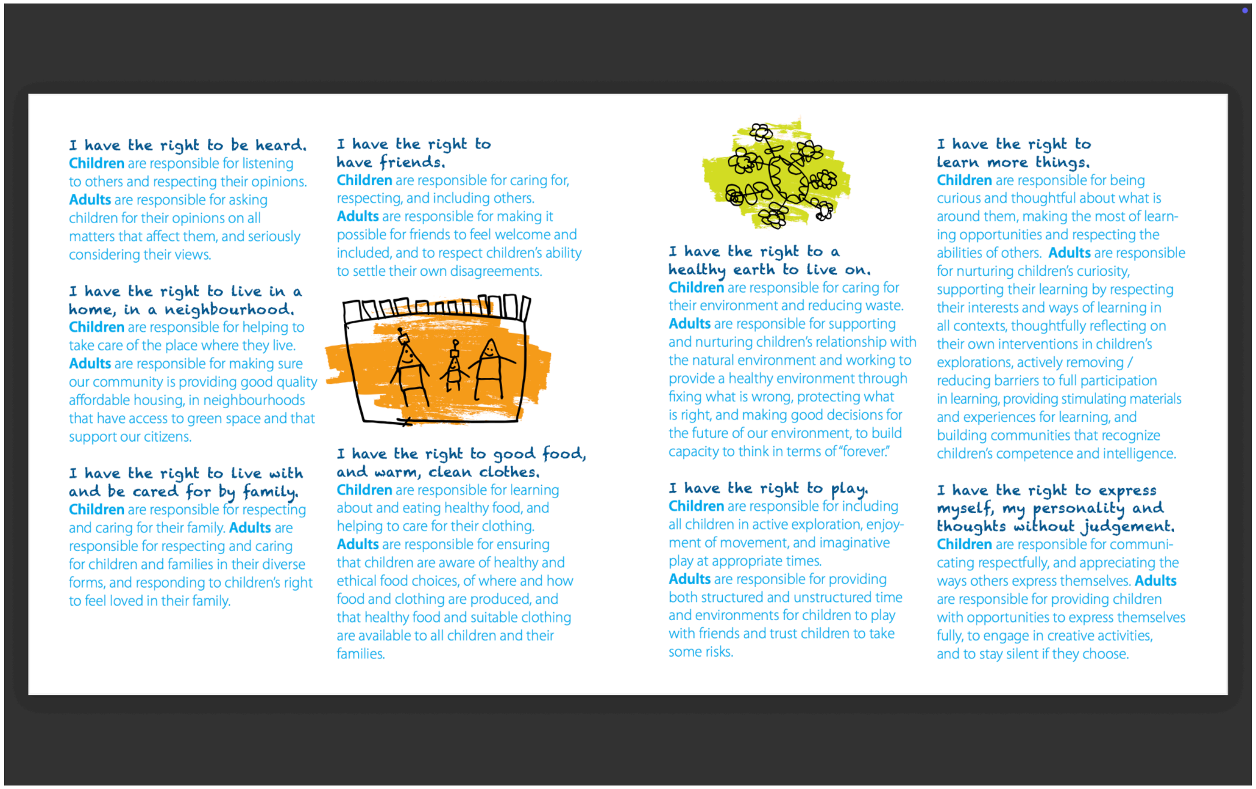
Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole Child Design



https://www.hamilton.ca/sites/default/files/2022-11/earlyyearsservices-hamilton-charter-rights-children-booklet-englishv2.pdf

I have the right…

- ✓ to be heard.
- ✓ to live in a home, in a neighbourhood.
- ✓ to live with and be cared for by family.
- ✓ to have friends.
- ✓ to good food, and warm, clean clothes.
- ✓ to a healthy earth to live on.
- ✓ to play.
- ✓ to privacy.
- ✓ to express myself, my personality and thoughts without judgement.
- ✓ to learn more things.
- ✓ to make choices.
- ✓ to special help like a wheelchair if I ever need it.
- ✓ to know about and practice my culture.
- ✓ to care for living things.
- ✓ to be safe, secure, and healthy.
- ✓ to be free from discrimination.
- ✓ to rest.
- ✓ to be proud of who I am.



I have the right to be heard.
Children are responsible for listening to others and respecting their opinions. **Adults** are responsible for asking children for their opinions on all matters that affect them, and seriously considering their views.

I have the right to live in a home, in a neighbourhood.
Children are responsible for helping to take care of the place where they live. **Adults** are responsible for making sure our community is providing good quality affordable housing, in neighbourhoods that have access to green space and that support our citizens.

I have the right to live with and be cared for by family.
Children are responsible for respecting and caring for their family. **Adults** are responsible for respecting and caring for children and families in their diverse forms, and responding to children's right to feel loved in their family.

I have the right to have friends.
Children are responsible for caring for, respecting, and including others. **Adults** are responsible for making it possible for friends to feel welcome and included, and to respect children's ability to settle their own disagreements.

I have the right to good food, and warm, clean clothes.
Children are responsible for learning about and eating healthy food, and helping to care for their clothing. **Adults** are responsible for ensuring that children are aware of healthy and ethical food choices, of where and how food and clothing are produced, and that healthy food and suitable clothing are available to all children and their families.

I have the right to a healthy earth to live on.
Children are responsible for caring for their environment and reducing waste. **Adults** are responsible for supporting and nurturing children's relationship with the natural environment and working to provide a healthy environment through fixing what is wrong, protecting what is right, and making good decisions for the future of our environment, to build capacity to think in terms of "forever."

I have the right to play.
Children are responsible for including all children in active exploration, enjoyment of movement, and imaginative play at appropriate times. **Adults** are responsible for providing both structured and unstructured time and environments for children to play with friends and trust children to take some risks.

I have the right to learn more things.
Children are responsible for being curious and thoughtful about what is around them, making the most of learning opportunities and respecting the abilities of others. **Adults** are responsible for nurturing children's curiosity, supporting their learning by respecting their interests and ways of learning in all contexts, thoughtfully reflecting on their own interventions in children's explorations, actively removing / reducing barriers to full participation in learning, providing stimulating materials and experiences for learning, and building communities that recognize children's competence and intelligence.

I have the right to express myself, my personality and thoughts without judgement.
Children are responsible for communicating respectfully, and appreciating the ways others express themselves. **Adults** are responsible for providing children with opportunities to express themselves fully, to engage in creative activities, and to stay silent if they choose.

I have the right to privacy.
Children are responsible for respecting the privacy of others. **Adults** are responsible for respecting children's belongings, spaces, and need for time alone.

I have the right to make choices.
Children are responsible for considering their decisions carefully. **Adults** are responsible for seeking out and seriously considering children's views on all matters that concern them, to help them to make informed decisions, and to recognize the importance of relationships and making a meaningful contribution to their own financial security and independence.

I have the right to special help like a wheelchair if I ever need it.
Children are responsible for including and helping children who need support. **Adults** are responsible for working with children to define what meaningful participation is for them, and to accommodate and reduce barriers to full participation for all children.

I have the right to know about and practice my culture.
Children are responsible for respecting other people's language and celebrations. **Adults** are responsible for modelling respect for people of all backgrounds, supporting learning about diverse cultures and learning how to listen in many ways.

I have the right to care for living things.
Children are responsible for caring for animals and contributing to community gardens. **Adults** are responsible for supporting children's empathy and care for all living beings and making meaningful contributions to gardens using sustainable methods.

I have the right to be safe, secure, and healthy.
Children are responsible for caring for themselves and others by taking steps to reduce hazards and by avoiding dangerous situations. **Adults** are responsible for supporting children's assessment of risk, refusing to inflict pain or emotional harm on children, protecting and strengthening our social safety net, and building communities that are safe for all citizens.

I have the right to be free from discrimination.
Children are responsible for respecting and being empathetic to others. **Adults** are responsible for building inclusive communities that welcome and support all people.

I have the right to rest.
Children are responsible for learning about and taking care of their bodies. **Adults** are responsible for ensuring a child's time is not over-scheduled, and that they have a place to rest.

I have the right to be proud of who I am.
Children are responsible for working to the best of their ability. **Adults** are responsible for recognizing children's efforts without comparing them to others, and cultivate spaces where children are able to demonstrate their particular competence.

These rights and responsibilities shall apply to all children and youth under the age of 18, without discrimination according to race, colour, gender, sexual orientation, ability/disability, ethnic origin, religion, neighbourhood, economic status. This Charter of Rights for Children and Youth does not replace the law.

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Appendix F

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