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Adam Davies , Zuhra Abawi  and Brooke Richardson

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Resisting Epistemic Injustice of Developmentalism in Early Childhood Education Spaces

Adam Davies, Zuhra Abawi, and Brooke Richardson

We write this introduction as scholars who have encountered ongoing resistance, whether interpersonal or bureaucratic, in our time teaching in postsecondary early childhood education and care (ECEC). We each bring our perspectives to this special issue as marginalized scholars who engage with critical work in postsecondary ECEC and child studies. By naming our respective positionalities, we do not seek to essentialize our subjectivities or merely provide a list of identity categories. Instead, we aim to locate our multifaceted subjectivities as beginning places for theorizing, praxis, and addressing epistemic injustices that continue to haunt ECEC. Adam Davies (they/he/all) identifies as a white, queer, neurodivergent, Mad scholar who engages with critical activism at the intersections of gender, sexuality, disability, and madness. Zuhra Abawi (she/her) is a white-passing racialized mother of four whose work is grounded in antiracism and anticolonialism. Brooke Richardson (she/her) brings her perspective as a mother of four, a survivor of domestic violence, and a scholar with a Mad identity. These experiences and our respective subjectivities inform our social location, which includes how and from where we theorize. Instead of offering feminist philosopher Miranda Fricker's (2007) work in epistemic injustice as a "solution" to a "problem" (Michalko, 2002; Titchkosky, 2012) of developmentalism in ECEC, we instead gesture toward how thinking with Fricker's philosophical concepts might offer new entryways for conversation regarding the erasure of nondevelopmental theories and perspectives in ECEC widely.

Accordingly, this special issue is part of our ongoing attempt to disrupt the developmental status quo in postsecondary ECEC curricula (see Davies, Abawi, & Richardson, 2025). One of the central questions that orients this endeavour is: What knowledge is of most worth? (Kridel, 2010).¹ ECEC, in a Euro-Western context, has been informed by historical and ongoing legacies of developmental psychology and child studies knowledges, which have both promoted the pretense of an *objective* and *neutral* scientific approach to studying children, childhoods, and early years education (Saracho, 2023; Varga, 1997, 2011; Walkerdine, 2009). While there have been important critiques of this knowledge base in reconceptualist and feminist research and writing in ECEC (Langford, 2019), we are interested in engaging with this conversation through the framework of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) to argue that the ongoing dominance of developmental psychology in ECEC brings forward critical queries regarding epistemology in ECEC.

Fricker (2007) describes epistemic injustice as a form of harm rooted in how knowledge is produced, shared, and understood. Epistemic injustice arises when society lacks adequate understanding of the experiences of certain social groups or lacks the conceptual resources needed to name the injustices they face (Fricker, 2007). Fricker argues that epistemic injustice takes two primary forms. First, *testimonial injustice* happens when prejudice leads a listener to undervalue a speaker's credibility. Second, *hermeneutic injustice* arises when gaps in shared social understanding make it difficult for someone to interpret or communicate their own experiences (Fricker, 2007).

Within ECEC—both in Canada and internationally—neoliberal emphases on developmental knowledges, standardization and assessment, and future academic outcomes promote a form of *ignorance* in early years education whereby critical and disruptive knowledges are ignored and silenced (Varga, 2020). Postsecondary early childhood education programs emphasize the application of ideas/practices in the pursuit of long-term vocational outcomes for children (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2018; Sims, 2017; Vintimilla, 2014).² Despite calls from critical scholars (Davies, Karmiris, & Berman, 2022) for disruptions of

the hegemony of developmentalism in postsecondary ECEC curricula and programming, developmentalism—in particular, normative child development knowledges from white male 20th-century child study theorists and psychologists such as Jean Piaget—remain the dominant knowledges taught at the postsecondary ECEC level (Davies, Richardson, & Abawi, 2024).

While child development theories are dominant in postsecondary ECEC, as well as in the ECEC field more widely, limitations are still placed on educators and instructors/faculty who wish to teach knowledges that are deemed disruptive of developmentalism or that seek to contextualize the history of developmental dominance in ECEC (Davies, Watson, et al., 2022). This has become a central question of all three of our research programs as we have sought to bring marginalized knowledges from the periphery to the centre in postsecondary ECEC and beyond while also advocating for a greater awareness and contextualization of developmental knowledges in postsecondary ECEC classrooms. The question of who can know and/or what knowledge matters has crucial impacts in terms of job prospects, job precarity, and job permanency within and outside of postsecondary ECEC. Those who adhere to developmentalist narratives are more able to conform to the notion of the “innocence” of 20th-century child development theories (Davies, Richardson, & Abawi, 2024; Davies, Abawi, & Richardson, 2025; Varga, 2020)—a way of thinking that is professionally reinforced within existing ECEC systems and postsecondary ECE programs (Davies & Greensmith, 2024; Davies, Mizzi, et al., 2025). Varga (2020) writes about this ongoing dominance of developmentalism in postsecondary textbooks by articulating how there becomes “an illusion that the field of developmental psychology has only made positive contributions in society” (p. 12). In our years of teaching in postsecondary ECEC, we have witnessed this framing of developmental psychology in both postsecondary ECEC and the sector through this notion of innocence—an idea tied to hundreds of years of Enlightenment-based thinking that positions the child as inherently innocent and pure, as well as in need of scientific observation and intervention (Baker, 1999).

There is room for some optimism, however. Each Canadian province and territory has developed a curriculum framework that contains openings to ways of knowing beyond developmentalism. Critical ways of knowing are far from dominant, but it is fair to say these frameworks have moved beyond a purely ages-and-stages approach. The contributions in this issue are all from Ontario, Canada—a province that formally transitioned from *Early Learning for Every Child Today* (ELECT; Best Start Panel, 2007) to *How Does Learning Happen?* (HDLH; Government of Ontario, 2014) in 2014. ELECT was very much a tick-box, prescriptive approach to teaching and learning whereby individual child developmental benchmarks in particular domains (i.e., social, cognitive, physical) were named and used as measures of “quality” programs. Stated simply, the knowledge/skills that mattered were those that were clearly labelled in the ELECT document. Evident in its questioning title, there is more room in HDLH for ways of knowing and being beyond an externally imposed expert approach. What is perhaps most interesting is that in 2026, there are still ECEC programs and centres that continue to use ELECT, and even in centres that don’t, the developmental thinking inherent in that document continues to significantly influence the parameters of what knowledge matters for children, early childhood educators (ECEs), and the postsecondary education of ECEs.

The other relevant contextual piece in Canada—again, where all the articles in this special issue originate—is that there is now a federal, universal childcare program in which \$30 billion has been devoted, and more promised in the coming years, to enacting the program (Government of Canada 2025; Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2025). While the focus of the national program has been on reducing fees to parents and creating childcare “spaces” (its tagline is “\$10/day childcare”), the fact that ECEC is receiving federal support for professional development could be a key, structurally supported opportunity to think differently about children, families, and pedagogies. This could be a helpful avenue for introducing ECEs, and allied professionals, to non-dominant and marginalized ways of knowing and being. Unfortunately, these funds can also be used to reinforce developmental ways of

knowing, and it appears that this is the direction many Canadian provinces are pursuing.

In our work, we conceptualize Fricker's (2007) work on epistemic injustice as *vital* for critiquing and dismantling the hegemony of developmentalism and child development theories in ECEC pedagogies, curricula, and practices (Davies, Richardson, & Abawi, 2024). While calls for further equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives are being put forward for postsecondary ECEC programs, such as a recent call from the College of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario for more course content emphasizing Black voices and addressing anti-Black racism in postsecondary ECEC programs, the onto-epistemological dominance of child development remains. We argue that destabilizing and interrogating developmentalism is critical for the epistemic justice that is emancipatory and is founded upon the recentering of voices of those long silenced. And we believe that to do this, public funding and professional infrastructure must prioritize professional learning—within and beyond postsecondary ECEC institutions.

We believe in the transformative and liberatory power of care practices and seek to bring forward activism, writing, and research in ECEC that reimagines the field. The onto-epistemological foundation of developmentalism and child development theories, particularly those of the 19th and 20th centuries, in class, race, gender, sexual, and disability-based hierarchies and eugenicist thinking demands disruption. Instead of holding onto these theories and frameworks that were once employed to legitimize the work of ECEs, we desire differently for our field and seek to bring together scholarship that will think with Fricker's (2007) theorizing in the context of early childhood education and care.

We open this special issue with Adam Davies's *autotheoretical* (Fournier, 2021) professional and personal reflection on epistemic injustice in their life. As a queer, gender-diverse scholar, Adam speaks to the experience of being rejected and silenced by traditional academic ways of knowing and being. Adam draws inspiration from their grandmother, "Bamms," who they recall always being open to thinking and embracing Adam in new, unfamiliar ways. Adam speaks of the many micro-transgressions they engaged with in their own educational experiences—from reading literature in grade 11 math class instead of paying attention, to taking a women's studies course in university. These encounters with developmentalism throughout educational trajectories speak to the ongoing, unspoken violence many experience throughout formal and informal educational institutions. Adam's journey in the academy reflects a sort of developmental tap dance whereby they are constantly dancing around dominant developmental discourses, refusing to engage with / adhere to its norm and suffering the consequences of this refusal. Adam's deep commitment to epistemic justice (they are the lead editor of this special issue) has and continues to create space for children, families, and ECE professionals to understand ourselves and each other in new ways.

Stephanie Fearon brings the perspective of a Black mother/scholar attending an EarlyON program in the Greater Toronto Area. The program itself, rooted in white, Eurocentric, developmental ways of being, was ultimately of little support to Stephanie as she never came to feel a sense of belonging with the ECE running the program. What Stephanie brings attention to, however, is how she was able to connect with other Black mothers through this space and build a community of folks who could understand her hopes, fears, and desires for herself and her 15-month-old child. Situating her experiences in an academic context, Stephanie shares how a WhatsApp message group was where she found openings to her lived experiences in the world. Her experiences simultaneously reflect epistemic injustice and the burgeoning of a grassroots community resisting these injustices.

Nidhi Menon's work seeks to dismantle the hegemony of white patriarchal knowledge systems underpinning pedagogical and epistemological approaches in ECEC. She argues that hierarchies of power within knowledge production processes and practices sustain the status quo and thus widen inequities between privileged and marginalized identities. Nidhi draws on the ways that developmentalism plays out as imperialism at the intersection

of childhood and migration through deficit constructs and stereotypes of children and families of refugee backgrounds. Through norms of developmentalism, the agency and knowledge contributions of refugee children are effectively silenced through what Nidhi refers to as epistemic violence. In this juncture, refugee children and their families are spoken for, and on behalf of, by the more powerful subject, in this case, the developmentalist lens that sees refugee children as inherently damaged and in need of saving. In this paper, Nidhi calls on educators to critically reflect, challenge, and unpack how refugee children are known and understood within early childhood education spaces as well as society at large.

Carolyn Bjartveit, Emmie Henderson-Dekor, Emma DeCecco, and Alisha Bagshaw Brooks describe the political importance of forms of craftivism in ECEC settings as advocates of social change, specifically children's rights. These authors note how their duoethnographic approach is a form of self-study that encourages dialogue between bachelor of child studies students and faculty/instructors. This approach engages with craftivism through feminist praxis, relationality, and collaboration between students and faculty, as well as work with children directly, to advocate for social and epistemic justice and awareness of children's rights. The authors articulate how their project allowed space to honour and validate children's understandings of social issues such as homelessness and address further awareness and literacy toward social justice issues in community.

In their article "Anti-Black Racism in Disabled Children's Health Care Spaces as Epistemic Violence," Fiona J. Moola, Kathia Johnson, and Nivatha Moothathamby describe their research project regarding the experiences of Black mothers who provide care to children with disabilities while navigating the Canadian health care system. Their project examines the intersections of issues related to racism, sexism, and health care as it relates to anti-Blackness within the Canadian health care system, which is often steeped in patriarchal, anti-Black, ableist logics. This work comes from the intersection of childhood disability and race, studied within the context of the HEART lab at Toronto Metropolitan University. The article illustrates how epistemic injustice affects Black mothers, with impacts that lead to the questioning of knowledge related to race, mothering, disability, and community.

The articles in this special issue offer a call to action within the ECEC landscape, a call to turn away from and dismantle the dominance of developmentalism that continues to underpin pedagogies, policies, and epistemological orientations. We hope that others appreciate both Fricker's (2007) framework for considering the politics of knowledge production and the contributions of the scholars within this special issue toward a more socially and epistemically just ECEC. We acknowledge that there are many avenues for entering into this longstanding conversation regarding developmentalism within ECEC, and our hope is that this special issue's offerings provide some expanding theorizing regarding epistemic injustice in ECEC (Davies, 2023a, 2023b, 2025a, 2025b; Davies et al., 2022, 2024) and new opportunities with thinking with Fricker's framework beyond philosophical offerings.

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- 1 Ironically, according to Kridel (2010), this question was reportedly asked first by Herbert Spencer (1861) in his text *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical*. Varga (2020) explains that Haeckel promoted the notion of recapitulation theory, or “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” which is often taught in child development textbooks, despite the theory being debunked and heavily associated with eugenics thinking. However, it is not uncommon for child development textbooks to not contextualize this theory or its harmful influence and legacy in child studies, early childhood education, and developmental psychology thinking (Varga, 2011, 2020).
 - 2 For example, in Ontario, unlike other provinces and territories in Canada, postsecondary ECEC programs must meet standards set by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities’ (2018) *Early Childhood Education Program Standard* document. While this program constructs a specific worldview toward children and families (i.e., developmentalism), it does not limit programs in their teaching of critical frameworks per se.

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