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Article abstract

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Listening with Bamms: An Autotheoretical Critique of Epistemic Injustice in Postsecondary Early Childhood Education

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This article uses an autotheoretical approach to examine epistemic injustice in postsecondary early childhood education and care (ECEC). Drawing on Miranda Fricker's framework of epistemic injustice and my personal narratives, I explore how dominant developmentalist and neoliberal discourses marginalize alternative knowledges and lived experiences in ECEC programs. Through reflective vignettes centered on affirmative experiences of being listened to by my grandmother, I analyze testimonial and hermeneutical injustices faced by educators and students whose identities and epistemologies fall outside of normative developmental frameworks. This article argues that hierarchical knowledge structures and accreditation standards perpetuate exclusion and proposes listening as an ethical and political practice to advance epistemic justice. It concludes by envisioning democratic ECEC spaces that embrace multiplicity, challenge developmentalist hegemony, and create openings for diverse ways of knowing and being.

Key words: *epistemic injustice, postsecondary early childhood education, autotheory, developmentalism*

> *A colleague asked me once, "Why should one teach neoliberalism in an early childhood degree?" My students have asked: "Why should we bother studying this?"; "Why should we bother with neoliberalism when we have to learn how to teach children?"* (Cristina Vintimilla, 2014, p. 79)

One of my most cherished childhood memories is sitting at my grandmother's kitchen table, sipping hot tea and talking with her. My grandmother—affectionately nicknamed Bamms by family members, though the origins of this name remain a subject of debate—would listen attentively as I shared my various interests and passions. Bamms nodded along as I spoke, asking thoughtful questions that showed her genuine interest in my ideas. As an adult, I often think of her whenever I sip hot tea from a mug—especially at my kitchen table—because the honeyed aroma of orange pekoe always brings back our conversations. I deeply appreciated the genuine curiosity and care she showed as she listened attentively to me.

I treasure these memories of drinking tea with my grandmother because I did not experience any impression that what I had to say was not of worth or *not valuable*. I left these conversations feeling heard, witnessed, and seen. Bamms had a remarkable way of making everything I shared—whether about cartoons and video games, school events, or musical and artistic pursuits—feel valuable and worthy of her time and attention. She never redirected the conversation to her own interests, nor did she challenge, critique, or dismiss mine.

I begin with this story about my grandmother to emphasize the power of listening and creating space for diverse perspectives and experiences—even when they challenge or contradict our own views of the world. I now situate this discussion within my experiences teaching and studying in postsecondary early childhood education and care (ECEC), considering how such listening can occur in a field marked by ongoing contestation and power dynamics around sharing experiences and diverse knowledges (Campbell-Barr, 2019; Richardson & Langford, 2022). In the opening quote, Vintimilla (2014) reminds us to acknowledge how neoliberalism is woven into the fabric of postsecondary ECEC as a constraining force that shapes what is considered valuable, important, and necessary for future educators to learn. While it is often claimed that nondominant and critical perspectives are silenced in ECEC, I follow Moss (2017) in suggesting that the issue is not simply one of silencing but *also* of listening and understanding. Critical scholars in postsecondary ECEC share voices, experiences, and perspectives, yet these are not always heard attentively by those who reinforce dominant developmentalist narratives. When faced with critique, critical perspectives, and nondominant frameworks from marginalized communities, how do we listen, hold space, and honour what is shared—even when such approaches disrupt the taken-for-granted ideas we value about our field and our work?

Certainly, neoliberal values regarding productivity, constant growth and development, and standardization infiltrate the logics of postsecondary early childhood education (Moss, 2017; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Moss, 2020). Such neoliberal ideas of constant assessment, development, and standardization reproduce stories regarding the knowledge that is considered valuable and important (i.e., developmental theories) when becoming an early childhood educator (Hernandez et al., 2022). Relatedly, these approaches commonly promote notions of "mastery" and "expertise" that make it almost unthinkable for many to listen to and consider ways of knowing and existing that critique the developmental status quo (Vintimilla, 2014). Related to this discussion, Moss (2017) notes how, within early childhood education, there is "a dominant discourse that values (and assumes the possibility of) certainty, replication, mastery, objectivity and universality, and bestows on experts a privileged epistemic role of discovering and applying objective and universal theories and laws" (p. 15). Discourses of mastery and expertise promote narrow notions of what future educators "should" know, thereby closing off possibilities for teaching, learning, and feeling that could open potentialities beyond the developmentalist status quo in early childhood education (Davies, 2022). Such neoliberal values often produce hierarchies of knowledge. In this, I return to Vintimilla (2014) to paraphrase and ask, "What knowledge should future early childhood educators know? *How* should future educators know?" And, how do we *listen* and engage as postsecondary early childhood education educators when nondominant perspectives and knowledges are brought to our attention or even disrupt our sense of normalcy and status quo?

As both a registered early childhood educator (RECE) and a faculty member who has taught in postsecondary ECEC for many years, I have encountered questions similar to those raised by Vintimilla (2014) within higher education contexts (Davies, 2023b). These questions often arise when others either do not understand the theoretical concepts and terms I seek to share or openly dismiss critical theory.[1] In this article, I seek to specifically explore these questions of knowledge and postsecondary ECEC through Fricker's (2007) theorization of *epistemic injustice*. Employing Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice as a framework, I adopt an autotheoretical approach (Fournier, 2021) that integrates theorizing with personal experience and reflective writing. Through this process, I weave together reflections and questions drawn from my lived experiences with broader inquiries into knowledge production and dissemination within postsecondary ECEC. I begin by outlining autotheory and discussing epistemic injustice, including my previous theorizing of it in the context of postsecondary ECEC. I then connect questions of epistemic injustice in ECEC to the normative knowledges privileged within postsecondary settings. Finally, I gesture toward possible directions for addressing epistemic injustice in postsecondary ECEC.

Autotheory: Exploring experiences of teaching and learning through personal writing

Autotheoretical writing involves both "a wrestling with, and a processing of, discourses and material realities of theory… [and] an invoking of one's self as an integral part of theorizing" (Fournier, 2021, p. 15). Therefore, I proceed throughout this article to place reflections on my lived experiences in conversation with theory and philosophy by reflecting on a variety of lived experiences through Fricker's (2007) theorization of epistemic injustice. Autotheory, while similar to autobiographical and memoir style writing, offers a frame for writing that "exceed[s] existing genre categories and disciplinary bounds, that flourish[es] in the liminal space between categories, that reveal[s] the entanglement of research and creation, and that fuse[s] seemingly disparate modes to fresh effects" (Fournier, 2021, p. 2). In this sense, autotheoretical writing combines both academic theorizing with lived experiences and life-writing methodologies.

Fournier (2021) theorizes an autotheoretical methodological approach that is "grounded in the personal-theoretical, incidental, gut-centred nature" (Fournier, 2021, p. 5). Such a "gut-centered" approach bridges the personal and the political by drawing from "the history of the essay and essayistic practices" (Fournier, 2021, p. 31) to illuminate private and personal experiences. As such, autotheoretical writing engages with essay-style writing practices that engage with personal reflections and theorizing in an interwoven manner, layering writing, theorizing, thinking, and being into and through each other (Fournier, 2021). Through this autotheoretical methodology, I aim to write through fragments and fractions (Davies, 2021a, 2021b) of my life experiences—both within and outside of postsecondary ECEC—and layer these experiences within and through theory and cultural criticism.

My approach to autotheoretical writing is also in conversation with Halberstam's (1998) "scavenger methodology," which seeks to combine textual sources and vignettes that might otherwise seem random or at odds to provide further understandings for often underrepresented and marginalized communities. Within this writing, I focus on vignettes of my lived memories to explore how epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) might be worth considering within the context of postsecondary ECEC and the ongoing dominance of positivist and developmental knowledges. By no means do I intend to forward a new notion of what *should* be taught at the postsecondary level or any universalizing notion of experience and truth. These memories are recollected as part of drawing to attention a problematic—a question—regarding the state of postsecondary ECEC. In this, I seek alternatives to the dominant developmentalist status quo, which, as Pacini-Ketchabaw and Moss (2020) note, necessitates democratic approaches to knowledge production because "to acknowledge and encourage alternatives, to challenge the dictatorship of no alternative, is profoundly democratic" (p. 99). Following this, my critique of developmentalism in this article comes from a place of desiring different possibilities and constructions of children, childhood, and educators outside of the hegemonic status of 20th-century child development theories. Accordingly, this writing occurs from an autotheoretical and situated social location in how my questions regarding the dominance of child development theories in postsecondary ECEC are intertwined with my subjectivity and experiences and offer questions without easy answers.

In this writing and act of retelling events and claiming names and identities, I acknowledge the tensions involved in recollecting histories, memories, traumas that imply a splintering between the past, present, and future and the humanist traditions associated with autowriting (Fournier, 2021). Approaching this writing through autotheory entails acknowledging the labour involved in its writing as "a processual knowing, a moving in sensing, perhaps, that writing simply is, it is what it is, it is what it has to be, and is therefore nothing more than what it is in emergence, in becoming: writing" (Gale, 2020, p. 94). As Gale (2020) argues, writing is an embodied and immanent act—one that escapes and exceeds language. While I do retell and recollect my histories and experiences using the dialect of 'I', there is much more to the story that lingers and haunts—that exceeds the limits of the page (Derrida, 1994). While these memories and histories are presented to the reader as representational recollections—always partial—of memory and experience, they also gesture toward openings and fissures within the developmental project. In these cracks, memory can persist—and haunt—the present, seeking other, more affirming potentialities for a future that is yet to come (Gale, 2020). This form of writing disrupts any linear notion of developmental temporality that dislocates the past from the present and future.

Situating myself and my story: How I arrived at questions of epistemic injustice

Here, I feel that it is important to provide the reader some context about who I am and how I have entered these questions regarding postsecondary ECEC and epistemic injustice. This fragmented recollection of elements of my childhood and young adult life is not intended to reify a normative developmental trajectory from childhood to adulthood, although I do use subheadings to mark different sections of my lived experiences. My recollection follows Dyer's (2017) queer methodological approach to child development and education, which "can more generally disrupt teleologically constructed narratives of growth that require a developmental sequence which culminates in normalcy" (p. 292). Normalcy has presented itself as a spectre, haunting me throughout my childhood and adulthood as I have felt outside of its scope, always incomplete but simultaneously too capacious to fit within its boundaries (Davies, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2024). There have been elements of my life that have felt affirming and authentic, such as my interactions with my grandmother and the joy I experienced in exploring fantastical worlds—fantasy, fiction, and imaginative worlds were my escape from the "real" and "now"—which I will describe further later in this article. In these moments, I did not experience boundaries on my thinking and being or the necessity to pursue normalcy as a goal or destination.

I write this article as an early childhood educator who has worked in early learning settings and as a professional who has taught and conducted research in postsecondary ECEC for almost one decade. After graduating with my master of arts in child study and education, I became eligible to apply for RECE designation in Ontario, which requires applying for membership in the Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators. Through this program, I received both my Ontario certified teacher designation in the elementary grades (K–6) and eligibility to apply for RECE status. While completing my PhD in curriculum studies and teacher development (education), I started teaching at the postsecondary level in ECEC and gaining experience supervising student practicum placements, visiting students in the field, and teaching courses regarding inclusion and well-being. These pieces of background information are important because they illustrate what I bring into my practice and teachings.

Fragments from my childhood

Throughout my childhood, I learned that adult figures might question or not believe me, including even challenging my ability to self-define myself and my identities. Growing up, I spent my childhood experiencing intense bullying in school environments because of my feminine self-expression and early queer signifiers, which meant that my masculinity was only ever understood as a failure and hauntingly queer. My testimonies of experiences with bullying were often disregarded by teachers who appeared to disbelieve me or consider me annoying for continuing to bring my experiences to their attention. Regardless, my retellings of bullying experienced at the hands of other children at school were mostly not taken seriously, and I continued to tread lightly at school, ever anxious that I might draw attention to myself. I was, at one point, afraid to use the boys' washrooms because of how the other boys would often bully me inside the closed doors of the washroom and throw epithets at me, such as "fag."

As a child, I encountered feelings and emotions that I did not have the ability to understand, both in terms of my gender and sexuality and my mental health and neurodiversity. I was aware that I held same-sex desires, but I also grew up in a conservative Evangelical Christian denomination where I learned from a young age that same-sex desire was "sinful." Accordingly, I hid my queer desires and was commonly only presented with the idea that to be queer would be a life of sin. As noted, I often was tormented by others for my feminine mannerisms and sensitive disposition. The message I received was that boys were not to present themselves in a flamboyant manner and I was to contain myself or else attract negative attention. When I started experiencing anxieties and feelings that I did not know how to name and that felt overwhelming, I only tried to describe this to adult figures a few times before realizing that teachers and adults might feel I was merely seeking attention or being silly. They did not know how to make sense of the feelings and anxieties I was describing.[2] I did not have access to positive ways to describe myself, nor did I have the language to comprehend that my anxieties were most likely a result of trauma and ongoing fear and bullying.[3]

However, when I spent time with Bamms, I felt affirmed in my interests and curiosities, even if these interests did not make sense to her or were not considered “productive” or “useful.” For example, my grandmother fostered my interest in Pokémon and would often take me to the local mall to look at Pokémon trading cards at the trading card store and would ask questions about my interests in these different fantastical creatures. Pokémon, a popular Nintendo media franchise, has been critiqued and analyzed for its role in consuming the time of children and youth, and even changing the landscape of children and youth cultures in the early 21st century (Allison, 2013; Tobin, 2004). I mention this here because my grandmother was never concerned about whether my interest in Pokémon was useful in providing future job or career aspirations, or how my interest might lead to later educational attainment and development—she listened to and affirmed my interest in Pokémon wholeheartedly and even created space for me to share my interests and curiosities with her, despite her lack of background knowledge of Pokémon. I valued the space to pursue and share interests that might not otherwise be deemed important or worth sharing.

My education

I strongly disliked math and sciences in school as I often did not excel in these subjects, leading to my internalized belief that I was incapable at important subjects for my future job prospects. Throughout high school, I was told by teachers that I was “not good” at these subjects. When I received the results of our provincial Equity Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) examination in grade 9, my teacher shared students’ results in front of the class and I was informed that I had received 30% on my mathematics examination. I was placed in a special education class in grade 11 because I was failing my chemistry class beyond repair. My chemistry teacher would comment about my poor grades in front of the other students in my class, and while I was failing the course, the teachers did not understand *why* I was failing or what to make of my poor grades. While this was occurring, I was receiving very high grades in my arts and humanities courses. I would commonly deal with the intense stress and anxiety I felt in math class by reading fiction under my desk. Teachers would misread my reading during class as disinterest or not being motivated in school. However, my intention in silently reading was to regulate the distress I felt due to being constructed as a “failure.”[4] My actions were thus misunderstood.

While in high school and my undergraduate degree in music, I worked in day camps during the summer, eventually coordinating a summer early years day camp, and I also worked in drop-in before- and after-school programs with the YMCA. I did not consider these experiences any less professional or pedagogically important than experiences working in childcare or classroom settings, and I am immensely grateful for the many years I spent working in these programs. Much of my experience working with young children was gained through working in day camps and after-school programs. While I did occasionally work in early years programs, I did not become eligible to register officially as an early childhood educator until after completing my master’s degree in child studies. I note this because I have encountered the sentiment while teaching at the postsecondary level that experiences working in day camps are potentially less relevant or valuable than those in childcare settings as experiences to draw from in course teachings, or may even contradict the pedagogical approaches of ECEC. I must wonder at the generative possibilities that are foreclosed when we consider certain occupational experiences as inherently more valuable than others in our work with children and families. I have also heard students who work in day camps state anecdotally that they have been told in practicum placements that their experiences working with children in camps are akin to childminding or babysitting.[5] Thus, experiences working in day camps might not be considered valuable for students, or even a detriment to their success in ECEC.

Not unlike many people, I learned throughout my life that my voice and perspectives might not always be listened to or believed. As a student with disabilities, I was registered with accessibility accommodations throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies; however, I encountered times when I would ask for accommodations and be denied or receive pushback, despite being fully registered with my institution's accessibility services. By my undergraduate degree, I had started receiving diagnoses for various mental health disabilities as well as eventually attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). While I had accommodations provided for me in terms of writing my examination in a separate room and extra time on tests and in completing assignments, I did sometimes receive comments from instructors and faculty who questioned my need for accommodations or denied my accommodation requests (Davies & Clarke, 2025). Although this was not a frequent occurrence, it was clear that when it did happen, I was not believed in having a disability or requiring accommodations. This has continued into my workplace experiences when requesting disability-related accommodations.[6]

Studying in teacher education and postsecondary ECEC

Despite having many years of experience working with young children, I only took a few developmental psychology courses in my undergraduate degree. However, I did experience other encounters with questions regarding knowledge, experience, and value (essentially, the knowledge that is considered valuable and worthwhile to learn). For example, in my first year of university in my music degree, I enrolled in an introduction to women's studies course, which was across campus and right before my band ensemble rehearsal. One day, I was late for band rehearsal because I had stayed late to ask my women's studies professor a question. Upon arriving to rehearsal, I was asked by the conductor in front of the entire ensemble why I was late. When I informed her that I was enrolled in a women's studies class that is at the other end of campus, the band conductor began to make jokes in front of the entire wind ensemble about my enrollment in a women's studies course, which ended in the entire ensemble erupting in laughter around me. I ultimately wondered *why* my interest in women's studies was openly denigrated and how come a field of academic scholarship was being devalued for laughs. The message was clear—women's studies was not considered a serious academic endeavour by my band conductor.

Upon being accepted into my master's degree, I became aware of a peer of mine who was also a music student at my university who had been accepted into a similar master's program. This peer told me that they were informed by the program they were entering that they did not meet the required number of academic credits from their music degree. I had heard of this happening to a few other students who were from fine arts and performing arts backgrounds. After much back-and-forth with the registrar's office at my future institution, I discovered that despite having more credits than necessary to graduate, I was short two classes that were considered academic. I took two extra "academic" courses in the summer between my undergraduate and graduate degree to ensure that I met this academic credit criterion to keep my place in my master's program. These experiences have provided curiosities and wonderings about hierarchies of knowledge within the academy and, as Land and Montpetit (2023) write, about why "we decide who to think with, as well as how and why to think with some scholars, authors, knowledges, stories, poets, or artists (and more) and not others" (p. 3).

Why this matters

I provide this detailed background to illustrate some of my questions regarding knowledge, truth, listening, and epistemic injustice. As I entered graduate studies in child studies, I noticed a significant shift from my predominately liberal and fine arts focused undergraduate degree to emphases on statistics and child development theories. There was a lack of opportunity to pursue research that aligned with my interests and academic background. From the beginning of my master's, I sought out ways to learn about statistics and child development theories, only to continue to feel that these approaches represented the very paradigms I sought to leave behind after my high school years. I did not see myself represented within these theories or approaches.

Postsecondary ECEC curricula—both in Ontario and geopolitical locations—is predominately centered around child development and developmental psychology theories and frameworks (Davies, Karmiris, & Berman, 2022, Davies, Abawi, & Richardson, 2025). For example, Ryan and Grieshaber (2024) write that "while the theoretical lenses used by scholars continue to expand and become more sophisticated (e.g. poststructural, posthumanist theories, critical black disability studies, etc.), the EC profession, for the most part has continued to remain mired in developmental understandings" (p. 768). Throughout my doctoral studies, I was introduced to critical, queer, and feminist theories and cultural studies frameworks, which provided language for critique, deconstructing, and reconstructing lived experiences as a queer disabled person that I did not previously have access to. I gained meaningful access to concepts and theories that represented questions I had always been interested in but was not taught in my earlier education.

When I began to teach in postsecondary ECEC, the dominance of developmental psychology and resistance to other ways of knowing surprised me. As a queer, neurodivergent, Mad person,[7] most, if not all of the communities I belong to and theorize in relation with were—and are—often not taught at the postsecondary ECEC level. As well, I felt a deeply seated form of exclusion when navigating conversations with colleagues and students whereby I questioned what Fournier (2021) describes as "the politics of access and power around the production of theory and the transcription of what constitutes acceptable knowledge in spaces of higher learning" (p. 27). I often felt as though by sharing my identities and lived experiences and the theoretical frameworks I adhere to, I was destabilizing the frameworks that others around me had taken for granted for the entirety of their careers. However, as Peter Moss articulated in an interview with Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, "once you can free your mind of all these words and open yourself to other words, you can begin to tell and listen to other stories" (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Moss, 2020, p. 104). I realized that telling my stories—both within and outside of ECEC—could be a form of truth telling and theorizing that might challenge current epistemic exclusions within the field (Davies, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025; Davies & Joy, 2023; Davies & Neustifter, 2023; Davies, Abawi, & Richardson, 2025).

Epistemic injustice: Power, knowledge, identity, and postsecondary ECEC

The politics of *who* can know and *what* they can know is related to the politics of knowledge production and transmission. Feminist philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007) theorizes this form of injustice as *epistemic injustice*, which can be defined as an injustice where someone is discredited, denied their status as a knowledge holder, or has their own interpretations of the world, knowledge, and experience invalidated by dominant ways of knowing and being. In this article, I draw from Fricker's work conceptually as a frame for my lived experiences of teaching and learning within postsecondary ECEC. Subjugated and nondominant ways of knowing and existing are often deemed the "other" by credentialing authorities such as universities, for example, whereby "knowledge(s) that differ from dominant discourses and ideologies are too often deemed 'alien' and dismissed or ignored" (LeBlanc-Olmstead & Kinsella, 2016, p. 74). In particular, knowledges that are considered "not objective" and that do not conform to modernist, Enlightenment, positivist ways of knowing and producing knowledge, are commonly disregarded, inferiorized, and subjugated within the academy (Bruce, 2021).

Fricker (2007) emphasizes these forms of injustice, which take place when dominant power structures legitimize knowledge that is deployed to silence and disenfranchise marginalized people and knowledges. Fricker specifically theorizes two interrelated but differentiated forms of epistemic injustice: “testimonial injustice, in which someone is wronged in their capacity as a giver of knowledge; and hermeneutical injustice, in which someone is wronged in their capacity as a subject of social understanding” (p. 7). Fricker connects both forms of epistemic injustice to “the normality of injustice” (p. 7), or, in other words, how these types of injustice are institutionally and socially normalized so that they are often imperceptible. These kinds of injustice are normalized and perpetuated by forms of “social power,” which Fricker describes as “a socially situated capacity to control others’ actions” (p. 4). In this sense, both interpersonally and institutionally, individuals have their actions controlled, as well as the forms of knowledge they can use to make sense of their lived experiences (Fricker, 2007).

For example, many scholars have thought with Fricker’s theorizing to analyze the discreditation of the experiences and testimonies of individuals who live with mental health disabilities or who identify as Mad, since “the experience of thought insertions and uncontrollable compulsive behaviour is largely alien to the world of dominantly situated knowers” (Spencer & Carel, 2021, p. 13). For individuals with mental disabilities, sanism, or systemic discrimination against individuals who have mental disabilities or who are perceived through their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours to be mentally ill (LeBlanc-Olmstead & Kinsella, 2016), impacts conceptions regarding the “reliability” of mentally disabled individuals’ testimonies. More notably, when individuals identify with their mental health disability, or identify as Mad, there can be an even higher distortion of their credibility and reliability as knowers (Sutton, 2026).

Here, I wish to situate my current thinking on the relevance of epistemic injustice for postsecondary ECEC programs (Davies, Richardson, & Abawi, 2024). I am writing from a specific context—Ontario, Canada—where, notably, postsecondary ECEC programs are certified through both the College of Early Childhood Educators (2021) and the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities (2018). The latter provides an early childhood education program standard that stipulates the broad requirements of postsecondary ECEC programs (at both colleges and universities) in Ontario, as well as the expected competencies of graduates of such programs.

Within education, epistemic injustice can be perpetuated by “teaching a canon of ideas and works by actors from a particular cultural tradition makes that form of culture accessible to students; conversely, not teaching other cultural traditions forecloses students’ understanding of that cultural tradition” (Kotzee, 2017, p. 327). Essentially, when formal curricula and content covered in classrooms privileges specific worldviews and epistemological frames, there becomes a silencing that perpetuates a hermeneutic gap in understanding or otherwise unnoticed ideas of how one specific worldview (i.e., Western development knowledge) becomes seemingly universal and all encompassing (Burman, 2016). With this, one particular worldview—albeit a dominant one—becomes masked as a universally applicable and always relevant perspective (Ahmed, 2017).

Accordingly, Fricker (2007) notes that epistemic injustice is also “a practically socially situated capacity to control others’ actions, where this capacity may be exercised (actively or passively) by particular social agents, or alternatively, it may operate purely structurally” (p. 13). The ability to control who can know (which agents) and how people can know (which knowledge) and to structurally silence experiences and knowledges is an exemplification of epistemic injustice (Sutton, 2026). I have discovered Fricker’s theorization of epistemic injustice upon experiencing barriers in my years of working in higher education—exhaustion had crept up on me as I experienced what felt a struggle to fit my teaching and course content into the frames of provincial accreditation requirements (Davies, 2022, 2023). Essentially, I felt limited in the ability to teach theories and frameworks that I believed in.

During a peer evaluation of the very first course I ever taught at the postsecondary level in ECEC, I had a two-hour debrief with a senior faculty regarding a lecture I gave on settler colonialism and its impacts on ECEC. During this evaluation, my colleague asked me *why* we were teaching postsecondary ECEC students about neoliberalism, capitalism, settler colonialism, and interconnected structures and asked what students could possibly *do* with these terms and ideas. I received a "poor" evaluation rating and was encouraged to think about the kinds of knowledge that might be useful for students in the ECEC field. As a sessional instructor who hoped for further teaching work in the future, I sensed the power disparity between myself and the senior faculty in this meeting as I did not feel I could share my opinions and thoughts authentically with a senior colleague. In essence, I felt limited in my ability to be true to myself and my beliefs.

Unfortunately, this has presented itself as a common theme during my years of teaching in postsecondary ECEC whereby critical knowledges might be considered not "applied" enough for ECEC students. However, what is really at question here is both the kinds of knowledges that are valued in postsecondary ECEC programs as "baseline" knowledges and the silencing effect toward students and faculty members who are invested in ways of knowing that are outside of or are critical toward child development theories. Similar to what Vintimilla (2014) described, when critical knowledges and theories are brought into the postsecondary ECEC classroom, resistance and pushback from colleagues—and sometimes students—can immediately present itself.

Where I am located in Canada, as in other regions in the world, there is a rich history of reconceptualist scholarship that has contested, critiqued, and disrupted the dominance of child development theories in ECEC (Langford & Richardson, 2022; Johnston et al., 2022; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2005), although such scholarship is commonly taught at the graduate and higher undergraduate levels, with child development theories still remaining the foundation of preservice postsecondary ECEC programming and curricula (Culley, 2023; Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2018). However, in my education, I received my qualification to apply to the Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators to become an RECE through extra qualifications I took throughout my master's degree in child studies.

Although I appreciated this education, I did not learn about reconceptualist scholarship in this program; my courses focused on child development theories and developmental approaches to assessment and observation. As someone who has taught at the postsecondary level within several child studies and ECEC programs, I have frequently encountered the positioning of reconceptualist scholarship, if it is addressed at all, in the margins, although I do think this is slowly shifting in some institutions. It is through discussing this ongoing marginalization of knowledge outside of the child development theoretical cannon in postsecondary ECEC that I have become aware of how this is a systemic issue woven within the fabric of ECEC (Bezaire & Johnston, 2022; Richardson & Langford, 2022; Ryan & Grieshaber, 2024; Stronach, 2023).

The politics of listening in postsecondary ECEC

When discussing decentering developmental theories at the postsecondary level, there can emanate from some audiences a groan or feeling that any other alternatives might not be possible or practical (e.g., "How could this even be done or possible?" or "What can students *do* with this knowledge?"). Moreso, developmental psychology is commonly employed as a legitimizing and professionalizing discourse in postsecondary ECEC as the fears are that "we remove our legitimacy as educators by removing our expertise in child development" (Bezaire & Johnston, 2022, p. 436). It is risky to question the discourses that have informed the dominant images of educators in the field and the continued unquestionable "truth" of child development in ECEC . Instead of listening to marginalized perspectives, we continue with the status quo, desiring to maintain the sense of comfort and legitimacy that child development theories might provide.

When I consider listening, I also must ask *what* listening looks like and *who* is always asked to listen and *who* continues to share/speak. For example, as a child, there were many times when I was forced to listen to content, even if it was harmful. I grew up in an Evangelical Christian church and would sit in sermon on Sundays and listen, even though the content did not always—or ever—feel affirming to my queer sense of self. I learned to *not* listen as a form of refusal—I would bring a book or video game to church and distract myself during the sermon as a way of self-preservation. When we listen and who we listen to is political and requires that we consider power dynamics, positions of privilege and subordination, and even if listening might be harmful (Fricker, 2007). For some, there is a desire to be heard, and for others, there is the necessity to selectively listen or to not listen at all.

A refusal to listen can also emerge out of a desire to protect one's sense of self, or even a wish to maintain collegiality or avoid conflict. Bezaire and Johnston (2022) note the common exclusion from postsecondary ECEC programs of scholars who are critical theorists, and the seemingly impossible position of critical scholars in Ontario to either teach developmental theories they do not adhere to or experience "tensions with colleagues, university/college administration and accreditation systems, whose histories, power and structure are steeped in child development" (p. 438). Such tensions can impact job opportunities and future careers and create psychological and emotional strain. Given these potential consequences, refusing to listen can even emerge as an attempt to avoid conflict, albeit one that can create more conflict in the long term.

We can also preemptively anticipate or expect what the response of our colleagues and peers might be so that we stop sharing, or alternatively, only listen for confirmation of our own beliefs instead of engaging with others who could challenge our perspectives. Ahmed (2017) notes how "it is possible, of course, in expecting to hear wrongs not to hear them, because if you do hear them, they fulfill an expectation, becoming a confirmation of what you already know" (p. 174). Thinking with Ahmed here, we—those of us who teach at the postsecondary level—might theoretically cease to dialogue between and amongst each other as colleagues because we risk hearing something that does not confirm our own perspective. The fear of sharing our perspective when it does not align with the dominant perspectives of others, or the a priori expectation that others will not be able to receive our perspective, "functions as a social code" (Vintimilla, 2014, p. 84) that encourages silence instead of discussion.

I recall sitting in a meeting for a child development and ECEC research lab and listening to the lab director and faculty member talk about how they were forced to read the works of Paulo Freire in graduate school and how it made little sense to her and she did not know what to do with it. As I heard her discuss her disdain toward Paulo Freire, I had just started reading his works in my own time and, in particular, was reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). Staying quiet, I said nothing during this meeting despite my inner feeling that it was not until I read Freire's words that I had felt affirmed in my postsecondary education. One of my favourite quotes from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is "If the structure does not permit dialogue the structure must be changed" (Freire, 1970, p. 93). I felt in that moment that I was unable to articulate my love for Freire and his words and that his thinking and writing were being disregarded as "too complex." I had my copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in my backpack during this meeting, but did not feel comfortable, as a graduate student, sharing my honest thoughts with others and did not feel that my thoughts would be received in an affirming manner. I felt I had no choice but to listen to the dismissal of Freire, although I resisted actively engaging with my professor's opinions, as I did not feel that I could openly share my perspective.

As described by Richardson and Langford (2022), Canadian college and university programs are "deeply immersed in developmental theory" (p. 414). What this ends up meaning is that ECEC students are "expected to transmit and apply the knowledge of psychologists and paediatricians" with such figures "defin[ing] the parameters of what is important to know and do, as well as the ‘best’ path to get there (i.e., through developmentally appropriate practice” (p. 414). Questions regarding knowledge and the ability of people to “know” and share their experiences have been frequent for me throughout my time in higher education. For example, I recall sitting in the first lecture of my first critical disability studies course in graduate school and the instructor asking our class why special education and educational psychology courses were mandated in teacher education programs but critical disability studies courses were not. I do not know if I fully conceptualized the gravity of what was being asked, but now I see this question as an inquiry into the kinds of knowledge that are deemed valuable and mandatory to learn in postsecondary education. Who is able to know? Who is trusted in their knowing and testimonies? Why are certain forms of knowledge deemed valuable and important while others are disregarded? I return to listening as a way of beginning to address these questions due to my many personal experiences of feeling that I was not listened to and the affirming experiences that occurred when adult figures, such as my grandmother, did listen to my thoughts, feelings, and interests.

To return to my grandmother, she was able to listen authentically (in my experience) to my interests in Pokémon and other cartoons and video games, despite any preconceived biases she might have held about either the content (Pokémon) or children and their ability to express themselves broadly. Even if she had held biases against cartoons, video games, or interests that might otherwise be classified as “for children”—and to be clear, I do not have any indications that she held such biases—I felt listened to, that she cared about and took my interests seriously and was able to engage with me through reflective questioning. Fricker (2007) notes that epistemic injustice occurs commonly when “prejudices … enter into a hearer’s credibility judgement by way of the social imagination, in the form of a prejudicial stereotype—a distorted image of the social type in question” (p. 4). Children frequently experience epistemic injustice whereby their credibility as knowledge holders, their opinions and/or experiences, and their voices are discredited, disregarded, and actively dismissed (Burroughs & Tollefsen, 2016). Childist belief systems infiltrate the discrimination faced by children that therefore discredits and disregards children’s perspectives and voices and also attaches prejudicial meanings and associations to content and interests that are deemed child-like and inferiorized (Adami, 2024).

While ECEC, including the postsecondary ECEC field in Ontario and elsewhere, has striven to professionalize through masculinist discourses of standardization, accreditation, and developmental knowledges (Davies & Hoskin, 2021; Richardson & Langford, 2022), the faculty and especially sessional instructors who hold less institutional status and job security experience ongoing surveillance, scrutinization, and monitoring (Abawi et al., 2019; Bezaire & Johnston, 2022). Such ongoing resistance to the multiplicity of lived experiences and frames that instructors and faculty members might bring to their classrooms can perpetuate a silencing effect that marginalizes perspectives outside of the developmental status quo. While listening is only a first step to addressing epistemic injustice (Burroughs & Tollefsen, 2016), I continue to reflect on my experiences of feeling safe and heard with my grandmother. Despite being potentially misunderstood or even ignored in other realms within my childhood, my experiences with my grandmother always featured active conversations and engagement, warm (or even hot!) tea, and a feeling of being seen and heard for who I was and am. When I became an adult, my grandmother was one of the first people I came out to as gay and she just held my hand, looked at me, and told me that she had always known I was someone special, even if she did not fully understand everything about me, and that she loved me for who I am.[8]

Importantly, listening does not have to mean passively agreeing or staying quiet—in fact, listening might necessitate speaking one’s opinion or thoughts even if they are different than the status quo. As Vintimilla (2014) articulates, the “good early childhood educator” (Langford, 2007) often is “governed by a politics of niceness” (Vintimilla, 2014, p. 85) whereby they are expected to maintain a quiet disposition that does not disrupt the status quo. However, listening can be followed with generative questions and dialogue—dialogue that can even enrich the points of view of all parties involved in the conversation, even if it is uncomfortable (Vintimilla, 2014). Addressing epistemic injustice in postsecondary ECEC necessitates following what Richardson and Langford (2022) describe as a *care*-full pedagogy in postsecondary ECEC whereby "everyone in this political and ethical community embarks on the journey of not only acknowledging but also grappling with the inevitable tensions and affinities within and between different ideas, theories or ways of knowing" (p. 417). This is challenging work that necessitates collective dialogue, acknowledging inequities and the varied lived experiences postsecondary instructors and faculty bring into their/our teachings, and thus, "humility, and therefore anxiety, as it is uncomfortable to sit with the idea that we do not know, and sometimes cannot know, the way" (Richardson & Langford, 2022, p. 417).

In conclusion: Learning from Bamms and disrupting epistemic injustice in ECEC

Some people might ask who I am to be making this critique of postsecondary ECEC—what experiences working with children and families I have and if I am the person to be making this argument. In essence, who am I to be making this critique and proposition? While it is important to have experience working within the field, I think that it is necessary to engage with a multitude of perspectives from both within and outside the sector's mainstream. As Richardson and Langford (2022) ask, "How can the classroom be a place in which everyone is valued, respected and intellectually challenged? How can learning spaces be democratic spaces in which multiple perspectives, theories and world views are explored and debated" (p. 415)? Even if we do not fully agree with each other's epistemological stances, how can the postsecondary ECEC classroom—and community—be one where different opinions and perspectives on child development theories are accepted and even embraced?

In this, I return yet again to the story regarding Pokémon and my grandmother. I never heard from Bamms that Pokémon was frivolous or something that was not useful for me to be interested in. My grandmother was always a curious and open-minded person—she would ask me questions, never judge me in my interests, and always seek to learn and engage respectfully in conversation. Even when I came out to her as gay as an adult, she said: "I might not fully understand, but I love you for who you are, and I will learn." However, in ECEC, it seems to be that unless knowledge can be legitimized through psychology or child development, it is often not considered of *value* for students and/or educators.

Questioning this notion of certainty, replication, objectivity, and "mastery" can leave one vulnerable to exclusion and marginalization within postsecondary ECEC. There are real occupational risks when one openly critiques hierarchies of knowledge within postsecondary early childhood education (Davies, Richardson, & Abawi, 2024). However, by considering the forms of epistemic injustice that are perpetuated through the privileging of developmentalism in ECEC, new space can be cultivated for different ways of thinking and being within the early years. We might be able to consider the ongoing impacts and effects such injustices have on educators at the postsecondary level who feel that they must censor their hearts, minds, and interests in their classroom teachings.

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[1] Critical theory in early childhood education can be defined as theories that engage with the "effort to understand how power works in society through structures like schooling to perpetuate inequities. … Critical theories question taken-for-granted assumptions (or ideology) the field holds to be true about teaching, learning, childhood, and curriculum" (Blaise & Ryan, 2019, p. 81).

[2] Those with mental health disabilities or conditions—often termed mental "illnesses"—frequently discuss experiencing epistemic injustice in terms of not having access to affirming ways of discussing mental health disabilities and the frequent gaslighting they experience at the hands of therapeutic and psychiatric professionals (LeBlanc-Olmstead & Kinsella, 2016).

[3] Fricker (2007) articulates how those who are lacking in social power and capital often encounter experiences where they are either denied access to or excluded from language that could assist in helping to make sense of their social world and experiences. Such forms of exclusion are common among queer and trans children and youth, who might experience trauma and gaslighting in schools, whether from teachers, administrators, or other students. Such forms of epistemic injustice can certainly result in psychological impacts due to a lack of access to affirming identities, communities, and forms of self-understanding (Kassen, 2022).

[4] Even though these experiences were from childhood, the feelings of being incapable or unintelligent due to struggling with math still remain. Fricker (2007) discusses how the internalization of dominant norms can lead to "residual internalization" whereby even when one has new beliefs that critique or challenge the dominant ideologies that promoted internalized shame, these remaining sentiments remain. Although I am a critical scholar now and critique positivism within my work often, I still experience moments of such residual internalization whereby "cognitive commitments held in our imaginations retain their impact on how we perceive the social world even after any correlative beliefs have faded away" (Fricker, 2007, p. 37). Such feelings continue to leave the impression at times that I might be "less capable" as an academic due to these past struggles.

[5] I have noted my concerns elsewhere about the professionalized and institutionalized status child-centered pedagogies and approaches have in the early years profession, but here I wish to note the differential power status between those who are newer to the field—typically postsecondary students—who might have gained their work experience through day camps and those who are professionals in the field, such as faculty or instructors, who commonly reinforce child-centered pedagogies and approaches as the taken-for-granted status quo. These power differentials between students and placement instructors/faculty could be examined through the frame of epistemic injustice. Fricker (2007) articulates how "the powerful tend to have appropriate understandings of their experiences ready to draw on as they make sense of their social experiences, whereas the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible" (p. 147). I am noting this in an expanded form in other writing and research, but I have questions regarding the power dynamics that occur in postsecondary ECEC that reinforce dominant child-centered pedagogies as the only imaginable approach for caring for and with children.

[6] Disabled people in higher education continue to encounter epistemic injustice as it relates to academic and work-related accommodations, which has followed me throughout my various experiences learning and working within academic institutions. For example, during my early years as a tenure-track faculty, I requested academic accommodations for my ADHD in the form of academic copyediting for article writing and was told by my institution that my medical documentation from my family practitioner was insufficient and that I needed further "objective" proof of my disability. I was even informed that my professional development funds, which are provided for my career development, were not allowed to be used for academic copyediting. This process of requesting academic accommodations and eventually withdrawing my request for accommodations lasted over two years, with several rounds of medical documentation provided by my family practitioner. It was exhausting, to say the least.

[7] Throughout my years teaching and learning in postsecondary early childhood education and care, I have noticed that my identities and the knowledge frameworks I draw from are often highly minoritized, with most folks not even being aware of what it means to identify as Mad or neurodivergent, and there being very few queer and nonbinary educators in the sector.

[8] I love you, Bamms.

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