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Article abstract

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Dismantling Epistemic Injustice in Early Childhood Education: Bringing Forward Counternarratives of Marginalized Children and Families to Disrupt Developmentalism

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Early childhood education and care is heavily influenced by epistemologies rooted in the perspectives of white European men, which prioritize neoliberal ideals of developmental knowledge, standardization, and assessment. These frameworks limit the scope of research, policy, and pedagogy in the field. This paper examines how developmentalism, as a manifestation of white patriarchal knowledge, functions as an epistemic injustice that marginalizes young refugee children and families in their schooling experiences during resettlement in Ontario, Canada. Through the lenses of Black feminist thought and the sociology of childhood, this analysis highlights how developmentalist discourses contribute to deficit-based perspectives of refugee children, shaping their educational experiences and reinforcing their marginalization.

Key words: *developmentalism, epistemic injustice, Black feminist thought, refugee children, early childhood education and care*

The hegemony of the dominant paradigm makes it more than just another way to view the world—it claims to be the only legitimate way to view the world. (Gloria Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 257)

The term *epistemology* has its roots in the Greek words *episteme* and *logos*. *Episteme* can be understood as knowledge, and *logos* as reason (Steup & Neta, 2024). In early childhood education, epistemology is often described as “the relationship between the inquirer and the known” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 22). Ladson-Billings (2000) expands on this definition by warning that “epistemology is more than a way of knowing”; it is a “system of knowing” (p. 257). An established epistemology is considered rational, possessing both an “internal logic and an external validity” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 257). Scholars often create a hierarchy between knowledge (ontology) and ways of knowing, positioning certain research and scholarship as the gold standard or mainstream, while others are

marginalized, with less value or dominance in the field. For instance, knowledge arising from lived experience—particularly of people of colour and marginalized populations—is often undervalued and seen as less worthy in early childhood education. In this paper, I align with Ladson-Billings’s (2000) conceptualization by positioning the dominant developmentalist epistemology in early childhood as a system of knowing that has reinforced hegemonic, patriarchal Euro-Western perspectives as the foundational knowledge in the field, presenting it as “the only legitimate way to view the world” (p. 258).

It is essential to engage in deep reflection on epistemology, as it significantly shapes our worldview. Our worldviews

and epistemologies are symbiotic, meaning the knowledge we hold influences how we perceive the world, and our perceptions are also shaped by the knowledge we possess (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Our social contexts, including the ways we are socialized through various relationships and experiences, play a critical role in shaping both our knowledge and our worldviews. We are often profoundly influenced by dominant knowledge and perspectives imparted to us through schooling and our interactions with others in society. In the field of early childhood, reconceptualist scholars have long debated about the power of developmentalism over other ways of knowing children and childhoods (Cannella, 2005; Davies et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2009; Kessler & Swadener, 1992). This paper examines how our understanding of refugee children is rooted in developmentalist epistemology and embedded within hegemonies of power, where the privileged control knowledge. This control, in turn, shapes how we perceive and relate to refugee children.

Developmentalism, a dominant lens in early childhood education, has led to “devastating consequences for marginalized children” (Perez & Saavedra, 2017, p. 3). This lens not only distorts how we understand these children in school settings but also shapes how we relate to them in our everyday lives (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). It is crucial to examine the injustice inflicted by dominant developmental knowledge on young children of colour, particularly refugee children, and how this knowledge places them within deficit discourses that focus our attention on their perceived damage (hooks, 1990; Menon, 2021; Tuck, 2009). Almost always viewed through the lens of developmentalism, rights, and protectionism, refugee children are marginalized, with their very existence often subjected to erasure through stereotypical images of the weak, traumatized, and vulnerable child devoid of a childhood (McBrien, 2005). The narratives of their childhoods projected in the Western world often present the story of a “lost generation” (Sirin & Rogers Sirin, 2015). In essence, a developmentalist epistemology casts these young children and their families as the Other, a dehumanized entity framed by the discourse of deficit.

Canada has welcomed approximately 45,000 refugees from 2015 to 2019 (IRCC, 2024). Notably, the country prioritized sponsoring families with young children, with about 85% of government-sponsored refugees being families with children aged 0–14 (Statistics Canada, 2019). Many Syrian families arriving as refugees were young, often with several young children. The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) in Ontario emerged as a popular settlement destination, with around 55% of Syrian refugees to Canada resettling here (Statistics Canada, 2019). Despite the large number of young children among Syrian refugees, their stories and experiences are often underrepresented in research focused on this group (Ali & Jibran, 2020).

In this paper, I critically analyze how developmentalism contributes to the deficit perspectives of refugee children. I then present narratives from two refugee children and their mothers in the context of schooling that challenge and disrupt these dominant deficit conceptualizations rooted in developmentalism. Drawing from my investigation of the experiences of young Syrian refugee children during resettlement in Ontario, I present my arguments through the lens of Fricker’s (2007) conceptualization of epistemic injustice, the sociology of childhood, and Black feminist thought. Viewed through Fricker’s framework, the dominance of developmentalism in early childhood education, grounded in white patriarchal beliefs, can be understood as a form of epistemic injustice related to knowledge and knowledge production. This injustice perpetuates the status quo by creating hierarchies that deepen the divide between marginalized populations and the privileged. Fricker’s call to address epistemic injustice not only exposes the persistence of developmental beliefs but also challenges patriarchy in the early childhood field by centering feminist perspectives. I juxtapose Fricker’s call with the sociology of childhood, which positions children as experts in their own lives. To truly understand children, we must learn from them by paying attention to their cultural and social contexts. The everyday experiences of refugee children that are undervalued are precisely what Black feminist thought considers valuable. Learning about children involves witnessing a wide range of lived experiences that stem from their lives, including displacement, loss, poverty, joy, relationships, schooling, and more.

As I engage with Fricker's (2007) perspectives on addressing epistemic injustice, I am troubled by how white, privileged knowledge continues to dominate discussions on this topic. As a person of colour, a woman, and a social justice scholar, I question why similar critiques from scholars of colour (Menon, 2022; Pérez, 2017, 2020) often do not receive the same attention or visibility as the work of white women scholars. Research in early childhood has a long history of not only undermining the perspectives of scholars who identify as people of colour or from the Global South but also dismissing the knowledge that emerges from the margins, such as Black feminist thought (Pérez, 2017, 2020). To truly amplify the voices and lived experiences of children and families who identify as people of colour and marginalized, it is crucial to engage with critical theories from the margins. These perspectives "provide the language and embodied ways to uncover, challenge, and rethink sexist, racist, heteronormative, and colonizing aspects of the field" (Pérez, 2017, p. 51).

To understand how dominant deficit developmental beliefs contribute to the deficit discourses surrounding refugee children, positioning them as the Other, I begin by discussing relevant literature that illustrates how deficit beliefs erase the identities, subjectivities, histories, and perspectives of refugee children and families by positioning them outside the discourse of normality. Next, I introduce a theoretical framework that includes the sociology of childhood and Black feminist thought, through which I argue for positioning marginalized knowledge as valuable. Finally, I present narratives of children and mothers in the context of schooling that challenge and disrupt the dominant deficit discourse of developmentalism. Taken together, I aim to demonstrate the injustice of epistemologies that position refugee children as existing outside of normality, reinforcing hegemonic structures and maintaining the status quo.

Hegemony of dominant epistemology

"How do our beliefs about childhood serve as violence against children, a kind of epistemic violence that limits human possibilities, freedom, and actions?" ask Cannella and Viruru (2004, p. 3). How we see refugee children in research and education is canonized and mediated through developmentalist epistemology. This body of knowledge that emerged from the minority world not only dominates how we understand children, families, and childhoods in the West, but also has a global reach (Pérez, 2017). For example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an organization that takes a central role in the protection of refugees, claims that "the uprooting, disruption and insecurity inherent in refugee situations can harm children's physical, intellectual, psychological, cultural and social development" (1994, p. 38). This statement by the UNHCR represents the underlying developmental beliefs that frame the dominant deficit understanding of refugee children. Like Cannella and Viruru (2004), I wonder about how our beliefs about the deficits of these children and childhoods serve as violence against them, a kind of epistemic violence that limits their possibilities, questions their humanity, and invalidates their lived knowledge, freedom, and actions.

Developmentalism, a prominent theoretical framework in the field of early childhood studies, is considered a foundational paradigm founded on developmental psychology and the objective, scientific study of the child and child development. Through systematically observing, noting, and documenting children's growth and development, this knowledge has created universal standards for ages, stages, milestones, and developmental domains and lays out patterns of typical development in childhood (Gabriel, 2014; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). Developmentalist epistemology's great focus on children's increasing progression through ages and stages frames the child as innocent, unfinished, incompetent, immature, and incapable. Moving through life, this child evolves into a complex, mature, competent, capable adult who embodies rationality, autonomy, and self-regulation (Gabriel, 2014; Woodhead, 2008). This construction of the child developing through linearity, ages, stages, and dependency serves the hegemony of patriarchal, neoliberal societal beliefs (Karmiris, 2021).

In the context of the lives of refugee children, research conducted *on* or *about* them systematically assesses these children against predetermined ages, stages, and milestones as they mature into adulthood. Studied dispassionately, these children are treated as objects of inquiry, with their individuality, social and cultural contexts, and lived experiences overlooked (Burman, 2008, 2010). Compared to typically developing children living “normal” childhoods, refugee children are categorized as individuals existing outside of normalcy. This framing begets the discourse of the lost generation or lost childhoods, which fuels the urgency to “normalize” their lives (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). Research in Canadian schooling contexts emphasizes the urgent need to prepare refugee children for adulthood by helping them reclaim what they have lost, (re)normalize their lives, and socialize them to become capable adults who can integrate into society (Guo et al., 2019; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015; Yohani et al., 2019). The discourse of lost childhoods also brings a strong focus on the trauma experienced by these children due to war and displacement and how it might impact their progression toward adulthood (Dona & Veale, 2011; Guo et al., 2019; Yohani et al., 2019). While it is important to acknowledge significant losses these children have often experienced, it is also crucial to question the tremendous amount of research that fixates on the trauma of these children and families, documenting their pain and brokenness and positioning them as weak, vulnerable, and without agency (Adichie, 2009; hooks, 1992; Tuck, 2009).

Developmentalism as epistemic violence

Developmentalist epistemology is almost always presented as “natural, unquestionable, and inevitable” (Albin-Clark & Archer, 2023, p. 53). The hegemonic power of developmentalist discourses and stories means these stories remain fiercely resilient and hold greater epistemological power as the ultimate truth. The discourse of weakness and vulnerability is “tainted by prejudice” (Fricker, 2007, p. 38), greatly influences societal judgments, and can render “the social imagination an ethical and epistemic liability” (Fricker, p. 38).

This fiction is laid out very clearly by Black feminist scholar and author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) when she says that “the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (n.p.). Fricker (2007) argues that we need to carefully consider stereotypes and their danger to harm, on multiple levels, the people who are subjected to these beliefs. The primary harm is the erasure of knowledge. Fricker argues that the single story of deficit diminishes the capacity of the individual as a knower. According to Fricker, “to be wronged in one’s capacity as a knower is to be wronged in a capacity essential to human value” (p. 44). To dismiss the lived experiences of refugee children and families is to diminish and devalue their embodied knowledge. The very nature of being with others is to share knowledge; it is a significant aspect of being human that is taken away from these children and families. This denigration cuts deep into their very humanity, situating them as less than human, as the Other who exists on the margins of humanity. Wynter (1992) explains that “such systems of knowledge, as ‘acts of communication’ which influence the behaviors of those being studied, are always generated from the ‘paradigm of value and authority’ on whose bases the order is instituted” (p. 21). Fricker calls to our attention the power and authority exerted by individuals who uphold damage-centered epistemologies and explains that these are social and political decisions, not just scientific ones. Excluding individuals from discourses and conversation not only marginalizes them from participation in society but also systematically undermines their identity (Fricker, 2007). We need to question the persistent and unmitigated nature of the assault damage-centered research does to these children and families in their everyday lives. We need to deeply consider the harm inflicted on refugee children by the discourse of failure, loss, and less than.

Exploring refugee children's lived experiences

I think with the sociology of childhood (James & James, 2004; James, Jenks, & Prout 1998; James & Prout, 1990; Mayall 2002; Prout, 2005; Punch, 2016; Spyrou, 2018) and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2008; Pérez, 2017) to emphasize that everyday life of refugee children is worth exploring and questioning. By examining these children's daily experiences, we can better understand the realities refugee children face and take the first step toward understanding the complexities of children and childhoods. Black feminist thought values the knowledge that emerges from real life. Foregrounding the attention to voices and stories of refugee children and families brings attention to stories omitted from dominant discourses and normalized ways of doing research with disempowered populations like children, refugees, and women whose knowledge is not considered mainstream or foundational. Centering marginalized knowledge in the early childhood field makes visible concepts and understandings through bodies, subjectivities, practices, and discourses that may be considered ordinary and valueless (Collins, 2008; Pérez, 2017).

Reading the lived experiences of everyday occurrences for refugee children, such as suffering, joy, and oppression, through this feminist lens provides possibilities to explore, rethink, and reimagine the normative discourse of the vulnerable refugee child, their supposed invisibility, and the universality of their experience (Dixon & Marston, 2011; Pérez, 2017). A feminist analysis answers the call to unsettle the implied social categories of the marginalized and the vulnerable by drawing attention to how power is always at play in and through our experiences and how we experience them through our bodies (Collins, 2008; Pérez, 2017). Theorizing using a feminist lens allows for possibilities of decentering deficit discourses, patriarchal beliefs and subjectivities, and macro global political processes that have normalized the refugee experience.

The sociology of childhood complements Black feminist thought by establishing young refugee children as competent beings who have the capacity to significantly influence relationships and be influenced by their social relations (Mayall, 2002). Foregrounding refugee children's competencies, the sociology of childhood makes space for refugee children as experts of their own lives and childhoods able to speak from their perspective of being a child and a refugee in the current social and political contexts (James & Prout 1990; Spyrou, 2018). This position stands against the belief that refugee children are innocent, passive beings who are acted upon by others. The sociology of childhood and Black feminist thought make space to reconceptualize current understanding of young refugee children within multiple social contexts and relations. This significant epistemological shift makes possible multiple avenues of doing research *with* refugee children rather than on or about them. Instead of the refugee child *becoming*, this epistemology places the refugee child as a human *being* worthy of knowing, and as a knowledge producer whose worldview is worthy of study and inquiry (Qvortrup, 2005; Uprichard, 2008).

This article explores everyday life as a platform to deepen our understanding of the schooling experiences of two refugee children. Research on refugee children in educational settings in Canada has often focused on deficit discourses, such as trauma, mental health, difficulty in social integration, language barriers, challenges in forming friendships, bullying, and racism (Guo et al., 2019; Yohani et al., 2019). By integrating the sociology of childhood and Black feminist thought, this study emphasizes lived experiences and the active social relationships children choose, highlighting their potential for fostering change. It examines how these lived experiences offer counternarratives that challenge dominant deficit perspectives. The study focuses on the natural, contextual, and evolving processes through which two refugee children navigate their school environments, shape their identities, and explore new ways of being.

The narratives shared in this paper focus on the schooling contexts of the participant children. By applying the sociology of childhood and Black feminist thought to the everyday lived experiences of schooling in Canada, we

witness how dominant deficit beliefs influence children's and families' schooling experiences. I focus on these everyday experiences and what they reveal about societal hegemonies and how children and families counter and trouble dominant deficit discourses. In addressing this task, this study explored the natural, contextual, and evolving ways in which two refugee children made meaning in their everyday life as they created their identities and explored their encounters in Canadian schooling contexts.

Schools and schooling as integral spaces in resettlement: A site for political practice

Schools and schooling are integral spaces in the resettlement process, serving as critical sites for political practice. These spaces not only facilitate the integration of refugee children and families into new societal networks but also play a key role in shaping their experiences of belonging, identity, and agency. Through their interactions with the education system, refugee children and families navigate power dynamics, cultural norms, and societal expectations, all of which are influenced by epistemological ideologies. In this context, schooling becomes a battleground for both social inclusion and exclusion, where dominant narratives about normalcy, development, and belonging are contested and redefined.

One of the earliest and most significant acts of resettlement for refugee children and families is enrolling children in the local school, a process supported by both settlement agencies and schools (Guo et al., 2019; Yohani et al., 2019). Studies conducted with Syrian refugees in Canadian contexts underscore the vital role that schools play in the everyday lives of refugee children. Schools provide a safe space, establish predictable routines, offer opportunities for social connections, and create pathways for children and families to learn about themselves and the world around them (Guo et al., 2019; Yohani et al., 2019). While these benefits are well documented, there remains a lack of comprehensive data on the schooling experiences of refugee children, particularly young refugees, within Canadian contexts.

Research on and about refugee children in Canada has a strong focus on their loss, especially in the context of schooling (Guo et al., 2019; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015; Yohani, et al., 2019). War, destruction, and displacement disrupt refugee children's formal schooling, which is a defining childhood experience of many children globally. Studies on the schooling experiences of refugee children are often framed by the hegemonic deficit discourse of developmentalism, which often focuses on their lack. These discourses discuss the challenges these children face along developmental domains and the impact of trauma on cognition and academics (Kaplan et al., 2016). Studies focus on refugee children's aggression and inability to concentrate and how schools are unable to provide support for their psycho-emotional needs (Yu, 2012). Multiple studies have focused on their trauma and its impact on mental health (Guo et al., 2019; Rossiter et al., 2015; Sullivan & Simonson, 2015). Thus, developmentalist epistemology heavily influences the hegemonic discourse of the lost generation, which is a dominant discourse in schooling contexts in Canada (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015).

To disrupt the developmental lens through which we view refugee children's schooling experiences, I draw upon Farmer's (2017) ethnographic research in Canadian schools to explore "emerging phenomena in everyday life" and to question "often taken-for-granted beliefs" (Farmer, 2017, p. 49). Since the 1970s, ethnographic research on children's schooling has recognized children as active participants in their educational journeys and contributors to the learning process. Farmer (2017) highlights the complexities of schooling by examining children's lived experiences as students. Building on this idea, I explore how young refugee children navigate "multiple and often conflicting pressures" (Farmer, 2017, p. 50) in their everyday schooling encounters. The findings of this study illuminate the perspectives of children and families through their narratives of daily interactions within the school environment. These interactions emerge as crucial areas of understanding, enabling us to conceptualize

resettlement as a dynamic and relational process. Through these encounters, we also gain valuable insights into how children's lived experiences of schooling are influenced by dominant developmentalist beliefs.

The current study

The data used in this article was collected as part of a multiple case study that investigated the resettlement experiences of 16 Syrian refugee children and 8 mothers in the GTA. This article focuses on the experiences of two of the children and their mothers, and their narratives are presented together because the children participated along with their mothers and often engaged in a conversation with them. Children and mothers were asked to elaborate on their experiences in the context of schooling in Canada. I analyzed the children's and mother's narratives of schooling in the everyday context of their resettlement.

Ten-year-old Zayed was born in Syria, but the family left Syria when he was seven months old and moved to Jordan before they arrived in Canada in 2019. He participated along with his mother, Daneen. Seven-year-old Miriam and her family came to Canada in 2017 as refugees from Egypt, where they lived for four years when they were displaced from Damascus, Syria. Miriam participated along with her mother, Maira.

I conducted participatory research with the children and their mothers over three research encounters. During these encounters I started to build a relationship, received consent, and discussed their resettlement experiences at home, at school, and in the larger community. Because the focus of this paper is on schooling experiences, I will elaborate on that aspect of the research. The analysis in this article is underpinned by the paradigms of the sociology of childhood and Black feminist thought, specifically the framework where children are seen as competent social agents and experts of their own lives. This framework not only values the views and experiences of refugee children and families (a marginalized population), but also validates them as knowledge producers.

Study findings

In this study, I examined how developmentalism reinforces deficit perspectives of refugee children in the context of schooling during resettlement. The findings are presented below, followed by the discussion and the implications for research and practice. Pseudonyms are used to preserve the confidentiality of all participants.

Children's and mothers' narratives of schooling

During our conversations about school, children shared their experiences enthusiastically and willingly. They were animated when talking about school experiences in Canada.

Zayed and Daneen. I start with the narrative of 10-year-old Zayed. Zayed was born in Syria, but the family left when he was seven months old and moved to Jordan. They stayed there for almost two years before they moved again to Egypt. At the beginning of our conversation, Zayed was enthusiastic and animated and shared that he loved going to school and talking about his friends and his teachers. He recalled his grade 3 teacher fondly and said that she spent a lot of time with him. He said she spoke slowly and loudly and communicated with him with her body, using gestures. He appreciated the different ways she helped him learn. Daneen, Zayed's mother, was part of this conversation, and she interrupted his talk by saying that Zayed's experiences were not always happy and positive. She reminded him about how sad he was about school and asked him to elaborate on his early days of schooling in Canada. Zayed started school in Canada in grade 3 and shared that he was fearful of school in the early days of resettlement. He said,

I was scared of getting in situations where I don't know how to speak English and help myself. Well, it

was really hard at the beginning. I would cry every day because I didn't understand what my classmates or my teachers were saying. It was all in English. And I was really so confused and surprised, and I could not communicate. So, it was very hard. I kept telling my mom I want to go back to Egypt.

Daneen shared her views by saying,

Yes, for one month, he told me he wants to go back to Egypt. Even though the schools there were really bad, he still wanted to go. It was just because he was not able to understand the language or communicate, and that made him feel really upset and bored and he didn't know what to do.

During our conversation, Zayed explained that it took him about a year before he started to feel happy in school. In the first year, even though he wanted to go back to Egypt, he attended school because his family convinced him that school was important and that he would start to feel better about it. Daneen shared that she did not know how to help him cope with his fear and sadness. All she could do was listen to him and tell him it would get better and send him back to school.

Miriam and Maira. Miriam and her family arrived in Canada as refugees from Egypt, where they had lived for four years after being displaced from Damascus. During our conversations, seven-year-old Miriam was always accompanied by her mother, Maira, and they often shared their narrative together. When discussing school, Miriam spoke about her experiences in kindergarten and shared how much she enjoyed playing with her peers. She said she loved being in school and everyone loved her, but sometimes Ms. R, her teacher, "got angry." Miriam continued by saying Ms. R was "not good" sometimes and that she was "mad with her and sometimes she shouted." This made Miriam not want to go to school.

Maira, continued this conversation by saying that she was not happy to see her daughter upset and so decided to have a conversation with Ms. R. During their conversation, Ms. R. said that Miriam was "not good" and needed more "practice" in reading and writing to become better. She also said that Miriam was "not okay" in class.

Upon hearing Ms. R's statements, Maira took this up with the school principal and told the principal that Ms. R. was

very rude. She makes Miriam sad. She tells Miriam, "You are not smart. You can't do it." She makes her sad. And this was the first time Miriam came to school. She can't believe the school is good. That teacher is good. I want her (the teacher) to stop.

The principal asked Miriam to come to the office, gave her paper and a pencil, asked her to write some letters and numbers and she did. Maira told the principal that because Miriam fears the teacher, she is unable to learn in school and unwilling to show what she knows. She needs to be comfortable and feel safe to participate in class and learn. After this incident, the principal had a discussion with Ms. R, who apologized to Miriam and Maira.

Discussion

The above narratives provide insight into the perspectives of two refugee children and their mothers about their experiences of schooling in a Canadian context. In the following section, I analyze the stories shared by the participants and argue that dominant developmentalist discourses contribute to deficit perspectives of refugee children in educational contexts. Furthermore, the narratives of refugee children and mothers presented above serve as a counternarrative, disrupting these dominant deficit conceptualizations rooted in developmentalism.

Schooling as a project of universalization

This study explored refugee children's and mothers' schooling experiences in Canadian contexts. A significant finding of the study is how developmentalist epistemology in early childhood schooling contexts is embedded as a system of knowing that foregrounds hegemonic patriarchal Euro-Western perspectives. Developmentalism is understood as the foundational knowledge in schooling and is presented as the legitimate way to view the world (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

The stories of the participant children and mothers highlight schooling in Canada as a project of universalization and normalization founded on developmentalist belief systems. This project is accomplished by situating monolingualism (specifically English) as the predominant way to teach, learn, communicate, and connect with others. Schooling legitimizes not only the superiority, hegemony, and dominance of English but also the colonial logics associated with it (Leonardo, 2013; Pérez, 2020). When English is presented as the mainstream and sometimes only language of teaching, learning, and communication, the "softened and coded/coated expressions" of coloniality uphold white hegemonic beliefs (Leonardo, 2013, p. 16). Creating this boundary delineates refugee children and families as people who exist outside of normality. Refugee children's and families' difference is seen not as a different state of being but as a problem to be fixed (Chimni, 2009, p. 22).

Positioned as a problem to be remedied, refugee children are enveloped within protectionist sentiment, which overlooks their identity and ways of being, doing, and communicating (Fricker, 2007; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). Dismissing the lived experiences and multiple strengths of these children and families devalues and undermines their embodied knowledge. Sharing knowledge is an essential aspect of human connection, yet this fundamental part of existence is denied to them by powers that determine how they must communicate. This denial strikes at the core of their humanity, relegating them to the position of the Other—individuals marginalized and viewed as less than fully human. It effectively positions them as "the perfect objects of Empire, those who would be defined, described, known, and controlled" (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 74). By wielding power over the bodies and minds of refugee children and families and situating them as people who belong on the outside of normality, schooling is imagined as providing opportunities to be "normal." Cannella (2000) argues that "positioning children within predetermined discourses and expectations immediately devalues them by placing limits on how they see themselves, on how we see them, and on how we hear what they want to say" (p. 18).

The project of universalization and normalization, a core aspect of developmentalism, shapes schooling experiences that position refugee children and families as unworthy, undermining their strengths while elevating colonial values as the standard and most valuable (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). It is crucial to critically reflect on how the project of schooling impacts refugee children and families, conveying the message that inclusion is conditional and must be earned for them to truly belong.

Developmentalism contributing to perpetuating stereotypes

Developmentalist beliefs drive the assessment of refugee children and families based on predetermined ages and stages, embedding them firmly within a narrative of deficiency (Pérez, 2020; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). The resiliency of these discourses tainted by prejudice demonstrates an urgent drive to immerse and, in effect, assimilate refugee children and families into dominant ways of learning, being, and doing. As a refugee child with strengths and experiences different from those of a "typical" Canadian child, Miriam is viewed as deficient. This perspective reveals the hegemony shaped by prejudice that sustains epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). Miriam's story serves as a pressing reminder to recognize how stereotypes about certain populations, reinforced by a discourse of lack, sustain oppression in everyday interactions. It is essential to critically examine and question

who is silenced and excluded, who is granted inclusion, whose knowledge is elevated, and whose is dismissed.

As a woman, refugee, and person of colour, Maira is actively dismissed by the educational system, her knowledge of her own child deemed unworthy. This is a classic representation of how prejudice influences worldviews and systems that shape behaviours and relationships and produce a paradigm of value and authority, which forms the foundation for establishing and maintaining teaching and learning processes as well as wider social relations (Pérez, 2020; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018; Wynter, 1992). Ethnocentric sentiments and exclusionary and pedagogical ideologies that center deficit paradigms contribute to these tensions and challenges for refugee families in schooling contexts in Canada.

Zayed and Daneen's story highlights the fear, sadness, and trauma they experienced in schooling experiences during resettlement. Their stories highlight a key aspect of schooling that is rarely discussed, that of trauma caused by schooling due to the project of assimilation and normalization. During our conversations, it was clear that refugee children and families considered schools and schooling as an integral part of their everyday lives. It was a space they considered safe that offered them an opportunity to build community and belonging. While this is true for this population, alongside this truth exists another: that of fear and trauma caused by unrealistic expectations placed on their bodies. These children are essentially hurtled into an English-language-dominant environment without any proficiency in it, which not only caused anxiety in these children, but they also grappled with feelings of shame, inadequacy, fear, isolation, and desolation. By dismissing their strengths and highlighting their deficiencies, these children and families are wronged, their humanity diminished. A significant aspect of being human is to be able to communicate and share knowledge using one's personal strengths. Upholding prejudiced damage-centered beliefs and the power and authority of individuals and systems renders the social imagination as both an ethical and an epistemic liability (Fricker, 2007).

The participant children came to internalize the belief that their experiences and knowledge were not considered valuable or worthy of being taught or learned in the school setting. In their efforts to feel a sense of belonging, they had to conform, often at the expense of their own identities. Being Othered created challenges for them in building the sense of community that is essential to their well-being. The practice of immersing refugee children in English language learning serves as an example of epistemic injustice, perpetuating violence through everyday schooling practices. It is deeply ironic that the same school system that advocates for trauma-informed practices to support the well-being of refugee children is complicit in inflicting trauma on these children during their resettlement journey.

Disrupting and countering deficits in early childhood research

Drawing on the work of Black feminist scholars and the sociology of childhood, this study emphasizes the urgency of listening to voices excluded from dominant conversations, engaging with knowledge that exists on the margins, and bringing attention to stories overlooked in mainstream discourses on early childhood (Collins, 2008; Pérez, 2017; Spyrou, 2018). According to Collins (1998), "by speaking out, formerly victimized individuals not only reclaim their humanity, but they also simultaneously empower themselves by giving new meaning to their own particular experiences" (p. 48). This approach creates space for multiple truths and highlights the potential of centering the knowledge of marginalized populations, such as refugees, whose experiences are often excluded from foundational narratives. This paper advocates for research and education that honours the everyday lives of ordinary people, draws insights from the lived experiences of young children and families, and prioritizes learning through bodies and subjectivities often regarded as ordinary or valueless.

Stories of everyday life and the oppression that arises within relationships serve as a pressing call to engage with

ethical issues such as listening, trust, compassion, kindness, responsibility, and attention to power dynamics in relationships (Collins, 2008; hooks, 1990). It is essential to ask: What are the ethical ways of being, living, teaching, and learning with marginalized populations? How can educators and researchers become more attuned to the power that always operates within and through our shared experiences? How do we make visible the politics of childhood and move beyond critique toward meaningful transformation in our teaching and learning practices with young refugee children?

The stories shared above represent counternarratives that challenge the portrayal of these children and families as weak and vulnerable. By sharing their experiences of joy, anger, suffering, anxiety, fear, racism, and trauma, these children and mothers make their embodied knowledge visible, asserting their agency and their expertise to narrate their lives in ways they consider significant. These narratives contribute to broader conversations about the need for scholars, educators, and society at large to reject Eurocentric, whiteified, monocultural, and monolingual definitions of early childhood (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). Making space for these narratives challenges the hegemony of developmentalist discourses and their epistemological authority by exposing the incompleteness of the single story. These stories draw attention to the power and authority wielded by individuals who uphold damage-centered epistemologies, highlighting that such perspectives are rooted in social and political decisions rather than purely scientific ones.

Furthermore, these stories demand that schooling, curriculum, teaching, and learning experiences be reimagined to recognize and value diverse worldviews and practices, particularly those that have been historically marginalized. They call for naming, problematizing, and disrupting the pervasive influence of developmentalism, which upholds prejudice, racism, and the status quo within early education and broader society (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). By harnessing the transformative power of sharing lived experiences of joy, suffering, oppression, and marginalization, the participating children and families offer opportunities to rethink and reimagine the dominant discourse of lack, vulnerability, and the universal refugee experience.

Conclusion

In this paper I drew on narratives from refugee children and mothers to position dominant developmentalist beliefs as epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Pérez, 2017, 2020). Ladson-Billings (2000) rightly says that the “distinction between an epistemology and ‘ways of knowing’ is not a trivial one” (p. 257). In fact, research in the field of early childhood has created a hierarchical distinction in knowledge production, with developmentalist epistemologies seen as scientific, logical, and valuable whereas embodied and lived experiences of children and families of colour are considered “less rigorous, less scholarly and perhaps, less culturally valuable” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 258). Reading Fricker’s (2007) work alongside that of sociology of childhood and Black feminist scholars, some insights emerge. First, it is essential to reflect deeply and critically on the stories we tell about, for, and with refugee children and their families and to consider how framing these stories through a developmental discourse inflicts harm on them. Next, we must seek ways to bring attention to stories from the margins that offer rich and nuanced perspectives on the experiences of marginalized children and families. We need to acknowledge and honour the everyday lives of ordinary people, draw insights from the lived experiences of marginalized young children and families, and prioritize learning through bodies and subjectivities that are often considered unworthy.

Centering epistemologies that preserve injustice maintains power over the Other and continues to disadvantage them, effectively pushing them further into the margins. One way we can disrupt this power play is to center the perspectives of the Other that “can empower us to free ourselves from the categories and prescriptions of our specific order and from its ‘generalized horizon of understanding’” (Wynter, 1992, p. 27). Revealing the liminal

knowledge of refugee children and families is both essential and valuable, as it challenges the ways that dominant ideologies uphold stereotypes and distort the realities of marginalized populations to maintain the status quo. This invites critical questions about the possibilities that arise when we make space for the stories of knowledge producers who live on the margins of society.

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