



Winter/Spring
2025

AECEO Guiding
Committee on Truth
and Reconciliation

Decent Work Project
Update

Peer Reviewed
Section

**CIRCLE
TIME**

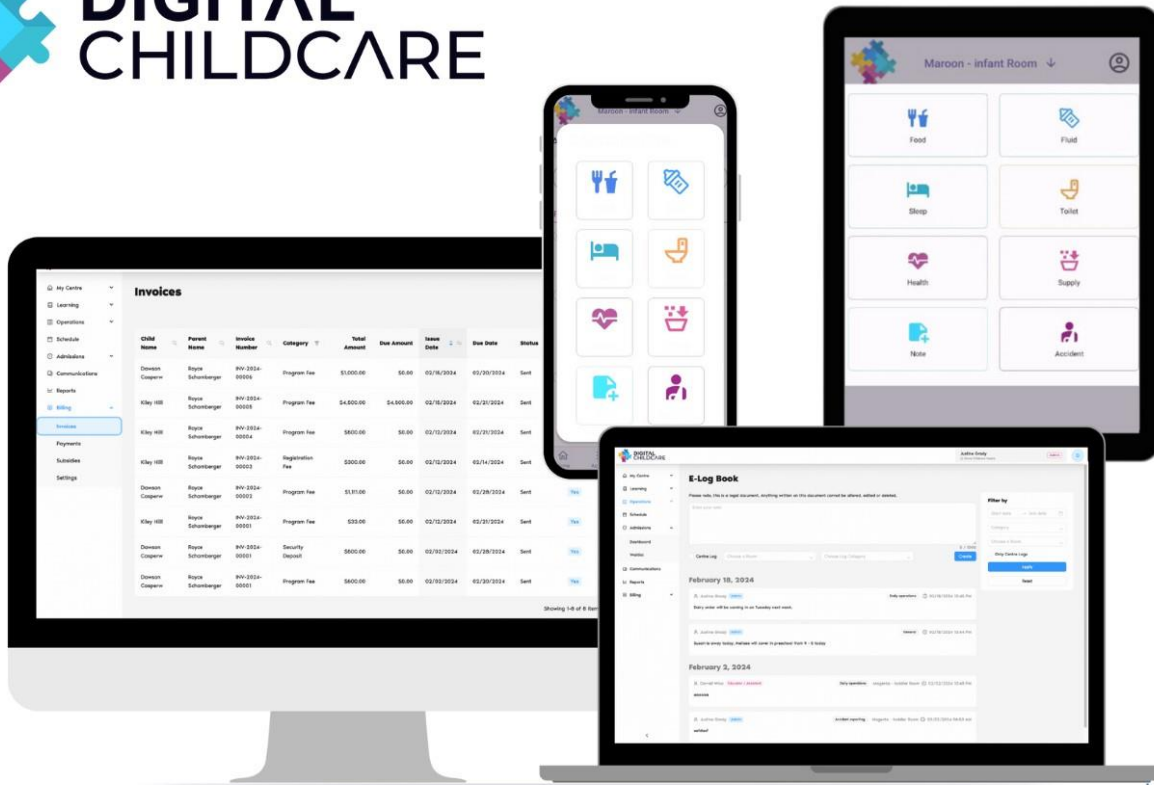
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Registered Charitable Organization Number:
106732001RR0001

Canada Post Publication Mail Agreement #:
40014752

The eceLINK is a quarterly publication of the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO). Since 1992, the publication has been distributed across Ontario to all our members and affiliate organizations. The eceLINK has a circulation of approximately 3000, reaching Early Childhood Educators working in different early learning and child care settings. They include students, frontline practitioners, administrators & supervisors, trainers and policy makers.

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https://www.aeceo.ca/peer_reviewed_articles

The AECEO would like to acknowledge & thank the following contributors:

Adam Davies

Lori Huston

Nicole Ineese-Nash

Elder Brenda Mason

Nidhi Menon

Emmanuel Stephen Oluwaseun

Kathryn Underwood

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ECELINK DESIGN & LAYOUT
kim nelson design

NEWS from the AECEO

Online Merch Store

AECEO merch is here! Celebrate ECE POWER with ECE themed cards and gifts. Shop stickers, cards and apparel designed by ECEs, for ECEs. Check out the available options on our [RedBubble shop!](#) Celebrate ECE POWER & support your professional association!



Podcast

This past fall, we launched a new initiative – a podcast! **Circle Time with the AECEO** is a podcast made for ECEs, by ECEs and is a space for all things related to ECE culture: the good, the bad, and the sticky.



Make sure you subscribe to the [AECEO YouTube Channel](#) and [follow us on Spotify](#) to catch future episodes! [Join or renew your membership](#): AECEO members will have exclusive access to extra podcast content, future bonus episodes, and more!

Links

www.aeceo.ca/aeceo_merch

www.aeceo.ca/podcast

www.youtube.com/@AssociationofECEsOntario

www.aeceo.ca/membership

AECEO AGM 2024 Results

Thank you to all AECEO members who participated in our Annual Member meeting and voting! We are pleased to announce the results from our online secured balloting service and verified mail in balloting. Our sincere thanks and appreciation go to the board nominees for their support for the AECEO through their willingness to stand for election and serve on the Board of Directors.

All Annual Member Meeting motions were approved/accepted, including: AECEO Annual Report, Audited Financial Statements, revised Bylaws, and Articles of Incorporation amendments.

AECEO Board of Directors 2024-2025

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Amy Williams (she/her), RECE, Hons. B.ECL, M.A.

Our gratitude also goes out to retired board members: Adam Davies, Simone Haughton, Lyndsay MacKay, and Charlotte Prince for their service to the AECEO.

Seven Years of the AECEO Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation: Walking Together in Reconciliation

Lori Huston, Elder Brenda Mason, Sue Parker, Alana Powell

In many Indigenous worldviews, the number seven carries deep significance, often representing the Seven Grandfather Teachings—wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth—which serve as guiding principles for living in balance and harmony. The past seven years of the AECEO’s Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation reflect a journey of learning, unlearning, and re-learning, rooted in these values. Walking together in reconciliation requires time, patience, and relational accountability, much like the seven generations teaching, which reminds us that our actions today impact those who come after us. This work is not simply about policy changes but about nurturing a collective responsibility to uphold Indigenous ways of knowing and being in early childhood education, ensuring that future generations of children, families, and educators walk forward with knowledge, respect, and a shared commitment to truth and reconciliation.

Introduction

Over the past seven years, the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) has committed to reconciliation with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit communities through its Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation, formed in 2018. This collaborative effort included the development of a comprehensive framework rooted in Indigenous principles aimed at transforming early childhood education (ECE) practices and policies across Ontario in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action. By addressing colonial barriers, amplifying Indigenous leadership, and supporting inclusive spaces for Indigenous children, families, and educators, the AECEO has initiated significant milestones, including published articles, professional learning opportunities, and establishing the All Nations Circle of Practice. This issue of eceLINK reflects on these achievements and the ongoing journey toward meaningful reconciliation in ECE, centering Indigenous voices and knowledge systems.

Spring/Summer 2018: AECEO’s Active Commitment to Truth and Reconciliation published in the eceLINK.

2017: Commitment to Reconciliation

The AECEO Board of Directors unanimously committed to reconciliation with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, stating:

“The AECEO will actively participate in and support reconciliation processes with Indigenous communities in Ontario and across Canada.”

Following initial conversations with Indigenous community members, establishing a **Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation** emerged as necessary to support this commitment.

2018: Establishing the Guiding Committee

March 28, 2018:

The introductory meeting of the AECEO Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation took place. The invitation to join emphasized:

“We have a role to play in the journey toward reconciliation and much work to do. With the help of a Guiding Committee, we aim to establish a formal statement and action plan.”

2018-2020:

The Committee met quarterly to develop its **Terms of Reference, Guiding Principles**, goals, and priorities.

Key Guiding Principles:

- Center Indigenous self-determination and cultural reclamation.
- Honour cultural protocols and diverse perspectives.
- Address settler colonialism within governance structures.
- Foster leadership from underrepresented voices.

2020: Formalizing Action

July 2020:

The Committee co-developed and published a formal **Statement and Action Plan** outlining the AECEO’s commitment to reconciliation, equity, and systemic change in ECE.

Excerpt from the Preamble:

“AECEO is dedicated to ensuring that Indigenous educators have equity within the organization and are positioned to lead in matters concerning their children and communities.”

The plan acknowledged the ongoing impact of colonial frameworks on Indigenous children and families and committed to creating equitable opportunities for Indigenous ECEs to lead and share their knowledge.

2020–2024: Expanding Impact

The Guiding Committee continued to broaden its reach through AECEO professional learning offerings and published articles focused on Indigenous pedagogies, land-based learning, and allyship:

Guiding Committee Articles Published in eceLINK (Open access)

- **Walking Together in Reconciliation** – Winter/Spring 2020
- **Exploring Indigenous Pedagogies Connected to Experiential Learning in Relation to Mother Earth** – Summer 2020
- **Awakening and Coming to Know Indigenous Pedagogies in Early Learning** – Fall/Winter 2020
- **Sharing the Experiences of Indigenous Educators and Communities During COVID-19** – Spring 2021
- **Interview with Métis Nation of Ontario’s Early Learning and Child Care Program** – Fall 2021
- **Meaningful Change for First Nations Children** – Winter/Spring 2022
- **All Nations Circle of Practice** – Spring/Summer 2022

- **What Kind of Ancestor Do You Hope to Be?** – Fall/Winter 2022
- **What Kind of Ancestor Do You Hope to Be: Responses to Elder Brenda Mason (Part 1)** – Spring/Summer 2023
- **What Kind of Ancestor Do You Hope to Be: Responses to Elder Brenda Mason (Part 2)** – Winter 2024
- **A Story of Keaton and His Wisdom** – Spring/Summer 2024

Also Published in *eceLINK*

- **AECEO's Active Commitment to Truth and Reconciliation** – Spring/Summer 2018
- **Peer-Reviewed Collection Special Issue on Indigenous Knowledges and Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education** – *eceLINK* Spring/Summer 2018
 - ◊ *Decolonizing and Co-constructing Contexts that Welcome Indigenous Practices and Knowledges in Early Childhood Education*
 - ◊ *Gizhaawaso: Culture as a Protective Factor for Indigenous Children with Disabilities*
 - ◊ *Dramatic Play in Northern Aboriginal Head Start Classrooms: Supporting Indigenous Children's Learning of Their Culture and Language*
 - ◊ *The Leadership Journey in the Spirit of Indigenous Early Childhood Educators in Remote Northern First Nations Communities*
- **2 Articles Contributed by the Northern Oral Language and Writing Through Play (NOW Play) Project:**
 - ◊ *Indigenizing Curricula: Developing a Pedagogy of Relationship that Centers on the Child* – Spring/Summer 2024
 - ◊ *An ECE Instructor's Action Research: Reflections on an Initiative to Teach Anishinaabemowin* – Winter 2024

Professional Learning Offerings

- *Reimagining Our Relationship to Land through Natural Curiosity*
- *(Re)Imagining Relationships with Land*
- *Listening to Land as Teacher (Part 1/4: Birth)* – *Beginning with a Seasonal Pedagogy in ECE*
- *Listening to Land as Teacher (Part 2/4: Movement)* – *Walking Together on Mother Earth Through the Four Seasons in ECE*
- *Listening to Land as Teacher (Part 3/4: Relationships)* – *Acknowledging the Importance of Ceremony in Truth and Reconciliation in ECE*
- *Listening to Land as Teacher (Part 4/4: Passing)* – *Giving Back to a Growing Understanding of Community in ECE*
- *AECEO Conversation: Listening to Land as Teacher Sharing Circle*
- *Allyship: Relationships, Humility, and Moving Forward*
- *Question & Answer on Allyship*
- *Indigenous Astronomy: As Told by the Haudenosaunee – Filling Your Spirit with Stardust and Astronomical Knowledge*
- *Family and Race Representation on Screens – ECEs Exploring Children's Media*

2021: AECEO Guiding Committee Webpage

Space created on the AECEO website where stories, information, and resources are shared on an ongoing basis: www.aeceo.ca/aeceo_guiding_committee_on_truth_and_reconciliation

- Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation
- *eceLINK* Articles
- Shared Resources & Information
- CMAS Webinars: Supporting Child Care in the Settlement Community

2022: All Nations Circle of Practice

The AECEO Guiding Committee launched the **All Nations Circle of Practice**, inviting Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators to share experiences and knowledge.

Goals of the Circle:

- Foster relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators.
- Advocate for justice and equity for Indigenous families.
- Reclaim Indigenous knowledge and connect educators with land-based learning.

Excerpt from Elder Brenda Mason:

“We gather to serve children and families, deepening our understanding of our responsibilities to community and land.”

Spring/Summer 2022: All Nations Circle of Practice article published in *eceLINK*.

For information about joining the Circle of Practice please email Sue Parker at sparker@aeceo.ca

Looking Ahead: A Vision for Future Generations

As the AECEO Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation reflects on seven years of progress, the work remains ongoing and deeply considering the impact of the **Seven Generations**. This teaching reminds us that our actions today shape the world for those who come after us.

Invitation for Indigenous Educators

Through sustained efforts, the AECEO is committed to supporting inclusive, equitable early learning environments where Indigenous children, families, and educators can thrive. By listening, learning, and acting

together, we walk forward with the knowledge that reconciliation is a collective responsibility—a journey we take for today and future generations.

We welcome Indigenous educators to join this journey, sharing their voices, knowledge, and leadership to shape early learning environments that reflect and honour Indigenous worldviews, values, and ways of being.

For more information and resources, please visit the AECEO website:

aeceo.ca/aeceo_guiding_committee_on_truth_and_reconciliation.

For information about becoming a member of the Guiding Committee please email Sue Parker at sparker@aeceo.ca

As we reflect on the past seven years, we acknowledge that reconciliation is not a destination but an ongoing journey—one that requires sustained commitment, deep listening, and reciprocal relationships. The work of the AECEO’s Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation has laid a strong foundation, but the path forward calls for continued action, humility, and courage. By centering Indigenous leadership, upholding Indigenous knowledge systems, and fostering meaningful partnerships, we move closer to creating early childhood education spaces where Indigenous children, families, and educators feel valued, heard, and empowered. Walking together in reconciliation means embracing both the challenges and the possibilities, ensuring that the next seven years—and beyond—are guided by the spirit of respect, responsibility, and collective care.

Miigwech, Meegwetch, Merci, Thank you to our readers.

That's A Wrap!

The Building Leadership and Learning Communities project has come to an end



Written by: Amber Straker

In the Fall of 2021, the AECEO began work on a new project called *Building Leadership and Learning Communities: Strengthening the ECE Workforce (BLLC)*. This project focused on connecting, supporting, and empowering early childhood educators (ECEs) in Ontario. Over the last three years, we have aimed to support ECEs' sense of belonging, well being, professionalism, leadership capacity, pedagogy, and practice with children and families. There were two main areas of work in the BLLC project. The first area focused on creating and supporting additional Communities of Practice (CoPs), now known as CARE Collectives. The second focus was to implement a new professional learning (PL) model for ECEs across Ontario.

Four new CARE Collectives were created and supported, with a fifth to be announced shortly. This included a group for those supporting Newcomer Services, a local group in Peterborough/Kawartha, the Student ECEs of Ontario, and the Early Years Advocates London. CARE Collectives continue to be spaces for advocacy, connection, recognition, and empowerment. They are spaces where educators can build supportive relationships and join the collective voice for progressive policy change to address inadequate working conditions and compensation. CARE Collectives are the place where ECEs find like-minded people, reclaim the recognition they deserve, and develop relationships in safe spaces. These groups meet regularly, providing ongoing opportunities for relationship building amongst early years professionals. Over the last three years, CARE Collectives have engaged in numerous activities and events to support ECEs. These groups have hosted community picnics, participated in focus groups, connected with



municipalities, hosted guest speakers, engaged in workshops, provided webinars, participated in days of action, joined rallies, created written submissions for publication, shared information, engaged with media, and celebrated and provided care for educators. CARE Collectives are led by an absolutely amazing team of community CARE leads. These leads work together to support the collectives by connecting the community, organizing and hosting meetings and events, and acting as a point of contact between the collectives and the AECEO. Thanks to their care and passion for the sector, CARE Collectives are possible. A highlight of the provincial CARE leads collective was our 2023 retreat. Leads came together for a weekend of collaboration, reflection, and strategizing together. We are extremely grateful to all CARE leads for their dedication and commitment to the field. The AECEO understands the power of personal connections and our mission is to support the collective voice of ECEs. If you would like to get connected and involved with one of the AECEO CARE Collectives, please complete the interest form on our website https://www.aeceo.ca/care_collectives. We would love to see you there!



In addition to our CARE Collectives, the BLLC project team created a professional learning model that brought together thousands of educators from all across Ontario. BLLC Learning Experiences & Connection events built on the AECEO webinar series that was started during the pandemic as a way to provide free virtual learning experiences for ECEs across the province. This transformative PL model was ECE focused, strengths based, inclusive, and accessible. The sessions planned and implemented aimed to push against dominant discourse, challenge eurocentric ways of thinking and disrupt colonial knowledge while decolonizing spaces, and make spaces for marginalized voices by providing a platform for educators to share their knowledge and experiences. The sessions that were held over the three years included topics such as:

- *Unravelling Relationships with ECE Playgrounds*
- *Reimagining our Relationship to Land*
- *Black History Month is Done! Now What?*

- *Black Canadian History Beyond February*
- *Leading with Love and Compassion*
- *Listening to Land as Teacher*
- *Allyship*
- *Indigenous Astronomy*
- *Resisting Oppression*
- *Becoming an ECE Speaker*
- *Reimagining Our Work Through Play, Joy, and Togetherness*
- *Mindfulness and Grounding Techniques*
- *Reclaiming Recognition: What it means to be appreciated as an ECE*
- *An ECE Book Club, focused on Scarborough by Catherine Hernandez*
- *The Hidden Curriculum in Children's Media*
- *Family and Race Representation on Screens*

Each session purposefully focused on knowledge and skills held by and shared for ECEs and the majority of these sessions were hosted by ECEs. One of the major reasons for the success of the PL model was the team of AECEO facilitators who conducted small group discussions at each event. This team of educators worked to ensure that the participants had meaningful conversations with one another and were able to express their ideas in a safe and welcoming environment. Whenever we discuss the PL model, we will continue to acknowledge this team of facilitators, as it could not have been possible without them.

Another important part of the BLLC project was the 2023 AECEO Provincial Conference: *We Raise Each Other Up: ECEs building leadership and learning communities of joy, curiosity, and hope*. This conference brought together nearly 1,000 educators from across Ontario to connect, learn, and share with one another over three days. The conference included virtual networking and discussion lounges, an online gallery of digital, and poster and/or other creative formats. We kicked off our learning with a keynote panel titled *How We Rise: ECEs on Finding Advocacy*, and followed it with more than 25 sessions including workshops, presentations, and small conversation groups that were all hosted by ECEs. These sessions have now

been curated into an online conference hub that can be accessed at any time by AECEO members. This conference was developed in consultation with a committee of ECEs to ensure it was a learning experience truly created by ECEs for ECEs. We are indebted to the conference committee, as their contributions to the conference development and implementation were invaluable. In two previous *eceLINK* articles, we shared details about the conference and highlighted the outcomes of this incredible professional learning experience. These articles, *Building a Transformative Conference* and *The Impact of a Transformative Conference* can be found in the 2023 Spring/Summer Issue and 2024 Winter issue, respectively.

In our efforts to share our work and connect educators across the province, we were also busy connecting with post-secondary institutions to meet with pre-service ECE students, writing articles to share about our experiences, and presenting in other provinces to discuss the impact of providing care and support to educators in this specific way. We were able to connect with more than 3,000 post-secondary students across 17 different institutions throughout Ontario through class and community talks. We published two articles co-authored with Dr. Laura Doan of the Peer Mentoring Project entitled; *Communities of Practice in BC and Ontario: Sharing Our Stories Across Canada* and *It's Time: Making the Case for Ongoing Funding for Communities of Practice Programs that Support Early Childhood Educators* which were shared in the *Early Childhood Educators BC (ECEBC)* professional journal as well as the *eceLINK*. We presented at conferences in Ontario, BC, Alberta, and Manitoba, and our Transformative Professional Learning Model was even presented to the Ontario Ministry of Education.

It is because of the passion, hope, and perseverance of ECEs that this work was possible. Your participation and dedication is what makes a difference. The AECEO is a member-based organization, working to build and support the collective voice of ECEs to participate in and influence positive change. We lead with care, move at the speed of trust, and recognize those at the heart of the early years system... ECEs! We see you, we hear you, we want to connect with you, and we hope that you will join us! The BLLC project is over but our work will continue.



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Report on AECEO Strategic Planning Process & Outcome

The last few years have been a dynamic and evolving time. Adapting to and recovering from the Covid pandemic, the announcement and roll out of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, and ongoing challenges facing the early childhood education profession and workforce have meant that we have continuously adapted our work to best represent our members in constantly changing circumstances. We believe that it is responsible for us to take the time to dig deep with our members, early childhood educators and early years staff, allied organizations and partners to take stock, evaluate our work, and plan for the next five years to ensure what we are doing is meeting the needs of the profession and ensuring the flexibility to pivot as we know challenges and turbulence still lay ahead. As we look ahead to our 75th anniversary this year, we are deeply committed to honouring the work of the AECEO and ensuring we are here supporting ECEs for another 75 years.

Goals

We began this process with specific goals in mind;

- 1) assess the degree to which our mission and the work we do to achieve it is still meaningful and meets the needs of our members and community,
- 2) hear from our members and community about their ideas for the future direction of our work,
- 3) better understand how operational challenges impact our work with members and communities,
- 4) hear from our members and non-members about the value of and/or barriers to membership.

Who/How/When

We worked with Evenings & Weekends Consulting on developing our strategic plan. Evenings and Weekends led a listening campaign to hear directly from members, non-members and partners. They held 7 small group consultations with a total of 37 participants. The participants in these “house meetings” were various groups connected to the AECEO, including one that specifically invited racialized contributors. They conducted 5 one-to-one meetings with

identified ECE community members and an online AECEO member survey was distributed that received 73 responses. A second, shorter online survey was distributed to the AECEO’s list of non-members, which received 276 responses.

What we heard

From the listening campaign, an assessment of feedback, strengths, challenges and opportunities was created to guide the development of strategic goals. Some key feedback from the listening campaign includes the following:

Strengths

Participants identified many strengths they saw in the AECEO. The AECEO was consistently acknowledged for championing ECEs and influencing policy to recognize and address their diverse needs. The organization is seen by its members and community as being pivotal in advocating for fair compensation, professional recognition, and the rights of children to access quality care.

Advocacy: Participants emphasized the AECEO’s role in advocacy for fair wages, equitable conditions, and policy changes, expressing they felt that the AECEO’s leadership at both provincial level and collaboration at the national level enhanced the organization’s effectiveness in representing ECEs. Overall, participants felt that the AECEO is effective in translating community issues into actionable policy recommendations and navigating the policy landscape to advocate for the profession’s interests and those of the communities they serve.

Professional Development and Support: Participants consistently recognized the AECEO for providing significant professional development opportunities, resources, and support for continuous learning and growth for ECEs.

Community Building, Networking, and Empowerment: Participants felt that AECEO excels in nurturing sector strength and empowerment. This includes providing a platform for ECEs to voice their concerns and participate in policy-making, enhancing professional networking and collective problem-solving. Further, the AECEO was recognized for its critical role

in building community and networking among ECEs, including creating a sense of belonging, facilitating collaboration, and linking educators across different regions. These activities are essential for fostering a unified and supportive community within the sector.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI): Participants expressed that the AECEO's more recent focus on DEI efforts reflects the organization's ability to adapt to the evolving needs of the profession. This includes combating anti-Black racism and anti-Indigeneity, ensuring better inclusion in advocacy and community building efforts.

Challenges

Some of the challenges identified by participants bridged both organizational challenges and issues affecting the sector more broadly.

Sector-wide Recognition and Value: Despite ongoing efforts, there remains a need for broader societal recognition of ECEs as professionals, which is critical for improving work conditions and pay scales.

Financial Precarity and Revenue Generation: Resource constraints, the cost of membership, reliance on membership fees for funding, and funding stability were common concerns.

Professional Development and Organizational Role Clarity: There was some confusion expressed about the AECEO's role compared to other bodies like the College of ECE (CECE) and misunderstanding about its work was not uncommon. Clarifying the AECEO's mission, roles, and the distinct benefits it offers will be essential for attracting members and improving engagement.

Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusion in Leadership and Programming: The importance of incorporating cultural sensitivity into leadership roles and programming was emphasized, especially to better represent and address the diverse needs of the ECE workforce. This includes supporting promotion of racialized individuals and those with lived experience into leadership positions and ensuring cultural considerations in the planning of events and workshops.

Opportunities

Listening campaign participants identified various opportunities for AECEO.

Distinguishing Role and Incentivizing Membership: There is a clear request for better communication about the specific benefits of AECEO membership. Clarifying the AECEO's mission, roles, and the distinct benefits it offers will be essential for attracting members and improving engagement.

Inclusive Policy Development: The organization's strong foundation in advocacy and professional development presents opportunities to further influence policy and contribute to the continued advancement of the profession. Leveraging the AECEO's inclusive approach to amplify diverse voices in policy-making can strengthen the relevance and impact of its advocacy work.

Enhanced Professional Training and Development: There is a key opportunity to expand AECEO's role in professional development, particularly through digital platforms and regional partnerships, to reach a wider audience.

What we commit to

In response to the feedback and recommendations, the AECEO Board and Staff team committed to 5 key strategic priorities for 2024-2029.

- 1) Continue Advocacy for ECEs
- 2) Develop Organizational Identity and Demonstrate Membership Value
- 3) Strengthen Sector Leadership
- 4) Expand Equity Initiatives
- 5) Increase Professional Development Opportunities

In addition to these 5 key strategic priorities, and in light of our organizational milestone of celebrating 75 years of operations this fall, we will also undertake a review of our mission, vision and values to ensure we continue to respond to the needs of our members, the community, and our evolving context. The AECEO team has worked hard to align our workplans to deliver on these key strategic priorities. To ensure accountability we will report on our work and progress in these areas through our Annual Reports, which are published in the fall at the time of our Annual Members Meetings.

A note of thanks to our members for your support, time and commitment to our shared work, for sharing your thoughts, ideas, and perspectives with us to inform this process. We are grateful for the opportunity to serve the early childhood profession, build our collective voice and power, and work in community with you all to achieve our goals. If you have any questions about the AECEO's strategic plan process or priorities, please email apowell@aeceo.ca.

With care,

The AECEO team

Decent Work Project Update

Mobilizing the Early Childhood Workforce in the Movement for Decent Work

Written by: Amber Straker

We are pleased to announce that the AECEOs Decent Work Project is now in its sixth chapter. This project continues to build the capacity and leadership of the early learning and child care workforce in the Decent Work Movement. This chapter will focus on democratic engagement, as we prepare for elections taking place over the next two years. With the ongoing implementation of the federal child care deal, the Canada Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreements, now is the time to build the foundations of a system that ECEs need and deserve - one where professional pay and decent working conditions are foundational. It is critical that ECEs are able to articulate their needs and understanding of decent work, as we mobilize, refresh our skills, and use our leadership, expertise, and knowledge to effectively influence public policy that impacts the ECE workforce. The AECEO will continue to prioritize an ECE led movement, recognizing that ECEs are crucial to developing an Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) sector that prioritizes care and resists policies, narratives, and ideologies that centre economic efficiencies, autonomy, individualism, and austerity. We will listen to, respect, and value the voices and experiences of the ECE workforce, and bring these voices to decision makers.

In this new project chapter, we aim to:

- 1) Deepen our collaborations and relationships with ECEs and the ELCC workforce, partner organizations, and sector and cross-sector allies.
- 2) Support leadership development and bring more front-line voices to leadership roles within our work.
- 3) Expand our community and collaboration opportunities through relationships with students, parents, and community events and networking sessions.
- 4) Mobilize the ELCC sector and cross-sector allies in public education campaigns that centre decent work.
- 5) Develop Ontario-specific policy recommendations and public education materials that merge lived experience, front-line voices, and research, while building solidarity and collaboration.
- 6) Plan and implement public education, government relations, and media campaigns that build public support for decent work for ECEs as part of ELCC system building and broader care and decent work movements.



Our work will focus on connecting, engaging, and collaborating with ECEs in the field, students, parents, and community members, the 10 AECEO CARE Collectives, and government representatives. This will include sharing policy briefs and program profiles in conjunction with *The Roadmap to Universal Child Care in Ontario*, curating and publishing the *eceLINK*, and running campaigns that provide multiple entry points and avenues to participation that target critical touch points such as the coming elections.

Over the past few months, the AECEO team has been busy strategizing and planning our project work. We have engaged with the community at multiple events such as presenting at the: Toronto Children's Services ELCC Spring Town Hall, Leading Change Network Annual Community Meeting, Manitoba Child Care Association provincial conference, and the Dufferin County ELCC Symposium, participating in both STRIVE's Leading Inspired Learning and Institute for Change Leader's Leading Change Network podcasts, and tabling and sharing our work at CUPE Convention and the Toronto Outdoor Picture Show. CARE Collectives have been meeting virtually for community check-ins and conversations, as well as to host panels featuring recent graduates, providing learning experiences through webinars and reading groups, planning and supporting MPP meetings, enjoying games and movie nights and community picnics, sharing advocacy actions, and participating in Centre Visit Training in preparation for community outreach activities. We have collaborated with post-secondary institutions by presenting to and engaging with ECE classrooms, speaking to students at career fairs, supporting placement and internship students at the AECEO, and participating in Program Advisory Committees meetings. We have hosted three parent and family webinars, created a parent and family toolkit, and supported a group of parents in speaking at a press conference on ECE and Child Care Worker Appreciation Day. We have also had ongoing meetings with the Federal Ministry of Families, Children, & Social Development and the Provincial Ministry of Education. We continue to connect and collaborate with our sector and cross-sectoral allies, and work in collaboration with our partners the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. Additionally, we are extremely excited to announce



May 2024

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that the AECEO has launched Circle Time with the AECEO, our very own podcast! Check us out on YouTube and Spotify to listen to all things ECE.

Our latest policy brief titled *Ontario Child Care Funding Formula*, written by Dr. Gordon Cleveland, shares a vision of what a new Ontario funding formula should do in order to be successful. With the release of the new funding formula, our policy work has included two consultation sessions for operators and educators, as well as surveys with our members to understand the impact of the funding formula on centres across Ontario.

As always, the AECEO is committed to connecting, collaborating, and engaging with the ECE workforce. We recognize that advocacy in the ELCC sector moves at the speed of trust and that focusing on relationship building is necessary for us to move forward together. We look forward to all of the ways in which we will work together and hope you will continue to join us! We are stronger together, our collective voice can and will make a difference. The AECEO is YOUR professional association and we are here to advance the voices of the ELCC workforce in our fight for professional pay and decent work. Whether you join us at in person events, or on the podcast airwaves, we can't wait to see you there with us!

Call for Non-Peer Reviewed Submissions

SUBMISSION DEADLINE: APRIL 30, 2025

Submissions for the following *non-peer reviewed* sections of the eceLINK are welcomed:

ECE Voices section

The ECE Voices section of the eceLINK, welcomes creative pieces of varying lengths that prioritize YOUR voice and lived experiences.

ECE Voices is an open-ended section featuring contributions from educators. Submissions do not have to be a specific number of words or written in a particular style - every style and length is welcome. Submissions could take the form of a short article, a poem, blog post, a visual image and/or reflection on the image, a pedagogical imagining, etc. We are holding this space to ensure that ECEs can express themselves and be actively involved in pushing thinking/possibilities in our field.

Please use the following as a springboard for your submission - and feel free to think outside the box!

For publication in our Spring/Summer 2025 issue, we are looking for reflections that respond to the following:

As an early childhood educator or student of early childhood education, discuss your thoughts about your future in the field of Early Childhood Education. With your education/training and/or experience working with children and families and communities, what are you doing now, where are you looking to go next, and why?

- Do you plan to go into/stay in the field of Early Childhood Education or do you have other plans for your future?

We are excited to invite contributions to our Spring/Summer 2025 eceLINK!

We hope you will explore this opportunity to connect and share your insights, experiences, expertise and more.

- What conditions/issues are you looking at in making these decisions?
- Are there any factors that would prompt you to re-evaluate your plans?
- How are your future plans connected to the kinds of childhoods and worlds and spaces that you want to work towards?

Please include a short introduction about yourself and what brought you to the field of early childhood education.

Submissions that are accepted will be copy edited by the editorial team.

General Articles (non-peer reviewed)

We invite contributors, activists, educators and others from the field to write on current issues in the ECE sector.

We welcome articles of less than 3000 words that contribute to: 1) Strengthening the ECE network in Ontario, 2) news and updates from the sector, 3) Sharing resources or ideas related to professional practice and learning. This could include social justice initiatives, sharing of pedagogical projects or any other community updates.

Articles will be between 1500-3000 words and may include images. Articles that are accepted are not peer reviewed but will be copy edited by the editorial team.

To submit to either the ECE Voices or General sections please email info@aeceo.ca to request the submission form, or access the form at: <https://www.aeceo.ca/ecelink>

THE PEER REVIEWED COLLECTION

Volume 9, Number 1

Special Issue Introduction

Socially Just Ruptures in Early Childhood Education: Challenging Developmentalism in Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Policy

**Dr. Nidhi Menon (University of New Brunswick) &
Dr. Adam Davies (University of Guelph)**

This special issue is inspired thematically and conceptually by the notion of ‘ruptures’ - a term etymologically rooted in the Greek word for ‘to wound.’ Ruptures, while unsettling, also serve as catalysts for rethinking entrenched practices, beliefs, and frameworks that shape both professional and personal landscapes (Davies, 2022). As Souto-Manning (2021) theorizes, ruptures are not merely sites of disruption; they are transformative and hold the potential to become portals into new, more just ways of moving forward. As guest editors curating this peer-reviewed collection, we approach the idea of rupture through our own positionalities, intersections, and lived experiences.

Nidhi: As an early childhood educator, woman of colour, immigrant, social justice scholar, activist, and feminist, I (*Nidhi*) write from a deep commitment to challenging dominant narratives in early childhood education and care to disrupt the status quo. My work with immigrant and refugee children and families, newcomers, and marginalized populations has revealed the profound harm that developmentalism can inflict. I recognize the urgent need for alternative stories, theorizations, and imaginations—stories that center social justice rather than developmentalist ideologies, that embrace holistic perspectives rather than reducing childhood to an economic investment. Thinking with Benjamin (2024), I imagine ruptures as necessary for social change, making way for hope

as an “incubator for a solidaristic imagination” (p. 40). Hope is essential for envisioning a better future and a truly democratic education. As an activist, I find it imperative to imagine what genuine inclusion looks like—one in which all voices, especially those of marginalized communities, are truly heard and valued.

Adam: I (*Adam*) arrive at the question of ‘ruptures’ and rupturing developmentalism as both a white queer settler, neurodivergent person with mental health disabilities, registered early childhood educator (RECE), and a faculty member who has taught within post-secondary early childhood education for almost a decade. While I have worked within the field, much of my research and activism comes from both my lived experiences and identities, as well as my desire and passion for a more equitable and just society. When I was first introduced to developmental psychology within courses throughout my undergraduate and eventually a graduate degree in child studies, I did not have language to describe my questions/concerns about the frameworks I was learning; however, I knew that there had to be more to the story than what I was being taught. I have come to wonder why certain theories and frameworks are often pushed to the margins in post-secondary early childhood education and also why refusing the developmental status quo can potentially lead to professional ramifications, personal harms, or even the pushing out of faculty

and instructors who embrace critical theories (Davies, 2025; Davies et al., 2024). It is these questions that have animated my work as I seek to imagine a space within post-secondary early childhood education whereby different knowledges, experiences, identities, and approaches can be valued, affirmed, and critiques of the status quo can be done with care and a desire for a different future (Richardson & Langford, 2022).

Both: Within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), child development theories—overwhelmingly theorized by white male psychologists—continue to shape the core of post-secondary curricula and research as well as programs and practices. Despite decades of critique from reconceptualist scholars (Pérez, 2017; Berman & Abawi, 2019; Grieshaber & Blaise, 2019), developmentalism remains a dominant discourse, often presented as the foundational knowledge base for early childhood educators and programs. Yet, this hegemony wounds those whose identities, experiences, and ways of knowing fall outside of its normative trajectories (Menon, 2024, 2021). It is imperative to rupture these entrenched narratives and open possibilities for reimagining ECEC through multiple, intersectional, and justice-oriented perspectives.

This special issue invites scholarship that critiques and contests the ongoing hegemony of developmentalism in early childhood education. It asks: How do child development theories continue to wound those who are not imagined within their normative frameworks? How might we rupture the assumption that child development is the sole or primary knowledge base for future early childhood educators? Can such ruptures create hope for new possibilities, untested feasibilities, and transformative pedagogies (Souto-Manning, 2021)? What emancipatory potentialities emerge when we shift away from developmentally driven theories and practices and toward education as a site of hope and social transformation?

In the first article in our special issue, “Disrupting Disability in Colonial Contexts: Centring Critical Disability Theory and Community Perspectives in Nigeria and Canada,” Emmanuel Stephen Oluwaseun, Kathryn Underwood, Nicole Ineese-Nash explore conceptions of disability within different geopolitical contexts - Nigeria and Canada - and how their activism and scholarship within disability studies values multiple knowledge systems and seeks to decolonize

normative, Westernized conceptions of disability. This important article challenges singular conceptions of child development that stems from ableist and modernist notions of children and childhood. Oluwaseun, Underwood, and Ineese-Nash engage with rupturing Westernized conceptions of child development and disability through an exploration of *resistance* and how both critique and resistance through community and activism can contribute towards an understanding of multiple knowledge systems and perspectives.

To rupture is to engage in what we imagine as a *praxis of possibility*—one that, as Freire (1970) argues, is always in the process of becoming. Ruptures are not merely moments of disruption but sites where something new emerges—where meaning is collectively thought through, contested, reworked, and constructed within communities. This process resists static definitions, instead embracing fluidity, relationality, and ongoing transformation.

Through the thinking, being, and practicing of practitioner-scholars, we seek to cultivate a critical community—a space where ideas can be contested and reimagined without assimilation, where collective thought can give rise to new ways of knowing, doing, and being. This is an exercise in world-building, an interrogation of possible and impossible futures. It compels us to ask: Which children, families and educators are recognized within the current landscape of early childhood education and care? Who is excluded or rendered outside the normative trajectories that shape our field?

In the face of an increasingly volatile and precarious world, this special issue underscores the urgency of constructing alternative paradigms in early childhood education—ones that move beyond critique to actively contest, reimagine, and enact new possibilities. By embracing ruptures as sites of radical potential and imagination, we contribute to an early childhood education and care landscape that is not only more inclusive but also deeply committed to justice, equity, and the collective imagining of a more hopeful future. We look forward to continuing this conversation in a second edition of this special issue that will be upcoming in the near future.

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Disrupting Disability in Colonial Contexts: Centring Critical Disability Theory and Community Perspectives in Nigeria and Canada

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Abstract

This article explores how different knowledge systems can inform early childhood education, with a focus on centring community perspectives and the material reality of disability in educational practices in Indigenous and settler contexts in Nigeria and Canada. The authors draw on our own community-engaged experiences in and work with diverse Indigenous and disabled populations in Canada and Nigeria. The article proposes valuing multiple knowledge systems, and, in doing so, decolonizing early childhood curricula that teach developmentalism alone, without the context of colonialism and ableism. Through our narrative-based reflections, we aim to contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable educational approaches that transcend geographic and cultural boundaries.

Key words

Decolonization, disabled children, Indigenous knowledge, early intervention

Author Biographies

Stephen Emmanuel holds a master's degree in education and is the founding director of Inclusive Classroom Nigeria, a non-profit organisation that provides early and crisis intervention to students with learning difficulties in underserved communities in Southwestern, Nigeria.

Kathryn Underwood is a Professor in School of Early Childhood Studies at Toronto Metropolitan University. She is also the Project Director for the Inclusive Early Childhood Service System (IECSS) project, a longitudinal institutional ethnography of early childhood disability services.

Nicole Ineese-Nash is an Indigenous Assistant Professor cross-appointed between the schools of Early Childhood Studies and Child and Youth Care at Toronto Metropolitan University. She is also the founder and executive director of Finding our Power Together, a national Indigenous-led charity that provides evidence-based mental and spiritual health resources to Indigenous children youth, and communities across Canada.

Disrupting Disability in Colonial Contexts: Centring Critical Disability Theory and Community Perspectives in Nigeria and Canada

We are community-engaged scholars who work in not-for-profit sectors directly supporting educators and disabled students. Collectively, we also have lived experience and knowledge from disabled and Indigenous communities. Our investment in disrupting dominant developmental theories is informed in two ways. First, we are concerned that support for disabled children is overwhelmingly focused on “fixing” children rather than fixing systems and environments. Second, we situate our work with a respectful understanding of the unequal distribution of early childhood services globally and within countries, and the fact that disability is both used as a reason for and is an outcome of exclusion from services that purport to support children’s development. We are therefore advocating that any move towards dismantling systems informed by developmentalism is foregrounded by an understanding that these systems are a site of privilege as well as a site of oppression. We do this through our personal and academic reading of decolonization, Indigenous knowledge systems, and Critical Disability Theory (CDT). Our purpose is to present a framework for inclusive early education that recognizes inequitable access to services and systems that are not designed to affirm disabled children’s lives. We consider how communities might move towards more equitable access while disrupting pervasive developmentalism.

After introducing ourselves, we present a background on the intersection of CDT and decolonization, with a call to value Indigenous and colonial knowledge frameworks, while disrupting the dominant theory of developmentalism, and valuing the possibilities from integrating these knowledge systems on disabled children. The examination of colonial legacies in healthcare and educational systems reveals significant challenges faced by Indigenous and disabled communities in accessing inclusive education, particularly in the field of early childhood

education. This paper focuses on the Canadian and Nigerian contexts from our own experiences and highlights the importance of decolonizing educational approaches to promote equity and social justice across geographical and cultural boundaries. We consider the importance of centring community perspectives in educational practices in both Canadian and Nigerian contexts.

Our Context

This collaborative research dialogue has brought together scholars and educators from Nigeria and Canada who sought out a mutual partnership with the goal of learning from each other. It offers our rich experiences and perspectives on inclusive early childhood education. Our narrative reflects on lived experiences and community-based perspectives in Nigeria and Canada and highlights unique challenges and opportunities in promoting inclusive education across diverse cultural landscapes. The following principles emerge from our collaboration and guide the narrative:

- 1) Real change to the educational experiences of disabled children will happen when educators draw on multiple knowledge systems.
- 2) Community knowledge can be activated through teaching disability-affirming approaches locally, in education and healthcare settings.
- 3) Change must be informed by making colonial healthcare systems visible and identifying both the value they bring to and the challenges they create for disabled children.
- 4) Equitable access to disability services must honour Indigenous theories of development and human difference and Critical Disability Theory (CDT) through education and training for families, educators, and healthcare professionals.

- 5) Disabled community leadership must ensure diversity and difference are valued and bring strength to community.
- 6) Indigenous knowledge systems present a framework for seeing each person as part of the community and understanding human difference and disability as a gift that strengthens the community.

In the Nigerian context, our work has revealed the interaction of traditional beliefs, colonial legacies, and contemporary educational practices. Co-author Stephen Emmanuel Oluwaseun is the founding director of Inclusive Classroom Nigeria (ICN). Stephen brings experience with and concerns for resource scarcity in many Nigerian schools, which presents ongoing and substantial challenges. Educators who serve in some communities often display remarkable ingenuity, creating multisensory learning experiences with locally sourced materials, but systemic issues persist. Training sessions with Nigerian teachers organized by Inclusive Classroom Nigeria revealed a strong desire for knowledge about inclusive education. Many teachers expressed frustration with a system that inadequately prepares them to support diverse learners. These experiences reinforced the importance of community-centred approaches that involve parents, teachers, and local leaders and honour multiple knowledge systems in interventions.

In the Canadian context, our work has highlighted the interplay between traditional Indigenous knowledge, colonial legacies, and contemporary support services. Co-author Kathryn Underwood has led multiple studies that began with community organizations (including children's services agencies, municipal government, Indigenous serving, and Indigenous-led, and early childhood education and care programs) where there was concern about how disabled children were being served. All the authors of this paper have collaborated on these research projects to respond to questions that are co-developed with disabled people, families, and communities, as well as educators and policy makers who are seeking new ways to unstick cultural and colonial knowledge systems that abet the exclusion of disabled children and community members. In this context, the everyday experience of children,

their families, and their communities is centred, and services can be understood through the filter of whether policy, curriculum, or theory are addressing exclusions and acting to radically shift towards full participation in community and society.

The third co-author, Nicole Ineese-Nash, is the founding director of Finding Our Power Together (FOPT), a national Indigenous charity that provides holistic mental health and cultural programs to Indigenous communities across Canada. FOPT was established in response to community-based research in northern and remote First Nation communities in Canada that identified significant gaps in mental health services for Indigenous communities. In particular, FOPT offers mental health programs informed by an integrative (or braided) approach that draws from research and evidence-based practices found in Indigenous healing methods, youth centred praxis, and mainstream interventions. (For a more detailed account of this approach, see Ineese-Nash, Stein, & Patel, 2022). This program combines traditional Indigenous knowledge and teachings with Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) techniques to empower young people to understand their abilities and develop skills to enhance their wellbeing. The Building Our Bundle program, a DBT-informed mental health skills group tailored for Indigenous youth, is a prime example of this approach in practice. The integration of these diverse knowledge systems challenges dominant developmental frameworks and promotes a holistic understanding of mental health and well-being. The success of this program has not only benefited individual participants but also has shifted community attitudes towards mental health and disability; as youth participate in this program, they demonstrate an increasing awareness of themselves as full and unique community members rather than as sick, damaged, or disabled. FOPT's approach underscores the importance of integrating various knowledge systems and approaches to disrupt the all-too-common logics of cure-based interventions that are often prescribed to Indigenous communities and develop programs to equip youth with the tools and support they need to thrive in today's world.

Collectively, our community-led experiences inform our collaboration and a commitment to contributing to the development of inclusive curricula and

educational models that reflect the needs of communities in Canadian and Nigerian contexts. Because we are all academic researchers but identify closely with community and hold leadership roles in the not-for-profit sector, our interests are in disability activism that directly influences and affirms disabled peoples' lives. Our collaboration and the ideas we present in this article emerged from learning from each other.

Our collaboration brings together distinct knowledge systems with respect for the contributions that each brings to social policy, educational praxis, and community-led control of social institutions. Indigenous knowledge systems provide a framework to build community control over early childhood disability services, such as early intervention, healthcare and community support services.

Indigenous Frameworks for Disability: African and North American Knowledge Systems

Indigenous Knowledge Systems globally offer unique perspectives on disability that are deeply rooted in cultural, spiritual, and communal understandings. These systems often view disability through a holistic lens that encompasses not just the individual but their relationship with the community and the spiritual realm (Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013). In many African societies, disability is understood from a social and spiritual standpoint. For instance, some communities may attribute disability to spiritual causes, viewing it as a result of ancestral displeasure or mystical forces (Opoku et al., 2017). While these beliefs can sometimes lead to stigmatization, they can also foster a sense of communal responsibility for care and support.

The concept of *Ubuntu*, which is prevalent in many African cultures, emphasizes interconnectedness and collective well-being. This philosophy can promote inclusive practices by encouraging communities to support and value all members, including those with disabilities (Phasha et al., 2017). However, it is important to note that the application of these principles varies across different African cultures and contexts. Additionally, traditional healing practices play a significant role in African approaches

to disability. These practices often involve rituals and treatments aimed at addressing both physical and spiritual aspects of disability (Kpobi & Swartz, 2019). Although these approaches may not align with Western medical models, they reflect important cultural values and beliefs about health and well-being. African Knowledge Systems also emphasize the importance of oral traditions and experiential learning. This can influence approaches to education for children with disabilities, often prioritizing practical skills and community integration over formal academic achievements (Mpofu et al., 2017). It is important to recognize that African perspectives on disability are not uniform; they vary greatly across the continent's diverse cultures and are continuously evolving in response to social, economic, and political changes (Baffoe, 2013).

Similarly, North American Indigenous communities hold knowledge of ability that fundamentally challenges Western normative frameworks. Indigenous perspectives on ability are deeply embedded in cultural, spiritual, and relational contexts. These perspectives view individuals as integral parts of their communities and environments, emphasizing interconnectedness and collective well-being. In Anishinaabe thought in particular, concepts such as *Mino-Bimaadiziwin* (the good life), is central to an Anishinaabe philosophy that encompasses the idea of living a balanced and harmonious life, and All My Relations underscore the importance of living in harmony with all creation and recognizing the inherent value and gifts of every individual, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities (Simpson, 2011; Benton-Banai, 1988). *Mino-Bimaadiziwin* integrates physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being, emphasizing the need for balance among these aspects. In the context of ability and disability, *Mino-Bimaadiziwin* challenges the Western emphasis on physical and cognitive norms by valuing the unique contributions of each individual to the community. This perspective views all individuals, including those with disabilities, as integral to the collective well-being and as possessing unique gifts that contribute to the richness of communal life (Simpson, 2017).

The principle of All My Relations extends this idea further by recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings—human, animal, plant, and spirit. This worldview promotes a sense of unity and mutual

respect among all members of the community, affirming that each person's existence and abilities are valuable and interconnected with the well-being of the entire ecosystem. In terms of ability, this principle suggests that disabilities are not deficits but variations that are part of the natural diversity of life, promoting an inclusive approach where all individuals are valued for their unique strengths and perspectives (Benton-Banai, 1988).

Precolonial Indigenous societies often regarded what is now categorized as disability simply as another aspect of human diversity. These differences were integrated into the social and cultural fabric without the discriminatory attitudes prevalent in many contemporary Western contexts. Tanya Titchkosky (2007) notes that the European concept of disability is heavily laden with connotations of abnormality and deficiency, constructs that were historically absent in many Indigenous cultures. Instead, children were seen as gifts, and their unique abilities were embraced as contributions to the community.

In many North American Indigenous cultures, creation stories demonstrate inherent beliefs about the origins of people that inform beliefs about difference. These narratives often convey that children are gifts from the Creator, embodying sacred purposes and inherent worth that contribute to the community's overall balance and harmony. For example, in Anishinaabe cosmology, children are viewed as blessings bestowed by the Creator, imbued with unique gifts and responsibilities that are integral to the community's spiritual and social fabric (Johnston, 1995). This perspective inherently values diversity and difference, seeing variations in ability not as deficits but as manifestations of the Creator's diverse intentions. These creation stories reinforce the idea that each individual has a specific role and purpose within the community, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities. This belief system fosters a culture of inclusion and respect, where all members are encouraged to contribute according to their abilities. It challenges the Western paradigms that often marginalize individuals who do not conform to specific norms of ability, advocating instead for a more holistic and inclusive understanding of human diversity. Such narratives provide a foundational ethos that supports the integration of all individuals into communal life,

promoting practices and policies that respect and uphold the dignity and worth of every person.

Furthermore, Indigenous narratives often include accounts of individuals with unique abilities or conditions who fulfill specific spiritual roles within their communities. In some North American Indigenous cultures, those who would be labeled as having disabilities in a Western context are sometimes seen as being touched by the spirits, granting them particular insights or powers. These individuals might serve as shamans, healers, or visionaries, respected for their special gifts. Edward Benton-Banai (1988) recounts stories where individuals with unique traits are honoured for their distinct abilities, highlighting the spiritual dimensions they bring to communal life. Indigenous theories of disability are also informed by a historical and ongoing context of colonialism and resistance. Scholars such as Kim Anderson and Maria Campbell have documented how colonial policies were designed to assimilate Indigenous peoples and erode traditional support systems for individuals with disabilities (Anderson, 2016; Campbell, 1973). These scholars argue for a decolonizing approach that re-centres Indigenous knowledge systems and practices in contemporary discussions of disability and ability.

Despite the resilience of Indigenous knowledge systems, it is important to acknowledge that problematic attitudes towards disability have existed and continue to exist within Indigenous communities. Traditional beliefs sometimes attributed disabilities to spiritual causes or ancestral displeasure, leading to stigmatization and exclusion. These attitudes mirrored the exclusionary practices seen in African and Western contexts and highlight the need for a critical examination of all cultural frameworks.

Colonial Developmentalism and Critical Disability Theory (CDT)

The field of CDT is, in part, a response to Western medical models of disability that position disabled people only in the context of diagnosis and pathology, in need of health and psychological or psychiatric intervention, and requiring service. However, as Goodley et al. note, the application of Critical Disability Studies needs to be done with care, or it risks exploiting disability as an object, knowable and

to be manipulated, rather than the subject of the field, with the possibility of understanding it as a valid experience and identity (2019). As a direct response to colonial systems, CDT is informed by Critical Race Theory; anti-Colonial Theory; and economic, ecological, and gender justice (Ayres, Ocasio-Stoutenberg, Connor, & Fuller, 2024). Collaborations like the one in this article present an opportunity to strengthen responses to injustices that continue through systems that are linked to colonialism and that continue to proliferate.

Developmentalism is of particular concern for disabled children, especially in early childhood education environments, where there is pressure to identify non-normative development in children early and then intervene to (potentially) reduce their need for special education later in their lives (Boyce et al. 2021; Philpott, et al. 2019). These approaches, informed by response-to-intervention and pyramid models, often stream young children by the perspective of “need” for specific services that range from staffing early childhood programs to intensive one-on-one therapies. Each of these responses to individual children are situated within colonial knowledge systems that centre the individual child and intervene in order to shape the child to the educational environment.

The scientific literature posits is a relationship between children’s biology and their environments; adverse environments can cause adverse health effects, and early education and intervention are mechanisms to equalize biological and social differences (Boyce et al., 2021). The conclusion in the health literature is that “critical or sensitive periods provide unmatched windows of opportunity for both positive and negative influences on multiple biological systems” (p.1). Indigenous knowledge systems similarly recognize that learning and relationships are abundant and valuable in the early years. However, Western education and healthcare models have identified and categorized specific skills, domains, and relationships that exclude and devalue Indigenous knowledges.

As Parekh (2007) noted,

While medical and legal discourses of disability pervade in regions of the South, relatively few studies have explored their significance in

analyses of colonial/postcolonial institutions and hierarchies of power structures. Moreover, re-evaluation of humanities and humanistic perspectives and dimensions of disability challenges to social construction, rehabilitative or social service models, and implications of legal mandates versus lived experiences are on-going and heatedly debated issues within disability communities and scholarship.

There is a growing recognition that disabled people themselves are an important source of knowledge for educators and families. Diversifying approaches by listening to disabled people, particularly in Indigenous communities, is a direct path towards shifting out of the hegemony of singular knowledge systems. For example, Autistic self-advocates and those who are working towards education that affirms rather than corrects are a growing social movement in education (Douglas et al. 2021). There is also a growing movement of neurodiverse-affirming therapists and educators, at the same time as Black and Indigenous communities are taking control of education and intervention. In these narratives, special education, early intervention, and therapy that is attentive to Black, Indigenous, and disabled experiences is valued, especially when it supports learning new skills and building relationships that are authentic to neurodiverse experiences. As an example, the Autistic Self-advocacy Network has a guide for educators and early interventionists that details helpful and harmful therapies from the experience of the Autistic community (Autistic Self-advocacy Network, n.d.).

Inequitable Access to Early Intervention

Almost all international investment in early intervention positions medical approaches to childhood that are grounded in a normative framework of what constitutes health. Global and local inequity, between nation states and within nation states, is evident in inequitable access to early intervention and increasing medicalized understanding of child development (Puszka et al., 2022). In Nigeria, as in many Global South countries, this medical model is complicated by colonial legacies and Western influences on healthcare and education systems (Anokwuru, 2023; Adewale, Ritchie, & Skeels, 2016). The tension between traditional African perspectives

on disability and imported Western medical models has created a complex landscape for disabled individuals, particularly children, where investment is centred on Western medical intervention and lacks the community values of African Indigenous knowledge.

The salience of the medical approach is particularly evident in early childhood, where there is often intense pressure to identify and categorize children with disabilities at a young age. Understanding that there is enormous inequality in access to services between countries (such as Canada and Nigeria) and within countries (such as in rural, northern, and Indigenous communities in Canada) (Gerlach & McFadden, 2022; Underwood et al. 2019; Atwal et al., 2024), access to scarce resources must be considered. In Nigeria, where special education resources are often limited, early identification may serve different purposes, such as determining access to scarce educational resources or shaping family and community responses to disability (Salami, 2014). Children are then regularly excluded from mainstream early childhood education and care if identification, intervention, and specialized supports are not available. As noted above, while the conditions differ, this is also a concern in Canadian contexts.

The Limitations of Critical Disability Theory

CDT was developed in response to medical systems that are part of colonial knowledge systems. The social model of disability, a central tenet of CDT, was a response to colonial medical systems that aim to “fix” or rehabilitate disability (Oliver, 1990). However, much of the CDT literature stays within colonial knowledge systems — a counter-narrative that does not recognize where it is situated. Black and Indigenous scholars in North America have called out Critical Disability Studies for not recognizing the contributions of Black and Indigenous activists (see, for example, Race and Disability Canada, Indigenous Disability Canada (also known as BCANDS), and Ase Community Foundation for Black Canadians with Disabilities) and scholars in this space (see, for example, Bell, 2011). Further, CDT must recognize that it does not sit within Western Knowledge systems alone, since critiques of colonial medical interventions have always been part of decolonizing activism and Indigenous knowledge systems as articulated above.

While interventions through theoretical discourses are helpful, we are interested in how educators can disrupt normative discourses of developmentalism in educational praxis and ensure disabled children’s experiences are centred. As scholars, we are attuned to the need to connect theory to action with a decolonizing practice that disrupts colonial systems globally. Finally, is there a place for early intervention that decentres normative development and builds towards supports and care that allow for disability affirming practices that recognize the value of Indigenous knowledge systems and their theories of disability and human development (Halseth & Greenwood, 2019; Marin, n.d.; Kissi, 2020)?

Structures of Conquest: Tracing the Lineage of Disability and Colonialism

The intersection of disability and colonialism as governing mechanisms in education has led to developmentalist and ableist frameworks that reinforce imperial conquest. Developmentalism, grounded in early 20th-century child psychology, posits a linear, universal path of development that all children are expected to follow (Woodhead, 1999). This notion, primarily propagated by white male psychologists, has influenced educational paradigms and served as a mechanism to enforce conformity and suppress diversity (Quijano, 2000). The insistence on a standard developmental trajectory categorizes any deviation as a deficiency necessitating correction, thus legitimizing interventions aimed at “normalization” (Burman, 2016). This pathologizing of deviations in development is deeply intertwined with ableism and white supremacy, which constructs disability as an undesirable deviation from the norm (Chordiya & Protonentis, 2024). These frameworks have been key structures of the marginalization and oppression of Indigenous, Black, and disabled peoples.

In practice, developmentalism provided a pseudo-scientific rationale for the widespread implementation of Eurocentric interventions in the lives of colonial subjects (Ineese-Nash, 2019). As Garuba (2002) articulates, colonialism mapped the land, body, and subject into a network of power

relations that it sought to control and exploit. Within such a framework, African and Indigenous bodies were cataloged and commodified as part of the colonial land, seen as resources to be conquered and exploited rather than as fully human beings. This dehumanizing view justified the brutal practices of slavery and forced assimilation that were common in various colonial projects. As Davis (1988) articulates, the central function of the concept of race itself was to rationalize the treatment of human beings as less than human, to justify the use of slaves in the colonial project. African slaves were brought to the Canadian and American contexts to serve as labour, their bodies commodified and exploited in the name of economic and developmental progress. Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island were often deemed not even worth enslaving, as they were considered too unruly or unsuitable for the labour demands of the colonial enterprise (Reséndez, 2016). Instead, they were subjected to systemic displacement and extermination policies to clear the land for European settlers. Lisa Lowe (2015) articulates how the histories of slavery, colonialism, and labour migration are interconnected, showing that the racialization and dehumanization of Black and Indigenous peoples were central to the colonial enterprise. These interconnected histories highlight the pervasive reach of ableist ideologies in justifying and perpetuating the marginalization and oppression of colonized peoples.

Ableism is not merely a by-product of colonial empire; it is a fundamental mechanism that sustains colonial power. The construction of disability within colonial contexts has served to pathologize and control bodies that deviated from Eurocentric norms. As Ineese-Nash (2019) argues, disablement arises as a colonial construction, used to justify the marginalization and subjugation of non-European peoples. The intersection of race and disability reveals how these frameworks have historically and continually operated in tandem to enforce colonial domination.

Intersectional oppression is not just a historical artifact but continues to shape contemporary educational and social policies. Modern systems that prioritize Eurocentric standards of normalcy and development perpetuate the pathologization of Black and Indigenous bodies, reinforcing their

marginalization. Understanding this intersection is crucial for dismantling these oppressive structures. It requires a critical examination of how developmentalist and ableist ideologies have been used to justify and maintain colonial power. By recognizing and addressing the intertwined nature of racial and ableist discrimination, more inclusive and equitable systems that honour the diverse ways of being and knowing that have been suppressed by colonial ideologies can be created.

Disability in Colonial Contexts: Access to Healthcare and Education in Canada and Nigeria

Healthcare is the primary location of medicalized and developmental theory and is particularly linked to disability in early childhood. Its impact on children's access to education is profound. The only reference to early childhood in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) is found under the provision of early intervention in health. Overwhelmingly in urban Canada, disabled children are spending an extraordinary amount of time in healthcare settings, children's treatment centres, and early intervention programs such as speech and language, occupational and physical therapy, behavioural intervention, and children's mental health services (Underwood et al., 2021). Access to these systems is fraught with inequity, filtered through financial, educational, and racial privilege, as well as family status (custodial, citizenship, connection to a First Nation) (Ineese-Nash, Underwood, Haché, & Douglas, 2024). At the same time, these services are all linked to developmentalism through normative assessments, qualifying criteria, professional training, and service provision that aims to "fix" or rehabilitate. Indigenous models of care and wellness, as we have experienced in community work, can offer alternative frameworks that are holistic and community-centred (see for example, Lavalée & Lavalée, 2019).

The Nigerian context presents a starker picture of accessibility challenges. For example, a study in the Nigerian states of Kogi and Niger reported that 71 percent of respondents with disabilities were unable to access needed health services (Smith, 2011). Participants cited negative attitudes among health

workers, ignorance of disability issues, prohibitive costs of care, inaccessible information and communications, and inaccessible environments and equipment as primary barriers. There is a clear tension in the unequal access to services, at the same time recognizing that many services are not disability affirming.

The educational landscape in Nigeria also poses significant hurdles for disabled people. These include a lack of adapted learning materials (Ihuoma & Abaa, 2022), inadequately trained teachers, lack of schools, physically inaccessible school environments (Lawal, 2022), and inaccessible communication (Eleweke & Ebenso, 2016). A World Bank report highlighted concerns about learning outcomes and full participation of children with disabilities in inclusive education settings, particularly noting the challenges faced by hearing-impaired students in developing sign language as their mother tongue and visually impaired students in accessing Braille documents at the primary level (World Bank, 2020).

Work by Inclusive Classroom Nigeria (ICN) has revealed tensions between traditional beliefs, colonial influences, and modern educational practices. While educators strive to implement inclusive education, they often encounter deeply rooted cultural perspectives that view disability as something to be “fixed” or “cured”. These beliefs, often stemming from Indigenous approaches, can sometimes align with and reinforce the normative developmentalism imported through colonial systems. For instance, in many communities ICN works with, there’s a strong emphasis on “normalizing” children with learning difficulties. Parents and educators often seek interventions that promise to make these children “just like everyone else.” This desire, while coming from a place of care, reinforces ableist notions and overlooks the unique strengths and perspectives of disabled children.

Co-author Stephen Emmanuel Oluwaseun recounts an experience in a rural community where a child with dyslexia was misunderstood by both educators and family members. The child’s struggles were attributed to spiritual issues that reflected deeply entrenched cultural beliefs. This situation exemplifies the various challenges faced

in implementing inclusive education in Nigeria, and the tensions that can arise between Indigenous and colonial beliefs. Through community-based interventions there were remarkable transformations. As this child received tailored support, community understanding of learning disabilities grew. This approach not only benefited the individual child but also began to shift societal attitudes towards disability and education.

ICN workers have observed traditional healing practices being used alongside, or sometimes in place of, educational interventions. While these practices are an important part of cultural heritage, they can sometimes delay or replace educational support that recognizes the capabilities of disabled children. This creates a challenging dynamic where educators must respect cultural beliefs while also advocating for approaches that support children’s learning in education settings. Furthermore, the scarcity of resources in many Nigerian schools means that sometimes even when there is willingness to implement inclusive practices, the focus often remains on “fixing” the child to fit into existing systems, rather than adapting the environment to accommodate diverse needs. This scarcity-driven approach reinforces normative developmentalism. Instead, educators can identify where Indigenous knowledge systems value and affirm disabled people and their experiences.

ICN work involves navigating these cultural settings, seeking to honour Indigenous knowledge while also introducing more inclusive, ability-diverse perspectives. ICN strives to shift the narrative from “fixing” disability to embracing neurodiversity and creating truly inclusive learning environments. This involves extensive community engagement, working with local leaders, traditional healers, and families to develop approaches that respect cultural values while promoting inclusive education. The challenge lies in finding a balance — respecting traditional approaches while advocating for practices that recognize and celebrate the diverse ways children learn and develop. The goal of ICN is to foster an educational environment that does not seek to “normalize” children but rather embraces their unique abilities and supports their individual paths of growth and learning.

Disrupting Developmentalism through Diversifying Approaches

Theoretical interventions in early childhood educator training provide a critical opportunity to shift educator practice. Since young disabled children are entrenched in multiple spaces (for example, family, care, education, health), an ethical stance that attends to disabled children's lives in their entirety requires that developmentalism must be understood as holding different meanings in different contexts. Normative development that is constituted within singular cultural contexts, with educational aims that narrow the value of diverse ways of knowing and being are not only undesirable but cause harm. However, theoretical interventions alone are not enough, as evidenced by the alarming level of exclusion of disabled children from school despite widespread training in social models of disability and anti-developmentalism discourses that are gaining recognition in early childhood education training.

In Canada, exclusions from school are one response to the perception that some children cannot be included (Syed, 2024). Children are referred out of early education when educators and administrators are not ready or prepared to include children in programs that were not designed for everyone in the first place. Children are expected to regulate their emotions, to be able to speak, and to be independent enough to participate, and, if they do not have these abilities, they can be excluded from childcare or school.

In Nigeria, the impact of developmentalism on early childhood education and the treatment of disabled children share some similarities with the Canadian context, albeit within a different cultural and economic framework. The Nigerian educational system, influenced by both colonial legacies and international Western influences, often struggles to accommodate disabled children in mainstream settings. A study by Fakolade, Adeniyi, & Tella (2009) found that many Nigerian teachers held negative attitudes towards including disabled children in regular classrooms. This attitude can lead to exclusion or referral to specialized services, mirroring the Canadian experience.

As noted, in Nigeria, there's a significant lack of early intervention services and specialized support in mainstream schools (Fakolade, Adeniyi, & Tella 2009). This scarcity often results in disabled children being excluded from the education system entirely. According to a report by the World Bank (2020), many children with disabilities in Nigeria are out of school, with estimates suggesting that disability doubles the probability of never attending school. However, due to limited resources and access to specialized services, this often manifests as exclusion rather than intensive intervention. Studies by Haruna (2017) and Uba and Nwoga (2016) noted that many disabled children in Nigeria are kept at home due to a lack of appropriate educational facilities and societal stigma. For families, this approach leads to a search for services that can rehabilitate or teach children normalized abilities that will allow them entry into childcare and early education, with the idea that they require intervention to participate.

Families and disabled children seek out services that are informed by developmentalism because education systems teach that this is necessary, and these services are often the only spaces attending to disability as a human experience (Underwood et al., 2021). As noted, disabled children in Canada are much more likely to be interacting with healthcare systems, where normative discourses are embedded, and their families are made responsible for activities linked to normative values and thinking (Underwood et al., 2021). The results can be both supportive and devastating. Almost all healthcare interventions are based on normative knowledge systems that aim to "fix" anomalous physiology, genetics, biology, and/or psychology. This means that developmentalism is not only embedded in early childhood education and care, but also in the lives of disabled children. It is unlikely that the medical purposes of developmentalism can be untangled from the lives of disabled children, and to do so might not be the best outcome. These services also provide sites of community for children and parents, and in some cases, the staff hold knowledge of disability culture, community, and value.

Authors' narrative reflections

We are interested in practices that disrupt developmentalism as a gatekeeper for disabled children. There are many disability scholars who present different

ways of seeing disability and understanding these interactions with Western medical systems, as well as in the context of cultural and community informed knowledge. An example is Amanda Apgar's work on the disabled child, which is informed by parent narratives that push back against disability as dysfunction and loss and towards disability as a socially located identity and experience. Apgar digs into the ways that settler-colonialism, Western medical knowledge systems, and constructions of whiteness are implicated in the construction of the perception of the disabled child (2023).

We want to advocate for early intervention and other special education practices that are conscious of the knowledge systems within which they operate and that can be disrupted. This would mean situating disabled children and their families at the centre of any assessment of whether the disruption is of value. We also are informed by scholarship that disrupts the idea that Critical Disability Studies and rehabilitation science are at opposing ends of a continuum and instead "uses the tension between both perspectives as a unique opportunity to negotiate and prioritize what really matters when working with and for disabled people" (Mosleh, 2019, p.1).

Implications for Practice and Policy

As a result of our connections to community-based work, we propose an approach to decentring developmentalism that begins in community and recognizes the intricate relationships among developmentalism, the construction of disability as a health and educational category, and the different forms of knowledge that can operate concurrently to strengthen educational systems. The following implications for practice are supported by the recommendations found in the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC, 2022) shadow report for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

We see three key approaches where these principles can be activated through:

Teacher Training in which Critical Disability Theory recognizes its connections to Western medical paradigms and is integrated with Indigenous

knowledge systems can lead disrupt current dominant theories in teacher training. This should also include integrating community perspectives into early childhood education curricula in Canada and Nigeria. Teach anti-colonialism and how ableism operates to perpetuate colonial logics.

Policy Advocacy should explore implications of multiple knowledge systems working for the benefit of all peoples, including disabled children. Different knowledge systems point to policy implications for promoting inclusivity and equity in educational systems in both Nigerian and Canadian settings. Disrupt systems that devalue disabled people and centre normative frameworks, and instead affirm the value, knowledge and presence of disabled people. Ensure equitable access to early intervention, while ensuring disability justice is enacted within early childhood spaces. This will happen when educators are valued as community leaders, paid equitably, and are able to engage with local disability leaders to determine how each child will be valued in their family and community. Following Indigenous knowledge frameworks supports these values.

Community-led Research should prioritize the actual experience of disabled children and their families over interventions that are rhetorical rather than truly disruptive to inequitable education practices. We know from our own collaboration and partnerships that this requires deep reflection on collaborative research endeavours. Strategies that foster collaboration among academia, practitioners, and communities across geographical and cultural boundaries hold potential but need to recognize the power differential between academic institutions and many community partners.

Working across global boundaries fosters better support for early childhood educators in all contexts. Having Global North and South scholars and Black, Indigenous, and disabled community members in dialogue is an active recognition that all are entangled through colonial histories and settler relationships that cannot be untangled.

Conclusion

The notion of disruption, while often lauded in academic circles, must be critically examined within the context of developmentalism, ableism, and colonialism in Canada and Nigeria. To merely disrupt entrenched systems is insufficient; it risks being a superficial act that does not penetrate the lived realities of Indigenous, Black, or disabled people. Theoretical critique, though necessary, is not enough. Interventions must engage deeply with the everyday lives of those who endure the weight of these oppressive structures. Disruption, in its conventional sense, suggests a momentary disturbance that challenges the status quo. Yet, disruption alone does not inherently translate to meaningful change. In the contexts of Canada and Nigeria, where colonial legacies continue to shape the experiences of Indigenous and Black peoples, the act of disruption must be more than symbolic. It must be transformative. It is not enough to theorize about disruption; actions must be grounded in the material conditions and lived experiences of those who need support.

Developmentalism imposes a linear trajectory of progress that marginalizes and pathologizes those who do not fit within its narrow confines. Ableism compounds this by devaluing bodies and minds that deviate from normative standards. Disruption of these systems requires a fundamental rethinking of what is meant by *development* and *ability*. It demands a move beyond critique to actively engage with and uplift the voices of those most affected by these frameworks. The lived experiences of Indigenous and Black peoples in Canada and Nigeria reveal the limitations of disruption as an end in itself. These communities have long resisted and survived despite colonial impositions. Their resilience and wisdom call for more than disruption; they call for a reimagining of their worlds. As Leanne Simpson articulates, "Our systems of thought are embedded in our bodies, our land, and our relationships" (Simpson, 2011). Thus, the disruption must be embodied, relational, and rooted in the land and the people. It is not enough to critique from afar; we must immerse ourselves in the struggles and triumphs of those who live these realities daily.

Fanon reminds us that decolonisation is always a violent process, not in the sense of physical violence alone, but in the deep, structural upheaval required to dismantle colonial systems (Fanon, 1963). This upheaval must be reflected in any approach to developmentalism and ableism. In moving beyond disruption, the possibilities of new ways of being and knowing must be embraced. Theoretical critique must be coupled with tangible actions that build toward creating spaces where diverse ways of being are not merely tolerated but celebrated and integrated into the fabric of our societies. To achieve this, educators must listen, learn, and act in solidarity with those whose lives are shaped by the intersections of developmentalism, ableism, and colonialism. By centring their voices and experiences, educators, researchers, and communities can ensure that their efforts are not only intellectually rigorous but also materially transformative. In this way, we aim to move from disruption to decolonization and reparation, crafting a future where all can thrive in their full humanity. We hope that by sharing our own reflections from working collaboratively with multiple knowledge systems, we are modeling the process of inclusive and Indigenous leadership in community-engaged practice.

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