Mad Autobiographical Stories, Poetry, and Resistances within Post-Secondary Early Childhood Education and Care

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Abstract

This article engages readers with a Mad autobiographical poetry and storytelling approach by drawing from principles of disability justice and Mad Studies to share personal and autobiographical stories and poetry regarding teaching and learning within post-secondary early childhood education and elementary education. The author engages in autobiographical writing regarding their lived experiences within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) while critiquing the privileging of sanism within ECEC through developmentalist theories. Through the use of Mad autobiographical poetry, the author seeks to advance Mad narratives and stories in ECEC.

Key words

Mad Studies, early childhood education, madness, mad poetics, poetry

Author Biography

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"Madness need not be all breakdown... It may also be breakthrough" (Laing, 1990, p. 90)

I have always been drawn to stories as a way of making sense of my experiences and dreaming new worlds. Instead of being anchored in the current reality, I have been invested in imagining, creating, and dreaming new stories, which can evoke new possibilities. Indigenous writer and scholar Thomas King (2003) writes about the power of stories in informing societal understandings of people and communities by articulating how "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (p. 2). Within early childhood education and care (ECEC), dominant stories involve notions of developmental preparedness, academic outcomes and readiness, early intervention, and ensuring the mental health and well-being of children and families. Textbooks, course materials, and assignment outlines that are used in post-secondary ECEC courses often convey stories to students and those who engage with them about the communities that they describe—stories about ability/disability and inclusion/exclusion (Davies, 2022, 2023a). These stories in and of themselves seem self-explanatory in their "goodness"; however, there are many other stories within ECEC that are non-dominant and contest the hegemony of orthodox child development theories and their associated histories. These non-dominant stories are not always heard, especially in post-secondary ECEC education.

In this article, I share my personal and intimate stories within ECEC. Stories shape us, including our beliefs, identities, and ideas regarding inclusion/exclusion (King, 2003; Titchkosky, 2003). Stories also shape notions of who is/is not expected to be included or imagined in stories about belonging. In this sense, stories are incredibly powerful. Part of the intellectual, aesthetic, and artistic work I engage in within this article involves unearthing some of the dominant stories about ECEC and how such stories create notions of *who belongs* within ECEC. To do this work, I engage with writings about disability justice (Kafai, 2021; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Sins Invalid, 2015) and Mad Studies (LeFrançois et al., 2013; smith, 2018, 2020) to illustrate poetic storytelling about my experiences as a Mad[1], neurodivergent[2], queer, non-binary post-secondary ECEC faculty. By exploring my educational and professional journey within ECEC, I bring attention to how one dominant story and narrative—that of child development and "normalcy"—has come to shape ECEC professional practice and pedagogies and how this story has very *real* impacts on disabled and Mad educators who work within the ECEC sector. I hope that by sharing my vulnerability through stories and poetry and advocating for new relationships with and through madness, I can carve out space for disabled and Mad educators who might currently feel that they do not belong within ECEC.

Part of my sharing in this article involves Mad autobiographical writing and poetry (smith, 2018, 2020) that emphasizes my personal feelings, emotions, and experiences with madness while teaching and studying within post-secondary ECEC studies. The poetry is

[1] Here, I use the identity term *Mad* as a *reclaimed* term to refer to individuals who experience forms of psychological, mental, embodied, and/or emotional distress and whose behaviours, feelings, thoughts, and experiences have attracted psychiatric classification by psychiatrists, psychologists, and/or medical doctors. I realize there is contention about identifying as Mad. For individuals who are curious about the politics of Mad identity, I encourage you to read Le François et al. (2013) and Burstow (2013) amongst other articles and resources.

[2] To identify as "neurodivergent," entails identifying with diverse experiences, behaviours, thoughts, and feelings, which may or may not have gone under psychiatric and/or psychological classification, that classify you outside of normative ideas of psychological processes. Neurodiversity is not biologically or psychologically essentialist, meaning that the neurodiversity community embraces all kinds of difference in ways of interpreting the world and does not rely on psychiatric classifications, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, although individuals who have been classified as such might participate in the neurodiversity communities, movements, and activism (Walker, 2021).

provided as a counter-story to the dominant narratives within ECEC and to emphasize the affective and emotional elements of my experiences with madness (Cosantino, 2021; smith, 2018). In alignment with disability justice writings (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, 2022), the intention behind this writing is to emphasize the liberatory nature of disabled and Mad first-person narratives (Kafai, 2021; Sins Invalid, 2015) and to bring to the forefront stories that are often marginalized in ECEC education. However, it is important for me to begin by locating myself and how I have come to have the questions that I engage with in this article about madness and ECEC.

Locating Myself: Who I am in this Mad ECEC World

> Disabled people have always existed, whether the word *disability* is used or not. To me, disability is not a monolith, nor is it a clear-cut binary of disabled and nondisabled. Disability is mutable and ever-evolving. Disability is both apparent and non apparent. Disability is pain, struggle, brilliance, abundance, and joy. Disability is sociopolitical, cultural, and biological. Being visible and claiming a disabled identity brings risks as much as it brings pride. (*Wong, 2020, p. xxii*).

When identifying myself as Mad in the ECEC world, I often receive puzzled and confused looks. Most people are not aware of what it means to identify as Mad or with a Mad community, and there are many who can only conceptualize madness as a tragedy or medical phenomenon. To identify as Mad is to reclaim experiences with emotional and psychological distress and to critique pathologizing knowledge foundations that promote deficit ideas of mental, emotional, and psychological differences (Rashed, 2019). Despite ECEC frequently discussing relationships, there is still more work to be done in connecting ECEC post-secondary students and practitioners with communities that critique child development theories. Can stories that challenge the orthodox knowledge foundations in ECEC be brought forward? Might it be possible to imagine communities, such as disabled and Mad folks, who are currently only considered through exclusion and pathology, as a central part of ECEC pedagogies and practices?

It is by engaging with and reading disability justice literature and Mad poetry that I have found hope and community on days when I have felt that I have nothing to offer the ECEC field or do not belong. The above quote by disability justice and rights activist Alice Wong illustrates the complexities of identifying with disability—and madness—in any way and the *risks* that are taken when having open discussions about one's experiences with disability or madness in a frank fashion. In writing this article, I am aware that I make myself vulnerable by describing experiences and feelings in ECEC that are not often discussed. However, as Sara Ahmed (2023) notes, it is important to express these feelings—whether of non-belonging or exclusion—since "we do not feel what others feel, or we do not feel as we are supposed to feel. That's how we end up thinking about feelings, turning them into a resource" (p. 82). It is these Mad feelings—feelings that have been deemed potentially *pathological*—that I draw from as I describe my experiences teaching and learning within ECEC.

I have struggled to feel *true* belonging in ECEC. Belonging, as a felt emotion of being accepted and embraced for who you are, the perspectives you bring, and your identities and worldviews, has not always been a part of my experiences within ECEC. In my experiences, the single story (Adichie, 2009) of children and childhood in post-secondary ECEC is comprised of child development approaches and methods deemed scientific. Certainly, lived experiences pertaining to disabled and Mad people were not part of my post-secondary education and are still often deemed "fringe" epistemologies – in both ECEC and all levels of higher education.

As I completed my pre-service teacher education, I felt dissatisfied with the developmental perspectives I had been exposed to within my undergraduate and graduate education and knew that there had to be other stories regarding children and education that I was not aware of. I was appreciative of all the wonderful learning opportunities I had been provided and yet, still desired to be exposed to a language that could more fully describe some of my feelings of not belonging within educational spaces. As I navigated post-secondary education, I often felt as though I was moving through a space where I was expected to be a version of myself that I was not – and importantly, could not be. I was generally not drawn towards child development theories, especially the emphasis upon observation and assessment within early childhood education and elementary education. I was unsure if I would have the mental and emotional energy to fulfill what I felt were ongoing expectations to be constantly effervescent and joyous within professional practices with children, particularly as someone who experiences frequent depression and anxiety. It was and is not that I could not and cannot be a joyous person—however, I held a deeply felt sense that there was no room for

me to bring my whole self to my teaching and working with children, including my madness. I was also feeling burnt out after being in higher education continually throughout my adult life and feeling overwhelmed by an educational system not made to accommodate my disability needs.

As my chronic depression and anxiety worsened, I questioned if I belonged in early years education. Essentially, I did not know if there was space in ECEC or elementary education for someone like me. I felt like I could not express my mental health needs in practicum placements or be honest if my energy levels were lower or my mood was less upbeat. I felt exhausted and tired and that it was "unprofessional" to share my true emotions and inner feelings with others. With that, I turned to academic writing and graduate studies to reconsider and investigate my personal experiences and eventually entered into teaching in higher education within ECEC. Upon beginning to teach and work in post-secondary ECEC education, I came to realize that my passions really lie in writing and storytelling; that is, it is by sharing my stories, including potentially painful histories, that I can begin to imagine different futures that are inclusive of and affirming towards disabled and Mad people.

Autobiographical Writing and Counter-stories

Disability justice and Mad Studies writing emphasizes life-writing approaches that share the lived experiences of disabled and Mad people. Disability justice evolved out of a collective of queer, trans, and disabled activists of colour who mobilize art, cultural production and criticism, and performance arts to raise collective consciousness for issues pertaining to disability, inclusion, and accessibility (Kafai, 2021; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Sins Invalid, 2015). This collective seeks to mobilize the arts and storytelling as social activism and establish guiding principles to challenge the uncritical acceptance of ableism and sanism and the exclusion of disabled and Mad people and stories within society (Kafai, 2021; Sins Invalid, 2015). It is by discovering and reading the work of disabled activists and writers such as Leah Piepzna-Samarasinha's 2018 work *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* that I have felt validated in community and that there are others who can love and accept me as I am—without the need for any intervention or change in my mind, behaviours, feelings, or perceptions of the world.

Storytelling is a key feature of disability justice activism, carving space out for disabled individuals to share stories that are deeply vulnerable, intimate, and often come with risk to share (Wong, 2020). Autobiographical life writing, particularly disabled autobiographical writing, emphasizes the private and personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences of disabled individuals who navigate forms of societal exclusion and discrimination (Barrett, 2014). Autobiographical writing connects individual writing and narrative story retelling of life events with historical, cultural, social, and political systems (Barrett, 2014). Autobiographical approaches include narrative storytelling that can be used to bring personal experiences and narratives to the forefront of public social consciousness (Sklar, 2012). As Kafai (2021) notes in her writing on disability justice and Sins Invalid's activism:

> Storytelling as activism becomes remembrance, becomes genealogy. Sometimes the stories we tell about our bodyminds are the ones full of grit and sweat. They are the painful stories, the *I have never said this out loud* stories, the *This is the most vulnerable I have ever been* stories (Kafai, 2021, p. 77, emphasis in original).

Telling stories, particularly stories about madness and disability, is a political act because it is by sharing disabled and Mad truths—truths that society seeks to discount or discredit—that new futures and imaginaries can be created (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Through this act, I emphasize disabled and Mad storytelling as *counter-stories* (Lindemann, 2020) that encourage the sharing of first-person experiences as counter-stories and critiques of the status quo (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Wong, 2020).

Meanwhile, a counter-story is a "story that is told for the purpose of resisting a socially shared narrative used to justify the oppression of a social group" (Lindemann, 2020, p. 286). Counter-stories are narratives written by individuals from marginalized communities that seek to contest and challenge dominant understandings from the majority by providing new narratives that are not typically heard (Lindemann, 2020) and challenging stereotypes, stigma, and discrimination. Counter-stories challenge "master narratives" (Lindemann, 2020) or dominant narratives that are written by society and guide understandings of the social norms of groups of people and institutions (Lindemann, 2020). By bringing to the forefront experiences that are typically private, such as one's experiences with disability and/or madness, counter-stories strive to disrupt the normalization of forms of societal exclusion previously taken-for-granted (Lindemann, 2020).

Dominant stories of disability and madness in ECEC education construct disabled and Mad people through ideas of deficit and biomedical intervention. These stories become what Adichie (2009) terms "single stories," or

stories that represent marginalized communities through assumptions, stereotypes, and misunderstandings. Such dominant stories can be propagated through powerful stereotypical representations that are promoted within higher education programs and learning. An example of this is the emphasis in post-secondary ECEC upon child development or the ages-and-stages approaches, which conceptualize disability and madness through lack, pathology, and incapability (Davies, 2022). In essence, anyone diagnosed with a psychiatric disability or who experiences madness is assumed automatically to be incapable and potentially even dangerous to be around children and families (Davies et al., 2022a, 2022b). As such, the dominant story, or single story (Adichie, 2009) of disability and madness in ECEC becomes one of exclusion and incapacity. By engaging with counter-stories written by disabled and Mad educators, ruptures of the single stories (Adichie, 2009) of madness and disability as deficit can take place (Davies, 2022; Snyder et al., 2019). It is through emphasizing counter-stories that new potentialities for disabled and Mad educators in ECEC can emerge.

Mad Autobiographical Poetic Writing

In this article, I engage with Mad autobiographical poetic writing (smith, 2018, 2020) as a form of expressive writing of my personal experiences with madness. phil smith's (2018, 2020) work on Mad autobiographical poetic writing (smith, 2018, 2020) disrupts the erasure of Mad stories, narratives, and art in education. Mad autobiographical poetic writing involves writing that seeks to challenge biomedicalized and psychiatrized conceptions of madness by emphasizing Mad people's stories and personal experiences (smith, 2018, 2020). Mad poetic writings are intimate and affective in nature (Davies, 2023a; Cosantino, 2021) and involve the combination of autobiography, art, aesthetics, and politics, with a specific aim to bring Mad stories to consciousness (smith, 2018, 2020).

My creative writing follows Mad poetic ethics (smith, 2018; Cosantino, 2021), which employ aesthetic and poetic devices, such as bolding and emphasizing text, crossing out text to indicate present/absences, as well as purposefully placing text in different locations to counter ideas of linearity. Such stories and their aesthetic markings hang and linger (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022), calling for the reader to acknowledge the wholeness of the text. Importantly, these devices involve emphasizing the affective elements of my writing by bringing forward *mad feelings* that might be otherwise discouraged within ECEC. This is not to suggest that any specific feelings are "Mad" or that madness be associated with disruption inherently; however, my Mad poetry asks readers to consider what mad feelings that might be considered *pathological* typically could offer ECEC. As such, my Mad poems bring counter-stories forward and ask the reader to consider how disability justice and Mad Studies might lead readers to acknowledge the stories of those who have continually been erased in ECEC, especially disabled and Mad people. I encourage the reader to engage with these poems in a manner that is non-linear; that is, to feel free to read different sections instead of reading the poems through a neat linear developmental narrative—there is no beginning and end here.

Mad autobiographical poetic writing is in conversation with Mad Studies (LeFrançois et al., 2013), a critical, activist-oriented theoretical framework and critique of biomedical conceptions of "mental health" that continue to pathologize[3], subjugate, and harm those who have had experiences with mental health services and with psychiatric harm. Mad Studies critiques such medical/psychiatric markers, as well as the reliance upon medical, psychiatric, and diagnostic understandings of mental and emotional distress, often embedded within the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This is not to say that all who engage with Mad Studies similarly critique biomedical psychiatry and psychology in the same fashion—there is room for a plurality of approaches and knowledges within Mad Studies that aim to critique various aspects of psychiatry, psychology, and biomedical approaches (Beresford & Russo, 2021).

Sanism

In my other publications (Davies, 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Davies et al., 2022a, 2022b), I have described how *sanism* (Perlin, 1992) is embedded within the fabric of ECEC, particularly in normative images of children and educators that are propagated in the sector (Davies, 2022). Sanism "describes the systematic subjugation of people who have received 'mental health' diagnoses or treatment" (Poole et al., 2012, p. 20). Sanism (Perlin, 1992) "is largely based on negative stereotype, myth, hyper-unusual events portrayed in the media, and popular misconceptions that

[3] Pathologization is closely tied to medicalization although the two processes are distinct; that is, pathologization is a process that deems a behaviour, thought, feeling, or act as abnormal and odd whereby medicalization is a process that deems medical intervention a necessity (Sholl, 2017).

reinforce pervasive negative prejudices" (LeBlanc-Omstead & Kinsella, 2018, p. 15). Sanism, as a form of structural discrimination that is enforced upon those who identify as Mad or who are otherwise perceived to be Mad (Poole et al., 2012), is reinforced through the expectations of educators in ECEC (Davies, 2022; Davies et al., 2022a). Sanism is embedded within other helping professions, such as occupational therapy (LeBlanc & Kinsella, 2016, 2018), art therapy (Ehlert, 2020), education (Castrodale, 2017), and social work (Poole et al., 2012) as helping professions and practitioners are expected to regulate and contain their experiences with madness for fear of being pushed out of their profession or receiving scrutiny from their governing regulatory colleges (Chapman et al., 2016; Poole et al., 2021).

Providing Counter-stories: Enter Disability Justice and Mad Studies

As I share personal stories about my experiences with disability and madness, I follow Titchkosky (2012), who describes how she is "methodologically committed to beginning in the middle of things" (see Titchkosky 2003, p. 209) since "people do not merely sit on the edge of human identities; we inhabit them, and they inhabit us" (Titchkosky, 2012, p. 84). The stories that I share are all in the midst of other stories, whether about madness, disability, education, children and childhood, or otherwise (Davies, in press). What I am sharing is only a *fraction* (Davies, 2021) of these stories and only a fraction of my own life histories. Therefore, I do not pretend that these stories are ever complete, nor do I feel that they are finalized. However, in sharing these stories, I hope I can guide the reader toward a semblance of understanding of my personal history, and how I have landed on the questions I have about early childhood education, development, childhood, madness, and disability.

Pathologization and Childhood

Throughout my life, I have felt the pressure of a narrow concept of normalcy upon my personhood as I have navigated educational environments that did not—and do not—understand my specific accommodation needs, gender and sexuality, or my overall "anxious" and neurodivergent predisposition. My experiences with madness and disability started from a young age, where symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) emerged through constant checking behaviours, fears of swearing or saying inappropriate words at the wrong time, and reassurance-seeking behaviours, as well as generally "dysregulated" emotions that had me often labelled as overly "sensitive" by teachers and adult figures in my life. As a feminine young boy, my "sensitive" demeanour was often pointed out by teachers and other peers at school; teachers were concerned about my propensity for overthinking other people's feelings and opinions of me, and peers taunted me and bullied me for my sensitivity. Essentially, I was marked as irrational and potentially *ill* at different times. My feminine gender expression often made me a target of teasing from my peers as I commonly felt alone at school and that I had few friends. Upon telling teachers about my experiences with peers, I could sense their potential annoyance with me and disbelief of my experiences.

Eventually, I stopped approaching teachers for help with the bullying because I could tell that they would either not believe me or not desire to assist me. I learned to stay quiet and keep myself out of the way. I ended up finding my escape in videogames, such as *The Sims* (Wright, 2000), (a life simulation computer game) where I could create new worlds that were safer and more inclusive, as well as fantasy books that would take me to faraway magical worlds to escape the reality of feeling misunderstood. I would become lost in dreaming as I immersed myself in these fantasy and self-created worlds and became more interested in imagining new worlds than participating in the current one.

In elementary school, teachers began to comment on the levels of anxiety I was exhibiting in class, as well as my inability to keep my schoolwork or desk organized. Challenges with desks, paperwork, remembering dates, and using my agenda emerged at a really young age. Most of my teachers would either scold me for my perceived disorganization or enforce rigid routines and accountability practices to improve my organizational capabilities. While I realize these were often well-intentioned, they still unconsciously communicated a message to me that I was inherently flawed and significantly different in how I moved through the world than my peers in my classes.

Upon starting to use desks after kindergarten, my teachers would commonly note to my parents how messy and disorganized my desks were and my elementary teachers would often keep me in from recess to clean my desk to try and discipline me. Comments on my "Learning Skills" section of my academic report cards continued reporting upon both my lack of independence in terms of the frequency of questions I would ask my teachers and check-ins with them

about my work, as well as my general disorganization at school. Teachers were becoming agitated with the amount of reassurance I required and my continual questions regarding my academic performance and classroom behaviours. Beginning to forget things, I remember one morning when I arrived at school having left my History project at home and was supposed to be presenting it in the first period. Upon being asked where my project was, I had to frantically call my parents and ask them to drive home and pick it up for me and drop it off.[4] While I was ultimately able to perform well academically in many classes, teachers doubted my organizational skills and I continued to lose confidence in my own ability to stay organized. Upon entering my undergraduate degree, I finally started seeing a psychiatrist and received various psychiatric diagnoses and began to access the accommodations and accessibility services at my university.

Entering Post-Secondary Education

Upon finishing my teacher education program and Master of Arts degree, I decided to pursue a PhD in Education and Women and Gender Studies and Sexual Diversity Studies. After struggling with my mental health throughout my undergraduate and graduate degrees, I wanted to pursue further studies in education instead of working in the fields of elementary education or early childhood education (Davies, 2023b). Despite being an Ontario Certified Teacher and eligible to register with the College of Early Childhood Educators, I continued with further academic study and soon became immersed in and enamoured with cultural studies and critical theory.

A particular practicum placement was influential in my decision to not become an elementary teacher immediately. After teaching a lesson where I was assessed by my practicum supervisor, I was informed through my evaluation that I needed to embody the child-centred philosophy of the current school system to a higher degree or else, perhaps, find other avenues in the education system to explore outside of classroom teaching. Child-centred pedagogies and philosophies, while important in their emphasis upon meeting children where they are at and centralizing the voices and curiosities of children in professional practices, are also influential in shaping ideas of which educators do and do not belong in ECEC (Langford, 2007). As Langford (2010) describes in her critique of child-centred pedagogies from her professional experiences teaching in kindergarten:

> When I was a kindergarten teacher, a manual advised me that my classroom should be so centred on the children that a visitor would not be able to identify who I was. Rendering me invisible struck me as poignantly counter to attempts to raise the respect and status of early childhood educators and to include the teacher as an important member of the classroom community (Langford, 2010, p. 113).

This feeling of being "rendered invisible" (Langford, 2010) resonates with my experiences as I felt that I was unable to share my own access needs or anxiety concerns within classroom environments as child-centred approaches overwhelmed my senses through a sense of helplessness that I felt – almost as if I was unable to take any action that could be construed as redirecting the children's behaviour. Upon sharing that I have an anxiety disorder and that I was experiencing a high amount of anxiety in my current practicum placement, I was further encouraged by various mentors to work on my anxiety and reduce any teacher-directed interactions with students or otherwise find a different job outside of classroom teaching in education or another field. I offer this example with care and curiosity to bring about larger questions about ECEC – to engage in a reflection upon if and how educators can imagine themselves as mattering and important, as well as any access and/or accommodation needs that they might require. I share this experience to situate where my curiosities and critiques of child-centredness emerged from.

While I enjoyed working with children and teaching immensely, I often felt that the child-centred context of the kindergarten classroom I was in was not a good fit for my mental health needs and that there was little to no space for me to have my own personhood considered, let alone my experiences with mental distress, in the classroom.[5]

[4] I have thought with this example, as well as a few other mentioned pieces, in other writings as this memory has left an "imprint" upon me; that is, I remember the feelings of shame within my body as I realized that I had not even realized that I left my project at home until I arrived at school (Davies, in press). Elements of this story have been provided in other publications as these school memories highly impacted my understandings of myself as a young child.

[5] I share this experience with care and caution – not to be critical of my practicum placements themselves, but to bring to attention the forms of exclusion that can occur when we have one-dimensional molds of and expectations for pedagogy and teachers.

This experience left me with important questions and feelings of unease about child-centred and developmental approaches that I had yet to know how to put into words. The loss associated with this experience became almost identity shattering, whereby I questioned a career and identity path that I had spent my entire adult life cultivating. Feeling tired, lost, and discouraged, my madness became associated with a sense of a lack of competence and failure. *Was I a bad educator?* I did not feel that my disabled and Mad mind belonged in early childhood education and elementary education and specifically, I felt that my madness was potentially unwelcome. I decided at the time not to pursue future work as a teacher in the formal school system and instead focused on academic pursuits.

Throughout my doctoral studies, I was introduced to—and became highly committed to—cultural studies as a way forward and a discipline, if it can be confined to a singular discipline, as my curiosities about the world that I am a part of continued (Davies, 2023b). I have always been a curious and inquisitive person, but through my engagements with cultural studies, I was able to ask questions about normalized practices that reinforce structural inequities and hierarchies in the world of ECEC. Gaztambide-Fernandez and Cairns (2010) describe how the field of cultural studies is interdisciplinary in nature and involves analyzing "the ways individuals engage and make meaning of their relationships with others and with the institutions that mediate those relationships" (p. 356). I fell in love with cultural studies and critical theories as a way forward thanks to mentors and scholars from whom I learned throughout my PhD. I began to engage with questions pertaining to everyday life and entered doctoral research investigating gay men, emotional intimacies, and gay masculinities as it pertained to users of Grindr, a dating and hook-up application (Davies, 2021). I entered this area of study as a purposeful retreat from early childhood education and elementary education—I needed to move my focus to an area where I felt that exploring my personal experiences and curiosities through critique and deconstruction was a welcomed pursuit and I felt this might not be possible in early childhood education.

Entering Teaching in Post-Secondary ECEC

In Fall 2018, I received my first university lecturer position and found myself re-entering the world of ECEC at the post-secondary education level. This experience of teaching ECEC at the university level was reinvigorating in ways that I was not expecting; I experienced commonality with tenure-track and tenured faculty and mentors who took me under their wing and provided space for my thoughts and ideas. As a sessional instructor, I was able to build long-lasting friendships that I keep to this day. I was beginning to think that, perhaps, there might be space for me in ECEC after all and that critical theories and perspectives had a home in ECEC. The networks and connections I established through this experience were life-filling and affirming. I felt that I belonged in ECEC even though I did not adhere to the developmental status quo. I felt that my ideas were important. I still had questions about the connections between developmentalism and child-centred pedagogies, or how the emphasis on the individual developing child could position a form of educator who is considered *ideal* for scaffolding the development of the normative child (Langford, 2007, 2010; Saracho, 2023; Adriany & Newberry, 2022). However, after this experience of teaching in post-secondary ECEC education, I considered that there were individuals who believed that the field could be made of diverse stories and hold a place for different worldviews. I felt included.

In July 2019, I started a tenure track[6] position as an Assistant Professor in a post-secondary ECE program. Navigating the world of post-secondary ECEC education – as well as ECEC widely – in a tenure-track position has provided me with many challenges and wonderful opportunities while also underscoring the importance of bringing my madness to the forefront in my teaching, writing, and research. If, as Scottish psychiatrist, R.D. Laing (1990) notes, madness is not *only* a breakdown, but also a breakthrough, I have come into myself throughout these last four years and had many breakthroughs about who I am and what theories and perspectives matter to me. It is through these breakthroughs that I have begun to enter into my wholeness in who I am as a Mad person and what I believe.

Disability justice activist, Patty Berne (2015) describes *wholeness* as occurring when "we value our people as they are, for who they are, and that people have inherent worth outside of commodity relations and capitalist notions of productivity" (n.p.). I have certainly felt my madness emerge throughout my life in ways that have

[6] Having a tenure-track position affords a lot of financial privilege and job security that is difficult to achieve in a precarious academic market. Being tenure-track means that you typically spend five years as an assistant professor and then must submit a large application and references for job permanency and to receive tenure. It is important to note how this makes me both precarious and also very privileged and to note this to the audience.

left me feeling labeled as an outsider and on the fringes of acceptability in both ECEC and higher education. While I have often *felt* "out of place" or as though my madness is not welcome, it is by reading, thinking, and learning with and from disability justice and Mad Studies scholars, activists, and writers that I have found affirmation. Through learning to write my way through these feelings of exclusion, I have found inspiration and community and realized that there are many others out there who share the same questions about ECEC, even if I feel alone at times.

I have continued to have questions about some of the exclusions within child-centred and developmentalist pedagogies throughout my time teaching in ECEC.[7] My personal experiences have led to my questioning of what seems like an unquestionable "truth" in ECEC – child development and child-centred pedagogies. The impact of dominant developmental stories has been an inseparable link between early years education and developmental psychology to preserve "normalcy" (Gleason, 1999; Richardson, 1989; see also Davies, Richardson, & Abawi, in press). As articulated by Varga:

> Within the day nursery field, challenging the "gospel" of child-centredness, is heresy, tantamount to labelling oneself as *anti-child*. The tying together of the two words, development and appropriate, creates a conception of practice that is both good and essential. After all, how can one be critical of something that is "appropriate" and focuses on the central "truth" of knowledge about children—their "development" (Varga, 1997, p. 126, emphasis added).

This dominant story of ECEC remains one entrenched in sanism that reinforces the "developing able-bodied rational child" at the centre of professional practice. Ideas of child development that have evolved throughout the twentieth century are often taken for granted as a societal good—because how could one critique the idea of children developing and their health and well-being?

Critiquing the Single Story of Developmentalism

I describe this single story (Adichie, 2009) of child development and child centred-pedagogies to problematize it—I bring it forward to unearth these assumptions of how madness has become only known through pathology and exclusion in ECEC. Madness has never been welcomed in ECEC (Davies et al., 2022b). The monitoring of the mental health and well-being of future educators through quantitative psychometric assessments, for example, became a component of pre-service teacher education (Gleason, 1999; Varga, 2000). Pre-service early childhood education and educators who worked with young children were expected to conform to the tenets of child-centred pedagogies whereby they would normalize themselves to a highly regulated maternal disposition that could be learned through the scientific discourses of psychology and child development (Gleason, 1999; Varga, 1997, 2000).[8]

While there are many other important stories within ECEC that are joyous, this dominant interventionist story—the story of child development—still dominates much of the post-secondary and in-service ECEC world.[9] Disability justice and Mad Studies frameworks ask educators to engage with counter-stories and narratives that are non-dominant—stories that might even disrupt and make *messy* assumptions and beliefs regarding normalcy, education, children, and care (Davies, 2022; Davies & Greensmith, in press). Following disability justice principles (Sins Invalid, 2015), I share the following mad autobiographical poetry to present a narrative with madness that also acts as a critique of ECEC and a call for wholeness in bringing forward Mad knowledges and subjectivities into ECEC education (Davies, 2022, Davies, 2023a, 2023b).

[7] In critiquing child-centred pedagogy, I follow scholars, such as Varga (1997) and Langford (2007), who ask about the exclusions that the hegemonic status of child-centred pedagogy might propagate.

[8] I touch on this exclusion of Mad educators and teacher candidates in Davies (accepted).

[9] This history has also been described in terms of the shifts of the normative image of children and childhood within the lab school, child study, and post-secondary early childhood education movements in Canada. Please see Langford (2019).

Movement Forward with and through ~~Early Childhood Educator's~~ Madness

i choose here
to defy
defy the conventions of what—or who—you might expect
expect to be writing this article
do you expect me?
what does it mean
for someone
to be ~~un~~expected? (Davies,2023a; Cosantino, 2021)
maybe
to be expected
is to be
adjusted.
am i adjusted?
have i adjusted?
my stories
are our stories
stories of early childhood education.
what
stories
of
early childhood education
do we
listen to?
maybe
we all have different ideas
of what early childhood education
is
or can be.
or who
~~an early childhood educator~~
can be and become.
mad educator.
mad educator.
bad mad educator. (Davies et al., 2022a)

mad bad

~~an early childhood educator~~

~~an early childhood educator~~

~~an early childhood educator~~

when i am *feeling*

that i cannot bring my whole self forward

i am silencing

my

queerness

madness

neurodivergence

to be the educator

i am expected to be.

i cannot

be the person who

silences my madness.

hides my madness.

i

refuse

to live in

f

r

a

g

m

e

n

t

s.

i didn't know.

that being an ~~early childhood educator~~.

meant.

changing my~~self~~.

~~an early childhood educator~~

~~an early childhood educator~~

~~an early childhood educator~~

~~my. voice.~~

~~voice.~~

~~early childhood educator's voice.~~

you might think this poem disturbing.

d—i—s—t—u—r—b—i—n—g

does—madness—disturb—you?

how can someone *fit* when the w—o—r—l—d doesn't try and *fit* them?

~~and the educator.~~

~~the early childhood educator.~~

~~the mad early childhood educator.~~

Conclusion

My Mad poetry might not make "sense" to you—that is part of its beauty and promise. In their article on the potentials of subtracting developmentalism from ECEC, Delgado et al. (2020) articulate how "it is these processes of investing in the creation of particular kinds of subjects and subjectivities that, we think, pedagogists need to think with and unsettle" (n.p.). I have attempted to bring to the forefront a counter-story regarding ECEC to critique, unsettle, and challenge ideas of which educators do and do not belong in ECEC. Disability justice and Mad Studies frameworks call for such an unsettling of dominant developmentalist narratives and stories. By bringing together my personal autobiographical writing, Mad poetic writing, as well my current theorizing, along with other writings regarding the histories of ECEC, I present a counter-story regarding the sanist exclusion of Mad knowledges and subjectivities in ECEC.

If stories are all that people are (King, 2003), then it is a worthwhile endeavour to consider child development and developmentalism only one of *many* stories within ECEC. However, due to the sanist exclusion of Mad knowledges and educators from ECEC, educators do not often get to encounter Mad counter-stories within the ECEC field and sector. As such, I finish this article by offering my madness as a provocation to early childhood education by following disability justice and Mad Studies writings that emphasize first person accounts of experiences that promote new ways of considering both disability and madness (Wong, 2020). Mad autobiographical poetic writings (smith, 2018, 2020) desire madness as a necessary intervention—a disruption of the singular story (Adichie, 2009) of pathology that haunts ECEC (Davies, 2023a). Mad poetics harness *feelings* of non-belonging for aesthetic and creative inquiry that demand the creation of new worlds. To return to Laing (1990), madness might then not only be known as a breakdown, but a potentiality—a break-through—a rupture (Davies, 2022; Snyder et al., 2019) in creating a new world.

Piepzna-Samarasinha (2021) asks in her article on disability justice and healing: *"What does 'healing' mean to you/us?"* (p. 71). For me, it has been through sharing my counter-stories and being able to acknowledge and hold space for my madness that I have been able to heal and cultivate new relationships with myself and others. Seeking disability and Mad communities has been a much-needed healing modality for me. While medical and psychological interventions are one form of healing—a form that dominant society pushes on disabled and Mad people—there are many ways in which healing can take place. I now ask: what would it take to bring healing through disability justice and Mad activism into ECEC? How can educators honour the silenced and unsaid narratives and stories of marginalized educators? By thinking with disability justice and Mad poetics, it is my hope that this article begins this work.

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