The difference childhood makes: Uniqueness, accommodation, and the ethics of otherness

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Abstract: This article examines how the concept of childhood shapes understandings of social difference in education, with a focus on the intersections of ability, disability, and pedagogy. Through an exploration of childhood objects, teacher candidates' reflections revealed three recurring ways to approach difference: as an expression of individual uniqueness, as requiring accommodation, and as an irreconcilable disruption. We draw on Lauren Berlant to show how narratives of uniqueness and accommodation tended to reaffirm the 'cruel optimism' of normative developmental frameworks and ideals of assimilation. We further show how moments of disruptive difference unsettled and inconvenienced these paradigms, creating openings to reflect on educators' own ways of embodying alterity to create a space for criticality. By centering the ethical possibilities inherent in disruptive differences, this work invites educators to imagine education not as a site of management or resolution, but as a space of relational interdependence, where coexistence depends on valuing the inconvenience of difference. Our findings call for a reimagining of pedagogy as an ethical encounter that embraces the complexity of living with and through difference.

Introduction

The field of education continues to raise – and fail to raise – questions about the meaning and importance of social difference in teaching and learning relationships. Over three decades ago, Harper (1997) offered a historical overview of the role of educational policy and practices in the construction of difference beginning with the inception of the common school in Canada. Harper surfaces four orientations – suppression, segregation, denial, and celebration – and shows how each one operates to safeguard white supremacy that sits at the core of the nation. A fifth orientation, which she calls critical, offers a framework to examine how differences are produced through structures of unequal power and, in turn, how schools are implicated in reproducing those inequities. More recently, Kerr and Andreotti (2020) examine how difference continues to be produced through educational discourse and practice. Drawing on the works of Jacques Derrida, Linda Alcoff, Walter Mignolo and Ramón Grosfoguel, Kerr and Andreotti (2020) theorize three dispositions – autoimmunity, willful ignorance, and Enlightenment epistemology – that uphold hierarchical ideologies and colonial legacies. They show how these positions work together to preserve "dominant narratives and frames of reference of the nation-state that exclude consideration of the racial or cultural 'other'" (p. 653).

Discussions of difference and belonging in the field of education are also deeply entangled with the construction of childhood. At the very same time that childhood was used to chart the ascension of the modern human subject from lower to higher forms of thought, this same progressive construction was taken as proof of the inferiority of racially minoritized, Indigenous, disabled, poor, queer, and transgender peoples and justified the 'need' of education to assimilate, control, and ultimately destroy (Burman, 2017, 2024; Rollo, 2018). Critical scholars of childhood have long shown how the discourse of child development upholds normative notions of being and belonging that, in turn, reinstall inequities and hierarchies (see for

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instance, Burman, 2017; Stockton, 2009). Precisely because childhood has been and continues to be used to make selfhood legible within normative structures of being and belonging, childhood has also been used to construct all that is not legible within dominant frameworks as deficiency: i.e., what grows that 'should not' or what fails to grow within an imagined linearity of being (Stockton, 2009; Taylor, 2013). The trope of the child as a developing being, then, carries difficult knowledge about systems of normalcy and oppression, and is the reason Burman (2024) turns to childhood "as method" to identify and deconstruct these entanglements.

In this article, we consider how the construct of childhood is utilized to "make" difference, with particular attention to the difference childhood makes in thinking about the meaning and experience of ability and disability in education. In relation to this last point, the title of our paper is inspired by Michalko's (2002) book, *The Difference that Disability Makes*, in which he analyzes how environments produce disabilities as "other" to humanity and what constitutes a good life. For Michalko (2002), disability is an identity and a method that makes ablest constructions of difference apparent. Disability therefore exposes socially produced exclusions, but Michalko also shows us how disability can be used to rethink the very terms of humanity. The difference disability makes, then, is its reconfiguration of humanity as grounded in dynamics of relation, vulnerability, and interdependency. Mirroring Michalko's discussion, Goodley et al. (2016) offer the notion of the "dishuman child" that recognizes the humanity of children with disabilities while also "celebrating the ways in which disabled children reframe what it means to be human" (p. 770). Together, Michalko, Goodley, Runswick-Cole, and Liddiard theorize disability as manifesting a deeply relational and ethical quality of humanity precisely because disability exposes and disrupts normative frames of development that limit and even harm children as much as or more often than they enable growth.

The Problem with "Better" and the Promise of Inconvenience

We take as our entry point the idea that childhood is not necessarily or always about the experiences of children. We are not alone in this idea. Levander (2006), Gill-Peterson (2018) and Webster (2021) turn to history to show how, from the late 18th Century through to the early 20th Century within North America, childhood has been a discursive tool in the making of selfhood as tied to broader discourses of nation, capitalism, and Western imperialism. In this context, children were viewed as a window into earlier versions of humanity that were then used to measure and track development to higher forms of existence, ending in the achievement of rationality undergirding modern civilization. Within this same framework, differences were cast as deviations from development and humanity itself (Levander, 2006). Ironically, at the very same time that children were made to uphold progress narratives of being and belonging, racialized children and communities were cast in opposite terms: as uncivilized, irrational, and not human at all (Rollo, 2018). All this adds up to the use of childhood to justify a colonial agenda that was and continues to be used to harm children and communities not thought to exist within this construct.

Childhood continues to be a portal for inquiries about the meaning of selfhood and social difference. Within education, differences that appear as disability have been taken up as a deficiency. As Parekh (2023) argues, "Students identified through special education or who identify as disabled often feel that the classroom can be a hostile or challenging environment" (p. 118). Even when teachers use accommodations that seek to adapt classroom environments to engage multiple modalities of learning, identified students or students who identify as disabled can feel marginalized by those efforts because, as Parekh (2023) writes, "the stigma often associated with visible accommodations in school can produce a threat to students' self-identity" (p. 120). Parekh (2023) further reminds us that schools construct "ability" in hierarchical terms, such that certain abilities are thought to be more desirable than others (p. 6): an idea that can reproduce ableist ideologies bent on assimilation to normative outcomes. Thus while accommodations can productively forge multiple entry points to knowledge, they may at the same time leave unchanged normative learning outcomes operating underneath such inclusive efforts.

In her study of parent memoirs of disabled children, Apgar (2023) makes a similar point in surfacing a recurring motif that she calls, "a narrative of achievement of normality in childhood" (p. 1). As Apgar

(2023) found, while parental narratives describe concerns about their children having to "navigate an ableist world" and thereby "gesture to a more political way to think about disability as a social experience," they also focused on "establishing their disabled child's inherent right to belong to that same ableist social world" (pp. 5-6). However, in "writ[ing] children into the realms of 'normality,'" Apgar (2023) also highlights a proclivity to overlook "the entanglement of normativity and privilege that position disabled children outside these same realms" (p. 6). For Apgar (2023), and for us, the idea that disability can and should "achieve" something called "normality" repeats a neoliberal "narrative of overcoming" that leaves intact structural inequities and ultimately means having to be reinscribed into "the very same domains that stigmatize, debilitate, and exclude people with disabilities from full inclusion in all aspects of life" (p. 6). Also referred to as "the neoliberalization of inclusion" (p. 6), this logic repeats a violent narrative that disability can and should ultimately be disappeared through assimilation to ableist formations that are upheld as 'normal' and that go unchallenged as ableist.

This "achievement of normality" is much like McGuire's (2016) argument that "under the rule of normal human development, the only possible way for the autistic subject to be read as a good or at least nearly developed human is to learn, approximate, and perform normalcy" (p. 102). Returning to the context of education, practices of accommodation can carry traces of this normative logic. While diversifying modes of pedagogical address, practices of accommodation can also leave intact educational outcomes seeking to adapt disabled children to normative ways of being, relating, and living that may or may not be attainable or desirable for them. In this sense, disability remains a problem to socialize into a pre-set developmental trajectory and ultimately, a future constructed as 'better' (Burman, 2024).

The problem with "better" is that it "imports apparatuses of normativity and regulation" in the name of progress and development that uphold practices of exclusion and oppression (Burman, 2024, p. 10). This idea underlies Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism," a term they use to describe the promise, and pressure to pursue, a seemingly better future that is, in fact, not available, and certainly not to all. Indeed, optimism is cruel because it upholds conditions that also thwart possibility. As Berlant (2011) explains, cruel optimism refers to an,

> affective attachment to what we call "the good life," which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it. (p. 27)

The optimistic promise of a good life is "bad for so many" because it operates by structural inequities that already refuse access, especially to those already marginalized by the normative ideations of capital ownership, economic productivity, and heteronormativity to name a few, driving what constitutes a good life. Not unlike the discourse of "betterment," optimism is cruel because it idealizes normative aims and outcomes that uphold the very inequities that the promised future is said to alleviate. Within education, cruel optimism can be said to drive the promise of achieving within and/or fitting into systems and structures that reward normativity while at the same time reproducing exclusionary and disabling environments and ideologies. Ironically, cruel optimism propels our drive to achieve the "good life" even while it remains inaccessible and even "bad" for all those who are marginalized by its idealization of normativity. From the vantage of cruel optimism, disability is constructed as lacking and as requiring socialization in a "better" direction, which, in actual fact, means disappearing disability in the name of achieving "the good life." Developmental narratives therefore risk reproducing cruel optimism when they exclude disability from everyday life (Goodley et al., 2022).

By contrast, the framing of disability as a generative reimagination of humanity invites new ways to conceptualize our common and uncommon co-existence. At issue here is a valuation of difference precisely because it resists assimilation into pre-existing formations. In this sense, difference signifies as an "otherness" that manifests what Lévinas (1985,1998) describes as "alterity" that demands an ethical response other than what can be predicted, expected, or known. As Lévinas (1985) writes, alterity arrives via the exposure of an Other that "cannot become a content [that] your thought would embrace" (pp. 86-87); quite the contrary, "it is uncontainable; it leads you beyond" (p. 87). This "leading beyond" is not, however, an escape from the troubles weighing down on the ego; quite the contrary, it refers to a weighty

responsibility that "*puts into question* the proud independence of beings" and requires that I "give" over myself to the call of the Other (p. 116, original emphasis). Berlant (2022) gets at a similar quality of otherness in their later work, where they examine the value of *inconvenience* as a surprising resource because it agitates ego boundaries that otherwise defend against the obligations of living in the world with others[1]. Through the construct of inconvenience, Berlant (2022) calls attention to how being bothered can interrupt the smooth-running engine of normativity and demand a different sort of response. When we are inconvenienced, we are charged with the question of "how to create other kinds of social relation" beyond what we may already think we know (Berlant 2022, p. 11). Framing difference as an inconvenient, rather than as deficient, may catalyze new ways to conceptualize relationships, provided we can welcome the disruption it invites. The inconvenience of difference is not a negative quality that teachers must grasp and correct, but a generative reminder that interruption and interdependence – and not proud independence and individualism – sit at the core of coexistence.

Against this theoretical backdrop, we examine how educators represented and sometimes assumed the meaning of difference through their discussion of childhood objects. Interestingly, our analysis surfaced an arc of difference that mirrors Berlant's (2011; 2022) notions of optimism and inconvenience. While educators overwhelmingly framed difference as something that could be socialized to achieve "the good life," far less common, but still nascent within our data, were constructions of difference that refused assimilation into normative outcomes and that inconveniently demanded different conceptions of what, then, education and childhood can mean. We observe how power dynamics within inclusive practices shape who "gets to include whom and into what" (Bourassa, 2021, p. 254). Such power dynamics are enmeshed with normative educational goals for productivity and that haunt participants' decisions about which differences are deemed unique and thus valuable and which differences provoke the impulse to change, erase, and develop towards the 'good life.' In what follows, we show how differences were constructed as desirable when they reflected and/or could be adapted to fit into normative frameworks of being and development. We further underscore the value of times when emerging teachers used objects and metaphors that reached to the elusive – and inconvenient – aspects of difference that exceeded existing categories and that gestured toward the reimagination of teaching, education, and childhood itself.

Method

Research Context

This article is part of a larger three-year project that examined the role of childhood memory in teachers' conceptualizations of teaching and childhood. The overall aim of the research was to understand how educators use childhood memories and objects to represent key ideas, concerns, and assumptions about the children they would one day meet in classrooms and other places of learning[2]. Our participants were undergraduate students enrolled in teacher education and childhood studies courses at four university sites in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, and New York City. Research assistants at each site conducted focus groups consisting of three to five participants, totalling 15 participants overall[3]. The first and second authors of this article were Research Assistants on the project, which was led by the third author as Principal Investigator. Focus group prompts were designed to invite participants to consider links between their own childhoods and broader social meanings, or how social and political contexts may have affected – shaped, privileged, marginalized – their own experiences as children. At each site, participants were invited to share their motivations for choosing their object, personal attachments or uses of the object, and relationships to other objects in the focus group. They were also asked to consider the broader social meanings of their object, such as the modalities, capacities, and qualities of being presumed or required for its use.

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[1] Berlant's (2022) concept of "inconvenience" also informs a forthcoming paper by Farley and Kennedy (in press).

[2] Previous analyses of the data surfaced themes of children's nuisance-making (Farley et al., 2020), childhood innocence (Garlen et al., 2020), children's agencies (Garlen et al., 2022), nostalgia (Farley et al., 2024), teachers' memories of parents (Chang-Kredl et al., 2021) and getting sick at school (Sonu et al., 2022), as well as the status of dreamwork (Sonu et al., 2020) and transitional objects in narratives of learning to teach (Chang-Kredl et al., 2024).

[3] Focus group discussions were held and recorded using Zoom technology.

We were struck by how participants used their objects to represent the meaning and experience of difference in childhood, and specifically, differences in children's learning, access, and modes of representing knowledge. We further noted how participants used their narratives of difference to think about teaching practices that may be used to respond to differences, with a focus on how these constructions both repeated and opened new ways of conceptualizing the meaning and work of education. We therefore begin with the idea that childhood objects do not simply carry pre-set meanings, but that those who carry, keep, and share such objects project meanings into them. Such meanings may be literal, such as in describing how a child may use a certain object (i.e., reading a book), but they may also be implied (i.e., ideas of adventure and freedom projected onto a bicycle or binoculars). In attempting to surface implied meanings, we recognized the risk of ourselves projecting our own meanings onto the data. To ensure reliability and validity across the data, we each read and coded focus group discussions individually and then met as a group to share findings.

Important to our discussion of difference, focus group leaders asked participants to share the limits of their object to invite discussion about the qualities of childhood it did *not* represent. The participants of our study themselves embodied diverse social positions in terms of race, sexuality, age, and to a lesser extent, gender (Table 1, reproduced from Farley et al., 2024, p. 578).

Table 1
Description of Participants

City	Pseudonym	Preferred Age	Gender	Race	Sexuality	Age	Artefact
Montreal	Couscous	4-6 yrs	Female	Egyptian White	Female	22	Stuffed animal
	Rebecca	5-7 yrs	Female	Japanese Canadian	Heterosexual	27	Binoculars
	Kassandra	4-12 yrs	Female	White	Female	44	Bike
	Tam	8 yrs	Female	Indian Canadian	Heterosexual	31	Stuffed animal
Toronto	MJ	12-18 yrs	Female	Filipino	Heterosexual	21	Stuffed animal
	Kelsey	7-11 yrs	Female	White	Not straight	21	Bead maze
	Shelby	4-10 yrs	Female	South Asian	Bisexual	22	Dr. Suess book
	Denise	14-18 yrs	Female	Vietnamese	Heterosexual	24	Drawing
	Liza	9-16 yrs	Female	Asian	Bisexual (not out)	21	Pencil sharpener
Ottawa	Valerie	5-12 yrs	Female	Jewish	LGBTQA+ Pansexual	20	Watering can
	Thelma	5-12 yrs	Female	Black	Heterosexual	19	Beaded structure
	Sky	10-16 yrs	Non-binary	Filipino	Pansexual	18	Notebook
New York	Reina	6-12 yrs	Female	Asian Chinese	Straight	23	Animé characters
	Sarah	7-11 yrs	Female	Hispanic	--	21	Stuffed animal
	Michael	6-8 yrs	Male	White	Gay	21	Bag of flour

The 15 participants of our study referenced a broad range of positions of sexuality, from pansexual to gay to "not straight." Just four identified as White. We note this diversity of social identities as a backdrop to our focus on difference in this article and to keep in mind the many experiences, contexts, intersections, and positions that the participants of our study occupied in relationship to each other, the researchers, and the contexts that surrounded, and sometimes stifled them as children. As researchers, we identify across a range of positions in relation to sexuality, age, and to a lesser extent gender and race as three White, cisgender women. The third author of this paper has previously engaged in self-reflection about how the researcher's childhood becomes implicated in the research process, especially when the topic of research addresses childhood (Chang-Kredl et al., 2024).

Findings

Difference: Three Ways

Our analysis surfaced three main themes: 1) difference as individual uniqueness; 2) difference as a departure from social norms requiring accommodation and inclusion; and 3) difference as inconvenient otherness and alterity. We further identified sub-themes at work within each (Table 2). First, when difference was described as an experience of individual uniqueness, participants also tended to refer to

universalized themes of childhood including comfort, protection, adventure, and freedom. Second, when participants referred to differences as a departure from expected educational outcomes and social norms, they tended to consider how their objects could be changed or revised to widen points of access. This second theme was further linked to a desire for inclusion, but also socialization in that there was a tendency to frame teaching and learning in terms of accommodating children's diverse styles of learning, with the ultimate aim (to achieve) extant educational outcomes. Here, difference was understood as a call to change teaching practices, but not the outcomes of education itself. Third, participants described difference as an experience of disruption that could not easily be reconciled or interpellated. This third theme differed from both uniqueness and accommodation in that it conveyed "killjoy" qualities that disrupt the aims of schooling and thus suggest the need to reimagine what education itself can and should mean (Ahmed, 2001).

Table 2
Themes and Sub-themes

Meaning of Difference	Sub-theme	Sub-theme
Uniqueness	Comfort/Protection	Adventure/Discovery
Departure from norms	Accommodation	Socialization
Inconvenience	Disruption	Alterity

Desirable Differences: Individual Uniqueness

Most participants described their objects as reflections of their own individual and unique differences as children. Sometimes the object itself was described as unique and at other times, the object was used to narrate the uniqueness of a special relationship, event, or feeling that was formative to their childhood experiences. That is, their objects came to represent an internal experience made from a special time of life affected by significant others. Within narratives of individual uniqueness, participants also invoked notions of child development. Specifically, they spoke about their uniqueness as a forerunner to experiences that supported their growth, such as the security provided by a stuffed toy, or the independence and industry made possible through adventure. In these narratives, difference was ironically constructed as something that could not be replaced, even as it supported a universal idea of growing up.

Stuffies appeared at each research site and were described similarly by the participants who brought them as irreplaceable and comforting, but also utilitarian within a larger narrative of emotional development. Commonly, stuffies were introduced as useful for children to develop emotional regulation skills through providing comfort as an item used to self-soothe. For example, one participant, Sarah described her stuffie as a judgment-free friend sounding board for emotion in times of difficulty, while another from another site similarly admitted holding onto her object because, no matter what happens in the uncertainties of life, "that stuffed animal is gonna be ok with it." Both participants also spoke to the fact that stuffies were irreplaceable, indeed special, even while they had been changed by time, such as a broken ear or cycle through the washing machine. Here, the stuffies' imperfections became yet another quality marking of their uniqueness and that made them especially their own. For instance, one participant reflected on the uniqueness of their toy amid the simulacra of many others: "I could go and buy another exact same one at *Toys-R-Us*, but it would not be MY [wolfie]."[4]

This theme of comfort was also represented by Michael, who chose baking flour as his object. Michael, who was the only participant identifying as a cisgender man, used his object to recall times of baking and the pleasure of eating the fruits of his labour. While Michael acknowledged that his choice of object may reflect a common activity experienced by many children, he also underlined the special significance of his object by recalling memories of baking with his grandmother who had recently passed away. For Michael, these grand-maternal memories manifested a form of comfort that was also linked to

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[4] Toys-R-Us is a toy retailer in North America.

development, not unlike the stuffies described above. Specifically, he narrated the comfort of his early experiences with his grandmother as the foundation that allowed him to engage with grief and loss with some measure of security. Still today, Michael bakes to feel connected to his grandmother and his childhood memories.

Objects of comfort tended to be self-referential, in that they were directly linked to participants' personal experiences. As a function of the focus group, however, such narratives were also shaped and shifted in correspondence with others. On this point, it is notable that while participants initially introduced their stuffies with tenderness, they also expressed self-conscious feelings of shame or embarrassment about their continued use and need for them as adults. This affective shift changed the meaning of their comfort items, which were then used as measures by which to judge appropriate or inappropriate attachments based on age and gender. As Sarah put it, "no one judges a kid for having their comfort item they think it's cute," a fact she compared to the developmental assumption that, in adulthood, "they're not going to have it." Here, Sarah's ambivalence signaled the friction between inconvenience and progress narratives, where persisting emotional attachments to comfort objects were cast as an inconvenience tainting the fantasy of arriving in adulthood fully and completely, as an independent subject living a 'good life' (see also Chang-Kredl et al., 2024). Michael's flour also seemed to occupy a similar tension between progress and inconvenience. On the one hand, his comfort item did not carry the vulnerability of those carrying stuffies into adulthood, possibly due to cooking/baking being an adult activity, thereby planting itself as developmentally appropriate. On the other hand, Michael's choice of a comfort item was an outlier in the group. Not only was it not cuddly, his object disrupted gender norms that might otherwise push boys out of the kitchen and away from their grandmothers.

In addition to comfort items, participants also turned to other objects to assert other dominant tropes of childhood to assert their experiences as both unique and developmentally rich. For instance, Rebecca and Kassandra brought a bicycle and binoculars respectively to represent childhood as a special time of life involving the freedom of adventuring. The bike in particular was described fondly with memories of playing without supervision in the forest with friends. This type of adventurous play was described to be foundational in developing resilience, problem solving, adaptability, fitness, and curiosity. Further, Tam situated her childhood memories of adventuring in juxtaposition with her nephew's childhood, which she viewed as lacking such experiences due to fears of risk and increasingly digital attachments. She framed her thoughts on the matter in the form of a plea: "Let the kid go out! Like he needs to explore, like he needs to find things! He doesn't need you!"

For these participants, childhood experiences of adventure and industry were constructed as formative to the development of independence and agency, repeating historically produced ideas that link children to nature and nature to 'good' childhoods. Participants' positive constructions of adventure and autonomy were particularly powerful in a world that values individualism over dependency. Significant to this last point, Kassandra noted her pride when she "graduated up to a banana seat bicycle" adding that it "was the coolest thing because I didn't have training wheels [anymore]". This pride-filled memory was infused with developmentalism and specifically, the idea that increasingly advanced forms of activity (should) replace earlier ones that were constructed as lesser or formative. This trope of children's exploration of the world - such as in the examples of the bike and binoculars - were repeatedly described within frameworks of progress towards independence. For example, when expanding on her memory, Kassandra added, "I remember one of my parents just running along behind me, because I was a little older. Um, and finally I just made it on my own." In this narrative, the uniqueness of a child's adventuring was linked to movement away from earlier stages, including one's former self who had yet to develop out of their reliance on training wheels, and perhaps more symbolically, their dependency on others.

Similarly, Shelby brought the book *Oh the Places You'll Go!* by Dr. Seuss. For Shelby, the value of the book and why she chose it was intimately tied to the critical importance of literacy development from the perspective of a teacher. However, on a more personal note, Shelby also explained that this book was the first book she owned herself, noting that owning books was not readily available for her family. Further,

this was a book Shelby read with her family at home and that found its way into her life across time. In this sense, Shelby's book represented more than skills development in that it also symbolized her personal and emotional connections with family. Yet, Shelby found herself leaning back onto her teacher role by justifying the selection of the book for its uses in literacy development in reflecting on how her object " serves…a different purpose to a child" in that "reading serves…the literacy in the storytelling" and then, gesturing to other objects brought to the focus group, such as toys, could "help them engage motor skills and development." When discussing how her object did or did not represent all childhoods, Shelby considered accommodations by discussing how her book could be adapted for children who prefer to read oral histories and verbal sharing. Interestingly, the book's plot, which Shelby did not explicitly address, rests on a developmental arc of becoming as a matter of overcoming obstacles to arrive at a 'good life' made from a future of endless possibilities.

All these items – the stuffies, flour, bike, binoculars, and book – point to an irony that we suggest may invite new teachers into critical reflection and thought: that is, while narratives of uniqueness reflect the inimitable ways children experience and act on their worlds, so too might the idea of uniqueness feed into a universalized conception of what counts as a 'good' childhood, including notions about which developmentally-appropriate objects can cultivate good ways of being unique. In framing childhood as a unique quality of individuals, participants tended to overlook how this idea upheld a normative construction of childhood. Returning to Berlant (2011), uniqueness discourse may be read as a "cruel optimism" insofar as it holds out a notion of preferable differences that are not accessible to or even desired by all children, while positioning differences falling outside the normative bounds of childhood as deficits requiring uninvited management, socialization, and accommodation, an idea we turn to next.

Accommodating Differences: Getting it Right

Teaching is a complex negotiation that inherits dominant discourses of childhood and development, even while teachers themselves grapple with notions of difference, including their own, to complicate these very ideas. In relation to this last point, Britzman (2003) positions teaching as a site of psychic and social conflict, where teachers negotiate contradictory discourses, unresolved identifications, and the anxieties of becoming. In her classic text, *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach*, Britzman (2003) examines learning to teach as a process fraught with tensions between the public narratives of what a teacher ought to be and the private struggles of teachers reckoning with the child they once were and the teacher they might become: a notion we address more deeply in an another article (Mirkovic et al., 2023.) This tension between dominant discourse and social and emotional conflict can be prone to eclipse within contexts of early childhood education in the search for "fun" strategies and effective solutions over critical engagements with and theories about teaching, childhood, and difference (Vintimilla, 2014, p. 79). Here, the idea of 'good' teaching may look more like compliance, and teachers may unintentionally reinforce dominant discourses of learning and development rather than challenging or deconstructing them (Grumet, 1988).

A good number of participants in our study tucked themselves inside both sides of this tension, and in this way, generated narratives of difference as an important part of childhood even as they upheld dominant notions of development as a progressive attainment. In these narratives, participants tended to construct differences as something to be met with a solution that could set children on a predictable (and preferable) path to learning. This solutions-focused perspective seemed to manifest in participant concerns about children's learning that departed from normative development and in their imagination of teaching practices that could right their detours. However, in these efforts to include students within a trajectory of development, teachers may be repeating underlying constructions of normativity. In contrast, we underscore the value of times when teachers engage with the alterity of others, and in so doing, engage the labour of continually adapting to the (ongoing) inconvenience that differences do bring. Unlike the narratives of uniqueness discussed in the previous section, participants who speculated about learning departures also flagged the social and political structures that act on and order children unequally within

hierarchies of difference. Importantly, in these narratives, participants most often pointed to the limits of their objects, rather than children themselves.

For instance, Kelsey's bead maze was initially presented through a developmental lens, emphasizing its relevance in cultivating what Kelsey refers to as children's "developmental repertoires." However, Kelsey also noted the exclusion implied in the brightly coloured beads adorning her object, and specifically the implied assumption of its utility to and for sighted children. Thinking further, Kelsey contemplated the value of changing her object so that it could address a greater diversity, including blind children, by incorporating different textures and sizes of beads. As Kelsey put it, "there might be other ways to make it more stimulating like by adding different textures instead of having all the beads feel the same and kind of have the same shape." Here, Kelsey used her object to imagine an accommodation that might "encapsulate development for all children who aren't just relying on the same senses." Despite this accommodation, however, the underlying aim to develop children's motor skills, and the related idea of children progressing developmental stages, remained relatively intact.

Like Kelsey, Denise articulated a similar logic of accommodation through her object: a children's drawing. Specifically, Denise suggested all children should "engage in the activity of drawing" as a means of cultivating "important skills" that contribute to their development, but she also applied a class-based analysis to note that not all children have access to art supplies. This discussion led her to conceptualize different forms of access to drawing, including digital drawing, as a way to accommodate greater numbers of children. Still, while noting different points of access, Denise nonetheless held onto the view that drawing is and ought to remain an important part of childhood. Once again like Kelsey, Denise used her object to speak about accommodating children's varying points of access, while at the same time retaining the importance of drawing to children's development.

In both cases, Kelsey and Denise discussed how their objects fell short in supporting a child's developmental progress, without questioning development itself as an exclusionary construct. That is, in adapting their objects to imagine inclusive practices, they also held onto a solutions-focused idea of accommodation, ironically mirroring the promise of developmental ascension away from trouble to the triumph of understanding. It is not that drawing isn't important for many children. Indeed, re-imagining drawing to include different modalities, as Denise did, represents an important intervention insofar as teachers *do* have an obligation to organize learning environments that open points of access to greater possibilities. At the same time, the developmental assumptions underlying practices of accommodation may overlook how difficulty is itself a generative aspect of both teaching and learning, provided we can welcome and work through its significance. Even more difficult is the idea that, even within models of universal design, not all children will arrive at the same developmental outcome, and nor should this be the only way to conceptualize a meaningful education.

Still, participants most often proposed accommodations to better suit children's learning needs, without questioning how accommodations themselves can fall short and into a notion of universalism. For instance, Kassandra presented three different photographs of children's bicycles, offering suggestions like training wheels and power handles to support the use of the object for children with physical differences. While responsive to the different ways children move, her narrative left intact the idea that childhood is defined by adventuring in nature, also explored in the previous section. Indeed, Kassandra described her commitment to accommodation as also a commitment to preserve for all children "a sense of freedom too." Another participant, Rebecca, went further to suggest that her object (binoculars) underlined the importance of "movement" among "trees'' and "going outside," was "pretty accessible" and even "universal." Unimaginable within both narratives is the idea that some children may never ride a bike or scramble around in the trees. Unimaginable within both narratives is the idea that children adventure on different terms, and in so doing, upset the universalized notion that equates freedom with physical movement in nature, and perhaps even the idea that accommodations should be geared towards the attainment of this aim.

Rebecca and Kassandra's connection of freedom with wilderness holds deep significance, not just in its support of idealized notions of childhood innocence, but also in the assumptions it makes about who is deserving of such freedom. As these aspiring teachers cling to universalized concepts of childhood, they seem challenged to embrace alternative ideas about what it means to explore, adventure, or play. Their approach to accommodating differences appeared primarily focused on adjusting the object to fit predefined developmental objectives. This notion of accommodation suggested an inclination to conform to conventional views, as evidenced by their preference for standardized choices to encapsulate childhood experiences. Interestingly, some participants admitted that, if they were to repeat this exercise in the future, they would opt for more "standardized" objects that better aligned with normative constructions of childhood, just as the accommodations they described were deemed acceptable mostly if they supported children's achievement of established developmental norms.

At play in these discussions was also an assumption that accommodations apply only to individuals with disabilities, rather than recognizing their relevance for all individuals – both children and adults – across various contexts. For instance, when Rebecca and Kassandra framed "training wheels," they did not frame these tools as accommodations when the imagined user was non-disabled. Rather, training wheels were considered "developmentally appropriate" based on the twin assumptions that the need for them should be expected for children of a certain age and they would eventually move beyond these supports. In other words, accommodation was *not* raised when normative development was assumed, even when the technology described was used for precisely this purpose. In this way, disabled subjectivities were constructed as requiring special accommodation on the way to a good life, and the very meaning of a good life was cast in opposition to disability unless accommodations could change the course of a child's future to meet normative ends. Here we are reminded again of Berlant's (2011) "cruel optimism" as orienting attachments to the future that, while accessible to greater numbers of children, are still harnessed to exclusionary assumptions of what counts as having a liveable life.

Thinking further about accommodations, participants also looked to tenets of universal design and inclusive policies to amend their objects and move them into more accessible options, with the goal of supporting all children in development. Still, they drew on a linear model of development to inform the necessary accommodations for their objects. However, in some instances, they confronted assumed developmental goals and redefined the purpose of an object in more creative ways. In some examples, like that of the bike and binoculars, difference was an inconvenience to be accommodated, and successful accommodation replaced that difference with a discourse of overcoming (Apgar, 2023). The implication of these amendments was that some differences do not qualify as valued uniqueness, but rather a nuisance to others, to linear development, and to the purpose of childhood. In these ways, differences in children's capacities to engage with an "important part of childhood" like that of exploring on the bike, were cast as deficits either in the child, or their environment, rather than the model itself.

In the next section, we turn to a third construction of difference that interrupts and inconveniences the language of uniqueness and accommodation. Here, we explore times when participants articulated the disruptive qualities of difference that, while often difficult to describe, were enacted in ordinary and everyday relationships. This disruptive quality of difference opened onto the elusive aspects of being in relation and called participants to reimagine the terms of those relations. Much more than uniqueness and accommodation, we suggest that difference as disruption opens onto the ethical ground of childhood representation and education itself.

Inconvenient Differences: The Alterity of Otherness

In our ongoing inquiry into the interface between childhood and difference, notions of alterity and otherness emerged on the horizon of focus group discussions. These articulations were fewer in quantity and frequency across the research sites, perhaps indicative of their marginal status in relation to conceptualizations of difference within education, which, as shown above, tended to gather around themes of uniqueness and accommodations discourse. Because of their minor status in relation to the overall data set, we initially experienced the two narratives of this section as inconvenient to our analytic process and

even wondered if they warranted inclusion. Upon deeper reflection, however, and returning to Berlant's (2022) discussion of the potential of inconvenience, we decided to contemplate their significance precisely because they disrupted the categorical efforts of our analysis.

Thelma described the many differences of her beaded box as manifesting multiple forms and sizes to nuance the otherwise blanket assumption of childhood innocence. As she explained, the "different shapes, different sizes, and different colours" of her beaded box represented layered experiences and uneven access to innocence. As she described each bead, "some of them are kind of fragile or safe, others are strong, and some of them easily break, and some don't." To this she also added, "people don't really even look at the individual beads, they just look at the general picture, like this is a handbag or this thing." In this reflection, Thelma seemed to recognize each bead's value not just in and for its individual attributes, but how, collectively, each bead represented something larger than their individual distinctiveness. Indeed, for Thelma, the beads collectively gestured toward a quality of existence exceeding any singular modality or category. Also interesting to note is that Thelma originally intended to share a different object. Reflecting on this initial choice, she explained that "snowflakes show…the uniqueness of childhood," however she then shared her decision to change her mind about repeating this common trope because "you can't really link it to…how to see the world differently." Thelma's change of mind seemed to hinge on her desire to complicate uniqueness discourse with a more complex construction of how, through difference, we may reimagine the world.

Similarly, Sky redefined the significance of their object, which they initially presented as a standard school notebook. Soon thereafter, however, Sky explained to the group that they stole the notebook from school and reused it for their own purposes to explore their emerging gender identity and expression. In so doing, Sky not only reframed the purpose of writing from that of skills development to creative growth, but they also showed how development itself may happen through a productive defiance of two kinds of norms: the gender binary and linear temporality. In describing their object, for instance, Sky offered a metaphor of growth as a trail of breadcrumbs only to be discovered in retrospect and thereby posited a theory of development not as a forward-moving climb through predictive stages, but as a backward glance and belated construction made from traces of earlier experiences. In this sense, Sky's notebook mirrors what Britzman and Gilbert (2007) describe as the future anterior of becoming: a theory they use to frame identity not as an innate core unfolding into a linear future, but a narrative we make and remake belatedly from experiences that could not be known at the time of their unfolding. At play here is a theory of subjectivity that is mysterious even to the one creating the path because it is felt before knowing, and is thus driven by alterity – a quality of surprise and inconvenience – that irritates frameworks otherwise pinning identity to lockstep stages of becoming. This understanding of subjectivity as unfolding through belated meaning-making resonates once again with Britzman's (2003) study of learning to teach, where teachers' narratives may disrupt fantasies of linear or coherent development and, instead, represent ongoing impressions of childhood conflicts, uncertainties, and differences in their contemporary understandings of themselves as teachers.

Both Sky and Thelma's constructions of difference seemed to reside in this space of difference in that they used their objects to open new metaphors and unforeseen possibilities of meaning beyond dominant constructions of uniqueness and accommodation. Inconvenient narratives of alterity emerged in how participants described their objects, in both cases, with a sense of flux, uncertainty, and ambiguity as a quality of difference. Participants described this quality of difference by foregrounding the complex and shifting qualities of their objects themselves and by sharing their own changes of mind in undertaking the task of choosing an object that represented childhood. In highlighting the uncertain qualities of their objects and object-choices, both participants gave us pause to think about a quality of difference that does not easily slide into categories to be championed or corrected but can be said to be inconvenient to those very frames.

Conclusion

The Difference Childhood Memory Makes

Across the four sites of our study, we found that discussions of childhood are not literally about oneself having been a child, but rather symbolic of much larger questions about the meaning of difference, why differences matter, and how to work ethically across differences in the classroom and beyond. In our study, the difference childhood makes was very often one that foregrounded a story of individual uniqueness that was also ironically universally assumed. In this construction, childhood concealed how unequal power relations order differences differently within hierarchies of school success and livable futures. Even when childhood was used to speculate about difference as a disruption of given expectations and conditions to accommodate, we found a tendency among our participants to uphold normative frames of development that took aim at the same learning outcomes for all. For us, the smallest grouping of narratives in our study were the most potent. As discussed, these narratives constructed differences as irreconcilable and affecting experience of being in the world with others beyond presumed or given understandings. Unlike discourses of uniqueness and accommodation, narratives of irreconcilable differences grappled with the challenge of representing the elusive qualities of difference and the value of dwelling with the discomfort of not knowing. In centering not knowing, these narratives opened onto conflicts, contradictions, and complexities of existence and in so doing, created space to engage and welcome alterity. Precisely because they grappled with the unknown qualities of difference, these narratives provided a means to disrupt the "desirable difference" of uniqueness, and instead to imagine alternate avenues to the future as both possible and preferable.

We hope our paper can be read as an invitation for aspiring, emerging, and experienced teachers to recognize times when they implicate themselves in the dominant discourse of uniqueness and to notice how this implication may foreclose more critical ways of theorizing difference. While the drive to see oneself as unique is not inherently negative, it may also uphold a discourse of individualism that conceals how social contexts produce difference along axes of inequity. We further challenge teachers to consider the ethical significance of differences that, returning to Berlant (2022) once more, inconvenience efforts to understand and categorize them – for instance, as desirable or lacking – and that instead arrive as a question requiring a response beyond what can be known for sure. We go as far as to encourage teachers to flip the script of uniqueness discourse and to repurpose memories of their own desirable differences as children to consider times when they disrupted, irritated, or otherwise troubled normative expectations, whether inside or outside the walls of the school (Farley et al., 2024). Such repurposing may open critical questions about how to reframe children's nuisance-making less as individual acts of defiance, and more as indices of social and political inequities that differently shape educators' responses to them. Analyzing childhood memories as connected to relations of unequal power may productively inconvenience discourses of innocence that advantage only the most privileged children. Doing so may also become the ground from which to welcome children's alterity as the ground of ethics precisely because it disrupts efforts to capture the most unruly qualities of existence in normative frameworks. Attending to the inconvenience of difference may well change the very meaning of both childhood and education, but only if we can be bothered.

Declarations

Authors' Declarations

Publisher's Declarations

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