

## Offering a Question to Early Childhood Pedagogists: What Would Be Possible if Education Subtracts Itself from Developmentalism?

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What would be possible if education subtracts itself from developmentalism? What might happen if we put into question early childhood education's reliance on child development as a "taken-for-granted" way to understand, enact and create early childhood spaces?

In the spirit of these questions, we are interested in highlighting some of the legacies of child development and interrogating the concept of developmentalism. We do so as an invitation for pedagogists to continue unsettling the domination of such discourse in early childhood education and the ways developmental knowledges are implicated in maintaining the status quo. By focusing on developmentalism, we highlight the socio-political-ethical intentions that child development activates through early childhood education. Although child development has become 'taken-for-granted' knowledge within early childhood education, many researchers and educators have been thinking otherwise (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2016; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015). In this article, we reiterate the work of reconceptualist early childhood scholars and put into question a naturalized or non-political understanding of childhood, children, and education (to read more about developmentalism, please see Burman, 2018; Cannella, 1997; Lubeck, 1994; and MacNaughton, 2005).

Our first focus of concern is with how child development assumes and prescribes ideas of who a human is – and, in these edicts, it stabilizes the normative contours of who a child *can be* – giving to education the coordinates of the 'proper' childhood and the 'proper' child. In child development, human growth is made proper within culturally and historically contested coordinates. Put differently, developmentalism asserts both who the child should be and sets a measure for the particular normative developmental trajectories that this child's development must follow. A belief in the principles of developmentalism also creates a predetermined formula of universal quality pedagogical practices that are necessary to ensure optimal development. These tenets of development are enshrined with such high levels of validity and reliability that, as educators, we are often shocked and dismayed when children who are provided with best pedagogical practice experience failure (Walkerdine, 1998). Equally disheartening is how we might use developmental theory to conceptualize the "good" early childhood educator. Langford's (2007) work demonstrates that for many in the early childhood field, professional competency is represented by an educator whose practice reflects developmental theory. Under this idea, only practice that is based in

developmental theory is recognizable and acceptable – leaving very little space for reimagining what might be possible for an early childhood educator.

Entangled closely within the desire to guide children’s development along a universalized and normalizing trajectory is the concomitant work of course-correcting and remediating. Children who do not conform to Euro-Western developmental norms are therefore readily positioned as in need of intervention or support. Functioning to bound children’s lives to unfold only in accordance with a highly political and neutral norm, developmentalism also works to control and erase non Euro-Western experiences of childhood. This maintains the production of proper humanist subjects; children who have the skills and dispositions to be ‘good’ citizens by perpetuating structural projects of humanism, neoliberalism, and ongoing settler colonialism. Indeed, 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.

There are many reasons why a pedagogist would need to unsettle the possibilities for subjectivities, relations, and life avowed by developmentalism. We consider that this is a necessary effort because, as we have been pointing out, developmentalism erases and eradicates other possibilities for life. In other words, it marks ways of living and conceiving childhood that do not ascribe to particular colonial universals as abnormal, undesirable, or expendable. This is the material violence of developmentalism. As a universal paradigm for understanding childhood, developmentalism enacts an ontological violence by restricting the intellectual, embodied, and experiential resources with which we might engage children. Thus, embedded within structural narratives of normativity and the desire to support children to align with inherited notions of success, academic achievement and productive adulthood, developmentalism becomes the only dominant framework that educators are taught to engage with children – making this the intellectual coercion of developmentalism.

### **What becomes of early childhood pedagogy beyond developmentalism?**

As we have been pointing out, in the fixity of its developing methods and assumptions, child development gives education a ‘banister’ to hold on to (see Arendt, 1981)—one that furthermore ‘works too well’ for education to pursue her evidentiary quest for legitimacy as a social science. The dependency on this banister is so self-evident that it often can seem impossible—even itself aberrant, deviant or heretic—to think otherwise, or to imagine a child and a childhood that are not defined through pre-understandings of developmental stages and corollary behavioural norms. This impossibility is at the heart of education as a colonial project, as an eclipse of diverse possibility as and within childhood by a regnant ethos.

This is the reason why, for us, child development has little to offer to pedagogy. Unlike child development, pedagogy hides away from practices of application or logics of human management. Pedagogy is concerned with radical interpretative and contextual forms of thought and practice (to read more, please see [“What is Pedagogy” by Cristina D. Vintimilla](#)). It is a wordly encounter, never functional authority. It is always, therefore, rethinking what renders the world inert—and *especially* how children and childhood participate in this rendering. Pedagogy, we want to propose, asks questions that work in the name of living well together: how do we create more liveable worlds for all? How do we de-center

human mastery and the idea that humans are unitary, independent subjects and instead orient ourselves toward ethical and political responses to complex, messy, more-than-human worlds?

While for developmental psychology the aim of early childhood education is to authoritatively “know”, “predict” and “assess” children to guide them toward maturation and proper humanity, pedagogy is interested in the making of alternative and more-just worlds. Making early childhood education a pedagogical project requires that educators orient themselves toward entanglements and relational connections, and notice the complex human and more-than-human political contours of educational encounters. Thus, we suggest that we become interested in opening up and nourishing particular processes; especially processes concerned with ethically and politically-tense struggles so that we can nourish subjectivities and relations that respond to the complexities of our times.

This proposition entails pedagogical processes that are committed to creating and sustaining conditions where childhood is a voidless subjective process marked by alterity (Vintimilla, 2012). In other words, our proposition seeks opportunities for new subjectivities, new ways of being human (or unbecoming human perhaps), and heterogeneity, (or the proliferation of diversity, of a commonality, or community, in difference). Let’s remember: it is pedagogy that creates the conditions for the legitimation of multiple ways of being, for multiple childhoods. It is pedagogy that is interested in opening up curricular processes that have *no predefined ideas of who or what a child is*. It is pedagogy that is open to the possibility of alternative narratives and not about the repetition of predefined normative vectors. It is pedagogy that is concerned with the creation of collective spaces, of common and uncommon worlds. Child development is resolutely never interested in these processes. **What would be possible if education subtracts itself from developmentalism? Pedagogy would be a possibility.** Creating spaces for dwelling that are *ethical and creative* would be possible. Creating a collective life that keeps the question of the commons open would be possible. In pedagogy, as Machado said, “the path is made by walking.” So, unlike developmentalism’s competent pieties, the state of affairs that pedagogy assumes is so broad as to give the lie to breadth itself...and, in this, is instead breath itself. We breathe as we walk. And we do it together.

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