



Sexuality education for disabled children and youth in Ontario, Canada: Addressing epistemic injustice through school-based sexuality education

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Abstract

While conversations pertaining to school-based sexuality education are becoming more prominent, the experiences of disabled children and youth are still under-discussed in research. Despite disabled childhood studies emerging as a field of inquiry, there is still a lack of critical conversation pertaining to disabled students' sexuality education within their respective schooling. This article draws from Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice to describe some of the ethical questions that arise in the denial of disabled children and youth's access to sexuality education in school contexts. By engaging with relevant literature on sexuality education and disabled students in schooling, this article puts forward that the continual exclusion of disabled students from accessing school-based sexuality education promotes a form of epistemic injustice and silencing of the voices, perspectives and experiences of disabled students.

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INTRODUCTION: SEXUALITY EDUCATION FOR DISABLED CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Sexuality education for disabled children and youth in K-12 education still remains an afterthought and is highly ignored, despite recent conversations in various Canadian provinces, such as Ontario, on the need to update school-based sexuality education (Davies et al., 2022; Davies, Brass, et al., 2023; Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023; Davies & Kenneally, 2020). Disabled children's perspectives, voices, opinions and insights are frequently disregarded in research that is 'about' disabled children, instead of being constructed 'with' disabled children by honouring their voices and perspectives (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014; Parekh et al., 2021). Recent calls for attention to the needs of disabled children, youth and students in Ontario school-based contexts have described how disabled children experience exclusion in schools through segregation from their non-disabled peers, as well as through a lack of relevant content for disabled students within formal sexuality education curriculum documents (Davies & Kenneally, 2020). However, there is still specific work needed in relation with sexuality education in Ontario schools—as well as internationally—that centres the epistemic location of disabled students, children and youth by affirming their location as knowledge holders who are amidst meaning making of their social worlds and who have questions and curiosities that deserve to be engaged with (Gougeon, 2009, 2010). We focus our work in this article on Ontario, Canada by placing relevant literature pertaining to sexuality education for disabled students in schooling contexts in conversation with Fricker's (2007) theorization of epistemic injustice.

In Ontario, Canada, there are 72 different school boards, which are each expected to uphold inclusive educational practices as the ideal, although in practice, there is often a mix of segregated and inclusive approaches for students identified as disabled (Parekh, 2020). We argue that all provinces and territories integrate the recommendations made by the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, which emphasize the inclusion of sexuality education for children in their primary and secondary education program (United Nations General Assembly, 2010). This is especially important given the current socio-political context in Ontario, where small-town LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) Pride Parades are still receiving push-back and bans, such as the case of Emo, Ontario in 2020 (Milton, 2020) in addition to publicly funded Catholic school boards who refuse to fly the Pride flag at their schools in 2023 (CBC News, 2023).

Extant literature exploring the intersections of disability, gender and sexuality in Ontario have advocated for the importance of considering disabled children as competent, capable and having their own perspectives to share (Davies et al., 2022; Davies, Brass, et al., 2023; Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023; Davies & Kenneally, 2020). Notably, disabled childhood studies (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2013, 2014) has emerged as a field of inquiry and research that aims to authentically represent the voices, perspectives, opinions and needs of disabled children and youth, their parents, and caregivers, as well as ethical questions pertaining to academic research and writing pertaining to disabled children and youth (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014). In this article, we use 'identity-first terminology', such as 'disabled children' and 'disabled childhood' that centralizes

disability as a key component of life, personhood and childhood (Davies, Brass, et al., 2023; Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023) in alignment with disabled childhood studies (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014; Runswick-Cole et al., 2018). Disabled childhood studies is engaged in the work of challenging and critiquing social norms that construct disabled children and youth as unknowing, infantilized, vulnerable and lacking in agency and social knowledge of their own lives, which further perpetuates cycles of marginalization and silencing (Runswick-Cole et al., 2018).

AUTHORS' POSITIONALITIES AND ETHICAL REFLEXIVITY

As a research team, we are composed of both disabled and non-disabled individuals, as well as researchers, educators and clinicians who have worked directly with and care for disabled children and youth. For example, the first author is a neurodivergent, chronically mentally ill/Mad university professor, certified teacher and registered early childhood educator. Other members of the research team identify as professors in education, have held professional careers in children's developmental services, and some are graduate students in various fields related to psychology and/or education. We name these social locations collectively while acknowledging that naming our standpoints and identities in relationship with disability is a complex and messy endeavour (Rinaldi, 2013) and that merely stating our positionalities does not act to name our lived experiences with(in) disability. As Rinaldi (2013) notes, academia and higher education is not necessarily a 'safe' place for all of us to share our relationships with disability and body-mind experiences. As a collective, we care deeply about recognizing and re-centring the lived experiences of disabled children and youth, and predominantly live and work, or have lived and worked, within the province of Ontario in Canada. We follow O'Toole's (2013) recommendations around disclosing one's relationship with disability for both disabled and non-disabled people to claim public space for disability and create alliances between disabled and non-disabled people, hence why we have described our research teams' relationship with(in) disability.

We are intentional with our reflexive positionalities and acknowledge that our individual and shared experiences contribute to our understanding of topics related to disability and sexuality. Our relationship(s) with disability(ies) have led each of us to gain an interest in disability studies through our lived experiences—and the experiences of those close to us—which inform our belief in disability as a complex social and cultural frame that is often excluded societally in a way that is normalized (Liddiard, 2013; Rinaldi, 2013). For example, Author one has written extensively about their experiences as a Mad and neurodivergent scholar within the field of early childhood education and the normalized forms of epistemic injustices and exclusions within early childhood education pedagogies and curricula (Davies, 2022, 2023a, 2023b). These lived experiences of exclusion have informed Author one's personal and professional interest in epistemic injustice as it pertains to disability.

A small body of literature addresses the ethics involved with researching children's sexuality. While an in-depth exploration of ethics involved in childhood sexuality research is beyond the scope of this paper, we ground many of our assertions from a place of ethical consideration acknowledging and challenging the dominant narratives around children and childhood (Parekh et al., 2021), and specifically disabled children in sexuality research. We seek to understand the delicate ethical balance of the perceived harms that may come from both inclusion and exclusion of children in sexuality studies. This work in itself is often criticized for its merit and rationale, often accompanied by problematic assumptions (Flanagan, 2012). The prevailing notion

of childhood innocence, as we will discuss throughout this article, heavily informs adult beliefs about children and childhood, with the assumption that children are inherently 'innocent' leading to excluding them from conversations about sexuality (Flanagan, 2012). We contend that restricting children's access to conversations regarding sexuality reinforces antiquated beliefs about what constitutes 'adult' versus 'child' topics. Such restrictions further contradict statutes within the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). As well, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) articulates in Article 25 how it is necessary to provide 'persons with disabilities with the same range, quality and standard of free or affordable health care and programmes as provided to other persons, including in the area of sexual and reproductive health' (United Nations, 2006, n.p.). Our intent with this article is to encourage equity in the consideration of the multifaceted and diverse needs of disabled children in their sexuality education (Davies et al., 2022; Davies, Brass, et al., 2023; Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023).

SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN AN ONTARIO, CANADA CONTEXT

Ontario did not have a formal sexuality education curriculum until 1987, following political pressure to respond to the HIV-AIDS epidemic (Hutchinson Grondin, 2015). Sexuality education in Ontario has always been situated under the title, 'Health and Physical Education' and has been considered a component of physical education and family studies courses (Barrett, 1994). As with most regions of the world, the content of sexuality education classes in Ontario has historically—and currently—been influenced by the comfort levels and interests of educators, meaning that there can be great variability in what is addressed in sexuality education—or if it is even covered at all—depending on the educator who is responsible for teaching health education (Barrett, 1994; Osborne, 2019). The Ontario Health & Physical Education curriculum for grades 1–8 and 9–12 was updated in 1998, with no other update occurring until a controversial revision in 2015 under Ontario's provincial Liberal party. The update in 2015—which was initially attempted in 2010 but ultimately repealed due to parental pushback (Bialystok, 2018; Bialystok et al., 2020)—incorporated explicit conversations regarding bodily boundaries, consent, digital technologies, gender and sexual identities, mental health and diverse families. The updated document also included some teacher prompts for adjusting lessons for disabled students, although these prompts were few and focused ultimately on adjusting already existing curriculum expectations to ask what barriers or challenges an individual with a physical or intellectual disability might experience (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). As mentioned by Canadian scholars in disability and school-based sexuality education, such as Davies and Kenneally (2020) and Davies et al. (2022); Davies, Brass, et al. (2023); Davies, Bryan, et al. (2023), there is little to no mention of disabled students in any other sexuality education curriculum documents in other Canadian provinces and territories.

By 2019, upon the election of the current Conservative Party in Ontario, new debates regarding school-based sexuality education, fueled by populist politics led to a revised curriculum document for the elementary grades in 2019 (Bialystok et al., 2020). This shift pushed discussions of gender identity to higher grades and allowed for parents and guardians to fill out a request to have their child exempted from sexuality education (Bialystok et al., 2020; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, 2015, 2019). Conversations regarding sexuality education in Ontario became

focused upon populist conceptions of ‘parental rights’—a construct that has picked up political momentum in a North American context that fuels homophobia and transphobia, as well as sex negativity (Bialystok, 2018; Bialystok et al., 2020). Parental rights discourses can rhetorically position parents’ ‘right’ to decide which information their children engage with at school against children’s rights to comprehensive sexuality education and open discussions regarding diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (Bialystok, 2018; Davies & Kenneally, 2020). This false division becomes even more problematic for disabled children and students, particularly those who might also identify as a gender and/or sexual minority, who might also be reliant on their families and parents/guardians for forms of care that their able-bodied and neurotypical peers might not require (Davies & Kenneally, 2020; Davies et al., 2022).

Within these various iterations of sexual health education documents, there has been little to no direct consultation of disabled children and students, nor consideration of their needs or the requirement for training for special education teachers to address sexuality education in classes (Davies & Kenneally, 2020). The consultation process that was promised to be the ‘largest-ever consultation on education in Ontario’s history’ (Benzie, 2018) resulted in an online form that parents, guardians and community members could fill in, with a few questions about sexuality education. Once the online consultation finished and the results showed overwhelmingly that those who filled in the form were in favour of the current sexuality education documents, the Ontario provincial government made accessing the data from the public consultation convoluted and almost impossible (Zwibel, 2019). Further, the provincial government has implemented a document entitled, ‘Sexuality Education and Intellectual Disability: A guide for parents’ (Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services, 2021) which describes various approaches parents can employ when considering discussing sexuality openly with their children. While this guide is a step in the conversation, it places the onus of discussing gender and sexuality onto parental figures and lacks explicit mentioning of sexual pleasure and disability, instead choosing to focus predominantly on ideas of consent and personal boundaries (Davies et al., 2022). While we acknowledge the importance of reinforcing topics that promote safety and agency, these should not be the only conversations for disabled children. Doing so underscores pernicious attitudinal barriers that disabled individuals are asexual and either not interested or not worthy of sexual pleasure seeking (Davies, Brass, et al., 2023).

The omission of the lived experiences, perspectives and needs of disabled children within school-based sexuality education curriculum is underlined by the finding that many disabled youth learn about sexuality and social norms through their peer groups (Diah & Samsudin, 2020; Gougeon, 2009, 2010). This becomes increasingly challenging if disabled students are in special education programming or experience social isolation in their school settings while maintaining separation between disabled and non-disabled students in schools prevents learning opportunities for *all* students (Gougeon, 2009). By not explicitly having disabled students’ needs centralized in either a separate curriculum document or incorporating more explicit mentioning of disability in ‘mainstream’ curricula, disabled students continue to be ignored and denied their sense of sexual agency (Davies, Brass, et al., 2023; Gougeon, 2009, 2010). While the Canadian context is inarguably different from other geopolitical contexts, there are also important learnings that can be taken from the Canadian context and Canadian practices that are applicable in other educational settings, as illustrated by recent research investigating the perspectives of both Canadian educators and those from various geopolitical locations regarding sexuality education while teaching disabled students (Ogur et al., 2023).

CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE, GENDER, SEXUALITY AND DISABILITY

Western constructions of childhood have long been closely tied to discourses of childhood innocence (Epp & Brennan, 2018). Within Western societies, understandings of children as distinct from adults, and childhood as a unique stage of human development, emerged sometime between the 15th and 18th centuries in Europe (Ariès, 1962; Cannella, 1997). The rise of positivist science, and of developmental psychology, and the emphasis on Cartesian dualism during this period facilitated Western societies' binary systems of representation, such as the adult-child dichotomy (Cannella, 1997; Gabriel, 2014). Such age-based dualism has functioned to position younger members of society as subordinate. The dominance of ages and stages logic that emerged through child development ideologies tends to uphold the adult-child dichotomy and legitimize the positioning of younger members of society as immature, unknowing and naïve as contrasted with the image of the mature, knowing and rational adult (Cannella, 1997). In other words, children are characterized as human becomings rather than as full human beings (Lee, 2001; Prout, 2005) and thus in need of protection from the 'adult' world.

Importantly, such an image of the innocent child is experienced differently by different children and is not necessarily accessible to all. Instead, the image of the innocent child functions to disproportionately privilege white, Eurocentric, cis-heteronormative and able-bodied positionalities (Davies, 2023b; Rollo, 2018). In other words, poor, queer, Black, brown, Indigenous, disabled or a combination of these identities, are assumed not worthy of protection as these children tend to be positioned as corrupt, deviant, or adultified (Valenti, 2010). Conversely, the discourse of protection applied to Indigenous children legitimized their forced removal from their families and was utilized as a tool to increase assimilation and weaken Indigenous family structures (Garlen, 2019).

When it comes to gender and sexuality, the rhetoric of childhood innocence has functioned to simplify if not silence the diverse realities of gender and sexuality in young children's lives. Indeed, sexuality is constructed in opposition to innocence, and specifically as a 'corrupter' of innocence (Balter et al., 2023, Davies & Kenneally, 2020). Knowledge around gender and sexuality is largely positioned as 'adult' knowledge and, thus, sexuality education as irrelevant if not developmentally inappropriate for young children (Robinson, 2013). It is necessary to note how disabled people and children are both subjugated under adultist and ableist discourses that rely on developmental notions of normalcy that conceptualize children and disabled people as outside of normative humanity (Goodley et al., 2018). As such, the discourses of innocence that place children's sexuality (including disabled children's) as abnormal and abject also infantilize disabled adults, thereby placing their embodiment and sexualities as abhorrent and undesirable, even forwarding eugenics notions that disabled people should not reproduce (Liddiard & Slater, 2018).

Since innocence is also associated with disability, disabled people of all ages are characterized as vulnerable. Younger disabled people in particular are positioned as highly vulnerable, which can perpetuate sexual ableism, or structural discrimination against disabled people through the desexualization of disabled people (Gill, 2015). In childhood, disabled children are positioned as highly dependent, lacking rationality or intellectual capacity, and thus never expecting to 'properly' grow into adulthood (Ben-Moshe et al., 2021; Goodley et al., 2018). Disabled children thus tend to be viewed as unable to understand their own sexualities if not altogether incapable of being sexual beings and thus as necessarily asexual (Gougeon, 2010). Consequently, disabled children are imagined as never having a present or future sexuality. Such perceptions have meant that disabled children are largely ignored, misrepresented and

silenced when it comes to their sexuality education as they are viewed as never needing sexuality education, thus denying them their rights to full citizenship (Davies & Kenneally, 2020; Gougeon, 2009).

EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

Feminist philosopher, Miranda Fricker (2007), theorizes *epistemic injustice* by addressing the testimonial and hermeneutic harms that marginalized communities and individuals experience when they are either not provided with the interpretive resources to share their experiences or have their experiences and testimonies gaslit and denied when shared. Fricker divides epistemic injustice into two forms: (1) testimonial injustice and (2) hermeneutic injustice. Testimonial injustice takes place when an individual is considered unreliable or discredited in their ability to be knowledge holders or experts on their experiences (LeBlanc & Kinsella, 2016). Testimonial injustice occurs when specific groups or identities, such as those who might identify as disabled or be constructed as disabled, are distrusted in their accounts or claims (Scully, 2018). Disabled people experience testimonial injustice when they share access needs or their experiences with disability and are disbelieved or thought to be exaggerating their condition(s) or what their access needs are (Scully, 2018). If there is a form of prejudice or preconceived bias against a group of people or specific identity that impacts a listener's ability to believe a person's testimony or experience, this becomes a form of testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007).

Testimonial injustice can occur preemptively when individuals do not share their opinions, experiences, or inquiries to begin with out of fear that they might be disbelieved or discredited due to their social location (Dohmen, 2016; Fricker, 2007). As well, if an individual's opinion is not desired or consulted as an informant, testimonial injustice occurs, which seeks to only consider someone an object of knowledge, but not a source of knowledge (Fricker, as described by Dohmen, 2016). This occurs in the context of research about disabled students whereby disabled students are often not consulted as sources of knowledge, or acknowledged as knowledge holders who have experiences, themselves. In research pertaining to disabled students in schools, disabled students are often described in objectifying ways that distance the researcher from the students through bio-medicalized and clinical terminology or discuss pedagogical approaches towards inclusion without acknowledging the voices and experiences of disabled students.

Hermeneutical injustice occurs when individuals are denied access to interpretive resources to make sense of their social experiences or the ability to produce knowledge regarding their experiences (Fricker, 2007; LeBlanc & Kinsella, 2016). Hermeneutical injustice harms both marginalized people, as well as those who contribute to and/or perpetuate harm (Beeby, 2011; Fricker, 2007). As such, educators who might contribute to ableist discourses that disabled children and youth have no sexuality or need for open discussions of sexuality and gender in the classroom can also experience hermeneutical injustice. Such hermeneutic injustice takes place through educators' potential lack of understanding and/or cognitive access to frameworks and ways of thinking that emphasize the agency of disabled students and specific information regarding the needs of disabled students as it pertains to gender and sexuality. When educators do not have access to sexual health and education knowledge and training pertaining to the specific needs of disabled students in their care in gender and sexuality, stereotypes of disabled people, particularly disabled children and youth, as inherently asexual with no sexual future are reinforced.

EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE, DISABLED STUDENTS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION: VALUING DISABLED STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES, VOICES AND KNOWLEDGE

Most research that investigates sexuality education for disabled children and young people emphasizes the perspectives of teachers, educators and parents (Fader Wilkenfeld & Ballan, 2011; Hogan, 2023). In order to address the epistemic injustices that disabled students experience as it pertains to sexuality education, it is of critical importance for research, sexuality educators, teachers and parents to listen to the voices and lived experiences/perspectives of disabled students and adults who are best-suited to provide direct information about what is needed in comprehensive sexuality education for disabled students in the K-12 school system. Comprehensive sexuality education, or sexuality education that emphasizes bodily autonomy, consent, sexual and gender identity and diversity, mental health, sexual and reproductive health, and interpersonal communication and skills (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2015). Despite comprehensive sexuality education becoming an international standard (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2015), most provinces in Canada, such as Ontario (Farmer et al., 2019) do not meet comprehensive standards and are failing disabled students to a higher degree than non-disabled students (Davies, Brass, et al., 2023; Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023; Davies & Kenneally, 2020).

Both hermeneutic and testimonial injustice as epistemic injustice, impact disabled students' access to sexuality education in schools, and overall social, emotional and physical inclusion in school environments. In what follows, we describe how epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), impacts disabled students in schools as it pertains to school-based sexuality education. We argue that the experiences of disabled students with sexuality education in school-based contexts—within an Ontario context but applicable in other regions—fit both these conceptualizations by Fricker (2007) (hermeneutic and testimonial injustice) and perpetuate epistemic injustice. Accordingly, we follow Davies et al. (2022); Davies, Brass, et al. (2023); Davies, Bryan, et al. (2023), who in an Ontario context recommends including disabled students and advocates in curriculum development consultations and workshops.

Hermeneutic injustice and sexuality education for disabled students

Given the lack of explicit information pertaining to disability within school-based sexuality education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, 2019), educators, particularly special education teachers who work in segregated classroom environments, are often unsure how to respond to disabled students' expressions of sexuality, particularly when the students' questions involve issues pertaining to religion and culture (Nelson et al., 2020). Special education teachers report addressing sexuality education in their classes, particularly conversations of boundaries of public/private behaviours and providing disabled students with social information regarding social and sexual norms; yet, educators also expressed concerns with discussing reproduction and ideas of disabled students being able to provide for a young child (Fader Wilkenfeld & Ballan, 2011). This aligns with common eugenics ideas, beginning from the late 19th and early 20th century, which forcibly sterilized disabled women to prevent reproduction (Grekul et al., 2004). De la Cour (2017) describes how the first-wave feminist movement in Canada promoted eugenics ideologies that were articulated through categories of race, gender, disability and class. Such eugenics ideas promoted the sterilization of racialized, disabled, working-class women (De la Cour, 2017; Grekul et al., 2004), with such

ideologies continuing today through educators who question the ability of young disabled women to reproduce and care for their own children (Fader Wilkenfeld & Ballan, 2011). Such eugenics ideas remain to this day in the Ontario school system, where disabled students continue to learn about sex and sexuality predominately through the internet outside of school and experience a silencing around sexuality in their school contexts (Jones et al., 2022).

Hermeneutic injustice also occurs when there is no current data or collective research understanding of the experiences of disabled youth as it pertains to gender and sexuality. In a recent report, *Canada: Discrimination Against Violence Against LGBTQI2S Persons with Disabilities* by EGALE Canada (Bucik et al., 2017), it is reported that LGBTQI2S disabled people in Canada experience erasure of their intersectional identities in public policy and the lack of research pertaining to the experiences of LGBTQI2S Canadians. A recent article associated with the DisAbled Women's Network Canada (Brayton, 2017) discusses the high number of disabled girls and women who are forced into sex trafficking and the lack of empirically collected data that represents the intersectional realities of both gender-based and disability-based violence and marginalization.

When considering the hermeneutic injustices that disabled children experience in school contexts through a lack of sexuality education, it is crucial to consider sexuality education programs that promote communication between students, parents and educators (Davies et al., 2022). Due to the interconnected nature of parents as advocates in the lives of disabled students, school-based sexuality education that addresses the needs of disabled students should not only validate disabled students' perspectives and voices but also incorporate communication with parents and educators (Davies et al., 2022; Davies, Brass, et al., 2023; Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023). However, this should not be done in a fashion that supersedes the autonomy of disabled people and it should be recognized how parents or guardians of disabled people still often make decisions for their disabled children that reinforce ableist and eugenicist ideas about the undesirability of disability and disabled people, such as forced sterilization (Slater et al., 2018).

Epistemically, this ongoing lack of knowledge pertaining to sexuality education, places disabled students at a disadvantage when trying to navigate social, sexual and/or romantic situations both within and outside of school contexts (Gougeon, 2009, 2010). Although not in an Ontario context, a Blind youth participant from Diah and Samsudin's (2020) qualitative study illustrates how many teachers who work with disabled youth do not have the lived experience and background knowledge to teach sexuality education that is relevant to the needs of students with various disabilities:

Teaching sex education to blind students is different. We use our touching senses more. Perhaps abled-bodied teachers are not comfortable with this. We need disabled teachers who have a different skill set. (Diah & Samsudin, 2020, p. 535).

Not having educators who share lived experiences with or hold background knowledge of the sexual, social and romantic needs of students of various disabilities can perpetuate a form of hermeneutical injustice whereby disabled students do not receive relevant information that speaks to their lived experiences and daily lives.

Testimonial injustice and sexuality education for disabled students

Testimonial injustice impacts disabled students in schools since disabled people in many different ways, ranging from the pathologization of their expression of sexuality or questions pertaining sexuality to the questioning of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation when disabled

students identify as 2SLGBTQ+ (two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer). Disabled people widely are assumed to have no sexual orientation, interest in their own sexuality, and are constructed as highly vulnerable (Davies, Brass, et al., 2023; Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023). Such conversations of vulnerability as it pertains to disabled sexualities are highly contentious due to how vulnerability is often considered in an individualistic fashion instead of a consideration of the structural inequalities that increase the vulnerability of disabled children and youth (Davies, Brass, et al., 2023; Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023).

Due to disabled students not being considered possessing a sexuality, students who might identify as 2SLGBTQ do not always receive affirming responses from teachers whom they confide in or educators who are in their school communities (Gutmann Kahn & Lindstrom, 2015). For example, a disabled participant in Hole et al.'s (2022) qualitative study investigating the perspectives of intellectually disabled self-advocates with sexuality education, noted the importance of self-advocates and disabled voices when formulating sexuality education guidelines:

They should have a self-advocate involved in it too. Because a lot of people who have a diverse ability don't really wanna go to a doctor a lot of the time. They don't wanna confront the doctor because the doctor sometimes makes us feel like we're crap and we're not worth being cared for. (Hole et al., 2022, p. 459).

Many disabled youth are disbelieved by medical professionals when they share that they identify as LGBTQ2S+, even experiencing gaslighting and discrimination from their families and adult figures in their lives (McGuire & Zener, 2019). Some disabled students might be discredited when they express their sexual orientation and/or gender identity under the auspices of being 'too young' and not fully 'developed' yet to know how they identify (Hogan, 2023). As Holt (2004) notes, schooling is understood through developmentalist theories and approaches, which inform the make-up of who gets included and excluded, reinforcing the taken-for-granted exclusion of disabled students to special education classrooms and constructions of disabled youth as always in development and unable to understand themselves and their identities.

Equally important to note is how many disabled youth might identify as asexual and experience a form of testimonial injustice when they do assert their asexual identity as a response to efforts to advocate for disabled people's sexualities (Davies et al., 2022). It is necessary that school-based sexuality education provides opportunities for positive identity-development for all students and for disabled students to ask questions regarding identity, sense of self and gender and sexuality among other identity markers. In this sense, sexuality education that is inclusive of open conversations regarding disability, sexuality, gender and personal identity can benefit all students as they learn more about their own sense of self, community and belonging (Davies, Brass, et al., 2023; Davies et al., 2022; Davies, 2023a) note the need for the voices and perspectives of disabled youth and the importance of providing space for disabled students to cultivate a sense of disabled identity and community and to ask other disabled youth questions as it pertains to gender and sexuality (Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023). This is emphasized in Bollinger and Cook's (2020) peer research project with disabled youth in New Zealand, which reports disabled youth's descriptions of the lack of disability representation in their health and sexuality classrooms in secondary school, which led to the devaluation of their disability identities and disabled bodies and minds. Research conducted in both Western and non-Western contexts (i.e., Ogur et al., 2023) affirms the necessity for teachers and educators to enter into open dialogue with disabled students regarding sexuality, including receiving professional training regarding how to move away from punishment-based techniques that can perpetuate shame towards sexuality in disabled students.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING DISABLED STUDENTS' NEEDS IN SEXUALITY EDUCATION

In the Canadian policy landscape, disability is discussed at the federal (e.g., Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms [as part of the Constitution Act, 1982]; Accessible Canada Act, 2019; Canada Human Rights Act, 1985; and provincial levels of government (e.g., Ontario Human Rights Code, 1990; Education Act, 1990; Ontario Human Rights Commission Policy on Accessible Education for Students with Disabilities, 2018). Internationally, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2009) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989; e.g., article 12) seek to protect disabled children in the United Nations' member states from discrimination. For example, in article 7 (s.3) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, disabled children:

[...] have the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, on an equal basis with other children, and to be provided with disability and age-appropriate assistance to realize that right.

Regarding the rights of disabled children's education, article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities dictates that state parties must establish inclusive education systems that promote the dignity and self-worth of disabled students and ensure that students are not excluded from their education on account of their disability. As Canada is a member state of the United Nations, we are obligated to uphold the articles of these conventions. Unfortunately, executive decisions about what constitutes 'maturity' (among other constructs) are made without consulting disabled individuals when it comes to sexuality education, and many other domains affecting disabled children both in Canada and internationally (United Nations General Assembly, 2010).

In Ontario, policy and program memoranda (PPMs) set the directives and expectations for educators at the district school boards, covering topics related to student safety, well-being and several PPMs are devoted to children accessing special education services. Others, such as PPM 199—Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013) seek to provide opportunities to make learning accessible for all students regardless of their disability status, gender identity, gender expression and/or sexual orientation. This PPM outlines that barriers and biases, whether intentional or not, need to be identified and addressed to promote inclusive education for all. When it comes to sexuality education, the equity factors identified above (i.e., disability, gender expression, gender identity and sexual orientation) are an afterthought at best, which create and reinforce attitudinal and access barriers to education for disabled students in Ontario. Inclusive curriculum and assessment practices must take into consideration the experiences of all learners, not just able-bodied students, as described in *Policy/program memorandum no. 119: Developing and implementing equity and inclusive education policies in Ontario schools* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). To this end, disabled students should be able to see themselves represented in their sexuality education curricula as children and youth who are disabled have a right to healthcare and education free from barriers. As noted, it is discriminatory to preclude disabled students from sexuality and education and it imperative that education policies and practices that promote the inclusion of these students work to integrate disabled students' perspectives into the curriculum, in a manner that is free from barriers, biases and oppression (see also Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

While we have focused on content that is important for Ontario, Canada, the question of epistemic injustice and disabled children and youth in schools, particularly within sexuality education, is a necessary global conversation. Recent research in Iceland (Slater et al., 2018) and Sweden (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2012) illustrates how sexuality education and childhood and youth are receiving research and educational attention to address the injustices that disabled people experience at the confluences of childhood, youth, gender, disability and sexuality. For example, Löfgren-Mårtenson (2012) discusses how disabled youth often experience sexuality education through frames that emphasize *risk* instead of pleasure and desire, meaning that sexuality is only considered through the potential for harm to self or others. International conversations regarding disability and sexuality education are at various stages depending on the geopolitical context. Our hope is that readers can gain some understandings of the Ontario context and glean learnings that can be implemented within their own respective regions.

In this conceptual paper, we highlight the research gaps informing the intersection of disabled childhoods and sexuality education in Ontario Canada. A scoping review on sexuality and education in the United States and other Western nations carried out by McDaniels and Fleming (2016) mirrors our work in that sexuality education for disabled children continues to be inadequate. As such, discursive practices encapsulating disabled children within Western societies invoke Fricker's (2007) concept of 'epistemic injustice' to frame the mechanisms by which disabled children have been systematically marginalized from the right to access inclusive sexual education. Moreover, as reinforced throughout this paper, much of this silencing and othering of disabled children is grounded in developmentalist constructions of the 'disabled' child, who is viewed as a threat, as a body or bodies that may contaminate developmentally 'normal' children (Ben-Moshe et al., 2021).

While various Ontario, Canadian and international frameworks discussed, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006); the Canada Human Rights Act (1985), Ontario Ministry of Education (2017) and the Ontario Human Rights Commission Policy on Accessible Education for Students with Disabilities (2018) guarantee the right of disabled children to a quality education, disabled students continue to experience significant barriers especially when it comes to receiving a comprehensive sexuality education. Despite Ontario's education system seen as a bastion of equity and inclusion across the globe, the province is no exception to the silencing of disabled children when it comes to their right to a holistic sexuality education. In this, we feel that an epistemically *just* approach to sexuality education in schools for *all* students, including disabled students, would address how issues of sexual ableism are societally reinforced within sexuality education that does not construct disabled people and disabled sexualities as desirable. Sexual ableism creates hierarchical notions of who *deserves* to be a sexual being and based on hierarchies of race, disability, sexuality, gender and other identity markers, limits the sexual knowledge and expression of disabled people while also reinforcing non-disabled people's notions of disability inferiority (Gill, 2015).

The omission of disabled children from sexual education is one facet of the continual decisions and exclusionary practices that strip disabled people from autonomy throughout their lives. As such, disabled children are rendered incapable of their own narratives and advocacy, speaking to Fricker's (2007) concept of hermeneutical injustice outlined in the paragraphs above. The ideological gaps presented through the plethora of equity and inclusive education policies that have been enacted and the actual implementation (or lack thereof) of such policies speak to the performativity of Ontario's stance as a recognized champion of human

rights, equity and inclusion in education. Recommendations going forward to counter such pervasive assumptions of disabled children which are reinforced by the framings of Western developmentalism include the recognition of the rights and roles of disabled children as empowered advocates when it comes to access to education. The mobilization of pre-service and in-service educational and professional development programs that are co-constructed with and grounded in the voices and lived experiences of disabled adults, youth and children are needed (Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023) for more holistic understandings of and affirmations of disabled people as sexual beings who inhabit sexual desires and rights.

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