

## Tangled Literate Histories

Kim Stewart & Candace Gallagher

The conversations, planning, and negotiations for the Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Education began many years ago around the table at UNB’s Early Childhood Center.

Without the imagination and commitment of Dr. Ann Sherman, Dr. Sherry Rose, Dr. Pam Whitty, Lynda Homer, Pam Nason, Wendy McLeod MacKnight, and the funding from the Margaret and Wallace McCain Foundation this degree would not have been possible.

Within this article,  
their voices and the voices of many others are with us.

As feminists, our goal is to offer research that is useful to the field of early childhood literacies and “empowering to women” (Pillow, 2003, p. 178) who do most of the care and educating of young children in childcare and the early years of schooling. As an entanglement of women, we move together as collective cultivators of communities of courage, building the strength to stand up for what we believe and “to be accountable both in word and deed” (hooks, 2000, p. 92). Our community is one built on a love ethic where early childhood educators “utilize all dimensions of love—care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge” (hooks, 2000, p. 94). We strive to courageously share our stories,

have difficult conversations, question ourselves and each other, ask for support and guidance, and negotiate conflict as a valuable place for learning that engages with mindbody. We stand with vulnerability as a foundation of courage navigating risks, questioning certainties, and valuing emotions (Brown, 2017).

In this article, as we look to the beginnings of the University of New Brunswick (UNB) online Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Education (BEd in ECE) degree program, we ask how does valuing the web of relationships expand affirmative and creative possibilities in online learning spaces? Our desire is to value the literate histories that are often silenced and sometimes lost within standardized, institutional ways of being and becoming.

Twelve women, all early childhood educators, represent the first cohort of students to enroll in the University of New Brunswick's Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Education online program. They completed the requirements to apply to the program: two-year diploma in Early Childhood Education from an accredited college, a statement of interest, two letters of reference, and completed the university application process.

*As the coordinator of this program, I (Kim Stewart) have spent six months networking with early childhood educators via an email list generated during professional learning workshops, over*

*several years by the UNB Early Childhood Team. Within New Brunswick (NB) it is a challenge to communicate directly with early childhood educators within the early childhood sector. Unlike teachers in the public school system who each have an individual email, the NB government has not provided a listserv for early childhood centres or educators. Peter Moss (2010) speaks to these inequities,*

*the scandalous pay and working conditions and inadequate basic and continuing education of many ‘childcare workers’; the continuing split in many early childhood workforces between ‘childcare workers’ and ‘teachers’; and the lower pay and status even of early years teachers compared with school teachers. (p. 8)*

*Because of these systemic inequities, early childhood educators adapt. Together, we established a network of communicating, turning to texting, social media, and late night telephone conversations after children were in bed.*

We carry within our mindbody an ethic of responsibility and care (Noddings, 2003) valuing the silent and complex narratives of these women as they speak to the intersectionalities of race, gender, and class—the narratives beyond their application forms, the marks on their transcripts, and the tidiness of their letters of reference and

curriculum vitae. As educators, critical feminists, and vulnerable learners, we were prepared to lean over the edge (Jones, 2014) and dwell in the unpredictability of where their literate identities would lead them and us within this program.

We learned through an interview process, that they are a courageous group of women who are mothers, daughters, wives, early childhood educators, directors of childcare centres, and educational assistants. They shared their dreams of obtaining a university degree. Attempting to increase their qualifications, they have completed a cocktail of university courses, college programs, and locally developed professional learning opportunities. One story that will never leave our mindbody, is of an educator who used the janitor's closet to complete readings and assignments during her forty-five-minute lunch break. Backgrounds and prior experiences left them working against the current (Jones, 2014)—the standardized pathways of completing a university degree. Early childhood educators find themselves in the in-between spaces (Jones, 2014) of standardized, institutional education and providing essential but devalued care for Canada's youngest learners.

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, this group of women decided to lean over the edge and enroll in this online, asynchronous program allowing them to continue to work full time.

UNB's BEd in ECE degree is a first of its kind in Canada, offering a Bachelor of Education and a New Brunswick Certificate IV Teacher's Licence. Upon completion of the degree, early childhood educators will have the choice of working in early childhood centres and/or public school systems (K-3). The choice of being an early childhood educator in schools represents a significant increase in wages, benefits, working conditions, resources budgets, and access to paid professional learning opportunities (Cannella, 2002; Moss, 2006; Osgood, 2004).

**Thank you! We have so many talented ECE's leaving the field due to lack of recognition, salary, respect. I'll advocate for advancements to our field any day!!!**

*Figure 1. Screenshot of email, April 2020.*

*Hopes, apprehensions, concerns, insecurities, and messages of appreciation (Figure 1) from early childhood educators flood my email and voicemail. Perhaps they felt it was a space to voice the entanglements of their emotions related to themselves, their colleagues, and the sector of early childhood. They, like me, understand the opportunities and possibilities the degree offers to enhance the overall quality of early childhood education programs and working pay of early childhood educators.*

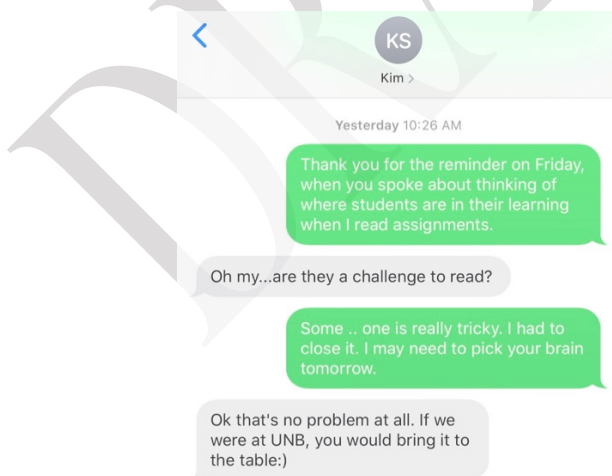
*An email from one of the early childhood educators arrived in my inbox; "Hey Kim, just a friendly reminder that \_\_\_\_\_ hasn't*

*heard anything back about the program. Really if I was offered an interview, she should be too. Just checking as, I don't want her to miss this opportunity." It was this email that prompted me to revisit the admissions folder from the Office of the Registrar and discovered the friend's application had not been included. After a number of telephone conversations with an Admissions Officer, the missing application arrived in my inbox revealing the friend was correct. It was stellar. At the eleventh hour and because of relational commitment, an additional time slot was added to the interview schedule. The friend was invited to participate and accepted the 10:30PM time. Her interview was emotional for members of our early childhood team-one that offered a glimpse into the life of a passionate, single mother who desperately wanted to someday be an early childhood educator with a university degree.*

These narratives reflect what hooks (2000) defines as a love ethic; one where early childhood educators embody dimensions of love in their everyday lives and relationships. In thinking about and with love, relationships, equity, possibilities, and the online space we are striving to support for this degree program, we made connections to a virtual conference we recently attended, The Festival of Literary Diversity (FOLD) 2020. We considered their definition of safe space: "The FOLD provides a space that prioritizes

underrepresented and marginalized voices. Mutual care and respect is our highest priority.” We hope to establish a space, similar to the FOLD, for early childhood educators, to experience love, mutual care and respect in the online learning space of university. Together, leaning over the edge we are open to possibilities, to the in-between spaces this program affords the field of early childhood education.

As we text on a Tuesday morning about the first set of assignments submitted for Cultural Constructions of Childhood, a course Candace is teaching, we are reminded once again that as adults, we are always being and becoming “...literacy learning is part of [our] histories, not something that [we] do as a cognitive task divorced from [our] lives” (Hicks, 2002, p. 37).



*Figure 2.* Screenshot of personal communication, June 3, 2020.

*Files sit open on my laptop, the first collection of assignments, I (Candace Gallagher) stare at the white space smothering the letters, the blinking cursor, and the haze of words stare back at me. It's moments like this, I have to remember the layers of literate histories, it is about much more than what is written to fulfill the requirements of the assignment. Thoughts of, "Who am I to assess their work?" Am I an imposter within a place of privilege loaded with responsibility? I sit here a learner, learning with the women who've passed in these assignments. In moments of intra-action (Barad, 2007) between myself and Stephanie Jones (2014), a critical feminist literacy researcher who reflects on teaching in a community-based writing project, articulates my contradictory positioning:*

*These shared moments of being together immersed in dialogic interactions, when our roles as student and teacher were blurred and we became . . . people trying to make sense of one another and our work in the world, are what [we] have come to see as a key part of the "critical" work in complex teaching and learning. (p. 17)*

*Within my mindbody I revisit the many conversations with UNB's Early Childhood Team. In preparation for the first cohort of educators, we have been imagining and negotiating the*



*possibilities for this online learning space and continue to plan curricula and discuss community building. These layers of conversations and learning are the in-between spaces we find ourselves living as instructors. Is this the same space that students are experiencing as they learn how to navigate the unfamiliar landscape of university, which is not necessarily part of their literate histories? Are my anxieties of ‘getting it right’ as an instructor a jagged image of the early childhood educators’ understanding and negotiating the academic code of university (S. Rose, personal communication, 2020) Kim’s words on Friday while we were together reminded me that we are at different places in our learning because of our classed, gendered, and raced lives, our literate histories. Conversations like these happen as we meet digitally each week, sometimes more frequently, to critically analyse the worldmaking (Goodman, 1978) that is unfolding. Individual learning journeys follow their own path, our discussions are open and supportive, helping create opportunities to grow and deepen knowledge and experiences as we question normative university assessment processes. Our assessment philosophies are in conversation with their literate identities, building respectful and responsive relationships, and creating communities of reciprocity and equity.*

When bodies and minds come together in unfamiliar territories, as early childhood educators and university instructors cohabitate in this online space, new and unpredictable events continue to occur—events that encourage new thoughts to emerge and take shape and therefore making new theories of pedagogy necessary. This pedagogical story “is a story of the not-yet-known, the unthinkable, coming to be thought, becoming visible” (Davies, 2011, p. 213). Moving together as collective cultivators of courage with an ethic of love, we fumble around (Jones & Hughes, 2016) in the in-between spaces, creating unwritten rules and new pedagogies yet to be written. As critical feminists we embrace the unpredictability that happens when we lean over the edge and continue to forge relationships, honouring literate identities.

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Kim Stewart has experience in the field of education as a teacher both locally and internationally, principal, researcher, curriculum developer, subject coordinator and instructor for UNB and STU. Currently she is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education, University of New Brunswick and the coordinator for the Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood. Through the theoretical frameworks of new materialism, posthumanism, and critical feminism, Kim's re-search investigates ways to re-conceptualize literacies and early childhood teaching/learning. Kim can be reached at [stewart@unb.ca](mailto:stewart@unb.ca)