

**Unravelling Early Childhood Education:
The Tensions, Knots and Entanglements.**

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Introduction

The following narrative is a written account of an early childhood educator's pedagogical commitment to leadership, identity, and creativity in early childhood education and care (ECE). It will begin by exploring, if you will, an origin story of an individual early childhood educator (educator) and of how they are situated in the Canadian, settler-colonial context. It will locate her with/in her contemporary milieu – that is to say, to name her social and cultural subjectivity – who she is, and who she has been able to be (Langford, 2022). It will provide a brief survey of education and care work and the ways particular roles, values, and beliefs have persisted into the present as self-evident, as uncontested and as *priori* truths, whilst faithfully maintaining the status quo. It will conclude with a visionary tale of beginnings, processes, and commitments to leadership projects, such as the creation and sustainability of a first ever, ECE student run journal for the University of British Columbia (UBC).

This paper relies on the use of metaphor; as both a methodology and a literary tool for unravelling early childhood education. Unravelling is used here as a way witnessing, and paying attention to the knots, tensions and complexities entangled in the identity of the early childhood educator. Namely, an identity that has been named as both passive and anti-intellectual (Vintimilla et al. 2021); and to address the question of *who and what is needed now to unravel this narrative and reimagine (re)knitting something otherwise?* This paper gestures toward a post qualitative inquiry, however it will not “systematically repeat a pre-existing research reprocess to produce a recognizable result” rather it will “experiment and create something new and different that might not be recognizable in existing structures” (St. Pierre, 2021, p. 6). Its position is that the processes of reknitting (reconfiguring) an alternate identity is both slow and urgent. This is partially because the early childhood educator engages with her world with her heart and hands

forward, therefore, professional leadership projects (PLC) ought to *be constituted with and in a relational approach*. It is also because who the educator is today, is deeply rooted in a feminine, and maternal identity entangled with a lust for legitimacy as both caregiver and expert in child development. Therefore I assert again, what is needed now *–more than ever* is compassionate, collaborate leadership projects to nurture, (re)imagine and (re)knit alternate identities, alongside affirmation narratives of who the educator is and can be *–and I (re)emphasize*, this project must be couched *with/in a feminist care ethic and with/in the creation of a new pedagogy of hope* (Braidotti, 2010; Langford, 2020; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) .

This paper promotes particular tasks and tools for reconstituting early childhood educators as intellectual, innovative, and agents of change with and in a multiplicity of leadership projects. The student run journal is but one such project –there is no *pièce de resistance* for educators in ECE, but rather many threads to be woven into a complex tapestry of a new identity and a new becoming. If what is needed now is an image of educators for this time, then what follows is a task for education to elevate and make visible the educators’s roles and responsibilities within a larger educational and pedagogical context. Namely, to disrupt human centric narratives deeply embedded in child development theories and practices; to promote post-modern pedagogies to reframe and expand our vision of the purpose, function and intentions of education; to experiment with different theoretical tools for (re)naming and (re)narrating old discourses; and to cultivate what I am promoting as a new pedagogy of hope *–all of these as necessary pre-conditions for transformational change in ECE and the educator in British Columbia* (Braidotti, 2010; Moss, 2018; Pahl & Rasool, 2020; Vintimilla & Berger, 2019).

An Origin Story

Woodill (1986) offers a concise chronology of the history of ECE, illustrating how early education and childcare discourses in North America are the social, cultural and political constructs of white, male European thinkers. And of how these Eurocentric and patriarchal ideologies functioned in the promotion of a particular image of the educator (as both care provider and teacher) and of the child as a *tablu rasa* –a blank slate, or empty vessel that is innocent, pure, and in need of adult protection, rescue and sometimes even, restraint. These philosophies have promoted an ideology of early education and care as ‘women’s work’ –a benevolent social reform for the salvation of children from; their ill equip mothers, the corruption of man, the evil world and for the good of all humanity and the civilized world.

At this time, when the age of educating children was decreasing, the presumptuous intellectual superiority of man, as an early childhood educator was decreed beneath him, and was a role better suited to women. ‘*Naturally*’, women embraced this opportunity, as it offered a step away from domesticity, and a step towards academia. Childcare, however, has remained stubbornly cemented in care policies aimed to mitigate harm; whilst continuing to be plague by a passivity and ‘anti-intellectual’ feminizing sentiment (Alaimo, 2016; Proctor, 2000; Vintimilla et al., 2021).

This, as an example of the inheritance of early education which continues to be entangled in monotheistic, positivistic, and individualistic thinking –and a moral stance reliant on human-centric value, worth, efficiency and productivity as regulated through regimes of truth, and power by the state and church (Foucault, 1982). As a worldview, it not only creates but depends on the maintenance of binaries such as power-freedom, male-female, nature-culture, civilized-savage, education-care and passive-intellectual (Ailwood, 2008; Alaimo, 2016; Foucault, 1982; Highway, 2022; Proctor, 2000; Woodill, 1986). And tis this apparatus that continues to function

today, constructing these ornery and contentious separations and divisions as if they were self-evident and uncontestable *Truths*.

Pedagogical Commitments

The notion of anti-intellectualism is a good segue into the recent contrivance of what is being promoted as the need for pedagogical commitments/declarations –and/or living manifestos in ECE. In a move to (re)activate thinking Vintimilla et al. (2021) co-opted the idea of a living manifesto, as a way for educators to “compose spaces that take up the possibility to think together and compose together a myriad of small events that try out, fail, form, and deform possible pedagogical and creative processes that are activated in the spirit of what orients them” (p. 4). This is a particularly salient idea for me, as it invokes uncertainty, imperfection, and the unknowability of our post-modern worlds; and it extends an invitation to think diffractively, divergently, and differently –a move towards making what is familiar, strange (Moss, 2018; Todd, 2019). The act of ‘thinking together to compose something different’ requires paying attention to the dominant narratives in ECE and to ‘unpick’ the knots, tensions and entanglement that bind us in unhealthy and unjust ways (Moss, 2018).

My Pedagogical Commitments

Are offered here, by way of musings, contemplations and the comingling of multiple ideas that continue to haunt me and my articulations of what I believe is needed now. To this end, I will endeavour to write a narrative, as an autoethnographic inquiry knitting together fragments of my past, and present, and of the dreams, desires, hopes, passions, entangled with/in my conflicting commitments to children, childhood, and the early childhood educator. These commitments, emerge from a situated, and contextual positionality of the I –that is to say, myself as the subject that I am (Foucault, 1982; Todd, 2019). I identity as being of Scottish and English

descent. My forebearers were settler-colonizer whom for the most part, choose to make this place home. As a descendent, I was privileged to grow up in a rural BC community, amid the vibrant and lively contexts of the 70s, 80s and 90s. Pahl & Rasool (2020) offer the following quote by Shaheen Shah (2018); “[t]he artist’s own work is central to the artwork” (p. 49). This quote highlights for me, how as a writer my story, inheritance and experiences are knitted into my constructions of reality and with/in all my stories.

As a research methodology, autoethnography is new to me. However, it enlivens my creativity, and passion; inspiring me with such hopefulness that I am now completely enamoured with its intellectual potential for doing inquiry work, and research. Or more broadly, the affordances ethnography, words and storytelling offer education, as a ‘social, cultural and political project’ and a “useful way...for us to understand the world we live in...[It] is a constructive approach ...for changing or improving [our] world (Ellis, 2020, p. 207). For early childhood educators “to read hard, write hard, think hard, and invent new forms of inquiry that might create a new world and a people yet to come (St. Pierre, 2021, p. 7). For me, these ideas are recognizable as *literacy as activism*. Literacy as a mode to (re)read and (re)write our worlds (Souto-Mannings & Yoon, 2018). Metaphorically, I see it as a process of unravelling and reknitting realities; invoking innovative pedagogical tools for (re)thinking as a “response to contemporary issues, including rising social and economic inequality, the climate crisis, and the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic” (Apple et al. 2020, p. 246). Literacy as activism creates a space for me to interrogate and (re)write minimalizing discourses that refute simplistic narratives of educators as “caring smiles and helping hands” (Jones et al., 2019, p. 127). Not only is writing a way for educators, leaders, and researchers to write themselves into the world differently but also to “enact [other] identities” (p. 60); and it is also a way to enliven creativity,

invention, and experimentation. Multimodalities within language and literacy affords alternate representations of our world, and the tools to empower women to speak their minds, explore, disrupt, and articulate different ideas in the everyday, mundane, and ordinary moments of our lives. “Co-labouring” to write and think together, challenging hierarchies and disrupting the unequitable circulation of power and the over representation of particular bodies, knowledges, and stories (Vintimilla & Berger, 2019; Foucault, 1982; Pahl & Rasool, 2020). Pahl and Rasool (2020) view “coauthoring...as a practice of challenging epistemological injustices” (p. 52) that invites us to “rethink what it is to do research within everyday settings –and to reflect about whose voices are being heard and where” (p. 52).

For me this is the magic. This thinking provides the conceptual tools to disrupt well-worn ways of being, thinking and doing in ECE; and to do otherwise. Thinking with the metaphor of unravelling ignites the creative energy for (re)writing new narratives. Ones that challenge the understanding of epistemology *as a way of knowing*, reframing it *as a system of knowing*. Further to this, viewing settler colonialism as a system of knowing invites us to unsettle, settler colonialism, and look beyond its frayed edges to the hidden, untold stories of multiple others left out by colonialist regimes deeply embedded in the fabric of Canada (Eduygen, 2021; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018).

The Unravelling

What Is a Yarn?

A yarn is a thread used for knitting, crocheting, or weaving. A yarn is also a term sometimes used to connote a ‘good story’.

Oh, how I love the promise of a good story; it is for me a welcomed escape into an alternate universe—a space alive with possibility –the temporary suspension of the realities of

my present circumstances. But alas, a good story is hard to find. My shelves are littered with the promises of good stories. Afterall, notions of good or goodness is value laden; relying on consensus, like-mindedness, and an assumptive understanding of what is good, and if it is good, it must be good for all.

As this story is ultimately about me, and my identity formations, it is neither good nor bad –simply uncomfortable for me to tell. For I do not often see myself as worthy or particularly interesting, or generally being able to contribute meaningfully to intellectual conversations. I prefer to stand in the back, easing into the default position of bystander –the preverbal ‘fly on the wall’. From here I can observe, (a past time I enjoy) quietly sitting, noticing, and listening to those around me. Perhaps it was this ‘smallness in the world’ that afforded me a presence at the kitchen table, in the company of adults and adult conversations not meant for me. These childhood kitchen table encounters were thrilling, and although I did not always understand the content, I felt the emotionally nuanced exchanges between my mom, and her friends –fellow housewives and mothers. It was within these spaces that my identity of mother/wife and the maternal began to form.

Am I content in this image of myself? I say I am, but in truth I think it is a romanticized notion and oversimplification of a childhood memory and of a role and a time in my life that felt safe, knowable and secure. And without any interventions, I was essentially left there to ferment in this view of myself, ruminating and constructing meaning for myself, whilst taking up as little space as possible. Later in life, I adopted a view of myself as an introvert, one who enjoys the quiet solitude of their own company, and who is more than happy to avoid the idle and incessant chatter of others. Reflecting on my childhood, my friendships and my occupations I acknowledge the importance of these moment to me then, and perhaps it was this

romanticization of my childhood as a carefree space surrounded by nature, of life on the farm, and as a confident child navigating her childhood, which inspired in me the unrelenting desire to become a mother and a *teacher*.

What Does the Idea of Unravelling Afford?

To unravel a piece of knitted or woven cloth is a process of undoing, involving the separation of threads, knots, and tangles (Cambridge Dictionary, January 2022).

The idea of unravelling invites me to question, problematize and interrogate all that I ‘take’ or assume to be true. It asks me to slow down and consider my thinking, paying close attention to the words I use, and the meaning my words convey. It affords me the space to imagine dismantling the multiple conception of identity; including my own and all the ways it collides with the contemporary identity of the early childhood educator today. As I sit here pondering my own identity crisis, I acknowledge it is from the perspective of ‘being in crisis or, as a being in crisis’ that I have constructed the following narrative. It is my story of ‘bumping against’ a thing, an idea, and a question –problematizing, *what other leadership possibilities exist beyond the professional leadership communities (PLC), of the Early Childhood Pedagogy Network (ECPN)?*

Let me explain. In the geographic location I know as British Columbia, the ECPN represents the aspiring role of a pedagogist. A (re) naming of the professional role of the pedagogista, as introduced to early childhood education by Loris Malaguzzi and the schools of Reggio Emilia, in Italy (Moss, 2018; Vintimilla et al., 2021). I have been an early childhood educator long enough to recognize the scholarly names and works of all the ECPN directors. As a collaborative professional community (CPC), they appear to act as self-appointed gate keepers; ensuring that only the brightest, most promising educators represent the ECPN. The role of

ECPN pedagogist (invented by the ECPN) requires academic rigor and a stamina to hold up under scrutiny and critique. Their guiding vision, articulated as a “working manifesto... [is] propelled by [a] desire to think collectively about what might be possible in early childhood education, and to actively create transformative processes within the field” (Vintimilla, et al., 2021, p. 1). Dedication and commitment to this desire is not enough for entry into this particular CPC, and for those of us that were ‘cast adrift’, we are left grappling with the question of *why, what else was needed? And in the name of what, exactly –what does this ethic do/create? A question that has fallen repeatedly on deaf ears, as they are under no obligation to comment, advice or mentor and in the absence of a response, we craft stories to counter the self-doubt, shame and unworthiness left in our wake --And we continue to bump up against our persistent questioning of what other leadership possibilities, communities, and projects exist for us?*

The (Re)Knitting

What Is a Metaphor?

A literary device used to imagine something as something else, and perhaps, as a way to change or transform how we see and construct realities.

For me, the language and tasks of ‘knitting’ provides a different starting point to engage with my realities, to grapple with my past and to imagine different futures. This particular story is of a seemingly ordinary day in the middle of summer. My spring courses were completed, and it was time for me to slow down, languish in this season’s warmth --which thankfully was devoid of the stifling smoke we have grown all too accustomed to in recent years. When suddenly (or seemingly so) an idea popped into my head – random? Maybe, but for me these ideas have been percolating for some time, entangled in my ongoing ruminations of *what is next? What is possible with early childhood education after the completion of a master’s in education?*

How Do Ideas Begin?

“Good morning [IB] and [MW], I have an idea- I am wondering what it may look like to create a ECE student journal/publication? My thinking is that it could be a way for students to begin to dabble in writing articles for publication and also a way to begin experimenting with multimodalities- including sketches, poetry, short stories, op eds. etc.” (VM., personal email communications, July 2022).

“What an intriguing idea, lets pick this up again in September” (IB, personal email correspondence, July 2022).

Now, I must be honest, I have had a boat load of ideas --a perpetual ferris wheel of dreams, wishes, hopes, and desires in search of a something that will make the difference in a moment, in a lifetime and in ECE. Why am I here, writing about this one now? There is primarily one reason and that is, *a person of significance*, who is positioned well within an educational institute, said yes to my idea. Saying yes activated movement, inspired, and injected just the right amount of energy required for this particular project to grow and gain momentum.

I want to pause here, just for a moment and circle back to cognitive knot I’ve been massaging –this switch-a-roo is a way of disrupting modernity propensity for linearity and logic ☺ and because I want to (re)visit Edward Said (1975) and his ideas of beginnings. For it is Said who reminds me to think about beginnings divergently, devoid of a starting or ending point, but always and already in midst of things. And so it is, with the inception of this idea, for an ECE student run journal. I could, however, mark the start as July 2022 but in reality, as an idea, it has been manifesting for a long awhile. I am thinking of idea as an affordance, a movement towards something new. I am thinking of it as having an ‘aboutness’ –it is about something (Ahmed, 2020) and a ‘thingness’ –an idea with agency (Bennet, 2010; Bernstein, 2011; Weldemarian &

Wals, 2021). It can be something, and do something, we simply have to create the conditions for it to become. In this sense, I acted, I shared it, and as an idea, it was affirmed, and in turn activated a process of becoming something else. At present this idea is dwelling in a liminal space (or in-between space), it isn't anywhere yet, but it holds the promise of a vitality, a creativity and an invention all comingling and gesturing towards a future of potentiality, possibility and for me, wonder—a wonderment and a hope for something restorative and transformative for educators in ECE (Todd, 2019).

How Do Ideas Stay Alive?

“Hello [IB], I can't believe it is September! I had posed a question or idea earlier this summer about creating a student run journal to which you had suggested this might be a project for the leadership course” (VM, personal email communication, September 2022).

“Let's talk. Zoom or phone?” (IB, personal email correspondence, September 2022).

All things need care and attention to grow; and to be fed regularly to (re)activate and continue the process of fermentation. And it is in this bubbling, growing contaminated space that transformation happens. Anna Tsing (2016) asks, when does a gathering become a happening? And this is how I am thinking about the idea of a student run journal. For now, it is a gathering, a collecting, and a fermenting. Perhaps through ongoing actions, of co-labouring with and in dialogic thinking spaces it will become a happening; thus, creating the conditions for transformative change in early childhood (Moss, 2018). The vision for the journal is to encourage and support students to see themselves as leaders, researchers, and innovators in ECE through the processes of writing, narrating, storytelling, and weaving yarns together into complex tapestries.

How Did Our Gathering Become a Happening?

An initial zoom meeting was set for early November with ‘W’ from the Kerner Library and with ‘SS’ from Arts and Humanities (also our ‘go to person’ for all things involving Open Journal Systems (OJS)). It turns out that the idea of a student run journals is not novel and in fact, most academic programs have them –including UBC, therefore the possibility of creating a ECE student run journal is beyond conceivable –it is utterly doable. The first step is to complete, sign and submit a two-page terms of service. Both a disclaimer precluding UBC from being implicated in what may or may not be published in our journal, and a permission for SS to set up a journal shell. This, as it turns out is the easy part, and the least time consuming. Canvas and the internet at large are rife with opportunity to participate in workshops, and webinars. Educational platforms abound, detailing the ins, outs and all abouts of journals creation and its workflow; including the creation of a website to host the journal, its intentions, values and mission statement, policies, procedures, submissions guidelines, formatting, and style. This ‘home’ will detail our reviewing, accepting, rejecting, rewriting, editing, copyediting, and publishing protocols. And in addition to this, the journal will require a name. *A name...?*

Working through all of this, is a process that will take time for all stakeholders, including the ongoing commitment extending into and beyond May 2023. Its survival and sustainability are in fact, contingent on the commitments of multiple others –persons, known and not yet known, beyond the conclusion of, and our graduation from this master’s program. As a sustainable project it will relies on the ongoing commitment of a UBC faculty member (IB) and the recruitment of future graduated or post grad student in ECE. And lastly, and most importantly, its success is our collaborative commitment is measured by its ability to be *response-able* (Haraway, 2016) that is to say, its ability to respond ongoingly, to one another, to our pedagogical commitments in ECE in accordance to the times in which we are currently living.

Conclusion

I hope to have offered a reflective and creative account of who I am within the context of my pedagogical commitments in early childhood. Using *metaphor* as a literary tool, to illustrate how it can create a pedagogical space for thinking otherwise, reimagining, reshaping and reconstituting identity(ies) within a narrative process, that ebbs and flows with complexity and intensities --never static, but always (re)imaginative, (re)generative and (re)inventive. I see it as a process by which I am able to experiment with autoethnography, as a method for narrating my lived experiences, and the interconnectedness (or not) to my idea of leadership and leadership projects in ECE. Through thinking about what might be needed in ECE, I am able to begin cultivating a political space for activism, social justice, and empowerment that transverses all levels of service provision and professional development for educators. At the time of this writing *UBC's Early Childhood Student Journal* is still very much in the beginning stages, it is a work in progress that gestures towards a hope, and a potentiality for what might be next for me. It has afforded me a creative outlet for engaging with metaphor, word play, and writing. To dabble with the idea of literacy as activism; and to document and expose my own vulnerabilities, in a way that I hope invites others to walk with me –walking and talking and caring and responding to all that is needed in these moments, as one small part of a shared journey. This paper has afforded me the opportunity to consider who the educator *is not* (and who I *am not*) and to imagine who the educator *could be* (and who I *could be*) (Foucault, 1982); whilst rescripting my pedagogical commitments with/in a complex assemblages of vibrant matter, material, living and unliving things, and as always and already entangled (Bennet, 2010; Bernstein, 2011; Keenan, 2017). To see myself and my commitments as knotted (or knitted) together in ways that require a careful and tentative rendering and unravelling, inviting me to pay

close attention to what needs to be picked up, stitched together and/or dropped. To see the act of (re)creating identity through leadership projects as layered, complex processes for these times; with affordance for a vitality, an aliveness and potential in the here and now of our lives to recast, restitch, and knit anew a pedagogy of hope.

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