Handholding, Walking with Students. Compassionate—Not Customer—Care in Post-Secondary Education

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Abstract

Values of independence and self-determination predominate over relations of care and compassion in fast-paced academia and post-secondary institutions, a "malaise" that faculty and students alike experience. Large-scale production rewards the "Invictus" (undefeatable, unconquered), leaving others mostly to their own and allowing little or no space for individual care, for handholding. As a graduate cohort advisor in early childhood education (ECE), I have resisted giving in to such values. Inspired by principles of a feminist ethics of care and pedagogy of listening, in this paper I reflect on a decade of handholding and walking with ECE post-secondary students as an act of resistance.

Keywords: academia, feminist ethics of care, early childhood education, post-secondary students, pedagogy of listening, resistance

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> Let me take you by the hand. It is a supremely human gesture, and in it, you and I are joined: we hold on to one another and go along together. In the linking of hands, palm meets palm while the fingers, bent to form a hook, literally interdigitate. Caught in each other's flexion, the pull of my hand on yours, or yours on mine, only tightens the grasp. (Tim Ingold, 2016, p. 3).

Discourses sustaining fast-paced academia value independence and self-determination over inter-dependence and relational-based exchanges. They dismiss open expressions of care or compassion. Such discourses reflect the trend towards large-scale production that rewards those making it to the finish line unconquered, undefeated, and resisting external and internal pressures—The "Invictus" — while leaving others mostly to their own. Hartman and Darab (2012) depict a "malaise" in post-secondary institutions that allows little or no space for individual care and where praise and rewards are reserved for a few.

Post-secondary students studying early childhood education (ECE) are not exempt from the impact of this "malaise." Navigating up and down multiple channels or "canals," their dual roles as professionals and students demand they follow the flow of their rhythmic, active, intensive days at work with children, families, and other educators, comply with early childhood program regulations, and at the same time provide the same level of focused attention to a minimum of 30 hours of coursework for each one of the three-credit courses they must complete. These hours are distributed between class, study, and assignments. Their personal and family commitments are not accounted for in such time calculations.

A program expectation for ECE part-time students, identified as "professional" in its having been designed for students mostly holding full-time jobs, requires an average of one core course per semester over two years. As an instructor in the ECE program, I have been a part of post-secondary students' journeys for over two decades. I have also served as a graduate cohort advisor and instructor in an early childhood professional master's program (MEd). As a cohort advisor, I have embraced the practice of walking the journey with my graduate students. Walking this journey together, side by side, entails intentional listening, acknowledging and honouring with deep respect where students are. Recently, I heard the term "handholding" mentioned in reference to my embracing, as if perceived as coddling or perhaps even stunting someone's growth. Instead, and echoing Ingold's (2016) words, "Let me take you by the hand…" (p. 3), I decided to own the term "handholding." Within the practice of walking together, handholding is nested within a collective vision of post-secondary pedagogy, one that supports student identities and faculty autonomy by engaging in and maintaining dialogue. This vision resonates with Freire's pedagogical praxis as it "circulates, is acted upon and revised —not being pre-determined . . ." (McLaren, 1999, p. 4). It has also become my expression of resistance to individualistic discourses embedded within the prize-winning, fast-paced academia. Kohan's (2019) philosophical biography, "Paulo Freire, Mais Do Que Nunca" (Paulo Freire, More than Ever), analyzed the political essence embedded in Freire's work. A trained lawyer who never practiced law, becoming instead an educator and a philosopher, Freire introduced a pedagogy that reveals the oppressing powers of the very institutions which are expected to provide tools and support to their users (banks, yes, but also schools). The dichotomy for ECE students is that they are trained to provide care and compassion against the backdrop of their own educational and training experience, which

is focused on quick-paced results, no considerations for life beyond training, and a culture of fierce independence.

Walking *with* ECE Post-Secondary Students

Turning to principles of a feminist ethics of care and a pedagogy of listening, I reflect on a decade of walking with ECE post-secondary students as acts of resistance. In this essay, I use short narratives as grounding points to elaborate on my particular experience of cohort advising. I also draw from Langford and Richardson's (2020) reflections on "care*ful"* listening, a call for "caring *for*" others, and not simply engaging in "care*giving* activities" (Noddings, 2015, as cited in Langford & Richardson, 2020, p. 36). I also call on Buber's (1959) "I and thou" as a script that accompanies my intertwined venture(s) with students. I identify the system inequalities that quietly and subtly pose a threat to the very success of students from the beginning of their program. I then dwell on the tensions that I encountered amidst the university guidelines and requirements. I examine my, and my students' navigation, which includes supporting students' individual pathways within the collective efforts of their cohorts. My reason for sharing my experiences is to offer handholding as an act of resistance across the ECE landscape. In a world of recognizing equity as a focus in most institutions, handholding offers a simple and effective way to resist oppressive practices embedded into many aspects of student academic life. Handholding enacts an ethics of care and fosters strong relationships across the student and faculty body. My experiences in handholding offer examples of how this practice can be taken up by other institutions so that, in time, they can become less like acts of resistance and more like best practices for student success and well-being.

Regarding the process I followed toward writing this essay, I sought (and obtained) feedback and consent from the graduate students whose work is included here; excerpts have been chosen to illustrate specific aspects of my pedagogical practice raised in this essay. I communicated with the students using e-mail, attaching the abstract for this essay, and asking their permission to cite their work and quote some of their e-mail correspondence or blog posts, without using their real names. I close this essay with reflections and considerations for program completion, and what success even looks like in this context.

What is Your Dream: I and Thou

In the beginning it is the prospect of a journey. I received e-mail and voicemail messages like the ones below for approximately 13 years:

> Dear Ms Pighini, I am a kindergarten teacher with 10 years' experience living in Nova Scotia. I would like to complete my master's program. I saw the online cohort course, is it all online?

> Hi! I am preschool teacher in a community program. I have completed my ECE certification and hold a Bachelor of Arts. I am interested in the master's program in ECE. Do you think I have enough qualifications for this program?

> Dear Mari, I am coordinator in a program serving young children and families. I have seen a recording of an info session for the online MEd in ECE program and I have a few questions. May I call you?

I read, I listen to, and I try to honour these e-mail and voicemail messages, each one speaking to me, using Tuck and Yang's (2014) words of the applicant's "desire" (p. 232) —one I recognize as their own yearning to embark on a new route. For reasons the interested early childhood

educator(s) may not even be aware of, these individuals are ready to trouble their existing lives, perhaps keen to embrace what Berger (2015) calls "a moment of not knowing" (p. 130), even though it means confronting their own fears about continuing into graduate school.

Relationality as An Act of Resistance

As I reflect on these e-mail and voicemail messages, I become aware of my first act of resistance: To allow for principles of *relationality* to guide my response(s) to students. I have rejected following the course of anonymity and personal detachment from the other reflected-on, pre-scripted, template-style responses. I invoke Buber's (1959) "I and thou": "I-thou… Primary words don't signify things but are intimate relations… The primary word 'I-Thou' can only be spoken with the whole being…" (p. 3). I am aware that the *I-thou* binding defines my positioning as a cohort advisor. Even at this very early stage of the correspondence, I give a hint in my response that I would like to know more about their background, as illustrated in the following sample e-mail message:

> Dear A,
>
> Thank you for your interest in our program. It seems you have a wealth of experience in early childhood education with your 10 years as a kindergarten teacher, and that your undergraduate background is relevant for the MEd program. Yes, our program is offered entirely online. I am happy to connect and talk more about your interests in our program. At the same time, we will be holding an online information session soon. Would you like to attend?
>
> [Note: At the time of this email, I used Skype to communicate with some applicants preferring video calls. Also, at the time of this email, video calls were only available for registered students; later on, I used Zoom].

Efforts to sustain relationality are offered through online information sessions for prospective applicants, like "A", and for orientation sessions for students admitted to the program. Webinar formats have been introduced as institutional preferences for information and orientation sessions; however, within the context of orientation, I experience webinar formats as perpetuating distance: *I* and *thou,* not *I-thou* (Buber,1959). My preference for the structure of such sessions continues to be through an open conference (non-webinar) format that allows for personal introductions and information exchange (voice and/or text). Rather than muting participants, I invite them to speak. Here is where the exchange of information begins: Our primary endeavor is to introduce applicants to what the program entails; however, I also want to learn who these potential applicants are— their backgrounds, interests, and concerns. Their queries and experiences shape our sessions together. No two sessions end up being identical. I realize that I want to learn more about students' own experiences. Though coming from diverse backgrounds, the prospective students share a common interest in learning about the particular topic of the online MEd program information session, similar to what Wenger (1998) termed "communities of practice." The process of reciprocal exchange that guides the information and orientation sessions promotes awareness of the diverse communities of practice that may surface for applicants and new students as they are introduced to one another. In addition to making a space to connect, conversations are acts of reciprocal exchange that allow for faculty and staff to share the program's background and for students to bring in their stories, their voices, and what they envision—their dreams.

The Systemic Bases of Diversity and Inequality

I have come to understand how acts of resistance may begin for me from the early stages of the application and selection process. In this graduate program, admission criteria allow some flexibility when it comes to the strict parameters of standardized text about dates, GPA points, and other requirements. The university's objective is to make this program attractive and feasible for applicants with undergraduate backgrounds that may be non-traditional and not necessarily meet the required specific combination of qualifications (type of degree, GPA minimum, and professional experience). Faculty involved with the admission process are invited to reflect on the narratives in messages received from applicants with these non-traditional backgrounds, giving careful attention to their unique context, characteristics, and needs. I pay close attention to such narratives. The message below is from an applicant who describes their journey into, and expression of commitment to, early childhood education:

> Hello Mari,
>
> Thank you for your response. I'll be completing my program this December. If all goes well, I could perhaps take a few extra ECE courses at the school during the next semester. I've attached my resume and unofficial transcript for you to look at. Once again, I'd love to apply for the program and this stems from my love of working with children. Three years ago I hadn't considered just how greatly I'd want to continue my career in the field I had already found myself in as an ECA. As such, I'd love for my graduate education to centre around my passion of early childhood education. (M.U., personal/email communication, Oct. 29, 2021)

A second message, presented below, is from an applicant who had not yet completed their undergraduate bachelor's degree, which is one of the program's academic requirements (a 4-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) or Bachelor of Arts (BA)). Hence, this student's application required a 'special case' examination:

> Good evening, Mari.
>
> I have most of my application complete for the Fall . . .MEd in ECE program.
>
> I have a very different academic background. I am currently on Education Leave from [name of Agency] until May 2018, where I have been employed as the Indigenous ECE Post-secondary Coordinator for the seven-plus years.
>
> I am currently enrolled in [name of University] completing my undergraduate degree in BPA-Human Services I will graduate in June 2018.
>
> I have submitted a PLAR- Prior learning assessment and recognition and was awarded 27 credits for the learning that I have demonstrated. This was a massive undertaking, [in] comparison to a personal learning thesis. I have attached the portfolio assessment for you to review and uploaded the evaluation to my application. I have received transfer credits for my two-year ECE diploma into my undergraduate degree as well.
>
> I have also attached my degree work sheet to allow for clarity to the transfer and PLAR credits.
>
> I am currently completing five courses and will be taking another five classes next semester. My marks are not all uploaded or entered at this point.

I wanted to connect with you and provide you with this background information. I recognize I will be considered a special case for review. Please let me know if there is any additional information you may need.

Kind regards,

[signed]

L.

(email communication, L.H., December 12, 2017)

As I re-read these messages, both sent by BIPOC (black/indigenous/people of colour) applicants, I recall Annette Henry's (2015) article "'We especially welcome applications from members of visible minority groups: Reflections on race, gender and life at three universities." Henry (2015) cleverly uncovered the sequence of disparities and uneven processes of hiring minority faculty from non-White, non-European backgrounds. As this author shares, the invitation, stated in all calls for faculty applicants, aimed to diversify the highly white faculty bodies in Canadian post-secondary institutions. Eight years since Henry's (2015) publication, efforts to minimize academic hiring disparities are ongoing. An example that illustrates the difficulties still encountered in reaching faculty diversification is the document titled "Task Force on Race, Indigeneity and Social Justice's Final Report" (The University of British Columbia, 2022). The report calls for major systemic and structural changes to be reflected in accessibility, funding, and program completion options for students. The current structure of the university, the report continues, still mimics a post-colonial model of education based on hierarchical values of power and achievement. Initiatives already in place to hire diverse faculty and staff representing various intersectionalities of race, gender, sexual orientation, social, and ethno-cultural backgrounds are simply not enough, the report offers, to attain the levels of systemic and structural change required to create inclusivity for faculty, staff, and students. I pause here to reflect on the meaning of these statements within the context of the application process and those faculty members who have been selected to be part of the admission committee to review the files from minority applicants. I wonder how these selected faculty members balance the admission requirements set forth by the university with the need to champion better representation across the applicant pool with regard to intersectionality.

"Too Many Special Cases"

During the admissions process, the selection committee is guided by the caution to avoid accepting "too many special cases stemming from admissions." In this case, special cases refer to students who have received one of their undergraduate degrees in an institution with academic credentials not recognized by this institution for credit transfer or validation, or (as in L.H.'s case) who have completed undergraduate credits through various programs that require validation by the university. Having more than two or three special cases does not sit well with university admissions.

Such a situation leads me to ponder this contradiction between the university's aim to "attract" BIPOC and other visible minority students and the strict limits regarding criteria for, and number of, special cases. The presence of the reductionist clause of "special cases" stalls applications from those who face life challenges (Shankar et al., 2013) that are not always faced by other students. Personally, I resist these institutional warnings. The success rate of "special case" students graduating from our program, some of them continuing into–and

completing—doctoral programs, reveals another storyline behind the cautious and exclusionary internal messages of the university.

A first step toward equitable access to university programs is to examine special case clauses like these ones. They preserve a system that favours privilege and maintains exclusion. The language in the clause reproduces cycles of privilege and exclusion, benefiting only those with privilege and punishing those who are already marginalized. Graduate students enrolled in professional, part-time programs often do not qualify for financial assistance, which tends to be reserved for those enrolled in full-time programs. I cannot ignore the description of the MEd program as a "professional" program. The term "professional" speaks of qualified and paid. Assuming educators, as professionals, have enough earning power that they do not require financial assistance (and are therefore not provided with such opportunities) presents a not-so-subtle way for institutions like universities to perpetuate a system of oppression. *I* (can pay) and *thou* (cannot). Students who are professionals do pay their tuition out of their salary and are then often expected to attain their master's degree within the stipulated calendar period. Yet, this is not the reality for many ECE students who earn one of the lowest starting salary ranges among professionals in Canada (Friendly et al., 2020). Low salaries for early childhood educators are an issue that has remained unchanged even though this was declared an issue of women's equality during the global pandemic (Berger, 2021). The ECE master's program does not take into account the needs of an increasingly large proportion of students coming into the program from non-traditional educational backgrounds who require financial assistance. Students with non-traditional backgrounds refer to those who, as in L.H.'s case (with her previous ECE certification and Prior Learning Assessment Recognition process), required a laddering component throughout their undergraduate years to complete a four-year-equivalent bachelor's degree, as the university admission criteria stipulate.

In addition to minority and/or immigrant student groups experiencing inequities, perhaps the most difficult situation that can trigger a student's withdrawal from their program (once accepted) relates to financial difficulties (largely due to forgone wages and/or financial costs). This finding was reported in a study examining graduate student attrition in Canada and the US, where DeClou (2016) cites Raftery and Hout's (1993) notion of "maximum inequality," referring to how "privilege groups maintain higher education when lower levels of education have been saturated" (p. 177). In other words, it is precisely students coming from non-privileged groups who do not complete their programs. In my experience as a cohort advisor, the majority of students in the ECE cohort have been female, reflecting current and past trends in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) field (Sakai et al., 2014). In keeping this research in mind, I remain astutely aware of how female students who do not have a spousal or family safety net are at increased vulnerability in relation to abandoning their program and/or delaying their graduation. This information guides my interactions with students when they introduce the discussion of discontinuing their studies, as described later in this essay.

Individual *and* Collective

Not acknowledging the needs of students coming from similar laddering experiences (from undergraduate to diploma to graduate programs) represents a stark contrast with university mottos like "tuum est" or "it is yours" (and "it is up to you," using the singular "you" pronoun in Latin). With this motto, a university is placing the onus of achievement and success on individual students, as if the students were detached from the very communities and structures that have nurtured and provided them with support to achieve completion at each stage of their programs and that continue

to sustain students through their own formal and informal networks. The emphasis on "tuum" brings to my mind Buber's (1959) 'I and thou' warning of non-relational structures of engagement perpetuating othering and mimicking post-colonial hierarchies, as per findings in the final report from the Task Force on Race, Indigeneity and Social Justice (The University of British Columbia, 2022) mentioned earlier on in this essay. I resist the pressure to engage in othering.

Drawing on relational principles sustaining a feminist ethics of care (Langford & Richardson, 2020), I have strived to walk alongside students, as a collective, as we begin this journey. The aim is to make it a journey where we can establish relationships of trust that provide the basis for sharing information. From day one, I embrace the practice of walking alongside students, a practice not supported at post-secondary institutions for fear of student-faculty over-dependence, as if "handholding" a small child. Instead, as I previously introduced, I interpret handholding as care*ful* listening to students. It is handholding that embraces *complete* care (Langford & Richardson, 2020). I borrow phrasing from Langford and Richardson's (2020) study about an ethics of care in practice based on observations of interactions between early childhood educators and preschool-aged children. These authors offer that "careful listening to children's needs, ideas, interests, concerns, and goals communicated in multiple ways without judging, classifying, or fitting them to match preconceptions of the child is paramount" (Noddings, 2013, as cited in Langford & Richardson, 2020, p. 36). In my active listening to, and corresponding with, students to find out more about their backgrounds, their interests, and their challenges, I adopt what Langford and Richardson (2020) identify as complete care: "In other words, care is completed when we know more about how children feel and experience their care and respond to it in varying ways…" (pp. 36–37). My goal is to match the ethic of care that ECE students are required to use in their professional interactions with the people they serve, in this case, children. My goal is not to treat the people I serve— in this case, ECE students— like they are children, but rather, to steep the entire profession, including children, their families, educators, and coordinators, in the same ethic.

Listening Intently to Students

I revisit the "tuum est" quote, an affirmation of the endorsement of values of trust, authenticity, and vulnerability that sustain the master's program, while I reflect on the communication that I (and others) sustain with students. I evoke Tim Ingold's (2016) sort-of-appearing-and-disappearing "threads" as he describes the interwoven connections of elements, experiences and actions that sustain life. In his attempt to provide clarity to the different types of expression in relationships, Ingold refers to traces, rejecting linear metaphors of relationships (one-way, or even two-ways): "Threads have a way of turning into traces, and vice versa. Moreover, whenever threads turn into traces, surfaces are formed, and whenever traces turn into threads, they are dissolved" (p. 2). Undertaking a graduate program where graduate students embrace togetherness while pursuing their individual pathways requires ongoing, reciprocal exchanges between faculty and students, and among students themselves. For reciprocal exchanges to be enacted in academia, the ongoing faculty-student exchanges of (mostly written) feedback benefit from the values of trust, authenticity, and vulnerability. In her writing blog, Lisa Munro (2015) writes: "It is ok to feel vulnerable, scared, angry or hurt when receiving feedback. It is ok to validate our feelings. We do ourselves no favour when we try to tell ourselves that we should not feel a certain way" (as cited in Belcher, 2019, p. 207). With these thoughts in mind about validating one's own vulnerabilities, I created a course blog for my students to share excerpts of their writing and for them to run their ideas by cohort mates during the beginning stages of their capstone graduating

e-portfolio project (taking place at the end of their second academic year; see Figure 1 for illustration of blog home page). The idea of writing a blog that would capture this final stage of the students' programs came about from a previous graduate course where cohort students shared, on discussion posts, their insights and connections, which were grounded in theory and research and illustrated through professional experience examples. As in previous courses, engaging with students by responding and posing more questions/or queries led to an expansion of our conversation and served as an example of theory-to-practice connections, which is discussed in the next section.

Figure 1

E-Portfolio Blog - Home Page (Excerpt)
Maze by R. Mareschal. Image by M. Pighini (2019). Image reproduced with consent

Home

Welcome All to your ECED XXX graduating e-portfolio blog! In this blog we will post yours/our collaborative work towards the completion of your final course in your MED in Early Childhood Education. We have this blog so that you have a chance to share ideas around how to create and develop your graduating e-portfolio as it "sinks in," and expand, together with your partners, in your pairs/mini-groups. For this blog to be useful to each one of you and us, the expectation is that there will be updates with posts from rotating representatives of every pair/small group of students every two -three weeks for Term 1.

The Power of the Cohort

Munro's (2015) words (as cited in Belcher, 2019) resonate with me as I recall one of the graduate students' (T.I.) blog post in response to the topic of global discourses in ECE at the end of the cohorts' first academic year. In beginning her post, T.I. shared her perspective as an Indigenous educator, openly revealing her struggles with issues of identity and culture:

> Wondering to myself, which is the right way to say things? Is my thinking right or wrong? I realized, that my mind and way of thinking have become so colonized that as an adult I am worried about having my own opinion. A secret fear of being wrong and not in line with the standards set out for me. "[F]orms of colonialism are harder to see, and so, they

are insidious because they penetrate and impact every part of the lives of those colonised" (Martin, 2018, p. 80). My colonial way of thinking explained to me. (T.I., January 2022)

T.I.'s authenticity and vulnerability are striking. As an Indigenous graduate student, her writing, inspired by readings from Mahon (2016) and Martin (2018), reveals that coming to terms with her own entanglement with colonial ways of thinking is beyond difficult and incredibly hurtful:

> The entire world has become colonized and accepting of the European criteria for success. We are all striving to meet the global "truths" towards milestones, standards and bench marks for children in the early years. (T.I., January 2022)

As an educator, T.I.'s realization about how she has accepted universal truths, with assigned values and labels about development, competencies, and parenting, brings forward harsh self-questioning: "When did we accept these standards set out for ECD as the goals for each child to achieve?" (T.I., January 2022). And yet, as personal and as difficult as it is, this conversation among T.I., the cohort students, and me as instructor/advisor is animated, honest, and keeps the topic alive for modules to come in the course, as illustrated in T.I.'s final statement:

> As an Educator the one constant that remains is, each child is different in the way they acquire knowledge. Child development is not linear, the disadvantaged parents and children of our communities should be given equal opportunities to be successful contributing members of society. Success for each child could mean different things…
> (T.I., January,2022)

These excerpts speak to this student's approach to finding her own identity as she shares with the collective. I reflect on how students like T.I. are on their individual journeys following their successful acceptance and entry into the program. Soon after, perhaps a semester or two into the program, these students may confront personal, financial, and professional realities as well as other day-to-day barriers that may prevent them from thriving in graduate school. Online courses do allow for students in any location with access to Wi-Fi to be part of this program; yet home and work conditions and geographical locations are as diverse as the students in this program. For many in Canada, geographical distances and harsh climate conditions in the fall and winter semesters interfere with daily commutes to and from work, or routinely leave ECE students exhausted, limiting their time and energy to connect online. Access to the Internet or Wi-Fi is often only available while at their work location after hours, with some students having unreliable Internet access from home, often relying on using their own data plans almost exclusively.

E-mail messages announcing a student's withdrawal from their program are received usually once every semester from students in every cohort. For those who were already registered, these messages are usually preceded by an unexpected drop in the student's online participation in their current course and/or a sudden change in the quality of their reflective posts. This information about either reduced online participation or a sudden drop in the quality of their reflective posts is sometimes brought to my attention by one of the instructors in the program. In my role as an advisor, I aim to keep a delicate balance: I must listen to the student's situation and pay attention to their request, offering alternative approaches and understandings. I strive to be clear on expectations and possibilities that fall within what the university can offer in terms of supports for students who may end up needing extensions, for example, while making sure the student is connected to the program assistant for all their logistic and administrative inquiries. Above all, I engage in conversations with students so that they can make their own decision, including when, indeed, they must leave or postpone their program. Referring to her own journey of completing

doctoral work, Unangax̂ scholar, writer, educator, and researcher Eve Tuck (2015) reflected on the support and respect from her mentor for the decisions she had made about her own program. Tuck recalled how her mentor was respectful enough to invite her to not give up on her program. At the same time, Tuck noted, her mentor avoided applying any pressure for her to stay. (The conversational thread about Tuck's work continues later in this essay).

Gaining an understanding of students' conditions and the challenges they face has led me to look closely and intently at their unique backgrounds. I pay attention to their individual situations, moving from a culture of "customer care" that predominates in the ECEC world (Taggart, 2016, p. 11) to a culture of compassionate care. Taggart refers to pre-service and emerging educators as being immersed in a culture of customer care that places value on professional skills acquired while promoting care as a slogan, not as a value. Instead, Taggart proposes a culture of compassion that is attachment-based, relational, and not necessarily linked to sentiments of suffering or vulnerability. Taggart asserts that this culture of compassion, which fosters secure attachments, could be brought into the ECEC field as a way to promote "ethical" and not just "skilled" professionals (p. 13).

Striving for a culture of compassion has led me to be intentional in trying to understand students' individual approaches to learning and their impetus and thirst for discovery. At the same time, I aim to understand and recognize the fragility of their circumstances when adverse events deflate them, leading them to consider dropping their program and leaving their dream behind (DeClou, 2016, p. 5). Inspired by Freire's principles of compassionate pedagogy, Taggart (2016) insists that, rather than dwelling on pity and fragility, instructors should invite students to reflect on their own possibilities, examine their vulnerabilities, and hold on to, instead of leaving behind, their dream if conditions can allow for it.

How, then, I wonder, do I draw from students' strengths? In pondering the type of message I could offer that would instill this desire to hold on to their dream, I engage in conversations with students, which might open with questions such as: "What do you think you bring to this program?"; "What does this program mean for you?"; "Why is it important?"; or, "What would it mean for you if you had to leave the program?" These questions bring a different perspective to the conversation, one that is relational, and one where the *I*-and-*thou* become closer, not detached and not othering.

Belongingness and Reciprocity

I welcome ideas of belongingness and reciprocity to guide the communication, interactions, and program support for the ECE graduate cohorts. Belongingness and reciprocity are tenets of the BC Early Learning Framework (E.L.F.) (Government of BC, 2019, p. 67) that are inspired by the First Nations' Principles of Learning (as cited in Government of BC., 2019, p. 43), and that contrast individualistic models of teaching/learning which aim at an academic finish line. These notions align with forest ecologist Simard's (2021) findings about the interconnectivity among tree roots and fungi of a myriad species —the mycorrhizal networks. Looking beneath the ground, Simard (2021) reveals how these networks not only nurture each other but they are also inter-dependent on one another to grow. For instance, a "mother tree" shares seedlings with nutrients of carbon, water, and nitrogen, yet clear-cut logging practices have ignored this fine web that keeps forests alive, Simard vehemently alerts in her book. The practice of clear-cutting deeply reverberates with students who cannot hold on to their mycorrhizal networks and are forced to abandon the program.

The notion of the mother-tree, and the web created under the surface that sustains many, evokes instead the possibility of a program that nurtures and, when needed, handholds.

Walking *with* Students

Each year, a program ends for one cohort and a new cohort is announced. I rejoice with students' successes when they enter their culminating year and outline their graduating portfolio projects. I welcome with excitement the announcement of the next information session for students beginning in the fall. The continuous flow of the program—its sustainability, in fact—depends on the success of students graduating and graduating on time. It also depends on reaching the required number of newly accepted applicants coming in for the upcoming calendar year. This flow evokes Simard's (2021) description of the forest's healthy growth which needs an ongoing exchange of nutrients, nitrogen, and carbon. Like a healthy forest, the handholding experienced throughout the program is one of exchange.

Closure and New Beginnings

During the final year of their MEd program, ECE graduate students articulate their capstone projects under the advisory of two co-instructors— an experience I was privileged to share with a lead faculty member in my dual role of advisor/course instructor. A model of careful, caring pedagogy continues to manifest as an act of resistance to the pressures of post-secondary education. My co-instructor in the graduating capstone project course and I require tight collaborative practices throughout the process of reviewing graduate students' proposals while reading, listening, and supporting the advancement of their projects. We have often reflected on how, beyond a strict relationship as colleagues, our collegial relationship has evolved into a deep friendship, a "sororal" relationship where *I*-and-*thou* have fused.

A joint vision of shared guidance and listening to students' voices keeps us, as co-instructors, honest, 'at bay' from any temptation to, for example, let personal preferences about our own choices of references to be cited or to sway their own selections, while still providing scholarly guidance. We look for content in the projects that requires further elucidation, and which invites students to challenge their assumptions, beliefs, and practices. Similar to Aristotle's peripatetic approach to the exchange of ideas between disciples and their mentor while walking in the public space of the Lyceum, we walk *with* students. Walking *with* defines the entire "handholding" experience from admission to graduation. It serves as a metaphor for knowledge sharing, for ideas in motion, and for making their experiences open, shared, and public. We choose to keep walking with students as we listen intently to the creation and compilation of their portfolio capstone projects. The students share the projects and their journeys with each other and, eventually, with anyone else who cares to learn about their representations of their graduate program. The projects revolve around a metaphor which they select to represent a central idea that connects students' academic work and educational experiences throughout their MEd program.

In her online e-portfolio graduating project, A.K. chose the metaphor, "a willow in the wind" which mirrors her own journey of strength and overcoming challenges throughout her program:

> A willow tree in the wind is a metaphor that speaks to my journey throughout my Master of Education degree, though this metaphor can also be related to a child's educational journey within the early childhood years. Within this metaphor, I believe that relationships symbolize the roots that we rely upon throughout our educational journeys – without strong

relationships, or without strong roots, we cannot have a strong trunk or a strong foundation. (A.K., 2021)

"A willow in the wind" is the language A.K. used to reveal her shifting educational beliefs and practices, as she left behind the behavioural perspectives formed in her undergraduate background and rooted in psychology. Elaborating on her newly gained understanding of holistic education, rooted in strong evolving relationships, A.K. described her philosophy of ECE as "…the interconnection of each part of a child's life, including their mental health, physical health, spiritual health, emotional health, and intellectual health" (A.K.).

As another example, poetic metaphors like the crescent moon, inspired by personal rituals of creative work, guided L.H.'s e-portfolio capstone project, which she titled "Beneath the Crescent Moon. Place, Time and Knowledge: Reconciliation Through Indigenous Pedagogy in Early Learning" (L.H., 2021). L.H. describes the chosen metaphor:

> My inspiration for the graduating project comes from a personal ritual of mine, journaling and reflecting practice connected to the new moon's energy. It represents new beginnings. The start of a new lunar cycle has been a time to revisit my goals, reflect, and create new projects. The new moon ritual is connected to my deep creative work that allows for a fresh start, a new beginning beneath the crescent moon. (L.H., 2021)

L.H. acknowledges her "being in between" through her own transitions in place and time, just like the phases of the moon.

Similarly, the physics concept of diffraction grounded V.R.'s e-portfolio capstone project, which was titled "Diffraction in Practice - Waves of Interference in Early Childhood Education":

> A nudge in thinking creates a ripple and then a wave: A wave that in turn might overlap with another wave, perhaps with one that originated in some other place and time, in some other reality, created by some other meeting of minds or energies or materials, infinitely reconfiguring what is real and what is true. (V.R., 2022)

V.R. spoke to her "…interest in patterns of interference in early childhood education" from the belief of new waves of thinking that originate through the ripple effect that started with a "nudge in thinking".

These metaphors from student projects stand among many others that are equally deep and inspire meaning. The process of articulating metaphors is one that carries a tension-and-release process, one that demands, yet also grants, time for open conversation in group discussions among students and instructors/advisors or in small or one-on-one, quieter moments, until students reach clarity about where their graduating project is heading towards, shaped—encapsulated—through their well-articulated, goals/guiding questions/pathways. Doing so mirrors earlier program processes previously described in this essay, where handholding refers to walking with students on their journeys of discovery, of choices, of progress, and, when needed, of pause. To this end, Tuck (2015) speaks of the many hands who held her through her journey, who supported her steps, her pauses and, at times, who collectively made it possible for her to stay. This image of handholding, of walking with, that Tuck so eloquently revives, is one that reflects ample space for both students and their program to thrive. If such space is embraced, it holds a promise to stop the *malaise* (Hartman & Darab, 2012) of perpetuating the disconnect between *I and thou* (Buber, 1959)— a disconnect that excludes those who cannot consider applying to the program or cannot anticipate making it *Invictus* to the finish line.

Beginning and Ending with Peaceful Resistance

I complete my last act of resistance: To walk along with students to the finish line as they present their graduating capstone e-portfolios/projects. Contrasting with the race or competition that I allude to in the introduction of this essay, one that evokes a set course, students instead explore these paths in their own, chosen ways. As illustrated in this essay, students' inspiring metaphors bring to life their individual educators' and learners' journeys toward their own insights, teachings, and learnings, while "meandering"—in Banack and Berger's (2019) words (p.1); that is, re-thinking and revisiting their own scholarly reflections on their MEd program coursework.

Closing Comments

In this essay, I first drew on a feminist ethics of care and compassion to describe acts of resistance to the current post-secondary *malaise*. I recognize how a feminist ethics of care offered me a way to adopt peaceful resistance while handholding and walking alongside students. Doing so invites me to stay truthful to Kohan's (2021) words in his biography of Paulo Freire: "to educate is an act of love . . . By loving more, you educate more. . ." (p. 67). Feminist perspectives on resistance and handholding are all acts of love, where inter-dependence and relational exchanges supersede the drive for individualistic determination. Here, I revisit Eve Tuck's own grounding and positioning with her firm stance as a newly appointed faculty at the time. I pause on Tuck's insistence to ground her work on decolonizing practices that guide, and will continue to guide, her scholarly and pedagogical work, rather than focusing on confronting neoliberalist ideologies (Tuck, 2015, 2018). I see in students their newly unearthed power that holds the potential for their own resistance against multiple pressures of fast-paced academia through their individual quests and collective work. Such shifts in perspective are likely to lead to transformative practices where both faculty and students may embrace, in Berger's (2015) words, the "…position of narrators and initiators of dialogue and critical reflection…" (p. 4). In the end, students' inspiring capstone e-portfolios/projects affirm resistance to the post-secondary *malaise*.

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