A SPECIAL VOCATION: TEACHERS OF EARLY SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSES IN TWO CANADIAN CITY SCHOOL SYSTEMS, 1910 TO 1945.

Summary of proposed research

My project is a historical investigation into the pedagogical values, professional careers, and personal life courses of Canada's earliest special education teachers, nearly all of whom were women teaching in urban public school systems. The period for this historical study covers the inception and early history of special education (ca. 1910 to 1945) in two Canadian public school systems, Vancouver and Toronto. Unlike school board officials and school reformers who drew up policies; or students, a group whose attempts to navigate the complex special education I studied in detail in my previous research (Ellis, 2011; 2013), we still know relatively little about special education teachers as historical actors.

The project's goal is to use innovative research techniques in digital humanities and women's/gender history to ask and answer three research questions of historical and contemporary relevance:
    1.   What personal and professional factors motivated teachers working in hierarchical and gendered school bureaucracies to engage with teaching a group of pupils many people said could not be taught?
    2.   How did special class teachers' life experiences, professional experiences, and personal values shape pedagogical and policy approaches to exceptional children's education at crucial time in history when special education was emergent?
    3.   How did special class teachers' values and experiences influence evolving ideas about disabilities and learning difficulties that ultimately extended well beyond the schools, shaping popular and professional perceptions about children with disabilities?

For data collection this project will employ the computer programming language Python, and open source software, to automatically extract, or data mine, sectors of the World Wide Web for historical sources that recently have been digitized, such as school board directories listing teachers and census records. This quantitative and qualitative information will be compiled into a database of demographic profiles and professional activities of teachers who taught special classes in Toronto and Vancouver, and a database of an unselected sample of teachers to be used for the purposes of comparison.

The analysis will apply methodological frameworks from social history and women's and gender history, including "life-course analysis," to the demographic profile and professional portrait of teachers who taught special classes between 1910 and 1945 – in order to highlight intersections between personal and professional experiences, gender, teaching, and professionalism that shaped the work of early special class teachers and influenced school policies and the school lives of exceptional children.

The mobilization strategy for the research is to present findings for two audiences: professional historians, and education policymakers or practitioners. My research will contribute to a growing body of historical scholarship on gender and education, work that has yet to study special education teachers, even though this group occupied an important space as front-line female workers who also possessed specialized professional knowledge and training in the areas of disabilities and learning difficulties. My research methodology will further model for other historians digital humanities techniques that could be applied to a wide range of social history research projects that examine the hidden lives of ordinary people in the past, such as teachers. To policymakers and practitioners, my research offers background analysis and context on the gendered professional identities of special education teachers today, information that will help policymakers to recruit special education teachers and, through training, to challenge the ideas and assumptions about exceptional children these teachers have acquired and will bring to their work in special settings and inclusive classrooms.