Child care and COVID: Precarious communities in distanced times

Beth Blue Swadener
Arizona State University, USA

Lacey Peters
Hunter College, City University of New York, USA

Dana Frantz Bentley
Lesley University, USA

Xiomara Diaz
Hunter College, City University of New York, USA

Marianne Bloch
University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Abstract
Drawing from an analysis of responses to COVID affecting the ECCE sector in the US, including the narratives of early childhood educators, we engage with several questions. These include: How is care work with children constructed and affected by COVID-19? How might current responses and policies be understood through the lens of social citizenship and the collective/the individual? How do these issues reflect the precarity of the ECCE sector? How are embodied and emotional aspects of care work manifesting in early educator/caregiver lives in the time of the pandemic? Who is caring for the caregivers and what care may be needed? How can we re-imagine the care of ourselves, and in relation to an ethics of care for the other?

Keywords
child care, early childhood, policy and advocacy, teacher perspectives

Corresponding author:
Beth Blue Swadener, Arizona State University, Phoenix, AZ 85004, USA.
Email: beth.swadener@asu.edu
Introduction

The loss of physical contact felt like having our central language with the kids silenced, with no viable way to rebuild the connection. So much of what we do is in a touch, a secret smile, the meeting of eyes over an especially amazing block structure, or the arm slipped around a small back when you just know they are having a hard moment. Suddenly all of it was gone, and now I’m trying to envision a world where none of that is allowed in the classroom. A classroom with no laps, no little hands in mine, no bodies scooped up when they fall. It takes my breath away. It feels like my practice and our kids’ primary language has been labeled unsanitary.

- Dana Frantz Bentley, preschool teacher

The COVID-19 pandemic sheds light on a number of deeply rooted issues faced in the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector in the US and globally. Issues include underfunding, disparities in compensation for teachers/care providers, under-valuation of the work, persistent inequities and stratification of types of care families can access and afford, lack of understanding and respect for the field and lack of national policy and governmental provision (Peters, Swadener, & Bloch, 2020). The pandemic also allows us to understand more about the precarity of the field (NAEYC, 2020; Tarrant and Nagasawa, 2020), as well as the emotional labor and embodied experience of teaching young children (Carlson, 2006; Sapon-Shevin, 2019). We draw upon a combination of theory, direct experiences of early childhood educators, and nested contexts of care and social citizenship to make sense of some of the myriad of complex issues facing the ECCE sector and all involved.

Furthermore, the pandemic has led to the real and perceived loss of opportunities to build caring communities in an array of early childhood contexts—as child care and early learning communities ended abruptly and children’s relationships with teachers and friends were no longer accessible (except via computer screens on an intermittent basis). This sudden loss of touch, caring interactions, and socioemotional learning was also underemphasized as in the public discourse, health and economic issues (parents needing to get back to work, the importance of child care, or “day care” for families in order to work) have been highlighted as most important.

While educational and emotional aspects of early childhood programs were deemphasized, the home schooling labor by parents/families was publicized. Some of these complications cut across issues of care work more broadly and reflect different assumptions regarding an evolving ethics of care, and a responsibility for self and other (Levinas, 1998) as well as possibilities for social citizenship (Rose, 1999a). What does it mean to be a social citizen or to have citizenship in which care and education for society’s other citizens, as well as for oneself and family, are highlighted? How is collective care for each other encouraged, as also part of the social fabric, part of our individual responsibility toward self, but also toward others? What does it mean to have citizenship in which caring for the other is considered too complex, not as important as other elements of citizenship such as caring for self, one’s own family, one’s own personal autonomy, choice or freedom?

As we look to an ethics of care, and various constructions of care work, as well as what it might mean to be a social citizen, we must also understand the discourses of situated contexts that allow for power and contingent histories and philosophies of care within the social to emerge very differently (Bloch, et al., 2003). How, as an example, in the United States, do we come to have different governing rules across geographical regions, as well as claims of personal choice and responsibility for actions, where our actions are also potentially and literally “infecting” the other?

Drawing from an analysis of early responses to COVID affecting the ECCE sector in the US, with special attention to conversations with early childhood educators, we engage a number of issues, including the following questions. How is care work with children constructed and affected by COVID-19? How might current responses and policies be understood through the lens of social
citizenship and the collective/the individual? How do these issues reflect the precarity of the ECCE sector? How are embodied and emotional aspects of care work manifesting in early educator/caregiver lives in the time of the pandemic? Who is caring for the caregivers and what care may be needed? How can we re-imagine the care of ourselves, and in relation to an ethics of care for the other? And how do we create space for imagining different futures when survival is at stake?

We write from the collective and intersecting standpoints of five intergenerational colleagues. Two are currently preschool teachers and all have been involved in early childhood education/child care programs, policy, and research. We are living and working in four contrasting state contexts, New York (City), Arizona, Wisconsin and Massachusetts. These settings represent progressive states (New York and Massachusetts), libertarian and conservative states (Arizona) and “purple” states (Wisconsin) that have both long-standing progressive histories as well as conservative voting records in many areas. Several of us acknowledge our backgrounds as reflecting that of “white privilege,” reinforced by our work with universities. These backgrounds intersect with gender, class, age, and our professional/personal histories giving us all a standpoint of privilege as well as a complex life work in early education/child care, and care for “others.” These standpoints also help us to see the complexity of an ethics of care for the other, as we must care for others, but not to be impositional in our “care.”

As one example, in the context of Early Child Care and Education (ECCE) in the US, regarding the questions of care and education for self, family, and “the other,” we need to interrogate how we came to these moments and conditions, and what visions we must have for “self” and “other” as well as social citizenship in the COVID and post-COVID United States. How is it that we came to be “the worst of the developed nations” in our response and in the economic, social, and health consequences faced during the pandemic? What are our individual and social ethical stances and actions at this moment when life itself is at stake, and deep inequities are fully exposed?

While Polakow’s (1993, 2007) germinal books focus on the history and conditions of child care and education as an existential crisis, especially for those in the “other America,” the current COVID-19 “crisis” again highlights intersections of class, race, gender, age, and ability as we look at the care/education of young children, as well as their educator/caregivers. Now—with the virus threatening the child care sector (e.g. NAEYC, 2020; Tarrant and Nagasawa, 2020), it is perhaps the moment to re-imagine ways of safeguarding the caregivers and the sector.

Polakow describes early childhood policy discourses in terms of the instrumental and existential (Polakow, 1993, 2007). Our article emphasizes the existential through the stories of educators/caregivers regarding emotional labor, precarity, policy, and future possibilities. We draw from personal narratives of two co-authors, who were actively teaching young children in Spring 2020, in order to better represent early childhood educators’ existential perspectives, beginning with Dana’s reflection on getting word that her preschool was closing for the rest of the school year due to COVID-19 in April.

Yesterday we heard the news that Massachusetts schools would be closed for the rest of the year. I knew it was coming. We all knew. But I sat down on my kitchen floor and cried. I’m crying as I write this because I still can’t believe that it happened. I can’t believe that I lost them, that I lost us. March in PreK is magic. It is this time when connections are igniting across the room, when our identities as a community have come together and we are so secure, so safe in one another; that we are ready to go places, ready to fly. I always love teaching, but in March, I can’t wait to go to school just to be together, just to see what comes next. And in March, I lost them. All day I fought tears as I cooked meals, helped my kids with distance learning, controlled the mayhem so my husband could work, and tried to hide my devastation. I had to tell my children that the story we had loved and told of school that year was irrevocably changing. We were not going back.
So, we told a story. We made a picture of the bad guy COVID, of us in our homes, of how our hard work was making that bad guy smaller and smaller. We talked it out together. We talked about the hard stuff. We talked about being superheroes. We talked about missing each other. We laughed. And it was good. It was just the kind of space that we work to create in our classroom, a space that holds critical conversations, hard moments, spaces of sadness and laughter, where it is safe. Spaces where we are all respected, and children know they are being presented with the truth, and are making sense of it together. It was good, and I felt that great sensation of discussion and meaning making. ...and then our time was up.

And without community, what happens? How do we work together as individuals, with diverse and intersecting backgrounds, to form a social community of care/education for self, family, the other whether from our own local network, our schools, our geographical spaces (local, national, global), and the human/non-human. While we focus on the USA in this article, the nested and intersecting contexts in which we live, work, and develop caring spaces highlight the importance of situation, specificity, and, at the same time, our deep as well as complex relationships with all others. If we weren’t in a global society, for example, we might not think what is happening in the USA was so unique or perhaps as terrible; but the US response or lack thereof has had terrible consequences for so many. The next section provides a possible way to think about this.

**Care and education in the USA: Historical reasoning systems**

Stemming from a long history of philosophies in education, we acknowledge that our “fore-men” philosophers in early child care and education often linked their novel philosophies to an imagined type of citizenship for their country. As one philosopher often thought to have colored western thinking about care/education of children, Rousseau’s book *Emile* (Rousseau, 1899), and its final chapter “Sophie” illustrate that Emile was to be raised to be independent, autonomous, a problem solver who learned from his own actions; he was to become a leader for the new French nation. Sophie on the other hand, was to be reared to be supportive, nurturant, focusing on the collective good, and, to some extent, dependent on male (Emile’s) reasoning (Martin, 1981). In summary, the combination of Emile and Sophie were to be used to balance each other out, and together develop the citizens for a new type of nation, a democracy, where new social citizens—men and women, girls and boys—would learn to take over the nation eliminating the monarchy, or sovereign reign.

In John Locke’s work (in the context of England) (Locke, 1913, cited in Bloch, 2006), we also see the tutor working with (richer) families’ children to focus on their (male children’s) interests, individuality, and relative autonomy—eventually to become a new form of citizen. At the advent of child care and early education in the USA, Froebelian kindergartens, developed for white children of wealthy parents in US, drew from Rousseau and Locke. The US myth is of the rugged individual and this meshed with these philosophies focused on individual child and family, personal autonomy, private responsibility and personal liberty.

Cultural reasoning as the early childhood/child care sector developed in the US highlighted the idea that the “normal” family would include a male who was responsible for the economy, while women reared children at home. While this reasoning was imagined as the ideal or normal for white richer individuals and society, it was far less than ideal and abnormal reasoning for most—those women who were working full time at home, or who were employed outside their home—those families that required broader and more inclusive policies and support for “all,” rather than being seen as abnormal if they needed more help caring for children. We also recognize the unfreedom of enslaved children and their early childhood experiences; these included being legally denied being taught to read, separated from their mothers, and working at an early age. Finally, in
our brief look at the history of early care and education in the US, we acknowledge the legacy of stolen Indigenous children, raised in boarding schools and adopted by white families.

During the 19th and 20th century, day care and early education in the USA emerged in a segregated and patchwork way, dramatically differentiated by class, and race/national origin. In addition, the philosophy and discursive language that a “normal” family would still have a mother to care for and educate children while the economic needs were taken care of by the father and that a “normal” family would not need child care were maintained into the 20th century, and are still somewhat with us in the 21st century—with private and public systems of care still the source of great inequity in access, affordability, and type of care.

The ethics of caring for yourself, and your own family as a private responsibility, with help from the State, only when absolutely necessary, while simplified in explanation here, is part of the macro-political context we are struggling with during the COVID-19 crisis as our patchwork and segregated non-system of early child care and education falls further apart, and is demeaned as essential but expendable. As families struggle to care/educate their young children without a network of financial support, and caregiver/educators struggle to survive as centers close, health insurance remains elusive and wages for essential work remain low. During this crisis, the struggle to care for others who are essential workers for everyone has been highlighted. It seems the philosophy or reasoning system that focuses on individual desires and needs requires a shift toward actions and ethics as social citizens; we must reimagine a more equitable system of care for children, for those essential workers who care for us all, but whose work is precarious, often invisible, and in too many ways undersupported.

**Precarity, invisible labor, and care for the caregivers**

Early care and education providers have been grappling with the precarious nature of their work long before the pressure for child care programs to stay open or to reopen during the pandemic. Care work is precarious labor, it is also difficult and emotional labor. Butler (2009) defines precarity as “the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks . . . becoming differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (p. 2). In the United States, state leaders had varied responses to the pandemic, which had different consequences for child care programs in different regions and localities. Whereas some programs were ordered to shut down completely, as was the case in New York, others could stay open if serving essential workers’ children, as was the case in Wisconsin. Child care for essential workers included first responders, medical professionals, mail carriers, delivery persons, and grocery store employees. Nonetheless, child care providers, while recognized as being essential, have not had higher “hazard pay,” good health insurance, nor easy access to sick leave for self or family.

Durfee and Meyers (2006: 110) argue that, “As long as this work [child care] remains invisible, many of its costs will remain invisible as well.” The authors go on to explain that the care work is unseen because it is not thought to have economic or social value—this is a consequence of living in a patriarchal and neoliberal society. This also relates to the fact that child care has historically been considered a gendered work—meaning women have largely been responsible for carrying it out. Child care providers are overworked, underpaid, and undervalued in too many ways. Further, women of color disproportionately face inequities in compensation, working conditions, and respect. As Lark Sontag (2020) points out, “Childcare equity is intersectional feminism,” repairing this deeply fractured system requires the dismantling of the systems of oppression that have reinforced the disrespect and devaluation of the women (and men) who have always been essential workers. These issues reflect a lack of understanding and appreciation of care work—the often
invisible emotional labor of women—particularly women of color. The current pandemic and US socio-political climate may be changing all of this.

The pandemic also revealed the numerous ways mothers carry out invisible labor on a daily basis—Invisible labor is defined as “work that frequently receives little or no recognition or monetary reward” (Weidhaas, 2017). Recent reports share findings on the struggles mothers, especially working mothers, have encountered during the period of stay home orders (e.g. Calarco et al., 2020). In a similar vein, women who care for children within and outside of the home, are constantly carrying out invisible labor. This ranges from cleaning classroom spaces, carrying out household chores, planning activities for children, communicating with family members, maintaining schedules, caring for children, and emotional caregiving. Dana reflects on the transition to working from home and teaching on Zoom, and sheds light on the complexities of being a care provider/educator and mother.

My family has started keeping daily “at-a-glance” zoom schedules on our dry erase board to try to help us stay on top of all of the meetings, and to balance our somewhat limited internet access. Today between us, I, my five-year-old, and my eight-year-old had sixteen zoom meetings total. Sixteen.

My co-teacher agreed to plan via phone (freeing up our Wi-Fi connection) and also so that I could “support” my kids in their distance learning, while my husband got some work done. We both live in terror of being laid off.

In my second faculty meeting of the day, I was told that in addition to the whole group, small group, and micro group zooms we were doing each day, that we would also need to include one-on-one meetings with every child, at least once a week. I was too worn out to even protest. I began adjusting our dry erase board to make space for more zoom meetings.

Many early childhood educators are balancing their professional and family roles, including caring for their own children as they work from home. Dana reflects on balancing teaching and mothering and what it might mean to focus on care for the caregivers.

When thinking about “care for the caregivers,” I just don’t know what to say. Our administration is wonderful. Our school is wonderful. They have worked so hard to make this work, to deal with an utterly impossible situation. But there was no support for those of us at home with families. What support was there to give? No magical Mary Poppins arrived on our doorsteps to care for our kids or help with their remote learning while we taught and attended never-ending meetings. There was the acknowledgment that this was hard, and they knew it was hard. There was nothing anyone could do. We just had to try, to keep trying, to make it work however we could. And in the midst of all, there was a constant sense of mourning, of missing all that we were, all that we are as a class, as a school, as a community.

The question of child care workers/early educators being considered essential in providing this care brought up many questions, some of which we addressed in an earlier blog (Peters, Swadener, & Bloch, 2020). The notion of “essential not expendable” was the name of a child care Facebook group and reflects both the precarity of care work at this time and the unpredictability.

In a Wisconsin preschool that remained open, educators worried about their own health as well as their families, as they cared for very young children. The public health guidance suggested children with any symptoms should stay home, but if tested negative, though a family member might be positive, they could return to the center. Other children, and teachers were told they need not worry, as children seemed safe according to the public health guidance; but the educators did worry. Were they essential but expendable? Unlike public elementary and secondary schools, no unions protect child care workers in the US. This is an area where either a new vision for support of child care and the educators/caregivers must emerge, and/or enhanced social citizen collective action will be needed. But educators stayed on the “job” and the preschool stayed open. This was in contrast to
national reports about vast numbers of programs that closed or will close, and the hundreds of thousands of child care providers who have lost jobs (NAEYC, 2020a, 2020b).

The following narrative by Xiomara, who works in a for-profit child care center in New York City described some of her experiences of teaching during the early weeks of the pandemic. She and her colleagues worked at their center as news of a city-wide shutdown impacted people in ways they were not expecting. The program transitioned to remote teaching as ordered by city agencies and regulatory bodies in mid-March, but reopened at a limited capacity in mid-June. Decision making on behalf of the city’s leadership, as well as the child care center, was constantly changing.

At the start of the pandemic, there was no general consensus about what would happen should we be forced to shut down. Our administrative teams, and the corporate offices reassured us daily that they were vigilantly monitoring the situation but did not anticipate closing or pausing programming in the least. At the same time, managers popped in and out of our classrooms recording portions of our day for our students in the off chance it happened. Parents questioned us daily: were we sanitizing more frequently? Is anyone sick? Are those allergies or should you send that child home? We were filled with anxiety for ourselves, for our families, and our children. But once the day began, we closed the door on those anxieties and we smiled for our children. We checked their temperatures when they held our hands. We wiped their noses for them before they could react to the constant drip. And we kept on smiling.

Then the numbers dropped. Classes of 15 or 20 became 6 or 8 children. As a lead teacher I was pulled from my classroom once a day to call families whose children were absent, checking in on their child and their families, discreetly asking if anyone at home was sick or had been in contact with anyone who was. We followed the news, spoke often with others at schools both in our company and outside it, and we waited with bated breath for what would come next. When the news of our closure arrived, it was late evening on a Thursday. I did not get to say goodbye to so many children.

Child care providers are often considered the “workforce behind the workforce” and this framing has been used to push for the reopening of programs. As Uttal and Tuominen (1999) point out, “Race and class stratification, as well as gender hierarchy, organizes the work so that more privileged women and men benefit from the labor of the women who carry out the actual caring work” (p. 759). Child care providers are stuck in a double-bind—while they want to go back to work and be with children and families, they also have to focus on their own health and well-being. In some ways, this is what Rousseau’s Emile and Sophie were to be reared to be doing. While caring work at home is still unpaid or underpaid labor, now with the virus, it is now getting more attention. However, care work outside the home remains undervalued, making caregiver/educators appear to be expendable in terms of their health, wages, and respect.

Embodied and emotional care work during COVID

One component of enacting a vision of the future that embraces and prepares young people to construct a society that honors social citizenship as a way to think of others, as ways to care for self but also others, is the opportunity to experience it in the classroom. During a time of pandemic and social distancing, it is critical to acknowledge the embodied nature of early childhood care and education, and how much of the emotional labor involved depends on being present with children in the classroom or other care setting (Tarrant and Nagasawa, 2020). This loss and the related emotional labor is evident in the teacher narratives. The caring, democratic and inclusive classroom community (Langford, 2010; Loizou and Charalambous, 2017) reflecting principles of social justice (Swadener and Kessler, 2019) that teachers work hard to cultivate were deconstructed in March 2020 due to COVID 19. Teaching suddenly became disembodied, as teachers literally lost their ability to touch children, now interacting with young children via Zoom or other virtual platforms.
ECCE is an embodied experience for all concerned. Educator/caregivers “read” classroom dynamics and individual needs and emotions in nuanced ways and use touch (Carlson, 2006; Sapon-Shevin, 2009; Seidel, 2001; Souto-Manning, 2010), proximity and other pedagogies of care to comfort, challenge, guide, listen and instruct. Such practices represent pedagogies of love (Darder, 2017) and create “the beloved community” (Cousins, 2017; Sapon-Shevin, 2019). As in earlier stories shared by Dana, the following narrative underscores the frustration, sadness and sense of loss she feels as she is rendered helpless to comfort children and help them learn through emotional experiences as they would in her classroom community. While she does find ways to continue building community, the challenges are many. Dana reflects on how she attempted to explain how staying safe meant only seeing her class virtually.

It is early April, and we are scrambling to create routines, to build some bridge of normalcy across the gaping distance that has opened up between us and the children, these larger than life individuals that used to physically inhabit the majority of my waking hours. Our classroom routines were a heartbeat, a guiding force that shaped how our bodies swirled around and into each other each day. Now...now the routines feel more like a lifeline, or a shadow, reminding us, calling us back to our former togetherness.

We were in the midst of forming small groups, finding these new spaces of play and work together. This particular small group had put forth a collection of possible names, and members offered suggestions, such as “Darth Vader Avengers,” “Rainbow Superheroes,” and “The Batman Mermaids” (clearly a compromise). We carefully documented the different names, discussing our options, and doing two rounds of voting. As it became clear that the group was coming to a consensus around “Rainbow Superheroes,” I could see Alice begin to falter. She very much wanted her idea of “The Batman Mermaids,” to be our choice, and it was becoming clear that it would not. Her lower lip wobbled as she struggled to keep her composure.

As a teacher, these moments feel familiar and not worrisome. My body and mind move immediately toward the familiar path of comforting her, holding her in my arms, taking some time alone together to process, eventually returning to the group to perhaps share her disappointment...but even as every fiber in my body moves toward this very common part of the early learning experience, I find I am paralyzed. There is nothing I can do. I ache to put a calming arm around her, to pull her into my lap to help her through this hard moment. I try to think of any way to whisper those soothing words into her ear, to let her know that I hear her, that this is hard, that she doesn’t need to be alone when facing disappointment. This is not a tragic moment. It is a learning moment, a time to be sad, to think about it, to make sense of that experience...yet in the utter impotence of the zoom classroom, I can do nothing.

Alice’s face finally cracks, and she dissolves into tears, flinging herself off-camera. I hear her sobs begin as the video clicks off and she leaves the meeting. I stay on with the small group, feeling powerless as we celebrate our new group name, smiling inanely at the group when I know one of them is hurting. When it’s finally done, I sit, staring at the blank screen, soaking in my utter uselessness. I can’t do my job. I can’t do my work. This should have been one moment, one in a string of many over the course of the day, a moment of comforting, of thinking through the experience of disappointment, of finding our way back even when we are sad...

(Later) I sent her mother an email, and Alice led the next group session in talking about disappointment, how it feels, and how to feel better. We read books, and classmates shared their experiences of disappointment as well. It was fine. But it wasn’t enough.

The sense of personal loss felt by early educators and caregivers as they confronted the abrupt disbanding classroom community (in March 2020) has gotten little coverage in popular media as much as family perspectives on suddenly having children at home 24/7 and having to “home-school” young children. In this story, Dana conveys the significance of the time in the rhythm of
the school year that children were not able to continue learning in their classrooms and/or care settings. Explaining this transition to young children remains a challenge.

Care work for very young children is generally characterized by emotive exchanges, nurturance, health and safety, and social emotional learning. In the narrative below, Xiomara reflects on the loss of physical interaction with young children and what it meant to try to plan 3 hours of remote online teaching with toddlers.

The first morning of online learning I sat in front of the screen before pressing start for more than an hour trying to place all my supplies in front of me so that I would have them at a moment’s notice. I prepared back-ups for my back-ups if the first activities did not engage my students in the ways I hoped. In that way, it felt like it’s always been. I still felt like a teacher. But when my students walked away from the camera, logged off mid-session or didn’t reply when prompted, I felt defeated. We pride ourselves on our ability to scaffold lessons for each learner. We rely on adaptability to be able to attend to the ever-changing environment that is an early childhood classroom and we make connections with our students. Online learning put up a new very real barrier that I had to scale. . .

Of my 21 students, 13 have joined our online sessions at least once with half that attending every day for the majority of the 3 hour “day.” I always try to be humble but I am without a doubt proud of myself for this feat. Keeping 2 years old engaged on a virtual platform is a circus act. I start the day singing, pretend to lose the class puppets who have come to life and are now part of a continuous slapstick routine. I mix words for numbers and numbers for colors during math lessons to keep them on their toes and I wear many strange costumes. I collect items from around my apartment and use them to explore a new letter every day and much to my cat’s chagrin I include him in a number of our adventures. The laughter that I see on screen when a puppet hides from me seconds before I turn around and the corrections I see when I say that the number 5 is actually broccoli remind me why I love to do what I love to do. But each session ends in a surge of sadness because I can only see them laugh and only hear one correct me at a time, if at all, from the limitations in our technology.

It is important to acknowledge ways in which Zoom or other technologies disrupted classroom dynamics and community, particularly when only one person could speak at a time. Lost was the community cacophony of the ECCE setting. It also silenced so many children who tend to have quieter voices, or are less comfortable speaking, raising further questions including, for whom is online learning successful, and virtual classrooms communities a safe space? Who is excluded by the shape and structure of something like a Zoom space?

Concluding reflections: From persistent equity issues to future imaginaries

Dana reflects in a final story:

We sang our goodbye song and their little boxes disappeared making that awful “wuuuup” sound (I hate that sound), and where once there was our little family, there was nothing. They were gone. And I should have felt good. It was a great conversation, but instead I just felt utterly alone, and let down. Because what is all of this work, this critical community if the community isn’t with you to keep living in and with our thinking when the conversation is all over? What happens when the conversation is all that you have?

For me, this moment clarified some things I didn’t before realize about the work of the critical classroom community. As a teacher, I’m always thinking about the conversation itself, what questions to ask, what framing to use, how to give honest, accurate information that also feels productive and generative for the kids. Until this moment, I’m not sure that I fully realized that the importance of critical conversations is what happens after. These moments don’t just happen in a
void of productive meaning-making, distanced from the rest of our day. They are, in fact, cradled in the unfolding story of the day, wrapped in play, in conversation, in snack times, and clean-up times, and the myriad spaces in which we think through, make sense of, and come to live with our critical work together. We don’t do it alone. Just as the conversation cannot happen alone, the spaces in which we operationalize our meanings into the flow of daily life happen within the arms of the community itself.

We have used teachers’ stories to illustrate the many ways in which educators/caregivers as well as programs, families, and children have been impacted in again—often invisible but material ways. Lives have been disrupted, love and emotional caring possibilities—for children and also for our families, each other—have been transformed. Health and economic prospects are shifting as we write, with an unpredictable set of outcomes still in formation. Not all are affected in the same way, as race, class, gender, and nationality intersect in the ways in which the story of child care, and its workforce will go.

In many ways the network of reciprocal relationships of the classroom community was transformed by distance, fear of what is next, and various types of dangers—health or economic. At the same time, families, children, and educators/caregivers maintained a critically important community that was emotionally and instrumentally sustaining for all. The existential purpose and meaning these networks provided were critical, but also fragile. The literal and metaphorical loss of touch might be used to illustrate fragility and precarity in the sector.

Recognizing the roles of a critical classroom community—one filled with collective care for each other rather than individualized “babysitting”—is particularly important in these times. Indeed the early philosophies regarding care for young children highlighted nurturance, and caring adults, as well as the relation between individual and the social. But these early ways of reasoning were very much foundational to material effects—the low wages or unpaid labor of a largely female mother/educator “workforce.” In the time of the pandemic, the devalued labor of the largely female mother/educator “workforce” directly concerns the nature of this type of "essential" work, with an emphasis on private pay, precarious individualized and hazardous work, low respect and wages, need for health insurance and sick leave for those caring for others’ children. Historically women have brought attention to the disrespect, under-compensation, and gross disparities in their daily work and many have argued for a feminist ethic of care (e.g. Hauser and Jipson, 1998; Langford, 2019; Tronto, 1993). Early childhood workers have fought, without the benefit of a union typically, for pay parity, and other essential benefits. Their, often individualized, long-term calls for change and equity have largely gone unanswered.

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (2020) offers a set of recommendations to safeguard essential child care workers/early educators from public health risks and financial ruin. As we have argued, this embodied care sector provides essential services, and is integral to all life experiences, from birth onward. We call for a radical shift toward an ethics of care that acknowledges our need to not only care for our private self, our private family, but for a community that cares for each other. The pandemic has made obvious that we must, with children and families, recognize our local connectivity—as a collective, and as part of the “social” in which we care for each other, as we would for ourselves (Rose, 1999b)—if resources were equitably distributed, and all were respected.

In this light, we imagine early childhood as a space in which children are acknowledged as our youngest citizens and their rights are recognized (Murray, et al., 2019)—including their right to consistent caregivers. Teachers/caregivers are recognized, respected, compensated, and cared for as essential, not expendable, important members of our community,—educating/caring for our youngest children at a time when their brains are developing rapidly, and the social and cognitive foundations learned are perhaps most important. As a community caring for our youngest social
citizens as well as each other, we would also ask that all families have access to safe, affordable, accessible, and “quality” care.

The context for the stories told, and discussion has been largely focused on COVID-19 as a crisis and a particular moment in the USA that has exposed a variety of systems and policies that frame inequitable and precarious situations for individuals, programs such as child care in the USA, families, educator/caregivers, and the elements we must have for a caring social citizenship and society. As we’ve portrayed individual stories as well as more macro elements, it’s been clear that care for self, family, and “other” moves in an intricate weaving, an entangled way, but in ways that are ethically and instrumentally critical to all. The portrait we have woven is also complex and reflects more than an inability to hug children. It also highlights the non-caring attitudes about essential workers in child care contexts who are often also considered expendable in relation to wages paid, health insurance, sick leave, or ability to choose to stay home when worried for one’s self and family.

At the same time, there is always movement. Micro-political actions demonstrate collective systems of care for each other that are present, and emerging in new and unpredictable ways. As one example, a “protest party” in Brooklyn with dancing across families by Zoom showed how a community can band together to foster support for each other, as well as advocate for caring politics. In another example child care providers and supporters came together for a Zoom watch party to witness the U.S. House of Representatives vote on and pass the Child Care is Essential Act.

In the end, we have shown that an ethics of caring for self and other is present in both micro-specific and contingent moments and actions. These are emerging worldwide in unpredictable ways but are most present in localized places. Networks that have been present and are emerging share resources and engage in social/political protests and advocacy actions at larger levels. Listening to and honoring teachers’ narratives and experiences as part of the growing advocacy movement in the sector remains critical.

While the structure of big government and the philosophies of individual responsibility, freedom of choice, and privatized care permeate the precarious systems of care in the USA, the ethics and actions that demonstrate caring for others are present, and are present, and have continued to emerge in small spaces, in centers, at home, and in the hallways of public discourses and policy development. In many ways, the choice related to caring for self, and not others, has been tested during the crisis of the pandemic. Persistent material inequities and work precarities have been made more visible during the pandemic. Many families and educators/caregivers have more connection and mutual appreciation. An ethics of care for the other, imagining and acting on what is necessary for all, rather than just self or a few, is emerging, and is critical in reimagining a new politics of community and care for our entangled futures.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Lacey Peters https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4978-9164
References

Bloch M, Holmlund K, Moqvist I, et al. (2003) Global and local patterns of governing the child, family, their care, and education. In: Bloch V, Holmlund K, Moqvist I, et al. (eds) Governing Children, Families, and Education. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 3–31.

Bloch MN (2006) Educational theories and pedagogies as technologies of power/knowledge: Educating the young child as a citizen of an imagined nation and world. In: Bloch MN, Kennedy D, Lightfoot T, et al. (eds) The Child in the World/the World in the Child: Education and the Configuration of a Universal, Modern, and Globalized Childhood. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 21–42.

Butler J (2009) Performativity, precarity and sexual politics. AIBR. Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana 4(3): i–xiii.

Calcarco JM, Anderson E, Meanwell E, et al. (2020) “Let’s Not Pretend It’s Fun”: How COVID-19-Related School and Childcare Closures are Damaging Mothers’ Well-Being. SocArXiv. DOI: 10.31235/osf.io/jyvk4.

Carlson FM (2006) Essential Touch: Meeting the needs of Young Children. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (2020) Recommendations for the stabilization and survival of the essential early care and education sector [Online]. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 15 April. Available at: https://cscce.berkeley.edu/recommendations-for-the-stabilization-and-survival-of-the-essential-early-care-and-education-sector/ (accessed 30 July 2020).

Cousins SB (2017) Practitioners’ constructions of love in early childhood education and care. International Journal of Early Years Education 25(1): 16–29.

Darder A (2017) Reinventing Paulo Freire: A Pedagogy of Love. New York: Routledge.

Durfee A and Meyers MK (2006) Who gets what from government? Distributional consequences of childcare assistance policies. Journal of Marriage and Family 68(3): 733–748.

Hauser ME and Jipson JA (1998) Intersections: Feminisms/Early Childhoods. Rethinking Childhood, Volume 3. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Kessler SA and Swadener BB (eds) (2019) Educating for Social Justice in Early Childhood. London: Routledge.

Langford R (2010) Critiquing child-centred pedagogy to bring children and early childhood educators into the centre of a democratic pedagogy. Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood 11(1): 113–127.

Langford R (2019) Theorizing Feminist Ethics of Care in Early Childhood Practice: Possibilities and Dangers. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Levinas E (1998) Entre Nous: On thinking-of-the-Other. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Locke J (1913) Some thoughts Concerning Education. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Loizou E and Charalambous N (2017) Empowerment pedagogy. Journal of Research in Childhood Education 31(3): 440–452.

Martin JR (1981) The ideal of the educated person. Educational Theory 31(2): 97–109.

Murray J, Swadener BB and Smith K (eds) (2019) The Routledge International Handbook of Youth Children’s Rights. London: Routledge.

NAEYC (2020a) Holding on Until Help Comes: A Survey Reveals Child Care’s Fight to Survive [Online]. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 13 July. Available at: https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/holding_on_until_help_comes.survey_analysis_july_2020.pdf (accessed 6 August 2020).

NAEYC (2020b) Child Care in Crisis: Understanding the Effects of the Coronavirus Pandemic. [Online]. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 17 March. Available at: https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/effects_of_coronavirus_on_child_care.final.pdf (accessed 6 August 2020).

Peters L, Swadener BB and Bloch M (2020) From Collapse to Future Imaginaries: Child and Early Education in an Era of COVID 19. May 26, blog post in Praxis. Available at: http://www.kzoo.edu/praxis/childcare-covid/ (accessed 6 August 2020).

Polakow V (1993) Lives on the Edge: Single Mothers and their Children in the “Other” America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Swadener et al.

Polakow V (2007) *Who Cares for our Children? The Child Care Crisis in the Other America.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Rose N (1999a) The social. In: Rose N (ed.) *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.98–136.

Rose N (1999b). Community. In: Rose N (ed.) *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.167–198.

Rousseau JJ (1899) *Émile, or Treatise on Education.* New York, NY: Appleton Press.

Sapon-Shevin M (2009) To touch and be touched: The missing discourse of bodies in education In: Shapiro S (ed.) *Education and Hope in Troubled Times: Visions of Change for our Children’s World.* New York, NY: Routledge, pp.168–183.

Santon Shevin M (2019) “What’s love got to do?” enacting the beloved community through early childhood education. In: Kessler SA and Swadener BB (eds) *Educating for Social Justice in Early Childhood.* London: Routledge, pp.131–147.

Seidel S (2001) To be part of something bigger than oneself. In: Giudici C, Rinaldi C, Krechevsky M, et al. (eds) *Making Learning Visible: Children as Individual and Group Learners.* Project Zero & Reggio Children: Reggio Emilia.

Sontag L (2020) COVID-19 has amplified the point that the fight for equitable childcare is a feminist fight [Blog]. *Will Start Small Child Centered, Social Justice,* 20 April. Available at: https://willstartsmall.com/blog/2020/04/20/women-essential-workers-need-childcare/ (accessed 30 July 2020).

Souto-Manning M (2010) Culture circles in an American first grade classroom. In: Souto-Manning M (ed.) *Freire, Teaching, and Learning: Culture Circles across Contexts.* New York, NY: Peter Lang, pp.49–74.

Tarrant K and Nagasawa M (2020) *New York Early Care and Education Survey: Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on New York Child Care System,* Executive Summary. New York, NY: New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute.

Tronto JC (1993) *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care.* London: Psychology Press.

Uttal L and Tuominen M (1999) Tenuous relationships: Exploitation, emotion, and racial ethnic significance in paid child care work. *Gender & Society* 13(6): 758–780.

Weidhaas AD (2017) Invisible labor and hidden work In: Scott CR and Lewis L (eds) *The International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, pp.1–10.

Author biographies

Beth Blue Swadener is a professor of Justice Studies, Social and Cultural Pedagogy and Disability Studies at Arizona State University. Her research focuses on critical childhood studies, internationally comparative social policy, with focus on sub-Saharan Africa, and children’s participation rights. She has co-edited and authored 14 books and published numerous articles and chapters and is a co-founder of Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (http://receinternational.org/) and Local to Global Justice (https://www.localtoglobal.org/).

Lacey Peters is a tenured assistant professor of Early Childhood Education at Hunter College of the City University of New York. Her research explores early childhood educators’ lived experiences in classrooms and examines their roles as policy enactors. She is also engaged in children’s rights-based research, emphasizing the views and voices of younger people in her scholarship.

Dana Frantz Bentley is a PreKindergarten teacher at Buckingham Browne and Nichols School and an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Dana is a critical practitioner, wondering with and through experiences with children. Her research focuses on anti-bias work with children, exploring how these early experiences frame children as empowered, political individuals.

Xiomara Diaz is currently assistant teaching in a first grade classroom and is a graduate of the Hunter College School of Education Early Childhood Master’s Degree Program. She also taught preschool for two years and served in an administrative role in her school during this time. Her research interests focus on developing resilience in children and communities to help reduce the “gap” systemic issues society has created. She aims to inspire confidence, creativity, and trust her students first and foremost.
Marianne (Mimi) Bloch is a Professor Emerita in the Departments of Curriculum & Instruction and Gender & Women’s Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research focuses on gender and child care/early education policy. She co-edited Bloch, Swadener, & Cannella, *Reconceptualizing Early Education and Care: Foundational Issues, New Imaginaries, & Social Action* (2018) and is a co-founder of Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (http://receinternational.org/).