

A Feminist Ethnography of Care in the Infant/Toddler Classroom

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For Priscilla M. Haden,
who would have printed this and read every word.

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ABSTRACT

In the neoliberal context of the Global North, early care and education (ECE) is a term—and a field —conceptually dichotomized and stratified in nature, with ‘care’ widely considered to be separate from - and lesser than - ‘education.’ Feminist perspectives challenge this dichotomization by reconceptualizing care as foundational to education, centering the historically feminized ideals of emotion, relationality, and interdependence. This three-part qualitative dissertation presents the findings of an 8-month feminist ethnography of care practices in one infant/toddler classroom. Participant observation and semi-structured teacher interviews were used to explore the following research questions: 1) What are teachers’ lived experiences of care in this early childhood classroom community? and 2) How do teachers understand these lived experiences of care? Thematic analysis of ethnographic data (i.e., field notes, video, photos, and interviews) produced three empirical manuscripts. The first leverages a feminist interpretation of Slow Pedagogy (Clark, 2022) to explore how slowness - a quality antithetical to the accelerated pace of neoliberal education - is central to care, as the classroom teachers understand it. The second links Ethics of Care theory with Chantal Mouffe’s (2005) political theory of the Democratic Paradox to explore how care and conflict are linked to participatory democratic practices in this infant/toddler classroom. The final manuscript is an autoethnographic analysis that interprets personal researcher reflections (drawn from field notes, conceptual memos, and personal memory) through the cultural and theoretical frameworks of Slow Scholarship and feminist research methods.

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INTRODUCTION

Early care and education (ECE) is a term - and a field - conceptually dichotomized and stratified in nature, with 'care' widely considered to be separate from, and lesser than, 'education' in the cultural context of the United States. The history of this dichotomization is inextricably linked to a variety of interconnected dynamics: the patriarchal devaluation of feminized work (Cohen & Huffman, 2003); the racialized and classed nature of the history of the care of young children (Andrew, 2015a; Duffy, 2007; Osgood, 2005); the discursive construction of 'professionalism' in Euro-Western culture (Campbell-Barr, 2018; Osgood, 2006b, 2010); and the emergence of the neoliberal discourse of 'human capital' as a reigning force in early childhood policy and practice (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021).

These complex intellectual considerations have been (and continue to be) explored and debated regularly within the academic realms of sociology, women's studies, education, and child and family studies. Yet one need not hold a high-level academic familiarity with the complex sociopolitical history of the care/education hierarchy to observe its tangible manifestations in early care and education, where it is clear to see that academic learning is prioritized over care in both the micro- (i.e., daily practices) and macro- (i.e., policy) level discourse of the field. On a macro-level, ECE teachers are paid far less than their K-12 counterparts and must advocate for the worth of their work in a way that teachers of older children do not (Boyd, 2013; Phillips et al., 2016). To gain higher levels of respect and compensation, ECE teachers are encouraged to 'professionalize' by gaining higher academic credentials themselves and to emphasize the intellectual nature of their work (Langford et al., 2017). On the micro-level, teachers themselves distance their work from that of caregivers,

decrying that they are ‘not babysitters’ to reclaim the dignity historically refused to their work (Nelson & Lewis, 2016).

The Current Study

It is this contentious and dichotomized state of the field that provides the rationale of the current study: to better understand the lived experiences of care in the early childhood classroom, and to complexify current understandings of how care is conceptualized and practiced by the early childhood practitioners who lead those spaces. The dissertation that follows presents the results of a 9-month feminist ethnography of care practices in one infant/toddler classroom in the southeastern United States, comprised of two lead teachers and twelve 1–2-year-old children. Research was guided by the following questions:

RQ1: What are teachers’ lived experiences of care in the early childhood classroom community?

RQ2: How do teachers interpret the lived experiences of care in the early childhood classroom community?

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation follows a multi-paper format, with three distinct manuscripts derived from the same ethnographic data. Chapter One serves as an introduction, providing background, including theoretical frameworks and methodological grounding, for the larger study from which the three manuscripts that follow were derived. The chapter begins with a researcher positionality statement, exploring the socio-political and epistemological standpoints from which I approach this research. This statement is followed by a review of literature focusing on the various ways that care has been discursively constructed, (re)conceptualized, and researched in the field of early care and childhood. I will then provide a detailed exploration of the

epistemological and theoretical frameworks that guide this study, namely poststructural feminism, and feminist ethics of care (including how these frameworks been applied within the field of ECE). This chapter concludes by detailing the study's methodology (feminist ethnography) and method, including design, sampling, and procedures.

Chapter Two, titled "Time for Slow Care?" explores the theme of time—and particularly, slowness—as a central element the care practices of this infant/toddler classroom. Drawing on a a feminist interpretation of Clark's (2022) articulation of Slow Pedagogy in ECE this manuscript explores how slowness—a feminized quality antithetical to the furious pace of neoliberal education— is central to care in this context. In addition, two major themes—Care as Emotional Presence, and Care as Acknowledgement—are presented as a central to teachers' understandings and practices of care. Findings and interpretations of this chapter introduce the concept of Slow Care, a theorizing of care practices that emphasizes the importance of slow, relationally guided temporalities, serving to contest and counter the growing neoliberal pressures of efficiency and productivity in the early childhood classroom.

Chapter Three, titled "Conflict as Care," relies on Chantal Mouffe's (2000; 2005) theories of the democratic paradox and agonist conflict to interpret one teacher's understandings of conflict in the classroom of study, and the practices that this teacher engaged in support of what Mouffe would term 'agonist conflict' (i.e., friendly, rather than antagonistic, conflict). Findings demonstrate that this teacher views agonist conflict to be a productive process for young children - one that enables them to articulate their political subjectivities as members of their classroom community and one that will foster their engagement as citizens of a broader democratic society. As such, the emotional support and scaffolding she provided to support such

engagement constitute a political form of care. This chapter discusses implications for reconceptualized understandings of peer conflict in early childhood contexts and insight into how teachers can better support children's developing political engagement through agonist conflict with their peers.

Chapter Four, "Toddler Temporalities," adopts an autoethnographic approach to explore the methodological connection between the temporalities of early childhood research and the temporalities of the early childhood classroom. Grounded in a feminist theoretical framework, this paper engages an autoethnographic analysis of personal researcher reflections (drawn from field notes, conceptual memos, and personal memory) to explore the possibilities of Slowness as methodology in early care and education. This paper presents the possibilities of Slow scholarship to a) enhance relationality and respect in early childhood research process, b) allow for more trustworthy representation of the unique temporalities experienced by children and teachers in early childhood contexts, and c) offer researchers an opportunity for more embodied and emotional knowledge to augment the largely intellectual exercise of research. Discussion within each of these methodological categories is supported by the autoethnographic narrative that exemplify the practice and possibilities of each as experienced in the author's own research. The arguments presented in this paper constitute a call to action for Slow early childhood scholarship that resists neoliberal temporal regimes and allows for relational and emotionally grounded research that conveys the unique temporalities of the early childhood classroom.

The dissertation concludes by summarizing the findings of the study as a whole, and with a detailed discussion of the implications, future directions, and limitations of this research.

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CHAPTER I: A FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY OF CARE IN THE INFANT/TODDLER CLASSROOM

The chapter that follows serves to provide background, including theoretical frameworks and methodological grounding, for the larger study from which the three manuscripts that follow were derived. I begin this chapter with a researcher positionality statement, exploring the socio-political and epistemological standpoints from which I approach this research. This statement is followed by a review of literature focusing on the various ways that care has been discursively constructed, (re)conceptualized, and researched in the field of early care and childhood. I will then provide a detailed exploration of the epistemological and theoretical frameworks that guide this study, namely poststructural feminism and feminist ethics of care (including how these frameworks been applied within the field of ECE). This chapter concludes by detailing the study's methodology and method, including design, sampling, and procedures.

Researcher Positionality

In opposition to quantitative research, which prioritizes researcher objectivity (Moss, 2015), qualitative researchers not only “recognize the inevitability.... of complexity and context, uncertainty and provisionality, subjectivity and interpretation - but also value them.” (p. 12). Within this framework, it then becomes critical for qualitative researchers to explore not if, but how their individual sociopolitical, epistemological, and methodological positionalities affect their engagement in the research process. Here, I detail my positionality to provide context for the work that follows.

Sociopolitical Positionality

I am a 32-year-old White, cisgender, heterosexual woman residing in Appalachia, in the United States. I was raised in an upper-middle class household and maintain access to many of the privileges and resources of this socioeconomic class, even though my personal income as a

graduate student places me within the income range of the working class. I experience marginalization in regard to my history of anxiety/depression and my chosen relationship style—polyamory—but even within those marginalized identities, I am protected by my privileged status, especially my whiteness.

Researcher Positionality

Before enrolling as a PhD student in the Department of Child and Family Studies at the University of Tennessee, I spent six years as an educator in progressive private schools which served primarily White, upper-middle class families. Three of these years were spent at a Reggio-Emilia inspired early childhood program in Boulder, Colorado, where I received formative education regarding my perceptions and practices as an early childhood teacher. Within this space, I came to know children as competent, capable in their own lives and learning experiences. I also learned (and have subsequently worked to unlearn) many White culture norms of early care and education, including the idea that a white-centric progressive educational approach is ideal for all young learners. Additionally, it was in this context that I developed my interest in the core research topics that have guided my doctoral work: teacher emotion/emotional labor, ethics of care, and the societal devaluation of care labor.

Since enrolling at the University of Tennessee Knoxville and in my pursuit of studying these topics, I have developed an identity as a poststructural feminist researcher. This descriptor refers first to my poststructural feminist ontological and epistemological stance, which views relationality as foundational to human experience, understands gendered power and discourse as foundational to understanding the social world. As a poststructural feminist scholar, I understand gender not as a monolithic and ‘natural’ category, but as a) an historicized societal and political

concept embedded within systems of power, and b) a concept that can be examined, contested, and rejected by means of deconstruction. Identifying as a feminist researcher also informs the way I conduct research: within my research endeavors, I prioritize relationality, reflexivity, reciprocity, and care.

Literature Review: Care in Early Childhood Education

Conceptualizing Care

Care is a concept that encompasses meanings and practices as diverse and complex as the social milieu in which they take place. A concept that some argue has been “overused, poorly defined, and under-theorized” (Goldstein, 2002, p. 9) in the field of education. Some, however, argue that this amorphous nature contributes to care’s conceptual power - much like love, care is an arguably ubiquitous human experience that defies easy definition (Brannen & Moss, 2003). Following Cnaan et al.’s (2008) approach to a similarly amorphous concept - community - I understand care as a “fluid concept that captures numerous manifestations” and defies easy definition; a concept that should not be treated so much as a tangible ‘thing’ but as a “variable quality that helps us to characterize and understand particular concrete cases” (p. 5). And so, acknowledging the manifold conceptualizations of care, in this section, I focus not on presenting a singular definition, but on exploring care’s multifaceted nature.

I will begin by tracing dominant discourses of care in early care and education, beginning in the 1800s. I then explore modern-day (re)conceptualizations of care by critical scholars who have each contributed to our current understandings of ‘care’ as a contested, fragmented, and political concept.

A Genealogy of Care Discourse in Euro-Western Early Care and Education

To understand the current landscape of care in early childhood care and education, it is important to trace the history of how such came to be. Before proceeding, however, it is important to note a limitation of this review. As this study took place within an early childhood center in the United States, I limit the focus of this historical review of discourse to literature written within a Euro-Western ECE context (i.e., the discourses that have shaped commercial ECE in the United States). Although non-Western conceptions of care would be illustrative in contrast and are of equal importance on the global stage, they lie outside the scope of a review of this limited length.

Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Montessori: Maternalistic Origins of Care in ECE.

The birth of the modern era of Western early care and education began with the work of European early childhood scholars, Johann Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, and Maria Montessori, whose collective work spanned from the mid-18th to the mid-19th centuries (Aslanian, 2015). Each of these scholars believed in an early care and education framework based on the ideals of love, maternalism, and ‘feminine’ care. Froebel, for instance, in discussing qualifications for ECE teachers, stated that “more important than school education... is the girlish love of childhood, an ability to occupy herself with children, as well as a serene and joyful view of life in general... It goes without saying that purity of intentions and a lovely, womanly disposition are essential prerequisites" (as quoted in Ailwood, 2008, p. 161). Likewise, Maria Montessori (1946) claimed that the teacher must be “attractive, preferably young and beautiful, charmingly dressed, scented with cleanliness, happy and graciously dignified... that the child may unconsciously pay her the compliment of thinking of her as beautiful as his mother, who is naturally his ideal of

beauty” (p. 87). It is this maternalistic discourse of care that would dominate the field of early care and education for the 19th and beginning of the 20th century until the influence of more scientific discourses took hold (Steedman, 1985).

The Academic & Scientific Turn in ECE

The first third of the 20th century was marked increased societal investment in the ideals of scientific rationalism (Recchia et al., 2018), a shift which presented in the field of early care and education as a groundswell of developmental science- and quantitative educational research (Bloch, 1987). These new paradigms placed the ‘natural care’ of maternalism in ECE under the “rational and scientific gaze” (Ailwood, 2008, p. 160) and found it wanting. This rejection of maternalistic care in favor of scientific approaches continued throughout the 20th century and was further expedited in the 1980s by the widespread adoption of neoliberal ideology into the realm of education (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Neoliberalism, with its focus on standardization, economic return on investment, and quantifiable accountability measures, melded with new developments in neuroscience-based understandings of the importance of the early years to produce high levels of external economic investment and control to early care and education (Moss, 2019). During this time, the unobservable realm of feelings and emotion were relegated to the background, while the “‘seen,’ ‘observable,’ and ‘scientific’ modes of knowing gained popularity” (Recchia et al., 2018, p. 143), a shift which, in short, resulted in the subordination and devaluation of care (Manning-Morton, 2006).

A Redirection Back to Care

Beginning in the late 1990s, the pendulum of early care and education discourse and practice swung back towards care (Recchia et al., 2018). This shift was largely predicated on

experimental and quantitative work in developmental science which showed that high-quality relationships and social-emotional learning in early childhood are essential to children's later academic and professional success (McNally & Slutsky, 2018). Literature from this period presents care as an intellectually, professionally, and scientifically grounded endeavor, rather than simply an emotional and naturalized orientation, as Froebel and his contemporaries had believed. Examples of the implementation of this perspective in the literature are many, ranging from theoretical and qualitative explorations of professional care (e.g., Goldstein, 1998; Cortazar & Herreros, 2010; McNally & Slutsky, 2018) to quantitative designs which seek to isolate 'caring' pedagogical attributes and to reinforce the role of relationality and social-emotional support to children's academic success (e.g., Ahn & Stifter, 2006; Jennings, 2015). In one example, Goldstein (1998) presents a conceptualization of care as a learned professional skill and an essential element of quality in ECE settings; care is, as the title of Goldstein's article suggests, "more than gentle smiles and warm hugs." Other authors (e.g., Cortazar & Herreros, 2010; McNally & Slutsky, 2018) rely on attachment theory to argue for care's importance within a developmental science framework, emphasizing the role of care-full teacher/child relationships in early childhood in ensuring the child's later academic success. This type of scientifically and rationally guided care theorizing can also be seen in national policy documents, with the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) 2019 "Professional Competencies and Standards for Early Childhood Educators" stating that early childhood educators must "understand and demonstrate positive, caring, supportive relationships and interactions" (p. 10) as a professional competency.

Overall, the literature described in this section can be understood as an attempt to reinsert care into early care and education while still maintaining the ideological parameters of professionalization, intellectualization, and standardization required by neoliberal discourse. These examples, and others like them, separate care from the bodily- and emotionally oriented roots which had been devalued within the rational and scientific discourses of the neoliberal turn and instead reinscribe it as an objectively measurable component of ECE professional practice.

(Re)Conceptualizing Care

Reconceptualist perspectives in early childhood education draw from critical, feminist, postmodern, and poststructuralist perspectives to challenge the status quo of knowledge and ‘reconceptualize’ taken-for-granted practices of early care and education. When considering care through a reconceptualist lens, it is understood as a political and historical concept that holds both possibilities and dangers in its theoretical conceptualization and tangible practice within the field (Langford, 2020). The following lenses represent reconceptualizations of care that draw it beyond the bounds of dominant discourses into an arena in which it can be historicized, contextualized, and contested.

In this section, I summarize a few of the ways in which care has been deconstructed within reconceptualist literature, including an examination of the role of love in institutional care settings; explorations of care as gendered emotional labor; and critical perspectives on the cultural whiteness of mainstream conceptions of care in education.

Care as Love

In a growing body of reconceptualist literature, feminist care and emotion scholars attempt to rescue care from both its essentialized maternalistic- and rationalized neoliberal

reincarnations by presenting care as a political, relational, and ethical practice of love. Within this emerging framework, these scholars (i.e., Aslanian, 2018; Cousins, 2017; Page, 2011, 2018; White & Gradvoski, 2018) argue that it is not the emotional, relational, and unscientific nature of care that is problematic, but instead a) the essentialized portrait of those elements within the gendered maternalistic discourse and/or b) the devaluation of those elements by the neoliberal and patriarchal ideological regimes in education. In attempting to break through the culturally constructed binary of the emotional and the professional, these authors ask questions such as: ‘What is the nature of ‘professional love’? (Page, 2011); ‘How do we understand the complexity of love’s nature as both beautiful and dangerous in ECE settings?’ (Aslanian, 2018); and ‘How do practitioners understand the nature of love in their work?’ (Cousins, 2017).

Care as Emotional Labor

Hoschchild’s (1983) concept of ‘emotional labor,’ can be understood as the process by which workers regulate both their internal and expressed emotions to align with the ‘emotional rules’ of their profession. This is done through processes of ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ acting, which enhance and/or inhibit emotions and behaviors to align more closely to normative professional standards of feeling and being (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008). Importantly, according to Hoschchild (1983), emotional labor is a repressive and exhausting task that is largely undertaken by women in feminized occupations such as retail, airline stewardship, and teaching. In ECE, the application of the concept of emotional labor means that teachers, rather than ‘naturally’ engaging in the idealized and maternalistic displays of emotion and care, are engaging in additional and uncompensated emotional work to enact and perform that implicitly and explicitly required facet of their work.

Care as Capital

Andrew (2015b) likewise acknowledges the role of emotional labor but challenges Hirschfeld's conception of this labor as exclusively oppressive. Instead, he presents the concept of "emotional capital" to discuss this phenomenon within the field of ECE. Emotional capital, a concept based in Marxist and Bourdieuan theory of economic and social capital, respectively, is used by Andrew to suggest that emotions are not just something that is enacted and performed as required by 'emotional rules' (as in emotional labor), but a form of capital that can be intentionally acquired through experiences and subsequently engaged to effectively create caring environments. This emotional capital comprises emotional skills and resources that a teacher gains through their work in the classroom, such as empathy, emotional regulation, and resilience. Colley (2011) provides support for this idea of emotional capital in her empirical study of the emotional labor of ECE pre-service teachers: she notes that, by their second year of teaching, students who had previously struggled with emotionally challenging moments in the classroom "declared it was easy for them now, explaining that they simply became 'a different person' when they entered the workplace" (p.22).

Care as Cultural

Traditional conceptions of care have been critiqued by Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars as failing to give due consideration to the fact that "caring is not a common reference point... [it is] a symbolic concept charged with multiple political, social, and cultural meanings" (McKamey, 2004, p. 5) Garad (2013) furthers this critique in describing the traditional conceptions of care as "couched within White ideals of morality and ethics" (p. 68). These White ideals include centering warmth, maternalism, and compassion as inherent qualities of the carer,

and neediness in the cared-for. When implemented in a minoritized classroom, these ideals form a deficit-based framework that Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus (2006) and Toshalis (2012) refer to respectively as ‘soft’ or ‘aesthetic’ care. Instead of functioning as true caring action, ‘soft’ care results in demonstrations of pity and low expectations towards students of color and/or low-socioeconomic backgrounds. Unexamined engagement in this deficit-based care functions to reproduce systemic inequalities by further fossilizing deficit stereotypes and classed, raced, and gendered cultural assumptions of minority students (Toshalis, 2012). Although caring White teachers often believe that they are being understanding or ‘nice’ by expecting less of students of color, they are in fact sending the message that these students are incapable of achievement (Nieto, 2010). Without careful practitioner engagement in critical cultural and racial reflexivity, White teachers may engage in symbolic violence and racism (Rolón-Dow, 2005), all the while insulated from acknowledging their participation in systemic racism by their “protective care-taking cloak” (Toshalis, 2012, p.6).

Theoretical and Epistemological Foundation

Feminist Theory

To speak of feminist theory is to speak of a theoretical chimera with lineages and manifestations that are as unique as the different contexts from which it emerged. As such, “it is impossible to produce a comfortable synthesis from those vertiginous locations” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 477). Feminism can be best described as a broad theoretical umbrella that encompasses perspectives which examine the systems of power and inequity that affect women and/or create oppressive expectations regarding gender and/or sexuality (Delmar, 1994). Within this broad umbrella, there are varying ‘types’ of feminism, including cultural feminism, liberal feminism,

radical feminism, and poststructural feminism. Each of these prioritizes a different lens in understanding gendered oppression, but all share the goal of “problematizing the seemingly unproblematic category of gender, making the invisible visible, and calling attention to inequities that fall along gendered lines” (Commeyras et al., 1996).

Knowing that a complete portrayal of feminist theory is impossible, here I summarize the broad genealogy of feminism in the Euro-Western context.

Theoretical Genealogy

First Wave Feminism

Western feminist theory emerged from - and resides within - the political and social movement for women’s rights in Euro-Western countries. This movement can be roughly delineated into three waves (Leavy & Harris, 2019). The first wave of western feminism began with the women’s suffrage movement of the 19th century and was primarily oriented at breaking down structural and institutional barriers that prevented women from full rights in voting, property ownership, marriage, and employment. This wave can be understood as the ‘liberal feminism’ noted above, in which liberal notions of democracy and individual rights were leveraged to highlight the relatively inferior position afforded to women in the United States (Weiner, 1994).

Notably, the movement was originally associated with the anti-slavery movement, with Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass speaking at the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention (Roth, 2003). This alliance was ruptured, however, because of white feminists’ refusal to prioritize the rights of Black women as part of the feminist movement - a rupture that would not

be bridged until nearly a century later with the mainstream acknowledgment of intersectional experiences of women of Color within ‘third wave’ feminist discourse.

Second Wave Feminism

Second-wave feminism is synonymous with the women’s liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s that coexisted alongside the anti-war movement (Leavy & Harris, 2019). This wave maintained a strong focus on breaking down institutional barriers (many of which still existed despite the efforts of first-wave feminists), but also tackled the issues of sexual liberation, access to birth control, and more broadly, the negative impacts of patriarchal beliefs and customs upon women of this age. Second-wave feminism can be understood as synonymous with cultural feminism, in which women argued for the legitimacy of a ‘feminine’ or woman’s way of being (Weiner, 1994). Mainstream second-wave feminism, like mainstream first wave feminism, was a predominantly white movement that focused on the issues of white women, while Black, Chicana, and other ‘third world’ feminist movements existed in parallel with less broad societal recognition (Roth, 2003; Combahee River Collective, 1977).

Third Wave Feminism

Third-wave feminism emerged in the 1990s and represents a time of ‘autocritique’ in feminism (Skeggs, 2001, p. 6), during which mainstream feminist discourse began to challenge the myopic focus of previous two waves and move towards including the voices of women of color, poor women, disabled women, trans women, and other women who hold marginalized identities (Leavy & Harris, 2019). This conversation began with the introduction of Kimberle Crenshaw’s (1991) theory of intersectionality that moves gender from its status as the central (and only) category of analysis, to locate it as one of several important categories of identity that

intersect to form an individual's lived experience. The adoption of this intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1991) signaled a deconstruction of the category 'woman,' and a reconstruction of this category in a way that acknowledges that "we are not bodies that are only gendered, but rather, we simultaneously occupy race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and other positionalities" (Leavy & Harris, 2019). In its deconstruction of the category of 'woman', this wave is informed by (and informs) poststructural theory, which are be explored in detail below.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism is a transdisciplinary philosophical movement that emerged from the field of linguistics in the 1960s (Agger 1991). This theoretical and philosophical framework invites us to "look awry" (Zizek, 1991) at our social realities and to ask questions that examine, deconstruct, and contest taken-for-granted perspectives, discourses, and institutions. Drawing upon the foundational work of scholars such as Derrida (1974; Derrida & Bass, 1967), Foucault (1972, 1977a, 1980), Deleuze and Guattari (1972, 1980), and Lyotard (1979, 1984), poststructuralism critically examines a wide variety of cultural and societal phenomena by asking questions such as: "How does it function? Where is it to be found? How does it get produced and regulated? What are its social effects? How does it exist?" (Bove, 1990, p. 54).

As indicated by its name, poststructuralism treats the structures of society (both tangible and discursive) with skepticism, and places emphasis on examining the role of discourse in shaping systems of power and oppression. Through the critical examination of discourse, power, and agency, poststructuralism "shifts the emphasis from accounts or stories about what is 'true'... to stories about how we produce 'truths'" (Purvis, 2006, p.6). Although critics of poststructuralism argue that this deconstruction and contestation of social truths leads towards a

conceptual paralysis, proponents of the framework describe it as one that is “accountable to complexity” (Lather, 2007, p. 11) and allows thinkers to imagine cultural and social possibilities beyond the status quo. In this section, I briefly explore four of the main concepts that comprise poststructural thought - discourse, power, agency, and subjectivity- before defining and exploring poststructural feminism as a subset of poststructuralism. I conclude with an overview of the use of poststructural feminism in early care and education research.

Discourse

Poststructuralism, in alignment with its roots in linguistic theory, holds that truth, meaning, and knowledge are constituted discursively through language (Davis et al., 2015). Foucault (1972) describes discourses as ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.’ These discourses, when engaged in social settings, create systems of shared meanings; and when combined with systems of power, certain discourses gain prominence and being to constitute “what can be said and thought, and about who can speak, when, and with what authority” (Maguire & Ball, 1994, p. 6). Poststructuralists believe that through understanding and contesting of these discourses, we can open new possibilities and alternative truths (Walkerdine, 1990). Another poststructural scholar, Derrida approaches this contestation through the process of ‘deconstruction,’ in which discourses are pulled apart—or ‘deconstructed’—to reveal their hidden conceptual and political genealogy and the ways in which they produce truth and reality (Derrida & Bass, 1967).

Power

Within poststructural thought, power is understood as a dispersed force that “circulates through the social world in ‘capillary’ like ways to reach into every detail of life and construct

particular ways of ‘being’” (Davis et al., 2015, p. 136). This capillary nature means that power is not held by a single individual or institution but is ubiquitous and enacted and engaged in every social interaction and in the daily processes that form and sustain social institutions (e.g., schools, businesses, religious organizations).

As detailed above, poststructuralism understands power to be constituted through discourse, and discourse to be constituted through power in an inextricably cyclical relationship (Foucault, 1980). In everyday life, this concept can be seen in the ways that certain political and social factions are able to gain power through certain discourses that appeal to others and create truths that afford them the right to the power they have gained. This power is then maintained by discursive ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1977a), in which the discourses that afford these individuals power are deemed ‘natural’ and are therefore largely invisible.

Agency

The tension between structure and agency is a fundamental consideration of poststructural thought. Within a poststructural framework, the individual, as a discursive subject, is produced and continually reproduced by means of the unique amalgam of societal discourses to which they are subjected and/or participate in (Davies, 1994). A Black, disabled woman, therefore, is reified at the intersection of the discursive identities of ‘Black,’ ‘disabled,’ and ‘woman.’ In that reification, she is subject to the constraints of behavior, thought, and identity considered to be normative regarding Black disabled women - what Foucault (1977a) would term a ‘regime of truth.’ As noted above, though, individuals are continually reproduced by the terms of the given discourses available in their social setting; it is in this process of reproduction that agency appears. In poststructural thought, the individual is thought to possess agency

through their role in the reproduction process, either being participating in or resisting the terms of their own reproduction as discursive subjects (St. Pierre, 2000). Or, as poststructural feminist scholar Judith Butler (1995) describes: “That the subject is that which must be constituted again and again implies that it is open to formations that are not fully constrained in advance” (p. 135). To continue the example from above, then, at every instance of being a Black disabled woman, the hypothetical individual noted above has the potential to ‘open up’ each of these categories into new possibilities deemed impossible by existing discourse, even as those existing discourses (and the individuals that wield them) continue to try to constrain her to the prior regimes of truth.

Knowledge & Truth

Poststructuralism rejects the humanist and Enlightenment notion that truth can be obtained through rational human inquiry (St. Pierre, 2000). Instead, poststructuralism asserts that truth and knowledge a) always contextual and contingent and b) are constructed within the relationship between discourse and power. According to Foucault (1977a), there is an inextricable entanglement between power and knowledge: “power and knowledge directly imply one another; there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (p. 27). This harkens back to the concept of ‘regimes of truth’ explored above, in which those who hold power also hold the ability to decide which knowledge is permissible, speakable, and ‘true’ - as well as who may speak it. The contextual and constructed nature of truth and knowledge can be uncovered and explored through Foucault’s (1977b) concept of genealogy, which “trace[s] the ways in which discourses constitute objects that can be examined as either true or false according to the codes of the discourse” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 497) or in

Derrida's practice of deconstruction, as defined above. Like the discussion of agency at the site of reproduction, it is in these moments of deconstruction that an individual gains power to challenge the hegemonic 'regimes of truth', a process of awakening and (re)construction of knowledge that critical pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970) referred to as 'conscientization.'

Poststructural Feminism

Poststructural feminism is a theoretical merger of the two theoretical perspectives explored above. Like both of its 'parent' philosophies, poststructural feminism is a contested terrain that defies easy definition (St. Pierre, 2000). This theoretical perspective is feminist in its emphasis on gender, patriarchy, and intersectional identity as conceptual foci, and poststructural in its acknowledgement of gender as a) an historicized societal and political concept embedded within systems of power, and b) a concept that can be examined, contested, and rejected by means of deconstruction. Through this deconstruction, poststructural feminism seeks to break "trouble [the] tidy binaries" (Lather, 2006, p. 36) that pervade through dominant societal considerations of gender, in both its personal and structural iterations, to open new possibilities of being and understanding, and to move marginalized manifestations of gender and identity from the margins to the center of societal discourse (Davis et al., 2015).

Poststructural feminism, unlike the liberal and cultural feminisms of the first and second waves, denies the assumptions of gender essentialism and challenges the category of 'woman.' So, while poststructural feminist work does indeed encompass much work considering women's gendered marginalization in systems of patriarchal power, it is not limited to such. Instead, this framework invites considerations of all intersectional experiences of gender and sexuality as they "arise from the intersections of dominance and marginality" (Davis et al., 2015, p. 142).

Foundational explorations in poststructural feminism include Judith Butler's (1990, 2004) foundational work on the performance of gender within a 'heterosexual matrix' (1990), and the French feminists Cixous's (1980) and Kristeva's (1969) explorations of sexuality and gender through linguistic and semiotic theory.

Poststructural Feminism in Early Care and Education

In the field of early care and education, poststructural thought has been used to unravel the 'tidy binaries' (Lather, 2006, p. 36) used to support hegemonic discourse surrounding young children's care, development, education, and lived experiences in early care and education. These include challenging developmentalism (Cannella, 1997, 2005; Grau, 2005; Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005); examining the role of regulatory power in classroom practices and processes (Fenech & Sumsion, 2007; Madrid & Dunkenny, 2010; Paananen & Grieshaber, 2022); challenging the hegemonic concept of 'quality' in ECE (Dahlberg et al., 1999).

Poststructural feminism has been wielded to examine the discourse and performance of gender in early childhood. These include the seminal works of Bronwyn Davies (2003), Valerie Walkerdine (1990), Glenda MacNaughton (2000; 2005), and Mindy Blaise (2005, 2014), all of whom exploration of children's agency in challenging gender norms; seminal works on the performance, construction, and contestation of gender in early childhood spaces. These various projects examine gender through a variety of theoretical lenses, incorporating the work of Judith Butler, Deleuze & Guattari, and Foucault. Regardless of their precise theoretical derivation, however, they have all served the cause of elucidating children's gender subjectivity not as an inevitable result of biological truth, but as a "a political, dynamic, and shifting political social construction" (Blaise & Rooney, 2019, p. 153). From this poststructural perspective on gender in

early childhood, children are believed to hold agency in their own gendered subjectivities, both reconstructing and contesting hegemonic gender norms in their day-to-day gendered performances.

Of particular importance to this project are those studies that have extended poststructural feminist examination of gender beyond considerations of children and child development to include consideration of the performance and experience of gender for early childhood professionals. These include investigation of gendered expectations for women in early childhood leadership (Davis et al., 2015); deconstruction of standards of early childhood teacher professionalism (Osgood, 2006a); investigations of discourse and power in the lived emotional experiences of early childhood teachers (Madrid et al., 2013; Madrid Akpovo et al., 2021; Zembylas, 2003, 2005, 2006); explorations of teacher emotion (Sorrells & Madrid Akpovo, 2022), and considerations of gender in the discourse, practice, and experience of love and care in early childhood spaces (Aslanian, 2018; Davis et al., 2015; Langford, 2020; Page, 2011). Not all these authors claim poststructural feminism as the theoretical foundations of their work (although some do). They are all aligned with that framework, however, through their intended purpose of elucidating the ways in which gendered systems of ideology, power, and discourse serve to constrain certain ways of being, thinking, and feeling.

Feminist Ethics of Care

Ethics of care is a theoretic framework is based on the relational feminist principles of connection, emotion, and interdependence (Acker, 1995). Within this framework, traditionally feminine ways of knowing and being are viewed as being as valid and valuable as the ideals of independence and emotional stoicism that have been accorded primacy by hegemonic

masculinity; femininity - and, by extension, the act of caring - is valuable in its own right. The theoretical lineage of ethics of care scholarship can be best understood in three conceptually delineated ‘waves’ that mirror those found within wider feminist theory (Cockburn, 2010; Featherstone & Morris, 2012, Hankivsky, 2004).

First Wave Ethics of Care

‘First wave’ ethics of care emerged from second-wave feminist theory of the 1960s and 1970s that was challenging the private/public conceptual divide and was presenting the formerly devalued arenas of women’s lives, feelings, and work for serious academic, theoretical, and societal consideration. Foundational first-wave articulations of an ethics of care can be located in Carol Gilligan’s (1982) book, *In a Different Voice*, and Nel Noddings’ 1984 book, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, which described the moral foundations and practices of a ‘feminine’ ethics of care.

Second Wave Ethics of Care

Second wave ethics of care, emerging in the 1980s, maintained the first wave theorists’ assertions of the intrinsically interdependent nature of being human, but limited first wave conceptualization of the dyadic nature of care to include community, societal, and political ramifications (Hankivsky, 2014). Second generation scholar Selma Sevenhuijsen (1998), for instance, advocates for care as the foundation for a relational ontology of humanity: “the guiding principle of feminist ethics of care is that people need each other in order to lead good lives, and that they can only exist as individuals through and via caring relationships with others. On a daily basis, everyone needs care and commitment during their lives...” (p.19). To move towards this more expansive conceptualization of care, second-wave theorists argue for the rejection of

first-wave gender essentialism. In contrast to first-wave theorists who refer to a ‘feminine’ ethics of care, second-wave theorists are more likely to use the term ‘feminist’ ethics of care. This change in terminology denotes a theoretical framework that challenges and deconstructs - rather than reifies - naturalized understandings of care, and one that problematizes the structural and historical reasons for the disproportionate association and allocation of care and care work with women (Mahon & Robinson, 2011). In *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, a foundational piece of second wave theorizing, Joan Tronto (1993) demonstrates this second wave rejection of gender essentialism, stating that “we need to stop talking about ‘women’s morality’ and start talking instead about a care ethic that includes the values traditionally associated with women” (p. 3). As an alternative to essentializing conceptions of care, Tronto proposes care as a human (rather than feminine) moral ethic and asks the reader to consider what our societies might look like if we were to accept care as a central organizing factor in our socio-political worlds. This reorganization, according to Tronto, brings care from the hidden margins of women’s ‘private’ (and unpaid) worlds and necessitates all members of society to recognize and take on their responsibility to care. In this way, she offers a conceptualization of care as a political, as well as ethical, framework.

Third Wave Ethics of Care

Third-wave ethics of care theorists accept second-wave theorists’ rejections of gender essentialism, as well as their extension of concepts of care to the political stage. They believe, however, that second wave theorists stop too short in their deconstruction of first wave essentialism and that to consider all manifestations of care, we must “go beyond the a priori use of gender as the privileged analytic through which care is analyzed” (Raghuram, 2019, p. 614).

Third-wave scholars (see Bartos, 2019; Hankivsky, 2014; and Raghuram, 2012; 2019) build upon Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality to consider how an individual's unique amalgam of social identities (e.g., race, class, dis/ability, citizenship status, and sexual identity) affects their relationship to giving and receiving care, in both the personal and political sense. Intersectionality theory, importantly, rejects a hierarchical approach to considerations of identity, power, and oppression; when brought to understandings of care, this means a move away from gender as the primary analytical lens towards a consideration of the totality of social positionality (Hankivsky, 2014).

While a full description of how various social identities affect an individual's relationship to care within systems of power is beyond the scope of a summary of the theoretical lineage of ethics of care, suffice it to say that third wave theorists would agree with Raghuram's (2019) statement that "care not only requires locating. It also requires dislocating from the normative white body through which much care is theorized" (p. 629). Third-wave ethics of care theory is typified by this expanded engagement with the multiplicities of social identity beyond gender and by its critical consideration of how difference is "composed and recomposed" (p. 630) through the intersubjective social conceptualization and performance of care.

Methodology and Method

In this section, I provide an overview of the dissertation study. I begin by outlining the rational purpose of this work and its guiding research questions. I then explore the theoretical lineage of my chosen methodological approach, feminist ethnography, before detailing the methodological imperatives of this type of work and how they were operationalized within this

research. I conclude with details of the research site, research timeline, methodology and method.

Purpose and Research Questions

This study explores the culture of care in an early childhood classroom setting, with a focus on how teachers understand, enact, and experience care. These aims were achieved through an ethnographic investigation of the following qualitative research questions:

RQ1: What are teachers' lived experiences of care in this early childhood classroom community?

RQ2: How do teachers understand these lived experiences of care?

Epistemological Framing

Due to its lineage as a qualitative research and feminist epistemology, feminist ethnographies nearly universally employ postmodern/poststructural understandings of truth and knowledge. This means that feminist ethnographers conduct research with the aim to understand and convey *a* truth, without any preconceived notions of finding *the* truth - a notion that they would, in fact, consider to be impossible. This understanding of the contingent and contextual nature of truth also extends to the ethnographers' interpretation of participant experiences: the critical feminist ethnographer must "continuously resist a desire to reveal the essential or authentic experience of the subject" (Nagar, 2014, p. 36), but instead recognize that all truths, even those conveyed by those more 'experience-near' (Geertz, 1973) than the researcher, are subject to social construction.

This dissertation study leans even further toward a contextual and unstable understanding of truth and knowledge due to its foundations in poststructural theory, such that it could be

considered a *poststructural* feminist ethnography, rather than simply a feminist ethnography. With this study, I join the ranks of other poststructural feminist scholars who, according to Elizabeth St. Pierre (2000), have “given up on finding out ‘exactly’ what is going on” (p. 477), and who deconstruct, rather than reify, social and cultural categories.

Additionally, this feminist ethnography adopts a critical epistemological lens that understands society and human relationships as weighted towards benefitting the powerful and serving to maintain marginalized individuals in oppressive conditions (Palmer & Caldas, 2015). Or, as Carspecken, an early scholar of critical ethnography stated: “criticalists find contemporary society to be unfair, unequal, and both subtly and overtly oppressive for many people. We do not like it and want to change it” (p. 7).

Methodology

In the above research questions, I frame an investigation of the lived experiences of care in an early childhood classroom. An ethnographic research design was considered an appropriate methodology to address these research questions due to its engagement with qualitative data sources that can seek clarity on participants’ lived experiences and its focus on understanding the broad cultural (rather than simply individual or dyadic) dynamics of a given context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Due to this projects’ topical focus on the highly gendered construct of care, as well as my emphasis on relationality in the research process, the methodology was further narrowed its final design: feminist ethnography. Here, I explore feminist ethnography in detail, beginning with generalities of ethnography as method before turning to distinguishing features of feminist ethnography in particular.

Ethnography

Ethnography is a qualitative methodological approach that seeks to examine and describe the cultural beliefs, practices, and institutions within a particular sociocultural domain (Madison, 2019). To gain access to the multilayered & contextually grounded truths of these domains, ethnographers typically engage in long-term immersion and participant-observation in the field, where they collect data in a variety of ways, including observational field notes, formal and informal interviews, video/audio recordings, and sourcing documents from archives (Palmer & Caldas, 2015). It is the immersive, long-term, and participatory style of data collection that distinguishes ethnography from other qualitative methodologies focusing on questions of lived experience within context.

Feminist Ethnography

Feminist ethnography (sometimes referred to as critical feminist ethnography) resides as a methodological subset of ethnography but distinguishes itself due to its methodological, philosophical, and epistemological roots in feminist theory. There are many iterations of feminist ethnography, just as there are many iterations of ethnography itself (Skeggs, 1994). In fact, Reinharz & Davidman (1992) state that it is simply “ethnography in the hands of feminists that renders it feminist” (p. 48). Generally, however, feminist ethnography is characterized by the following methodological imperatives: 1) a focus on gender as an ordering category of analysis; its consideration of researcher reflexivity; 2) an emphasis on the role of history, power, structure, and agency in lived experiences; 3) a consideration of the politics and ethics of representation and participant voice; and 4) an overt goal of societal transformation and change. In the following sections, I first provide a historical overview of the emergence and evolution of

feminist ethnographic work, and then move on to explore each of the above-listed methodological imperatives and detail how they were operationalized in this dissertation research.

Genealogy of Feminist Ethnography. Although the term “feminist ethnography” is new, the historical lineage of this critical subset of ethnographic work includes a wide variety of research extending back to the late 1800s (Visweswaran, 1997). Within anthropology, early examples of feminist ethnography are derived from two sources. First is the work of early female anthropologists such as Margaret Mead (1954) and Zora Neal Hurston (Hurston et al., 1935; Hurston, 1938) who studied the lives of women and the role of gender in various cultures. The second is the reflexive accounts of female partners’ experiences joining their male anthropologist partners during extended fieldwork abroad. In the latter case, these women could better access ‘women’s worlds’ in their respective field sites and produced reflexive and narrative accounts of their experiences there (for example, see Mary Smith’s (1954/1981) *Baba of Karo*; Elizabeth Warnock Fernea’s (1969) *Guests of the Sheik*, and Margery Wolf’s (1968) *The House of Lim*. In both formal and informal female accounts of culture, it is this style of ‘women studying the worlds of women’ that characterized early feminist ethnography.

As feminist ethnography grew and expanded alongside feminist philosophy and political thought in the 1960s and beyond, this methodological approach began to overtly challenge the masculinized traditions and foci of dominant ethnographic research (Visweswaran, 1997). Within anthropology, recognition was given (and courses began to be taught on) the subject of ‘anthropology of women’ at highly respected institutions such as Stanford University and The University of Michigan. Visweswaran (1997) refers to this time as the “inauguration of US

feminist anthropology” (p. 605). The use of feminist ethnography as a methodological approach extends beyond its roots in anthropology, however. Within sociology, for example, feminists have used ethnography to “put women’s lives on the main disciplinary agenda to challenges the complacency of previous research, to highlight its gendered assumptions and to generate new theory more fitted to exploring the complexities of gender, race, and class” (Skeggs, 2001, p. 4). Likewise, feminist ethnography in education has been used to challenge accepted masculinized theories of women's (and girls’) lives in educational spaces and to explore the intersections of race, class, and gender in education.

As feminism has grown and evolved, so has feminist research. In the ‘third wave’ of feminist theory, typically demarcated as emerging in the 1980s, the essentialized and binaried historical conception of gender within Euro Western cultures began to be challenged, and intersectional understandings of gender and gendered oppression emerged (Collins, 2000). This is reflected in feminist ethnography in that the prototype of ‘women studying women’ began to be replaced by a more nuanced engagement in which feminist ethnography can be understood as “ethnography that foregrounds the question of social inequality vis-a-vis the lives of men, women, and children” (Visweswaran, 1987, p. 593) in which gender is not the sole focus of theorizing and analysis, but rather “an entry point into complex systems of meaning and power” (p. 616). So, although gender remains a central conceptual category in feminist ethnography, women are not its sole focus, and its reliance on feminism as a theoretical foundation extends beyond the focus on women and/or gender to include a feminist research ethic, which includes philosophical, epistemological, and methodological considerations (Leavy & Harris, 2019). It is these considerations that I explore in the following section.

Methodological Imperatives of Feminist Ethnography. In this section, I explore the methodological imperatives of feminist ethnography, including 1) gender as an ordering category of analysis; 2) examinations of power, structure, and agency; 3) critical researcher reflexivity; 4) consideration of the ethics and politics of collaboration, and 5) consideration of the ethics and politics of representation. Of these, the first two involve conceptual framing of the research questions and analytical process, while the third through fifth involves concrete researcher actions during data collection, analysis, writing, and dissemination. I explore each of these imperatives in detail, including how each was operationalized in the current study.

Gender as an Ordering Category of Analysis. As noted in earlier sections of this dissertation, considerations of gendered systems of power and oppression play a central role in any feminist work. Feminist ethnography may employ any variation of feminist theory as its foundation (e.g., cultural, liberal, radical, intersectional), but “incorporation of gender implications must be intrinsic to all research processes when applying principles of feminist ethnography—from developing research question(s) to exploring implications of the findings” (McNamara, 2009, p. 165).

This study brings an intersectional and poststructural orientation to the feminism inherent in feminist ethnography. Although gender was an ordering category of analysis from inception to completion of the project, gender itself was not assumed to be a simple, stable, or unproblematic category. The teacher participants in this study were women, but their experiences as women during the process of thinking about, performing, and/or experiencing care were assumed to also be influenced by the various other identity categories that they occupy (such as race, ethnicity, class, age, disability status, etc.).

Examinations of Power, Structure, and Agency. Foucault invites an understanding of power as a ‘capillary’ and disperse force that resides within all instances of human social engagement (Foucault & Gordon, 1980). Feminist epistemology and research practice, in general, is interested in examining gendered systems of power as they manifest in these social contexts, along with the structures that support these systems and the agency of individuals as they reproduce or resist them (Madhok & Evans, 2014). Feminist ethnography, in its broad examination of the culture of a given context, can take into account the “multifaceted ways in which subjects are produced through the historical categories and context in which they are placed and which they precariously inhabit” (Skeggs, 2001, p. 12). As such, a feminist ethnography - and especially one grounded in poststructural theory, as is the case for this dissertation - is intimately concerned with gendered ideologies, discourses, and hegemonic practices that undergird the lived experiences of individuals and groups in social contexts, as well as the dialectical nature of the relationship between human action and agency in those contexts.

Within the current study, this emphasis on power, structure, and agency occurs at two sites. First, in the classroom and in my engagements with teachers and children, during which I aimed to be constantly attuned to the possible links between lived experience and broader systems of power and discourse surrounding care. In both participant observation and ongoing data analysis, I engaged a reflective and analytical lens that holds power, discourse, and in the forefront. And second, in my practice of critical researcher reflexivity and consideration of collaboration and representation, I remained alert to the potential for systems of power and oppression to turn my feminist aim of genuine relationship and collaboration into a harmful

practice (Stacey, 1988). In this latter case, details of my measures to avoid this harm are detailed in the following sections.

Critical Researcher Reflexivity. Feminist ethnographers understand their activities in the field, and in the process of analyzing data and writing research papers, to be an active process of social construction during which their social positionalities and personal subjectivities interact with their surroundings in a process of catalytic creation; their very presence changes the dynamics of the setting (Shrock & Anthony, 2013). Or as critical feminist ethnographer Visweswaran (1994) states: “The relationship of the knower to the known is constituted by the process of knowing. Conversely, the process of knowing is itself determined by the relationship of knower to known” (p. 48) It is due to this belief that they are a part of - rather than objectively separate from - the process of the creation and portrayal of knowledge, that feminist ethnographers engage in a continual process of critical research reflexivity, a process that involves identifying and exploring the relationship of their positionality and subjectivities with the research and context at hand (Anderson, 1989). Critical researcher reflexivity is an attempt to bring awareness to the nature of power and oppression that takes place not only within the structures and systems under study but also in the process of research itself. For, without constant critical reflexivity, researchers are liable to create and recreate the same types of “acts of domination” (Noblit, 2004, p. 12) that they seek to reveal and deconstruct through their work.

Researcher reflexivity required special attention in this project due a) my subjectivity as a former early care and education teacher, and b) my positionality as a graduate assistant and researcher at the research site, who may be perceived as holding power within that context.

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I was conscious of my status as an “outsider/within” in this research context (Pillow & Mayo, 2011). As a former early childhood teacher and a former employee of the research site, I was neither an outside nor a full insider when I engaged in research within the context of this infant/toddler classroom. This held the potential to result in a complicated dynamic in which collegiality and mutual understanding coexisted within hierarchical power dynamics. As a former employee, I was an insider. As a researcher and through my ambiguous role in the school’s hierarchy, I was an outsider. As Sprague (2016) reminds us:

When one is studying a community in which one has played a role, interactions with other members are not just occasions of collecting information. Rather, these interactions are instances of that community’s practices, shaped by its values. The researcher’s feelings about those interactions are primary data about the community (p. 135)

And so, to better understand the ways that my perceptions were guided by my inside/outsider role, and to document my reactions, thoughts, and feelings as a source of data, I engaged in ongoing research memoing and reflexive journaling throughout the data collection and analysis process. This allowed me to deeply consider the ways that my identity, beliefs, values, and histories influence my ways of being, ways of relating, and ways of interpreting knowledge throughout the research process.

Additionally, throughout analysis and writing, I engaged in ongoing communication with the two lead teachers of the infant/toddler classroom, both in informal emails/text regarding the work, and in formal data revisiting and member-checking meetings as analysis and writing progressed. I believe that these engagements mitigated the risk for the ‘acts of domination’

(Nobilt, 2004, p. 12) such as: encroaching into physical and conceptual spaces where I am unwanted by teachers and children; unilaterally interpret the classroom events without teacher input; and/or using my power as the researcher to unilaterally decide on the representation of classroom care in the research products.

Politics and Ethics of Collaboration/Reciprocity. Collaboration is a complicated concept within feminist ethnographic work. A fully participatory model in which researcher and the participants are on equal footing as co-investigators in the process is perhaps idealized as the gold standard in participatory ethnography. This model is not always practical, however, and may not be reflective of reality and/or wanted by the participants. The researcher often holds structural and logistical power over the participants by virtue of their social positioning as academics, their heightened access/control to research data, and/or their functional power to control the process of analysis, writing, and publication. This has led some researchers, such as Stacey (1988) to ask: “Can there be a feminist ethnography?” These scholars believe that, although feminist ethnography touts its respect for relationship and collaboration, it can place participants “at a greater risk of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer” (p. 23) in that relationality and vulnerability is promised, but, business-like reciprocity is delivered under the guise of relationship. Others, however, argue that this risk of manipulation and betrayal is not unique to feminist ethnography, but is instead a danger of any ethnographic practice (Skeggs, 2001): “all ethnography involves irreconcilable conflicts. It is how feminists use their knowledge to resolve dilemmas that produce a particular feminist ethnography” (p. 16).

This dilemma has led some ethnographers, such as Lassiter (2005), to argue that although collaborative is held up as a gold standard by researchers who believe that it enhances the

democratic nature and trustworthiness of the work, collaboration without critical evaluation can further patterns of extraction from, and exploitation of, research participants in research.

Refraining from insisting on collaboration and turning instead towards reciprocity, then, can be the more ethical choice. Reciprocity, according to Lassiter, involves acknowledgment that the research product primarily belongs to, and benefits, the researcher, and thus the researcher holds the responsibility to ensure that the participants and research community are provided with a mutually decided-upon exchange of equal value.

Early childhood teachers already engage in a high degree of tangible and emotional labor in their work (Hall-Kenyon et. al, 2014)—both of which are heightened even further by the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Swigonski et al, 2021). As such, I wanted to ensure that my presence and research activities in the classroom serve to support, rather than add to, the labor of these teachers. A feminist ethic of responsibility towards the well-being and rights of my participants informed the process of this study from conception to analysis. From the outset, I maintained openness to the degree to which teachers wish to be involved in the process of research design, data collection, data analysis, and/or writing of the manuscript. I initially had the teachers' pedagogical coach approach the potential classroom teachers to allow them more freedom of choice than may have present if I had asked them myself. I then engaged in in-depth conversation to determine to what degree the classroom teachers would like to be involved in collaboration, or if they would prefer a reciprocal partnership.

Ultimately, this project fell somewhere in the middle between a reciprocal and collaborative work. The project was reciprocal in nature in multiple ways. For instance, I provided tangible support to the teachers in the classroom as needed, including reading to

children, changing diapers, setting/clear the table at mealtimes, and helping children with jackets and shoes as we transitioned outside. During the first few weeks of the school year (August 2022), I acted primarily as a co-teacher in the classroom to support the teachers as they welcomed two new student teachers into their class, putting my research activities on the ‘back-burner’. Additionally, I have ongoing plans to provide tangible research product to the teachers and broader classroom community (including the classroom families and other teachers in the school) in the form of blogs, classroom documentation, and/or presentations.

The collaborative component was engaged as teachers acted as thought partners to me in informal and formal analysis. Regarding the former, the classrooms teachers and I had frequent conversations about questions and observations regarding care during participant observation. To the latter, I member-checked all emergent themes and final research products with the teachers and made clear that they had the power to revise or veto any work they felt did not represent their experiences. In order to minimize any exploitation of teacher labor to make this possible, I arranged with the school administration to have teachers complete these member-checks and interviews during their work hours.

Politics and Ethics of Representation. Extending the discussion of relationships and trust broached above, I turn now to the topic of representation in feminist ethnography. This is not a consideration unique to this particular methodology, but one that extends throughout qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). It is understood that, although qualitative research (and particularly, feminist research) is created through an intentional process of relationship and collaboration between the researcher and the participant(s), the research product (i.e., the paper, book, or presentation) almost always belongs solely to the researcher, as its

primary author (Stacey, 1988). This product, then, is “structured primarily by a researcher’s purposes, offering a researcher’s interpretation, registered in a researcher’s voice” (p. 23) (the exception, of course, being fully collaborative works where participants are co-authors on manuscripts, books, and/or presentations). With this power, the researcher is liable to portray the research participants in a way that is inaccurate, at best, and harmful, at worst. Within feminist ethnography, researchers are understood to be committed to avoiding this kind of representational violence (Schrock, 2018). Often, to avoid representational violence, feminist ethnographers will give participants veto power over their work.

As stated above, I did not require collaboration from my participants and allowed them to choose the degree to which they are involved in the process of analysis and writing. As they ended up acting as consultants in the process, I engaged in the following practices to minimize this power dynamic: first, I sought the participant’s perspectives before offering my own in informal and formal conversations regarding classroom observations and emerging research themes; and second, I offered participants veto power over any piece of data or any analysis that they preferred not to be included in the final manuscripts presented in this dissertation. In a small example of how this was enacted, the classroom’s assistant teacher, Maria, asked that I edit her direct quotes in one of the manuscripts to remove the use of the word ‘like,’ as she felt that this word detracted from the coherence of her statements.

Without participant engagement in analysis and writing, the project can easily become one that attempts to ‘give voice’ to participants. This well-meaning sentiment can easily be operationalized as the researcher using their own voice to speak for participants, rather than allowing participants to speak for themselves. To minimize this risk in my work, I engaged

regular formal and informal member-checks with the classroom teachers to incorporate their perspectives on themes/ideas emerging in the process of data analysis, in addition to offering the same opportunity for veto power listed above. I also relied heavily on my doctoral advisor to act as a critical friend who challenged my (inevitably subjective) interpretations of events. As will be detailed in the first manuscript presented in this dissertation (*Time for Slow Care?*), there were times where the focus of my analysis was radically changed through data revisiting with the teachers, demonstrating my commitment to analyses that followed the teachers' (rather than my own) interpretation of events.

Methods

Identifying the Research Site

This dissertation study was conducted within the context of an infant/toddler classroom at a university lab school in the southeastern United States. This site was selected for several reasons. First, I worked at this site as a Graduate Research Assistant for the year prior to the inception of this research project. Through my role as a graduate assistant, I had developed in-group familiarity with the context, and what I believe to be strong relationships with the teachers and children there. As such, much of the work of gaining entry and initial reconnaissance (Carspecken, 1996) was already completed by the inception of the study. Additionally, the context of COVID-19 necessitated a research site where I was able to have a regular physical presence to engage in participant observation and fieldwork, and I was certain to have on-going access to this space in a way that may not have been possible at another location.

I worked in tandem with school administrators to identify a potential classroom that would be suitable for research during Summer 2022. As noted above in the section regarding

reciprocity/collaboration as a methodological imperative, this decision factored in teacher availability (both logistical and personal) for the research process, as well as considerations of power and goodness of fit. To limit power dynamics between myself and the potential teachers in the act of establishing a classroom partnership, I asked the infant/toddler pedagogical coach (who act as mentors to the classroom teachers) to approach all infant/toddler teachers at the site to ask whether they would be open to discussing a research collaboration. In prior discussions with school administrators, we had established that they would act as advocates for the teachers and would in no way pressure them to engage in this study – their allegiance was first and foremost with the teachers, and their interests lay in protecting teacher time and supporting their well-being. In this way, I aimed to limit the impact of social pressure where the teachers may have felt pressured to consent due to their existing professional and personal relationships with me.

Professional Context of the Research Site

The research site constituted a unique early childhood context. First, it was university-associated lab school, and thus was actively engaged in ongoing research projects with faculty and students from varying academic disciplines. As such, Shelly and Maria were likely more accustomed to research activities taking place in their classrooms than the average early childhood teacher in a community-based center. Further, this center was particularly unique in its approach to teacher research and ongoing teacher professional development, which engaged poststructural and cross-cultural perspectives on early childhood and early care and education. Teachers regularly engaged in action research seminars where they were encouraged to deconstruct their personal and professional beliefs and practices. In this group context, they were challenged and supported by administrators and other teachers to identify the historical, political,

and cultural discourses that undergird their discourse and praxis. These factors combined created an environment where critical reflection and teacher research was encouraged and actively practiced throughout the school, even for those teachers not currently engaged in seminar-associated action research.

Establishing Relationships and Collecting Informed Consent

As explored in detail in the methodology section above regarding reciprocity and collaboration in feminist research, I engaged in a deliberate and slow process of negotiating the terms of collaboration with the classroom teacher before entering the classroom to begin the research process. When we reached an agreement on the parameters and purpose of the research, as well as what my role would be during participant observation, I asked the classroom teachers to sign a document of informed consent and to distribute and collect informed consent from the families in their classroom.

Data Collection

Following established standards of ethnographic data collection (Spradley, 1980), I engaged in long-term, frequent participant observation in the chosen classroom. I acted as a participant-observer in my chosen context for an average of 6-8 hours per week from July through November (4 months total) allowing for deep immersion into the classroom context. During my time as a participant-observer, I gathered data in the form of field notes (Emerson, 1995), video/audio recordings, and informal conversations with members of the classroom community. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each teacher (four interviews total). The full semi-structured interview guide can be found in Appendix D.

To encourage constant researcher reflexivity, transcribed written field notes and wrote conceptual memos (Emerson, 1995) after each instance of fieldwork. I also met regularly (weekly or biweekly) with my dissertation advisor to discuss fieldwork, data, and emerging analytical themes. These processes in tandem allowed me to maintain constant researcher reflexivity throughout the process, rather than relegating such reflexive work to the inception and completion of the project (Nagar, 2014). My conceptual memos also served as an additional form of data, representing my understandings, impressions, and perspectives of the fieldwork and data collection process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis will be explored in-detail within each of the individual manuscripts contained within this three-part dissertation, as there were varied analytical strategies used according to the nature of the data and the avenues of interpretation explored. Largely, however, analysis for the first two manuscripts relied on in-vivo coding of interview data, and subsequent thematic analysis of interview-derived themes (Saldaña, 2021). This thematic analysis was followed by theoretically guided analysis (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022) of established thematic categories. Detailed coding examples from each of these two manuscripts can be found in Appendices F & G. The final manuscript is an empirical methodological paper that relies on autoethnographic analysis (Reed-Danahay 1997) of field data (including conceptual memos and field notes) and personal researcher reflections drawn from memory.

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**CHAPTER II: TIME TO CARE: BRINGING SLOW PEDAGOGY INTO
CONVERSATION WITH CARE IN THE INFANT/TODDLER CLASSROOM**

ABSTRACT

This research contributes to the elevation of the feminized aspects of care practices in early care and education through the findings of an 8-month ethnographic case study of one infant/toddler classroom in the southeastern United States. Participants included the classroom's two (white, female) teachers and a racially diverse group of twelve children between one to two years of age. Our work, grounded within an ethics of care theoretical framework, was guided by the following research questions: 1) What are teachers' lived experiences of care in this early childhood classroom community? and 2) How do those teachers understand their lived experiences of care? During data revisiting with teachers (Tobin & Hsueh, 2007), time - and particularly, slowness - emerged as a central connecting theme. The emergence of this central theme led to an overarching theoretically guided analysis of the data, implementing a feminist interpretation of Clark's (2022) articulation of Slow Pedagogy in ECE to understand how slowness - a feminized quality antithetical to the furious pace of neoliberal education - is central to care in this context. In addition, a thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2021) of ethnographic data, including field notes, video, and photos gathered during participant observations, and four semi-structured teacher interviews, produced two foundational themes in teachers' understandings and practices of care: Care as Emotional Presence, and Care as Acknowledgement. As such, our findings and interpretations introduce the concept of Slow Care, a theorizing of care practices that emphasizes the importance of slow, relationally-guided temporalities, serving to contest and counter the growing neoliberal pressures of efficiency and productivity in the early childhood classroom.

Keywords: early childhood education; ethics of care; ethnography; feminist theory; slow pedagogy; slow care

Time for Slow Care:

Bringing Slow Pedagogy into Conversation with Care in the Infant/Toddler Classroom

Early care and education (ECE) is a conceptually dichotomized field, with ‘care’ widely considered to be separate from ‘education’ in the neoliberal context of the Global North (Jarvis & Liebovich, 2015; Osgood, 2006a, 2006b; Powell et al., 2020; Priolella & Davies, 2022; Sims, 2014). The history of this dichotomization is linked to a variety of interconnected dynamics, including: the societal devaluation of feminized work (Cohen & Huffman, 2003; Priolella & Davies, 2022); the racialized and classed nature of the history of childcare (Andrew, 2015a; Duffy, 2007; Osgood, 2005); the discursive construction of ‘professionalism’ in Euro-Western culture (Campbell-Barr, 2018; Osgood, 2006b, 2010); and the global spread of the neoliberal discourse as a guiding force in the increasingly ‘schoolified’ and marketized field of ECE (Bradbury, 2019; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021).

These dynamics are highly complicated, and their historical roots and modern-day permutations are varied and diverse, but we need not explore them here in their full complexity to note their impact in both the micro- (i.e., daily practices) and macro- (i.e., policy) level discourse of the field, where it is clear to see that academic learning is prioritized over care. On a macro-level, ECE teachers receive salaries far below those of their K-12 counterparts (Whitebrooke et al., 2014; McClean et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2016). There is a widespread push for ‘professionalization’ of the field, accomplished mainly by requiring mandatory higher-ed training for early childhood teachers and by replacing feminized discourses of relationality,

emotion, and care in policy, training, and curriculum with those more masculinized discourses of ‘child development’ and ‘education’ (Langford et al., 2017; Osgood, 2006b). On the micro-level, teachers distance their work from that of caregivers, decrying that they are ‘not babysitters’ in an attempt to claim a dignity historically refused to their work (Nelson & Lewis, 2016). Instead, they present themselves as educated professionals trained to foster young children’s social-emotional, intellectual, and physical development, preparing them for future success.

Feminist ethics of care (Noddings, 1984; Tronto, 1993) encourages us to critically examine and contest this trend of local and national policies and practices to ‘professionalize’ the field. From a critical feminist stance, emphasizing the intellectual nature and developmental importance of care may result in greater respect accorded to the work of early childhood teachers, but justifying care by situating its value within the masculinized framework of neoliberalism professionalism ultimately only serves to reinforce the perspective that the feminized components of care are neither valuable nor valid. Importantly, this contestation of professionalization in the field is not to be misunderstood as advocacy for a return to early ‘mother-made-conscious’ (Wiebe, 1896) conceptualizations that reduced care to a ‘maternal instinct’ or ‘natural’ orientation for women; that gendered conceptualization is as limiting, and as guided by patriarchal values, as the discourses of professionalism that followed. Instead, ethics of care scholarship argues that relationality and emotion are ontologically and ethically foundational principles that can be decoupled from maternalism and validated without requiring a masculinized reframing (Noddings, 2012). From this more balanced vantage point, we can resist essentialized understandings of gender while simultaneously elevating the value of those

relational and emotional ways of doing, thinking, and being in early care and education that have been historically devalued simply by virtue of their implication in ‘the feminine.’

Slow Pedagogy

Slow Pedagogy is an educational movement that re-examines the relationship between time and pedagogical practice (Clark, 2022; Collett et al., 2021; Payne & Wattchow, 2008). Built on the foundational premise that time holds a tyrannical reign in neoliberal educational environments where productivity and efficiency are equal to success, Slow Pedagogy invites the field of education to examine what is lost when we rush headlong toward our goals. This counterculture contestation of speed reflects Slow Pedagogy’s origins in the more prominent ‘Slow Movement,’ which formally emerged in the early 2000s in response to the growing neoliberal imperative for speed in an accelerating and globalized world (Honoré, 2004). This diverse movement reaches its philosophical tendrils into many different bodies of work and life; in addition to Slow Pedagogy, offshoots include the Slow Food (Chrzan, 2004; Heitmann et al., 2011), Slow Cinema (de Luca & Jorge, 2015), Slow Philosophy (Walker, 2017), Slow Research (Adams et al., 2014; Ulmer, 2017) movements, to name a few. Contrary to its name, the Slow Movement does not demand or encourage slowness in all things. Instead, it advocates life lived at the ‘tempo giusto,’ or the ‘right tempo’ with which one is “fast when it makes sense to be fast, and...slow when slowness is called for.” (Honoré, 2004, p. 13). In a globalized world that rewards efficiency and leaves the slow behind, the Slow Movement considers moving at a ‘tempo giusto’ can be considered an “act of organized resistance” (Elsaesser, 2011, p. 117)

Slow Pedagogy brings these same tenets to education, where its proponents advocate for deep pedagogical engagement and quality over quantity in learning outputs (Collett et al., 2011). This approach to teaching and learning runs counter to the neoliberal educational system of the United States and much of the Global North, which demands that teachers and students perform sufficiently in evaluative regimes of productivity or suffer the consequences: for students, poor grades and a resulting loss of future educational opportunities; for teachers, reprimands from superiors, performance plans, and, at the most extreme, job loss (Ball, 2016). Slow Pedagogy argues that this standardized performance and evaluation system is a deeply flawed process that, although easily measured and evaluated, fails to produce the “richness and depth of intellectual texture” (Massey, 2002, p. 259), which constitutes deep learning. In providing alternatives to the current system of mandated speed, Slow Pedagogy challenges neoliberalism’s driving argument that we must “run ever faster in order to maintain our place in the world” (Rosa, 2019, p. 415), and instead asks ‘why must we run at all?’

Slow Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education has not historically been a realm dictated by the neoliberal pressures toward productivity, standardization, and measurement, but today it is increasingly becoming so (Ball, 2003; Bradbury & Robert-Holmes, 2016). Nationwide focus on ‘kindergarten readiness’ in the United States (US), for instance, has resulted in a push-down of didactic instruction techniques and academic tools such as worksheets and testing into the daily lives of children still yet too young to enter the K-12 classroom (Bradbury, 2019). Play - once considered a primary imperative of early childhood development - has become “a casualty of the need to be seen to perform” (Clark, 2022, p. 16).

Early childhood professionals have voiced concern about this “schoolification” (Bradbury, 2019) of ECE and the developmentally inappropriate and culturally insensitive expectations inherent to many standardized curriculums and measures of quality (Bradbury, 2012; Brown et al., 2020; Gallant, 2009; Woodhead, 2006). Alison Clark offers critique in her 2022 book, *“Slow Knowledge and the Unhurried Child,”* where she brings Slow Pedagogy to the field of early childhood education to examine how the tyranny of speed and productivity is affecting our youngest learners, and to offer examples of how slowness can be cultivated in the early childhood classroom. Clark’s examples draw us away from questions of developmental milestones and standardized literacy education to the world of ‘timefullness,’ (Bjornerud, 2019) where children and teachers can explore beaver dams and fallen trees in the forest, eat lunch together at a leisurely pace, and read stories as many times in a row as children would like.

Research Overview

The following questions guided this ethnography of care practices: 1) What are teachers’ lived experiences of care in this early childhood classroom community? and 2) How do teachers understand these lived experiences of care? Participants included two full-time teachers and twelve children ages 1-2 years old in an infant/toddler lab school classroom in the United States. All research activities were approved by the researchers’ university-associated Institutional Review Board, and all participants provided informed consent to participate in the study (parents provided informed consent for the children). Participants have been given pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality.

Research Participants

The classroom community consisted of one full-time lead teacher, one full-time assistant teacher, and twelve children. Three student teachers were also present (one student from July through August and two from August through December), but due to their brief tenure in the classroom, we did not include them in our research.

Shelly, the lead teacher, is a White, married, 37-year-old woman with 15 years of experience as an early childhood teacher. She identifies as coming from a middle-class background. Maria, the assistant teacher, is a White, married, 30-year-old woman with eight years of experience as an early childhood teacher. Maria also identifies as coming from a middle-class background. Both identified their teaching practices as being influenced by the Reggio-Emilia approach, which prioritizes child-centered learning, emergent curriculum, pedagogical documentation, and understanding the teacher as a researcher in the classroom. As teachers in a university laboratory school, they had a history of regular participation in research activities.

The twelve children in the classroom were all between the ages of 1 to 2 years old for the duration of the study. Three of the children were identified as Black by their parents, two were identified as Asian, and three were identified as White. We did not collect any other demographic information from the children's families.

Considerations of Subjectivity and Power

The lead researcher is a former early childhood teacher and a current early childhood researcher. She is a 32-year-old White woman from the US from a middle-class background who identifies as a feminist scholar. She had pre-existing relationships with the participants in this study (teachers and children both) due to her work as a part-time teacher in the school. This pre-

existing relationship created a context in which considerations of subjectivity and power had to be carefully navigated (Peshkin, 1988). The lead researcher took several steps to accomplish this. First, she held bracketing conversations (Tufford & Newman, 2012) with the second author to establish her subjectivities as a former early childhood teacher and a former colleague to the research participants. She also established avenues to minimize the inherent power dynamics of researcher and research participant in the collaborative and relational procedures of feminist ethnography (Stacey, 1988). For instance, the researcher approached the teachers through an intermediary, the schools' pedagogical coach with whom the teachers met regularly and had a close relationship. This process helped to minimize any pressure the teachers might have had to participate due to their existing relationship, as the pedagogical coach was invested in protecting the teachers' interests rather than the researchers. She also encouraged the pedagogical coach to continue checking in with teachers during regular meetings throughout the research process.

The researcher's relationship with the teachers and the classroom also held certain benefits. The study's focus on care emerged from the researcher's knowledge that this was an existing topic of interest for classroom teachers. The researcher's deep pre-existing knowledge of classroom dynamics also adds trustworthiness and an emic perspective to the data interpretations presented below, as those interpretations were formed after a long association with the classroom context rather than solely during her six-month period of immersion as a participant observer.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently in an iterative process characteristic of interpretivist qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The table below details the three

primary data collection and analysis stages over the eight months of this study's duration. Each phase is further explored in detail in the sections below.

Phase 1: Broad Ethnographic Observation

During Phase One of the study, the lead researcher engaged in participant observation at the research site for approximately six to eight hours a week, making broad ethnographic observations. As the lead researcher has been employed at the research site previously, she held high familiarity with the classroom of study and had existing relationships with the children and teachers. As such, the work of gaining entry and initial reconnaissance (Carspecken, 1996) had already been completed by the study's inception, allowing for a relatively brief period of initial observation. However, the transition to a research role in the classroom community still required careful attention. For example, although the researcher had already spent dozens of hours in the classroom as a teacher, she had never done so with the explicit orientation to observing and documenting care practices.

Data collection (Phase 1) began with a broad survey of the environment, asking the classic ethnographic question "What is going on here?" (Spradley, 1980) regarding how care would present in the infant/toddler classroom. The lead researcher documented and indexed in the field notes any interactions that met any of the many definitions of care that have been established through ethics of care theorizing over the last four decades - including care as dyadic action of responsiveness and engagement (Noddings, 1984), care as moral and political ethic (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993), and care as emotional labor (Colley, 2011). Data was collected through field notes, photos, and videos. The lead researcher also engaged in informal

Table 1. Research Phases

Phase One: July - Oct	Phase Two: Oct - Jan	Phase Three: Feb - April
<i>Broad Ethnographic Observation</i>	<i>Teacher Interviews & Focused Observations</i>	<i>Data Revisiting & Member Checks</i>
10-week broad ethnographic participant observation in the target classroom (6-8 hours per week) Research memoing regarding emergent themes in ethnographic field data Informal conversation with the teaching team regarding observations and emerging themes	1:1 semi-structured interviews with full-time teachers (topic: teacher understandings + practices of care, with reference to ethnographic field data) In-vivo coding of teacher interviews to identify themes in teachers' understandings and practices of care Interview care themes used to identify and index salient ethnographic field data. Focused classroom observations (2-4 hours per week) to collect additional video data, which was indexed according to interview-derived themes.	1:1 data revisiting interviews with full-time teachers to member-check interview care themes & give interpretation of field note, photo, and video data salient to themes Theoretical analysis of final care themes; consistent teacher references to time in video revisiting interviews used to identify Slow Pedagogy as the interpretive theory. Member-checking of final themes and theoretical interpretation with full-time teachers

conversations with the teaching team regarding her observations and thoughts regarding the care practices in the classroom. After each classroom observation, the lead researcher digitized her field notes and wrote conceptual memos to document her ongoing thoughts.

Phase 2: Teacher Interviews & Focused Observations

After several months, the lead researcher has developed a broad familiarity with classroom norms, daily structures, and standard practices. The researcher also mapped out patterns to illustrate how the individuals of the classroom community related to each other and the various ways that care was enacted in the classroom. At this point, she moved into Phase Two of the research project, during which she conducted two 90-minute semi-structured interviews (one each with the lead teacher and assistant teacher) to determine a participant-derived, contextually based, and multifaceted conceptualization of care. The full semi-structured interview guide can be found in Appendix C.

These interviews were transcribed and subsequently coded according to Saldaña's (2021) framework for thematic analysis. Line-by-line' in-vivo' coding using participants' verbatim words was used to establish initial codes, which were then grouped thematically to determine final themes in teachers' understandings of care. These final themes were then used to index existing observational data to establish salient examples of video, photo, and field note data. Table 2, below, provides examples of the coding process. The lead researcher also conducted focused observations (Spradley, 1980) to document additional instances of care that matched the final themes of teachers' conceptualizations.

Phase 3: Data Revisiting & Member Checks

During Phase Three, the lead researcher conducted an additional semi-structured interview with each teacher to engage in member checking (Braun & Clark, 2013) and video data-revisiting (Tobin & Hsueh, 2007). The researcher first reviewed established care themes with teachers to ensure that they accurately represented their understanding of care in their classroom. After receiving teacher confirmation of themes, the researcher presented teachers with video data indexed as salient to interview-derived conceptualizations of care and asked teachers to provide their interpretations. In this final stage of the project, the focus on temporality in care began to emerge as both teachers repeatedly referenced the importance of slowness as they reviewed video data from classroom observations. Additionally, they demonstrated non-verbal cues, using verbal tempo and body language to indicate slowness as they spoke about care. The researchers subsequently used this newly established focus on time to identify the overarching theoretical lens of Slow Pedagogy, which was then used to interpret all research data, including the final teacher interviews.

Situating the Findings: The Importance of Temporality

Reflecting on my research in this infant/toddler classroom, one of the most striking moments for me was when, one afternoon very early on in my fieldwork, I lay on the floor with four children and two teachers. There was no agenda other than to pass the time together – no activities to engage with, no intention to overtly teach or learn. We simply lay on the floor and laughed and were present with each other. Children requested books to be read and climbed over and on the adults' bodies. In my conceptual memo from that day, I wrote:

Table 2: Coding Examples

Full Participant Quote	In-Vivo Quote	Initial Theme	Final Theme
“...for like my nonverbal kids, being able to sit with those children and like looking into their eyes was so valuable...just taking the second to invest in the moment created a whole different feel for what this caring task was meant for.”	“...being able to sit with those children and like looking into their eyes was so valuable...just taking the second to invest in the moment created a whole different feel for what this caring task was meant for.”	Care as Presence	Care as Emotional Presence
“...a connection of being in the moment, instead of being distracted from them. So taking like putting that person in full vision of like, I'm here with you, and we're gonna do these things together. And I'm not gonna get distracted by the 16 other children while I'm invested in your time at this moment in this task.”	“...a connection of being in the moment, instead of being distracted from them...putting that person in full vision of like, I'm here with you, and we're gonna do these things together.”	Care as Presence	Care as Emotional Presence
“Anybody can hold a bottle...but if I just take a second to be involved with this moment, sitting here, looking into the child's eyes...”	“Anybody can hold a bottle...but if I just take a second to be involved with this moment, sitting here, looking into the child's eyes...”	Care as Presence	Care as Emotional Presence

Table 2 continued

Full Participant Quote	In-Vivo Quote	Initial Theme	Final Theme
“Conflicts are going to happen, and when they do, your job is to help support them, and so validating their emotions and saying, “Oh, it looks like you are feeling sad. Why are you feeling sad? Do you want to tell me?”	“...your job is to help support them, and so validating their emotions and saying, “Oh, it looks like you are feeling sad. Why are you feeling sad?”	Care as Validation	Care as Acknowledgement
“When I think of a conflict between children, like if somebody hurt somebody, I would go over and sympathize with the person who got hurt first and acknowledge that that person is feeling sad.”	“...like if somebody hurt somebody, I would go over and sympathize with the person who got hurt first and acknowledge that that person is feeling sad.	Care as Acknowledgement	Care as Acknowledgement
“Caring is like when a child gets hurt, and I acknowledged that they fell down...it's acknowledgement, it's walking over and saying, ouch, like noticing them feeling like that child was seen and heard is a part of care.”	“Caring is like when a child gets hurt, and I acknowledged that they fell down...it's acknowledgement,	Care as Acknowledgement	Care as Acknowledgement

“I am so struck reflecting on the emotional experience of the informal family-like afternoon.... There wasn’t any structure there. We were just being in relationship and shared space together. It felt so good to me, and there was an understanding that it was okay that everyone was just enjoying themselves. Why can’t this be childcare? Why must there be so many activities and schedules and rushing children from place to place?”

When I brought this memo to Maria’s attention months later, during our video revisiting interview, I felt the resonance in the room when she finished reading, looked at me, and softly said: *“Why can’t this be true? Why can’t this be childcare?”* This excerpt and question illustrate the tension between what is desired by the teachers of this early childhood classroom and what is expected of them by dominant cultural discourse. The response to Maria’s statement, *‘Why can’t this be true?’* lies within the cultural phenomenon that sparked the Slow Movement: the neoliberal imperative for productivity, efficiency, and a constantly accelerating speed. Early childhood classrooms in the United States, and the teachers and children within them, are governed by these same imperatives, those hasty cultural rhythms of economically driven societies that devalue any endeavor deemed ‘too slow.’ Within this hegemonic temporal framework and US ideologies of “quality” and “productive” education, a lazy afternoon spent simply ‘being with’ others is a waste of time unless, perhaps, reframed as ‘social-emotional’ learning that serves to cultivate the human capital of the children in that space.

The theme of slow temporalities in care was consistent in all data collected for this study, not simply in the excerpt I shared with Maria. In field notes, videos, interviews, informal conversations, and researcher memos, we found recurring implicit and explicit verbal and non-verbal references to slowness. There were, of course, some instances when the teachers

intentionally rushed during their care practices - notably, for instance, to prevent physical aggression between children. This aligns with the concept of 'tempo giusto' as we explored earlier: rushing to stop a push or a bite is the 'right pace' for that situation, less so when the task at hand is feeding a child a bottle. The core of their care practices, the ideal they aspired to, was a slow, embodied version of care. Shelly and Maria's slow ethic of care offers a vivid portrait of care as a temporal ethical encounter in the early childhood classroom, a way of being that provides a counternarrative to the macro-level neoliberal discourse within which the classroom is situated. We found that the temporalities governing early childhood classrooms were contested in this space through our actions and reactions and questioning the dominant fast-paced movement.

Grounded in interpretations of Shelly and Maria's experiences and perspectives, this research offers the concept of Slow Care for consideration in early childhood scholarship and practice: a feminist and counter-hegemonic conceptualization of care that foregrounds the slow, the intimate, and the emotional. This slow way of being and caring may not be counter-hegemonic in cultural settings where slowness is more highly prioritized (Italy comes to mind, as evidenced in the Reggio Emilia approach; Rinaldi 2021), but within the cultural context of the United States and other neoliberal societies in the Global North, it most certainly is. In these contexts, this slow approach must be implemented in opposition to the constant cultural pressure to optimize human capital production in early childhood. Slow Care, however, cannot be optimized. It cannot be sped up, made more efficient, or productive. Instead, it takes the time it takes, and recognizes that time as well spent.

In the findings below, we detail the two components constituting Slow Care in this classroom community: Care as Emotional Presence and Care as Acknowledgement. These themes were generated through thematic analysis of field observations and interviews with Shelly and Maria and confirmed by these teachers through member-checking. They consider these two themes the fundamental prongs of their counter-hegemonic, temporally grounded approach to care.

Theme 1: Care as Emotional Presence

In our individual interviews, Shelly and Maria repeatedly underscored the importance of emotional presence in care routines - those daily caretaking tasks that are often relegated to the realm of the “less important”: diaper changes, bottle feedings, helping a child to blow their nose. According to Shelly, *“anyone can hold a bottle,”* but although *“it is easy to provide general care...when you really want to reach someone, you have to do the work.”* As Maria put it, *“A connection of being in the moment, instead of being distracted from them...So putting that person in full vision of ‘I’m here with you, and we’re gonna do these things together....’”*

To Shelly and Maria, time and particularly *slowness* were inextricably linked to ‘doing the work.’ In our interview, Shelly described the difference:

You know, I guess it makes me think of diaper changes. We could rush through them and make them a very fast process, or we can take our time and calmly wipe a child’s face after snack. Talk to them, saying, “You really enjoyed the nut butter and rice cakes today. You know, I love how you are really trying your new food.... Let’s wipe your hands, all right now.”

She said this in a slow, almost hypnotic tone, followed by an example of the opposite: *“All right, let’s change your diaper, all right, here we go,”* she said at a breakneck pace, miming changing a diaper as quickly and efficiently as possible. As a participant observer, I began to perform this slow way of being and noted many moments where I intentionally blocked out the rest of the world to connect with one child for a small moment”. This excerpt from my field notes provides an example:

“Came to sit by Hank while he drinks his bottle. I was so drawn to him, laying there looking so sweet propped up on the beanbag. I lowered myself down to his level, lay on the floor, and just gazed into his eyes while he drank. He looked back at me. I feel love, contentment, peace.”

The experience of mindful attention described above is the process that Nel Noddings (1984) describes as “engrossment,” an attentive, receptive experience of ‘feeling together,’ in which the carer becomes affectively immersed in the lived experience of the one-cared-for. In Noddings’ ethics of care, engrossment is accompanied by motivational displacement, which requires the carer to replace their own goals and motivations with those of the one-cared-for. Engrossment, however, takes time, and total motivational displacement is often impossible in a context where external (often institutional) forces often dictate the carer’s motivations. Noddings recognizes this in her work, stating that, in order to care, the teacher “must put aside, temporarily, the demands of the institution. She needs time to build a relation of care and trust” (Noddings, 2012, p. 774)

Regarding these external pressures, Shelly and Maria’s classroom were privileged: on the whole, their classroom was far less dictated by institutional requirements and policies than most

ECE programs in the United States. Although their availability to provide emotional presence to one child was often interrupted by the more immediate need of another, their daily schedule was primarily arranged according to the children's needs. This freedom (due in part to the school's independence as a lab school; its philosophical alignment with a child-centered Italian-inspired approach; and ample opportunities for reflective professional development) is a luxury afforded to few early childhood teachers, who are increasingly subject to requirements to implement any of the prescriptive curricula that are increasingly common in ECE programs (Haslip & Gullo, 2018).

Lacking the institutional imperative toward speed, the barriers to slowness were mostly for Shelly and Maria mainly were those of self-monitoring in relation to cultural norms of productivity, a phenomenon that Shelly described as a 'mental block':

"Sometimes it's my own self that gets in the way because I'm wanting to move through the "we've gotta get through this, and this, and this, and this." And I'm thinking of my schedule, and I'm thinking of what's next, or that I need to step out of the room for this meeting, or whatever.... sometimes it's getting over my own mental block, I guess you could say.... sometimes it's just my own mental processing, and I need to be like. "All right, Shelly, put your priority back where it needs to be."

Shelly's perceived pressure to quickly move on to the next task on her mental to-do list indicates that she is a citizen of the neoliberal world where efficiency and productivity are often the highest benchmarks of success. Daily care routines, in their mundanity, can often become casualties of the cultural imperative to always, as Shelly says, *"get through this, and this, and this, and this...."* at top speed. At this breakneck pace, slow diaper changes, leisurely bottle

feedings, and long hugs can quickly turn into perceived barriers to efficiency, just something to ‘get through.’ In his 2004 book, *In Praise of Slowness*, Slow Movement leader Carl Honoré notes that his exploration of slowness was catalyzed by the realization that he was consistently rushing through his son’s bedtime routine to maximize his daily productivity. However, as Honoré discovered, and Shelly and Maria conveyed in their interviews, emotional presence in care cannot be rushed. The “deepest and most tender human feelings” (Noddings 2003, p. 87) do not operate on the schedule of the neoliberal clock.

Slowness in care invites us to understand care routines not as irksome stutters in the otherwise smoothly operating machinery of productivity but as valuable moments of connection. This connection, however, can only occur if we slow down and feel in solidarity with the person who is receiving our care; for “attention without feeling...is only a report...empathy [is] necessary if the attention [is] to matter” (Oliver, 2007)

Theme 2: Care as Acknowledgement

In addition to the predictable needs associated with daily caretaking routines, children’s care often needs manifest in the unpredictable and the emotional: a child stumbles and skins their knee, crying out in surprise and pain; they scream in frustration as a friend takes their toy or wail in sadness as their father walks away, leaving them in their classroom. Just as with daily caretaking routines, it can be tempting for adults to dismiss children’s emotional needs as less important than the urgent tasks that need to be managed. The data illustrated how Shelly and Maria, however, align with an ethic of care that demands that, when a child experiences these unpredictable and turbulent emotional disruptions, those providing care do not simply ‘solve the problem’ at top speed but instead take the time to fully acknowledge the experience, emotions,

and viewpoint of the child. As Maria puts it, *“Caring is when a child gets hurt, and I acknowledge that they fell down... it’s acknowledgment; it’s walking over and saying, “Ouch!” noticing them feeling.... that child was seen and heard, and that is a part of care.”*

Shelly describes this acknowledgment as a practice of “verbalizing and validating” the child’s feelings - a practice they both agree that Maria exemplified on the playground one afternoon when Noah, nearly two years old, broke down in tears when he could not climb to the top of a climbing structure on the playground. In my recorded video, Maria turned away from the larger group and toward the crying Noah. She crouched down to his level, opening her arms. He fell against her body crying, and she held him on her lap while softly saying, *“I know, I know. That was hard. You really wanted to get to the top.”* In reviewing this video with me, Maria told me that her intention in that moment was to convey to this child: *“I know that this is hard, and I can hear your emotions. I can feel your emotions. I’m with you with these emotions.”* To her, it was not the words themselves that were most meaningful but the intention and time of the associated actions. As she told me:

“It would be really easy in passing to say, “Oh, I know. That was hard,” but that is not the same as...when I got down on the floor, bent down to his level. To me, in that video, it showed that I cared for him by being present with him in that exact moment, getting on his level.... I shut everyone else out, and I stayed extremely focused on just Noah.”

In this moment, what Maria demonstrated, both verbally and nonverbally, required slowness in multiple regards. Most obviously, she took the time to connect with Noah in this moment of emotional turmoil - to truly understand his emotions and allow him the time to experience them. However, this moment was also predicated on the months of slow connection

that Maria had engaged in up to this point that allowed her to fully acknowledge Noah in that moment - not simply *a* child in need, but *Noah*, the boy who loves to run and jump and so desperately wanted to reach the top of the climbing structure; the boy who often feels overwhelmed by his own strong emotions. She knows him. Not simply as any early childhood professional knows a child due to their training, but as an individual - and in that moment, she took the time to acknowledge him fully.

In a cultural context where children's thoughts and emotions are regularly invalidated when they contrast with the thoughts and emotions of adults, thoughtfully and responsively acknowledging children's perspectives without equivocation constitutes a radical act. Carlina Rinaldi (2001) refers to genuine and responsive engagement with children's ideas as a 'pedagogy of listening.' Merely listening, however, is insufficient and does not encompass the pedagogy to which Rinaldi refers: to engage in authentic listening, one must make room for 'otherness' (Berg & Seeber, 2017). Children do not experience the world in the same way that adults do. Their perspectives are 'other' and are so often Othered, as when adults dismiss them due to a perceived lack of maturity or ability to verbalize their views adequately. As such, practicing a pedagogy of listening requires teachers to slow down to sublimate their own perspectives into those of the child; they must "dwell, construct, formulate, reformulate, and negotiate their thinking, knowledge, and questions through active listening" (Chung, 2022, p. 2).

Shelly and Maria listened to the children in their care: not simply by hearing their words but by displacing their adult thoughts and emotions to engage in a slow, sensitive, and embodied practice of attunement to the children's experiences. Explorations of this type of engagement are not new; in the context of care, what Rinaldi (2005) referred to as a 'pedagogy of listening'

resembles what Noddings (1984) described as ‘attunement’ and Manning (2013) as ‘relational merging.’ What is new in Shelly and Maria’s descriptions of the process, however, is the emphasis on how temporally grounded it is: they intentionally put their other obligations on pause and ‘shut everything else out’ to connect emotionally and physically with the child in need of care.

Maria’s encounter with Noah, above, provides one illustrative example of how acknowledgment was provided in care encounters. However, this example is one of the innumerable instances within the complete data set where Maria and Shelly ‘shut everything else out’ to attune with a child needing care. During emotionally intense conflicts, the teachers would slowly and gently hold a child through their feelings of frustration, sadness, and dismay. When a difficult drop-off left a child sobbing on the floor, rather than try to distract the child with an exciting activity or dismiss their child’s feelings, Maria and Shelly would sit with them and say things such as “I know. You really didn’t want your dad to leave today.” Acknowledgment as Slow Care permeated the classroom at every turn, and the result was clear: children appeared to feel safe to express the full extent of their feelings and seemed secure in their belief that, whatever those feelings were, they would be seen and heard by their caregivers.

Implications

In cultures where neoliberalism and capitalism are not the guiding social forces in education, slowness in care may be perceived as obvious. Within the cultural context of the United States, however, neoliberal discourse reigns, and there is little room for slowness in a field that is increasingly concerned with efficiency, productivity, and optimization in the development of human capital (Ball, 2003; Bradbury, 2019; Bradbury & Robert-Holmes, 2016).

This research presents a counternarrative that challenges these neoliberal imperatives and provides an example of a pedagogy of care that prioritizes slowness through emotional presence and acknowledgment.

Conceptualizing this type of care as a pedagogy is critical: in slowing down, Maria and Shelly were not simply ‘not going fast’ or failing to meet the expectations of dominant discourse; instead, they prioritized slowness as an intentional pedagogical practice of care. In doing so, they offer the field an example of a professional practice that reprioritizes care as an emotional and temporal practice central to early childhood education. Notably, this pedagogical practice refrains from backsliding into essentialized understandings of care as ‘women’s work’ and instead offers care as an act of resistance to the increasing policies and pressures for acceleration in all things. By prioritizing slowness in care, Maria and Shelly refuse to engage in a neoliberal ethic of care. Instead, they offer children care that is not judged by its economic efficiency but instead by its depth of connection.

Limitations and Future Directions

This research provides a window into two teachers’ experiences and understandings of care in a university laboratory school setting in the southeastern United States. These teachers’ perspectives are influenced by myriad contextual factors and the manner in which each teachers’ sociopolitical positionalities and personal subjectivities encounter those contextual elements. Shelly and Maria are both white women in their 30’s from middle-class backgrounds working at a progressive university lab school. In part, their perspectives reflect the dominant culture discourse in which they were raised, and the discourses of Whiteness that pervade educational institutions in the United States. Yet, they are not solely derived from such: their

perspectives also emerge from the various academic, political, and cultural genealogies of praxis that they have engaged in their professional development work over their years of employment at the center. The specific models of professional development at this center were locally designed by administrators who have been influenced by post-structuralist and post-colonial feminism, reconceptualist scholarship, cross-cultural and indigenous scholarship. Experiences within this community of practice focused on anti-racist, decolonizing, and anti-capitalist theorizing that has historically generated critical deconstruction of discourses of time and capitalistic productivity. It is possible that longitudinal engagement with these perspectives influenced Shelly and Maria's pedagogy of Slow Care, even if they did not explicitly state such in their interviews and conversations with the lead researcher.

Thus, the findings in this research should be viewed as early and limited beginnings of theorizing Slow Care in early childhood education; findings that detail the perspectives of two women whose histories, subjectivities, and discursive beliefs/practices reside at a particular intersection of the cultural, the historical, and the sociopolitical. To more broadly understand the presence and possibilities of Slow Care in ECE, we encourage further research in various early childhood settings with teachers of varied identities, backgrounds, and pedagogical perspectives. In this way, future research into temporalities of care will encompass the depth and breadth of identities and backgrounds that constitute the early childhood workforce and examine how those nearly innumerable contingencies interact with the school and community context to invoke temporal practices of care.

We would also encourage further research into the bi-directional relationship between teachers' temporal conceptualizations of care and administrative, local, and national policies.

From a top-down perspective, how do the largely neoliberal policies of early care and education centers in the Global North affect the temporalities of care in the early childhood classroom? Further, what are teachers' experiences as they contest and/or align with the fast-paced temporalities demanded by such policies? From a grassroots perspective, what are the possibilities of Slow Care as an emergent political resistance against such policies?

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CHAPTER III: ETHICS OF CARE AND AGONIST CONFLICT IN THE TODDLER CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT

Dominant Western discourse in early childhood education (ECE) frames conflict as a disruptive and damaging force that is antithetical to the “ideal” classroom environment (Souto-Manning, 2013). However, critical early childhood scholars have begun to reconceptualize the role of conflict in early childhood classroom dynamics, exploring its potential as a productive and necessary force that supports current and future democratic participation for young children (Blank and Schneider, 2011; Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Nøme, 2022; Souto-Manning, 2014). This paper draws from data collected during an 8-month ethnography of care practices in an infant/toddler classroom at a university laboratory school in the Southeastern United States. Using Chantal Mouffe’s (2000; 2005) theories of the democratic paradox and agonist conflict, we interpret one teacher’s understandings of conflict in her classroom and the practices that she engaged in support of what Mouffe would term ‘agonist conflict’ (i.e., friendly, rather than antagonistic, conflict). Findings demonstrate that this teacher views agonist conflict to be a productive process for young children—one that enables them to articulate their political subjectivities as members of their classroom community and one that will foster their engagement as citizens of a broader democratic society. As such, the emotional support and scaffolding she provided to support such engagement constitute a political form of care. This research holds implications for reconceptualized understandings of peer conflict in early childhood contexts and insight into how teachers can better support children’s developing political engagement through agonist conflict with their peers.

Keywords: Chantal Mouffe; conflict theory; democratic education; early care and education

Ethics of Care and Agonist Conflict in the Toddler Classroom

The early childhood classroom has long been considered a formative site of political education in Euro-Western contexts. From the discursive construction of ‘Republican Motherhood’ during the Euro-Western revolutionary era (Schloesser, 2002) to the works of founding early childhood and educational theorists such as Freidrich Froebel (1903), John Dewey (1916) and Maria Montessori (1936), the foundations of early care and education are rife with calls for cultivating democratic ideologies and beliefs in the early years. Within this political conceptualization of education, early childhood classrooms are understood as sites of preparation for future citizenship, within which children receive overt and implicit education in democratically guided beliefs, behaviors, and social agreements (Hawkins, 2014; Millei and Imre, 2016). In recent decades, however, early childhood scholars have started to re-examine this portrayal of children as *future* citizens and instead posit that young children are current citizens of not only their larger communities but also the vibrant social context of the early childhood classroom (DeZutter, 2023; Millei & Kallio, 2018). When viewed from within a poststructural theoretical framework, teachers and children within these social contexts are understood to participate in the ongoing replication and/or contestation of the larger discursive political landscape in which the classroom is embedded (MacNaughton, 2005; Moss, 2018).

One example of such a process is how teachers and children enact and understand conflict, which, in simplest terms, can be understood as “the process that arises when two or more persons or groups manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives” (Kriesberg & Dayton, 2017, p. 2). Notably, the term ‘conflict’ throughout this paper excludes intentional acts of physical harm. These acts sometimes occur during peer conflict, but we will refer to them

separately as ‘physical aggression’ (Authors, 2021; Ashbey & Neilson-Hewett, 2012; Thornberg, 2006). Reflective of its broader discursive construction in Western culture, conflict in the early childhood classroom is understood as an every day, and yet, contentious, occurrence. As part of their daily lives in the classroom, children routinely experience conflicts over such things as toys, boundaries of personal space, and intentions for the trajectory of imaginative play.

Early childhood literature and policy documents in the United States acknowledge the ubiquitous nature of peer conflict, citing it as a normative and expected phenomenon (Ashby and Neilsen-Hewett, 2012; DeVries & Zan, 2012). These same documents, however, also advise teachers in classroom management techniques geared toward minimizing or eradicating conflict in the classroom. Early childhood practitioners, for their part, endorse the normative nature of peer conflict, and yet in practice, often work to avoid or quickly resolve peer conflict in favor of peaceful classroom engagement (Blank & Schneider, 2011; Blunk et al., 2017; Church et al., 2018; Coplan et al., 2015; Gloecker, Cassell, & Malkus, 2014; Johansson & Emilson, 2017; LeMaster, 2010; Myrtil et al., 2021). Taken together, it is clear that dominant policymakers and practitioner perspectives in the United States mirror hegemonic Western discourse that posits conflict as a harmful and destructive social phenomenon (Grindheim, 2014).

Within recent decades, however, early childhood scholars have used critical political theories of conflict to re-examine peer conflict in the early childhood classroom (see: Grindheim, 2014; Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Author 2, 2013; Nøme, 2022; Souto-Manning, 2014). These conceptual and empirical works reconceptualize peer conflict as a fruitful site of ‘mundane politics’ (Millei & Kallio, 2018) within the early childhood classroom sociopolitical milieu. The current study examines the role of conflict in the early childhood classroom through data

collected in an 8-month ethnography of care in an infant/toddler classroom in the southeastern United States. Although the initial ethnographic study focused on care, conflict quickly emerged as a parallel focus of study due to the frequency with which care occurred during peer conflict. In particular, this research explores how the classroom's lead teacher—referred to in this paper by her pseudonym, Shelly—engaged counter-hegemonic perspectives and practices surrounding peer conflict in her teaching practice, as evidenced in two semi-structured interviews and observational data (i.e., field notes, video, and photos). The semi-structured interview guide can be found in Appendix C.

We leverage Chantal Mouffe's (2000; 2005) political theories of agonistic conflict and 'the democratic paradox' to interpret this data and theorize its relationship to larger macro-level discourse of conflict in the context of the United States. Using this theoretical framework, we present Shelly's care practices as counter-hegemonic political acts designed to cultivate children's capacity to engage in agonist conflict—a skill she believes is crucial for democratic participation. These findings contribute to the reconceptualist conflict scholarship in ECE by providing a window into one example of how teachers' practices can challenge hegemonic conflict discourse. Before exploring these findings fully, we offer context for our research by exploring Mouffe's theories and an overview of current critical research on early childhood conflict.

Mouffe's Democratic Paradox

In her extensive theorizing on the political role of social conflict, Chantal Mouffe (2000; 2005) contends that liberal democracy is a political system characterized by an axiomatic tension between the plurality of individual perspectives and needs championed by democracy and the

equality of individuals promised by liberalism. The axiomatic and irradicable nature of this tension, according to Mouffe (2000), negates the possibility of conflict-free political consensus as championed by the increasingly popular ‘third-way’ politics championed by political moderates. Denied the option of *whether* to engage in conflict, citizens of a liberal democracy are left only with the decision of *how* to engage. Mouffe (2000) identifies two possibilities for engagement: antagonist conflict, characterized by animosity between enemies, and agonist conflict, characterized by an adversarial yet collaborative relationship. Antagonist conflict is likely corrosive and potentially destructive to the democratic process, whereas agonist conflict can be productive and generative. Mouffe (2000) goes as far as to argue that agonist conflict is not simply an inexorable characteristic of liberal democracy but also a desirable one. Through agonist conflict, in Mouffe’s opinion—those instances where citizens meet each other with mutual respect and a belief in each other’s rights to advocate for their differing views—that positive political growth and transformation take place. Without agonist conflict, societies are prone to stagnation or a ‘negative peace,’ which is achieved by forcibly silencing, rather than eradicating, differences of opinion.

(Re)Conceptualizing Conflict in the Early Childhood Classroom

As noted above, conflict in early childhood contexts is framed mainly within the same negative discourse surrounding conflict in the broader Euro-Western context (i.e., that it is an inappropriate and destructive social force). This negative understanding of conflict is arguably particularly heightened within the context of early childhood contexts, which are discursively expected to be sites of ‘good’ emotions, such as love, care, and joy, to the exclusion of the ‘bad’ emotions of conflict, such as anger and frustration (Boler, 1999; Zembylas, 2005). Relying on

this widespread negative conceptualization, many early childhood teachers work to avoid—or quickly resolve—peer conflict in favor of peaceful classroom engagement (Blank & Schneider, 2011; Church et al., 2018; Coplan et al., 2015; Johansson & Emilson, 2017; LeMaster, 2010; Myrtil et al., 2021).

In the last decade, however, early childhood scholars have reconceptualized the nature and function of conflict in the early childhood classroom by challenging the hegemonic cultural imperatives towards ‘peaceful’ early childhood spaces (see: Author 1, 2012; Grindheim, 2014; Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Souto-Manning, 2014; Strycharz-Banaś et al., 2022; Nøme, 2022). For instance, Blank and Schneider (2011) draw attention to the expectation that children learn to resolve peer conflicts using exclusively ‘positive’ verbal means. This imperative, they contend, is problematic for two reasons: first, in its overarching belief that conflict is an inherently destructive and disruptive force in the classroom, and second, in its controlling demand that the language of conflict aligns with the hegemonic white culture discourse of ‘positive’ social engagement (e.g., no raised voices, polite language). When the language of conflict is rigidly controlled, contend Blank and Schneider, so too is the ability of individuals to voice opposing viewpoints. Souto-Manning (2014) extends this critique of normative conflict resolution practices by challenging the ‘tyranny of politeness’ (p. 609) that she sees as endemic to White cultural norms of educational practices in the United States. This ‘tyranny of politeness’ silences the diversity of emotions, perspectives, and behaviors within a multicultural society and transforms any opposition to dominant cultural norms into something ‘inappropriate’ and unwanted in the early childhood classroom.

Other works in this area of scholarship rely on political theories of democracy to explore conflict in early childhood spaces as a participatory democratic practice. Johansson & Emilson (2016) use Chantal Mouffe's (2000, 2005) theory of the democratic paradox, as described above, to explore how children in Swedish preschools use conflict to form political alliances in peer groups and to voice dissenting opinions regarding peer and classroom practices. In another example from Nordic culture, Nøme (2022) uses Mouffe's theories to explore children's conflicts over toys in the toddler classroom as a form of political negotiation.

In the above studies, these scholars do not advocate for conflict as intrinsically good. Instead, they posit that *certain types* of conflict—what Mouffe (2000) would term 'agonist conflict'—build children's capacities for agentic participation in democratic societies, including their classroom (Johansson & Emilson, 2016). They argue that conflict should be considered an integral political and social ingredient to foster participatory and democratic principles in early childhood spaces. However, these studies lack explorations of teachers' perspectives supporting agonist conflict and examples of how teachers can effectively scaffold participatory agonistic dynamics during peer conflict scenarios. The current study, as described below, attempts to address this gap in the literature by providing insights into the beliefs and practices of one infant/toddler teacher as she attempts to support agonistic conflict in her classroom.

Methodology

This research presents findings from an 8-month ethnographic study of care practices in one infant-toddler classroom in the southeastern United States. Participants included two full-time early childhood teachers (middle-class, white women in their 30s) and twelve children 1-2 years of age from various racial backgrounds. Guiding research questions for this study were as

follows: 1) What are teachers' lived experiences of care in this early childhood classroom community? and 2) How do teachers understand these lived experiences of care? The current study explores the role of care in peer conflict scenarios in the classroom under study, focusing on how the lead teacher, Shelly, understood and approached peer conflict in her daily pedagogical practice. Data analyzed includes field notes, videos, photos, and transcriptions of one semi-structured interview that directly elicited Shelly's perspectives on classroom conflict and care. Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently in an iterative process characteristic of interpretivist qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) but can be functionally separated into the three phases delineated below.

Phase One: Broad Ethnographic Observation

Data collection began with broad ethnographic observation at the research site, an infant/toddler classroom in a university-based lab school in the southeastern United States. The lead researcher engaged in participant observation in the classroom of study for approximately six to eight hours a week for six months (July through February). During this time, she collected video, photo, and field note data, which was used in conjunction with reflective memoing (Birks et al., 2008) to develop a broad familiarity with the classroom norms, daily structures, and standard practices. The lead researcher documented and indexed in the field notes any interactions that met any of the many definitions of care that have been established through ethics of care theorizing over the last four decades—including care as dyadic action of responsiveness and engagement (Noddings, 1984), care as moral and political ethic (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993), and care as emotional labor (Colley, 2011)—as well as any interactions that

fell under the colloquial definition of care as “the provision of what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance, and protection of someone or something” (Oxford Languages, 2023).

Phase Two: An Emerging Focus and Targeted Observations

During Phase One, peer conflict emerged in observational data as a consistent site where emotional care was provided by teachers to the children—a phenomenon that the lead teacher verified during informal conversations with the lead researcher. This observed connection prompted a shift into Phase Two of the research process, which focused on the relationship between conflict and care. Phase Two began with a 90-minute semi-structured interview with the lead teacher to directly elicit her understanding of conflict and care in the classroom. Interview data transcribed verbatim was coded using an in-vivo coding technique (Saldaña, 2021) to preserve participant language in the coding process. In-vivo codes were then aggregated by similarity to form initial codes, which were used to guide targeted data collection (Spradley, 1980) in the classroom to capture video of additional salient examples of conflict and care for analysis. In Table 3, below, I provide examples of in-vivo quotes derived from Shelly’s interview, and how those in-vivo quotes were used to develop initial categories and guide targeted observations.

During this time, the lead researcher engaged in continued information conversation with the lead teacher, who provided feedback on initial analyses and emerging themes. The collaborative analysis was used to ensure trustworthiness of the findings and allowed for multiple perspectives and interpretations of the data.

Table 3. Coding Process

Full Participant Quote	In-Vivo Quote	Initial Theme	Targeted Observation Goals
“I think you know it's just part of figuring it out, is recognizing that we don't always get what we want, and helping a child to see that it's okay not to get what we want. “	"...it's recognizing that we don't always get what we want, and helping a child to see that it's okay not to get what we want."	Conflict is normal & has value	Do teachers allow conflict to occur and treat it as a normal and beneficial experience for children? If so, how and under what circumstances?
“Leaving the classroom what I would like for them to be able to do is to really work with each other and see the value in others, and see how to get along with someone, whether you like them or not in that moment. So, you know, we handling this social emotional needs, whether it's expressing how you feel or navigating a conflict or seeking out support when you need it, being able to really handle that part of it.”	“...what I would like for them to be able to do is to really work with each other and see the value in others, and see how to get along with someone, whether you like them or not in that moment...whether it's expressing how you feel or navigating a conflict or seeking out support when you need it, being able to really handle that part of it.”	Conflict is normal & has value	Do teachers allow conflict to occur and treat it as a beneficial experience for children? If so, how?
“I think if we were looking at like my ideal world. Um, just such a foreign thing to imagine. You know, having children who can negotiate conflict with each other, or can at least hear the other side, whether they want to agree with them or not is different. Um. So you know, being able to engage in problem solving of some type.”	“I think if we were looking at like my ideal world...having children who can negotiate conflict with each other, or can at least hear the other side, whether they want to agree with them or not is different...”	Conflict is normal & has value	Do teachers allow conflict to occur and treat it as a normal and beneficial experience for children? If so, how?
“Conflicts are going to happen, and when they do, your job is to help support them, and so validating their emotions and saying, “Oh, it looks like you are feeling sad. Why are you feeling sad? Do you want to tell me? Or you know, if they're fighting over a toy, you put your hand just gently over that toy. Then you say, “Hey, I see you're fighting over this toy. I'm going to help you, so i'm going to take your hands off, and i'm going to take your hands off and let's figure out how to work with this toy together.”	"Conflicts are going to happen, and when they do, your job is to help support them..."	Teachers' role is to scaffold conflict	What types of scaffolding do teachers use in moments of conflict?

Table 3 continued

Full Participant Quote	In-Vivo Quote	Initial Theme	Targeted Observation Goals
“It is okay for a child to express their feelings, even if it's kicking and screaming...we're here to help you.”	“It is okay for a child to express their feelings, even if it's kicking and screaming”	All emotions are welcome in conflict, but not all actions	How do teachers approach children's emotions during conflict? What types of actions do they allow/disallow during conflict?
“And so doing things like, “you wanted *blank* but I can't let you do that. It's not safe, you know, climbing on the table, or pushing your friends down. “I cannot let you push your friends down as much as you want to”	“...you wanted *blank* but I can't let you do that. It's not safe, you know, climbing on the table, or pushing your friends down.”	All emotions are welcome in conflict, but not all actions	How do teachers approach children's emotions during conflict? What types of actions do they allow/disallow during conflict?
“And then I, my biggest thing, though, is always validate what they're feeling, because most of the time people want to be seen and heard, and then you can move into solving the problem with them if they need it solved. Or maybe it's just that they needed to be heard.”	"...my biggest thing...is always validate what they're feeling, because most of the time people want to be seen and heard...”	All emotions are welcome in conflict, but not all actions	How do teachers approach children's emotions during conflict? What types of actions do they allow/disallow during conflict?

Phase Three: Theoretically Guided Analysis

The final phase of the project consisted of a theoretically guided qualitative analysis (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022) of all data that addressed the intersection of conflict and care, using Chantal Mouffe's (2000; 2005) framework of agonist conflict and the democratic paradox. Mouffe's theories were identified as guiding analytical frameworks due to the lead teacher's expressed belief in the positive role of conflict in the classroom, which aligned with Mouffe's unique conceptualization of conflict. The final theoretically guided interpretations were then presented to the lead teacher, who provided feedback and verified the trustworthiness of the researchers' interpretations. The findings, as conveyed below, represent the final form of these interpretations after discussion with the lead teacher and minor edits to ensure that her experiences and perspectives were accurately represented.

The Nature and Function of Conflict: Shelly's Perspective

In contrast to dominant negative understandings of early childhood peer conflict (Souto-Manning, 2014; Grindheim, 2014), Shelly described peer conflict as a normative and a necessary social experience for the children in her care. She believed the ability to hold space for conflict and navigate is an inherently human skill linked to participation in social relations across the lifespan. Shelly's views on conflict were evidenced many times a day in her classroom: when children would scream out in frustration as a peer took their toy or had broken down in tears because another child knocked over their building structure, Shelly would walk over and in a calm voice, say things like "Oh, you're feeling very frustrated about this!" without judgment or urgency in her voice. At face value, Shelly's typical response may feel identical to child-centered mediation practices (Gloeker et al., 2014), emphasizing acknowledging and validating children's

feelings during conflict. Nevertheless, it is in the intended goal (or lack thereof) that her actions diverge: while mediation strategies emphasize conflict resolution, Shelly's viewed it as her responsibility to *actively teach* children how to be in a specific type of conflict—what Mouffe (2005) would term 'agonist conflict.' She did not aim to *resolve* conflict—but to teach children how to engage in it effectively:

“leaving the classroom, what I would like for them to be able to do is to really work with each other and see the value in others, and see how to get along with someone, whether you like them or not in that moment....recognizing your own emotions in those moments, or how to work with your own emotions and navigate engaging with others, so the interpersonal connections, and how to live life around other people....”

In short, Shelly wanted to scaffold children's ability to effectively navigate the conflict inherent in their current and future pluralistic social worlds and to hold an agonistic, rather than antagonistic, stance towards those with whom they are in conflict. As such, when conflict arose, Shelly did not immediately intervene to impose a solution or move children toward a resolution, as might be the inclination of other teachers (Gloeker et al., 2014; LeMaster, 2010, Majorano et al., 2015; Myrtil et al., 2021). Instead, she provided social scaffolding and emotional care to the children in conflict to facilitate their ability to a) articulate their emotions, desires, and needs, b) understand the emotions, desires, and needs of their peers, and, critically, c) to manage the emotional discomfort that arose when the conflict at hand remained unresolved or was resolved in a manner that displeased one or more of the children.

Below, we share three illustrative incidents demonstrating Shelly's ideals and how those ideals were enacted in daily classroom life. These incidents, recorded by the lead researcher

during participant observation, revolve around four children: Paige, Noah, Ollie, and Lila. Using Mouffe's (2000; 2005) political theories of agonist conflict, we will explore the social utility of these incidents and how these contextual conflicts mirror the democratic paradox at play in this classroom. The three incidents share commonalities in the source of conflict (desire for a classroom resource or material), but each explores a unique aspect of how agonist conflict manifests in the classroom and/or the benefits that style of conflict holds. These include the following events:

- Incident #1: a conflict over a stuffed squirrel demonstrates how Shelly facilitates agonist peer conflict while preventing physical aggression.
- Incident #2: a conflict over blocks allows children to develop political subjectivities in their classroom community.
- Incident #3: a conflict over a swing explores the foundational role of Shelly's emotional care in scaffolding children's capacity to navigate these conflict processes.

Illustrative Incidents

Incident #1: A Struggle over a Squirrel

One morning, Paige held a small stuffed squirrel in the classroom. This squirrel was a new material in the classroom and was quite the hot commodity amongst the children. Noah and Lila appeared interested in the squirrel and began following Paige, who screamed, "*No, no!*" Noah reached her when she neared me and tried to push her. I said, "*No, I will not let you push her,*" but did not otherwise intervene. Behind Noah and Paige, Lila had fallen down while running and was crying loudly. Noah went over, leaned down, and looked like he might pinch her on her back. Shelly said, "*I don't want you to grab her body right now. It looks like you*

might be trying to help, but I don't want you to right now." Noah then leaned down, gently laid his cheek on hers, and gave her a kiss. Shelly said, *"Oh, I see you're trying to give her gentle touches"* Lila sat up and was still crying, looking toward Paige, who still held the stuffed squirrel. Shelly said, *"Yeah, you wanted a turn with that squirrel. Yeah. And right now, Paige is using it. We could go look at the basket of other animals. Would you like to go together?"*

In response, Lila tried to grab the squirrel from Paige's hands. Shelly said, *"I will not let you take it from her.... come this way with me, and we'll see if we can find you an animal, too."* Lila put her arm down. She soon started crying again, and Shelly said, *"I know, you were really wanting that squirrel. You really liked that today."* She stopped crying but continued to watch Paige from the other side of the bookshelf. Each time she reached her hand forward for the toy, Shelly stopped her gently but did not say anything else. After a few minutes of this, Paige placed the squirrel on the shelf, and Lila took it. Paige did not say anything—she just moved on to other toys. Shelly, who had been observing the exchange, said nothing. She and I made eye contact and smiled—I think she was as surprised as I was that Paige had willingly relinquished the squirrel after fiercely guarding it for so long.

Interpretation: Agonist Conflict

In this incident, we see a conflict centered around ownership rights to a valued classroom toy, a common source of conflict in toddler classrooms (Nøme, 2022). Through Paige, Noah, and Lila's engagement in this conflict, they experienced a political education in the intricacies of ownership conflict and how to engage in such. I delivered the first lesson: *"I will not let you push her."* Using these words, I mirrored Shelly's established practice of direct intervention to prevent physical aggression between children during conflict. I was also mirroring Shelly in what

I did *not* do: terminate the conflict entirely. This limited intervention was common in Shelly's classroom and acted as a guardrail during children's conflicts: they were allowed to continue in the conflict but were prevented from 'falling off the edge' of permissible agonist conflict into aggressive antagonist engagement. The lesson here was clear: you may engage in conflict, but you may not physically hurt your peers.

The second lesson during this conflict was regarding rights to ownership and self-advocacy for those rights. Within most cultures, ownership of shared classroom materials is often determined by who currently possesses a toy (Kanngeisser, 2022). As Paige ran away from Noah and Lila, she screamed, "*No, no!*" in an apparent protest of their attempt to circumvent her current ownership rights to the squirrel. Shelly affirms this ownership claim by preventing Lila from taking the squirrel from Paige's hands: "*I will not let you take it from her.*" However, this affirmation was not permanent: it was closely aligned with Paige's perceptions, and Shelly's response shifted as that perception shifted. At the end of the conflict, Lila reached for the squirrel, and Paige did not assert her ownership rights, verbally or nonverbally, so Shelly silently allowed Lila to take possession of the toy.

The third lesson can be found in Shelly's engagement with Lila before Paige relinquishes possession of the squirrel. Shelly affirmed Paige's ownership rights *and* affirmed Lila's feelings of frustration and sadness: "*I know you were really wanting that squirrel. You really liked that today.*" In these actions, Shelly conveyed to Lila that it is normal and okay to feel intense emotion during conflict but that those strong feelings are not a reason for the other person to change their behavior. Likewise, Shelly did not save Paige from her anxiety as Lila continually reached for her toy and stood nearby looking at it.

In many classrooms, this conflict may have played out by a teacher terminating it as soon as they heard Paige scream, “No!” Noah and Lila may have been stopped with a firm “No!” from the teacher and redirected to another classroom area far away from Paige. Instead, Shelly allowed these children to engage in this conflict with scaffolded support and intervened only where necessary (to prevent physical aggression or non-consensual transfer of the squirrel). In doing so, the children were allowed to “gain communicative abilities to use linguistic and other semiotic resources to carry out and resolve conflict in culturally and situationally specific ways” and to be “socialized into group and societal values related to morality, perspective taking, and relationships” (Moore & Burldowski, pg. 1). Through this conflict, they received implicit and overt instruction on the boundaries of appropriate conduct in conflict scenarios. Shelly’s neutral stance also prevented the children from being labeled as ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator.’ They are, instead, simply peers experiencing an agonistic conflict where conflicting desires and feelings are normalized and can be voiced by all parties involved.

Incident #2: A Conflict over Legos

One afternoon, Noah and Ollie stand together at a table on the patio outside their classroom, playing with blocks. There are only a few blocks, but many more are in a tub on the ground directly beside them. Ollie reaches for one of the blocks that Noah is playing with, prompting Noah to say, “No, no!” and to lean his face down to bite Ollie’s hand. I say, “No, Noah. I won’t let you bite his hand.” Shelly looks over calmly at my words and says, “Oh, Ollie. Would you like some blocks? You may have some blocks. I have some blocks here,” pulling a few more Lego blocks from the bin and placing them on the table beside Ollie. However, again Ollie reaches for Noah’s blocks and succeeds in taking one. Noah squeals in what sounds like

indignation, and Shelly says, “Well, I see that Noah is saying no, so I’m going to offer these blocks back to him,” handing the block back to Noah.

While Shelly was speaking to Ollie, Noah took most of the blocks that Shelly had handed Ollie, leaving Ollie with only one. Noah looks up, searching for another block. He reaches out for the single one in front of Ollie, who shouts, “NO!” Shelly hands Noah another block, but he continues to reach for the one that Ollie is using. Shelly gently stops his hand and says, “No, it’s his turn.”

Interpretation: Appropriating Political Subjectivities

Many facets of this conflict scenario resemble the incident described above with Paige, Lila, and Noah: there is a conflict over a classroom material, possession is reinforced as a marker of ownership, and physical aggression is stopped, but agonist conflict is allowed to continue. This scenario differs, however, in the contextual identities of the children involved: Paige, Noah, and Lila were all well-established members of the classroom community, but Ollie had only recently started attending school. He was a new member of the community, one whose contextual social and political subjectivity was still being negotiated. In our interview, Shelly identified the importance of children developing a sense of who they are in relation to the larger classroom community: “...*to really, truly be an active and engaged citizen, you have to have your own identity in the classroom.*”

This idea of subjectivities and citizenship is critical to conversations of conflict in a liberal democracy, where citizens can be understood as members of a polity (an organized society) with political agency in that space (Mouffe, 1992). Within the polity of the early childhood classroom, children appropriate their desires, their rights, their responsibilities, and

what actions they can and should take to manifest each. Millei & Kallio (2018) describe how conflict, as a site of tension and desire, can serve as a powerful tool for the development of political agency: "...political agency springs from contextual experiences with matters that appear particularly important to those involved, and is often connected with challenging and uncomfortable situations that invite people to act for or against something" (p. 33).

In this scenario, Ollie tested the nature and limits of his political agency: can he take materials from another child if he wants them? How can he defend against such an action being taken against himself? Will he be protected from physical aggression? As in the first incident, Shelly could have ended the conflict by moving the children away from each other or by providing enough blocks so that conflict would no longer occur. She did offer Ollie more blocks, but this action seemed more oriented toward demonstrating a viable way for him to meet his desire for more blocks rather than an attempt to end the conflict. This is evidenced by the fact that she did not continually add more blocks as the conflict proceeded. Instead, Shelly sat alongside Ollie as he negotiated this conflict, allowing him to establish political agency in his relationship with Noah and answer the above questions.

Mundane daily conflicts such as this allow children to develop political subjectivities within their classroom polity. In learning these norms, Ollie became more integrated into the political atmosphere of the classroom and gained more agency in that space. This sense of political subjectivity and agency could then be implemented in similar conflict scenarios with other peers and more complex conflicts as he joins larger polities in the future.

Incident #3: A Conflict at the Swing

On the playground, Lila and Paige walk toward the swing simultaneously, arms outstretched, but Lila reaches the swing first. They struggle momentarily, screaming and trying to pull the swing away from each other. They both begin to cry. One of the classroom's student teachers rushed over when the girls began screaming and quickly picked Paige up, drawing her away from the swing. Lila remains at the swing, crying, and the student-teacher tells her, "You can swing now!" Lila takes a few more choking breaths and stops crying. She begins to swing. Meanwhile, Paige still cries in the student teacher's arms, gasping for air between sobs. The student-teacher sits with her but does not say anything. At this point, Shelly walks over from where she has been observing a few feet away and sits beside the student teacher and Paige. She allows Paige to approach her and, with empathy in her voice, says, "Yeah, I hear you. It's hard to wait." She holds Paige for a moment until Paige's sobs begin to slow. Then she asks, "Do you want to wait for the swing here? Or would you like to play somewhere else for a while you wait?" Paige runs off to play on the other side of the playground.

Interpretation: Care in Conflict

The study from which this data was drawn focused on the care practices in Shelly's classroom. Early in our research, Shelly and I noticed that care seemed critically important to conflict scenarios, during which complicated feelings emerged for each child involved. Their ability to continue engaging in agonist conflict, and avoid following an emotional spiral into antagonist conflict, was often contingent on Shelly's acknowledgment and care for the frustration, anger, sadness, and/or fear they might feel during that process.

This particular incident demonstrates how critical emotional care is in supporting agonist conflict. Shelly's emotional care helped Paige 'stay with the discomfort' (Authors, 2021) of her conflict with Lila without experiencing intolerable distress. Reflective of child-centered mediation techniques (Gloeker et al., 2014), Shelly acknowledged, validated, and labeled Paige's emotions; these are well-established steps toward developing emotional literacy implemented in many early childhood classrooms. Shelly's approach differs, however, in the *goal* of her emotional care. She did not steer Paige and Lila toward resolving their conflict, as is often seen in such mediations. She did not offer to set a timer to limit Lila's use of the swing, nor did she tell Paige to ask Lila for a turn (with the implication that Lila should give her one). She instead provided Paige with the emotional care necessary to allow Paige to deal with the ramifications of the tension between individual desires in the classroom.

This aspect of Shelly's pedagogy of conflict can also be conceptualized as an ethic of care enacted with political purpose. In addition to addressing Paige's 'in the moment' emotional needs, Shelly's care also held the purpose of cultivating Paige's ability to navigate the inherent tensions of agonist conflict emotionally. The skills, in short, needed to—as Shelly put it—*“really, truly be an active and engaged citizen”* Shelly held Paige while she cried, acknowledged her feelings, and then offered a few suggestions for how she might pass the time while she waited for Paige to finish swinging. In a context that views agonist conflict as a regular part of being in a community with others, this skill is crucial: to be an 'active and engaged citizen' one must be able to navigate the inevitable emotionality of conflict. As noted above, Shelly could have relieved Paige's emotional distress by implementing a turn-taking system or offering another solution. This type of care, however, would have proved contrary to Shelly's overall

philosophy of conflict. So instead, she taught Paige a political lesson through her care: it is okay that others' desires will sometimes cause you emotional distress; this is not a reason for them to change their behavior. Ultimately, Shelly's care in this incident served to teach Paige that she had a right to be in conflict and to experience and express all of the emotions that come along with that experience—but the presence of conflict, and hard feelings, did not constitute a reason to infringe on Lila's autonomy. This is the democratic paradox in action.

Discussion

Early in my time in Shelly's classroom, as we sat together on a blanket outside, surrounded by toddlers, she spoke to me of her views regarding peer conflict. In contrast to dominant negative understandings of early childhood peer conflict (Souto-Manning, 2014; Grindheim, 2014), Shelly spoke of conflict as a normative and necessary social experience for the children in her care, as it is an experience that will continue throughout their lives as democratic citizens. In my field notes from that day, I transcribed some of her words:

"I spend so much time trying to normalize conflict with families. It's just normal communication...so much of our adult relationships is about managing challenging moments. It is so normal."

As Shelly advocates for agonist conflict with her classroom families, we present this research as an attempt to normalize conflict in early childhood and show its social and political value. Conflict scenarios in the toddler classroom, such as those detailed in our findings above, reveal the boundaries of social values and principles of the macro-level culture in which the classroom is embedded (Millei & Imre, 2016). Through conflict, young children learn how to be in relationships with others, negotiate disagreements, and what rights individuals have in those

disagreements (Grindheim, 2014; Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Author 2, 2013; Nøme, 2022; Souto-Manning, 2014). It is not that we believe that conflict is *always* good. Shelly did not hold that perspective either, as evidenced by her quick intervention when conflict erred towards the antagonistic. However, if conflict is actively discouraged and/or consensus is demanded by teachers in the classroom, children lose the opportunity to enact their agency within the ‘mundane politics’ (Millei & Kallo, 2018) of their classroom community.

To support this agency, early childhood and care policies and practices can be altered to differentiate between agonist conflict and antagonist conflict, and expressly encourage teachers to allow (and scaffold) the former. Within this agonist conflict, children learn to negotiate the inherent tension between their desires and the desires of others and practice the dance of interpersonal conflict that can result from the conflicting nature of those desires. Through policies that encourage the cessation or immediate resolution of conflict, children are refused their right to act as political beings within the political space of their classroom. Shelly provides us with an example of what such policies would look like on a classroom scale: by providing the space for conflict and active emotional scaffolding for those involved, Shelly allowed the children in her care to develop and enact their capacities for democratic participation. She traversed the discursive boundary of the ‘ideal’ early childhood, which demands an eternally peaceful and ‘positive’ environment (Souto-Manning, 2014).

These findings contribute to the reconceptualist scholarship on conflict in early care and education and provide an example of how early childhood teachers might resist dominant discourses that demand a conflict-free classroom. In the words of Souto-Manning (2014):

Conflicts can be powerful spaces for engaging in change and negotiating positive transformation in the social present.... within and through conflicts, we can (re)negotiate social rules as well as our relationships with others, disagreeing with them, offering multiple perspectives, and expressing in many ways our experiences in and with the world. (p. 608–609)

Shelly's perspectives and actions exemplify a political ethic of care that prioritizes emotional care for children in support of their capacities for current and future citizenship in a world where conflict is inherent, irradicable, and—as conveyed in Souto-Manning's quote above—productive presence.

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CHAPTER IV: TODDLER TEMPORALITIES: SLOW METHODOLOGY IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT

This empirical paper relies on autoethnographic analysis of personal researcher reflections to explore the connections between the temporalities of early childhood research and the temporalities of the early childhood classroom. Grounded in a feminist theoretical framework, this paper presents the possibilities of Slow methodologies to a) enhance relationality and respect in early childhood research, b) allow for researcher immersion in the unique temporalities experienced by children and teachers in early childhood contexts, and c) offer researchers an opportunity for more embodied and emotional knowledge to augment the intellectual components of conducting research. Discussion is supported by auto/ethnographic narratives that exemplify the practice and possibilities of each as experienced in the author's own research methods and methodologies. The arguments presented in this paper constitute a call to action for Slow early childhood scholarship that resists neoliberal temporal regimes and allows for relational and emotionally grounded research that conveys the unique temporalities of the early childhood classroom.

Keywords: auto/ethnography; early care and education, Slow Pedagogy; Slow Scholarship; toddler temporalities

Toddler Temporalities:

Slow Methodology in the Early Childhood Classroom

“What’s Slow? Slow resists Fast time, instrumentalism, and neoliberal values, like outputs and efficiency, and turns toward wise old practices grounded in the embodied experiences of the ‘here’ and ‘now.’ Slow leaves room for self-doubt, ambiguity, even futility. Slow is rebellion and love.”

- (Behrisch, 2021, pp. 667–668)

The pace of academic scholarship is not what many would describe as ‘slow.’ In a modern neoliberal landscape of higher education, researchers are more pressured than ever to produce—and produce *quickly* (Bergland, 2018; Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). Within this neoliberal regime of productivity, Slowness, self-doubt, ambiguity, and futility, as described in Behrisch’s quote above, are anathema to the nature of ‘good’ research.

Advocates of the Slow scholarship movements (Mountz et al., 2015), however, contest this trend towards speed and productivity at all costs and point the academy instead toward feminist temporalities of resistance that allow scholarship to ‘marinate’ and ‘ripen’ at its own pace (p. 1236). Within Slow epistemologies and methodologies, they say, deeper and more meaningful knowledge can be uncovered and conveyed.

Slow scholarship first came to my attention during an extended ethnographic study of care practices in an infant/toddler classroom. During my 8-month immersive participant observation in this classroom, I became aware of the centrality of slow temporalities to the care the classroom teachers provided to the children. Further, I found myself enacting those same temporalities within my research practices, becoming lost in small moments of connection that seemed to temporally expand to surround the children and myself as I changed a diaper, lay with them on the classroom floor, or fed an infant a bottle. In these

suspended spaces, I found emotional and relational knowledge that strengthened my analytical understanding of the classroom context and the phenomenon of care. Through this experience, I began to understand that, in order to represent what I term the ‘toddler temporalities’ of the early childhood classroom, I had to adjust the temporalities of my research to match. I had to allow for ‘unproductive’ moments where data collection took a backseat to *experiencing*, where observation and interpretation were subordinated to emotional engagement in an embodied mimesis of how children and teachers often experience the world.

I explore Slowness as methodology in the early childhood classroom, as experienced through the course of my ethnographic research. To do so, I present the history and theory of Slow scholarship, including the role of feminist temporalities in research, before delving into an overview of the body of research on temporalities of early childhood education. From the grounding of autoethnographic analysis, I then explore the possibilities of Slow scholarship to a) enhance relationality and respect in feminist early childhood research, b) allow for researcher immersion in the unique temporalities experienced by children and teachers when collecting data in early childhood contexts, and c) offer qualitative early childhood researchers methodology and methods that embody emotional knowledge. I close with a call to action for Slow early childhood methodologies that resist neoliberal temporal regimes and allow for relational and emotionally grounded research frameworks that convey the unique temporalities of the early childhood classroom.

Slow Scholarship

Slow scholarship is an academic movement that challenges the neoliberal temporal regimes of modern higher education and offers in its place a practice of intentional, thoughtful, and—significantly—unrushed scholarship. In discussions of Slow scholarship, Slow is capitalized to indicate its distinct nature from the ordinary usage of the word ‘slow;’ while ‘slow’ indicates decreased speed, Slowness in Slow Scholarship refers to responsive research temporalities that proceed according to the needs of any given context, or being “fast when it makes sense to be fast, and...slow when slowness is called for” (Honoré, 2004, p. 13), rather than operating according to the hurried mandates of the neoliberal academy. Such responsive scholarship may seem like a pipedream in the ‘publish or perish’ academic landscape, but scholars such as the Great Lakes Feminist Collective (Mountz et al., 2015) argue that Slow scholarship constitutes a necessary form of resistance to the ever-increasing demands of productivity that too often come at the cost of the physical, emotional, and relational well-being of the academic community. In this way, “Fast and Slow do more than just describe a rate of change.... they are ways of being or philosophies of life...” (Honoré, 2005, p. 14–15).

Advocates of Slow scholarship cite its responsive temporalities as critical to centering deliberative action, robust thinking, and highly creative qualitative investigation over demands of productivity (Wahab et al., 2022). Within the suspended temporal space of Slow scholarship, researchers can focus on their work's relational and emotional elements towards the goal of qualitatively deeper and more trustworthy research findings. Further, Slow scholarship allows for missteps, changes of direction, and disruptions/delays to exist as a

natural and even welcome component of the research process (Shahjahan, 2012). Some scholars even cite the presence of pleasure in the research process as a possibility afforded by Slow scholarship (Leibovitz & Bozalek, 2018). As deadlines and productivity take a backseat to in-the-moment experiencing, researchers are able to better enjoy the process of researching and relational engagement with their participants rather than viewing those components as a means to an end.

Feminist Temporalities and Research Method

Feminist theory encourages researchers to consider what aspects of their epistemological and methodological tenets may be grounded in gendered cultural norms and what alternative ways of being, knowing, thinking, and researching may exist beyond the bounds of those norms (Forman & Sowton, 1989). Working from this foundational search for other(ed) ways of researching, feminist scholars in the last few decades have reflected on the role of time and feminist temporalities in the research process (see: Dionne, 2020; Follagar & Bozalek, 2021; Forman & Sowton, 1989; Milojević, 2007; Mountz et al., 2015). These reflections broadly challenge the assumption of time as a universally linear progression and instead situate time as a subjective human experience that “does not exist independently of our observations, and specific approaches to time are thus social and human constructs” (Milojević, 2007, p. 332).

Understanding time as a social construct, we can then naturally posit time as a *gendered* construct (Milojević, 2007). Feminist scholars broadly describe the hegemonic Western understanding of time as “teleological, linear, and sequential” (Farquhar, 2016, p. 409) as a patriarchal framework associated with capitalistic colonization and Western

imperialism domination over non-Western peoples and non-Western places (Milojević, 2007). In the modern era of globalization, ‘patriarchal time’ (Forman & Sowton, 1989) also includes the synchronization of time across the globe. Feminist understandings of time, on the other hand, are grounded in those “Othered” perspectives in which time is understood as a complex, changing, and subjective experience that is culturally informed and contextually grounded.

Within feminist research, these contextual and cultural feminist temporalities allow researchers to experience data collection, analysis, and writing as recursive, relationally guided temporal experiences that extend beyond the bounds of ‘patriarchal time.’ Feminist temporalities enable researchers to engage in Slow research that “evoke[s] curiosity, wonder, responsiveness” (Fullagar & Bozalek, 2021)—phenomena that would fall short in an evaluative framework that judges the worth of a research activity based on its economically productive capacities.

Temporalities of Modern Early Care and Education

Childhood can be understood as a fundamentally temporal cultural construction (Tesar et al., 2017): in the Euro-Western context, children—and their present and future capacities—are strictly measured according to a predetermined timeline of developmental and academic milestones which, if promptly reached, are believed to ensure the child’s future as a productive neoliberal citizen. Following the precepts of this temporal conceptualization, childhood must be carefully structured, managed, and manipulated to ensure ‘best outcomes’ of children’s future economic and social value (what some scholars term their ‘human capital’; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Early childhood classrooms are critical contexts for

the implementation of these temporal regimes. Children as young as six weeks old (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021) are transported to these out-of-home facilities for up to 8-10 hours a day, where their time is micro-managed by teachers whose time is, in turn, likewise micro-managed by neoliberal institutional, state, and national-level policies (Rose & Whitley, 2010).

In recent decades, early childhood scholars have turned a critical eye toward consideration of early childhood temporalities, exploring the rigid managerial orientation towards time in early childhood settings as a manifestation of neoliberal, neocolonial, and/or capitalistic cultural paradigms (Clark, 2022; Farquhar, 2016; Kummen, 2010; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012, 2013; Rose & Whitty, 2010; Tesar et al., 2017; Tobin, 2008; Wien, 1996; Wien & Kirby-Smith, 1998). From these critical perspectives, scholars of early childhood temporalities argue that time can be understood as a disciplinary force in the early childhood context that regulates young children's activities, bodies—and often, thoughts—as well as those of their teachers.

Pacini-Ketchabaw (2012), for example, examines the role of “clock-educator-child assemblages” (p. 156) in the early childhood classroom. Pacini-Ketchabaw recounts various manifestations of this disciplinary assemblage, in which the children’s transitions to outdoor play when they wake up from a nap, and the moment they are reunited with their parents are all determined by the positions of the hands of the clock—without reference to the desires of the actual people involved.

Methodology

Autoethnography as methodology acknowledges the self as a fundamental carrier of cultural beliefs, norms, and behaviors (Chang, 2008). As such, it considers an individual's personal experiences to be a primary data source for understanding those cultural elements. In contrast to ethnography, however, which foregrounds the experiences of others, autoethnography centers the experiences of the researcher. It is "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (Reed-Danahay 1997, p. 9).

Data sources for autoethnographic work include personal memory of the researcher and written artifacts (including journals, conceptual memos, field notes) that describe the researcher's experiences of past events (Chang, 2008). Although autoethnography is fundamentally grounded in autobiographical reflections, it distinguishes itself as empirical research (rather than simply reflective writing) by subjecting those first-person reflections to cultural interpretation and analysis (Butz & Bieso, 2009). This process situates the researcher's reflections within a larger theoretical milieu and establishes their broader social significance beyond the author's individual experiences—an iterative process that Chang (2008) describes as akin to 'zooming in' on personal memory and reflections and 'zooming out' to analyze those memories and reflective data sources in cultural context.

Data Analysis

Within autoethnographic methodology, data analysis consists of systematic researcher engagement with reflective data sources to elucidate the cultural significance of their personal experiences (Chang, 2008). Subsequently, researchers engage in a process of interpretation and meaning making to link those areas of significance into a cohesive and culturally comprehensive

story (Creswell, 1998). In this manuscript, I engage autoethnographic data analysis to interpret personal research reflections contained within field notes and conceptual memos, as well as in my personal memory of related events. The findings offered below interpret these experiences through the cultural and theoretical frameworks of Slow Scholarship and feminist research methods, offering a personal reflective portrait of the lived realities and methodological possibilities of Slow Methodology in the early childhood classroom.

Auto/Ethnographic Reflections of Slow Methodology in Action

The following sections detail an autoethnographic analysis of the author's research reflections from an 8-month ethnography of care practices in an infant/toddler classroom. These narrative reflections are examples of the possibilities that Slow methodology holds for a version of early childhood research that fundamentally respects the relational and emotional nature of early childhood classrooms and early childhood temporalities. The first narrative a) recounts institutional pressures encountered in the attempt to prioritize relational practitioner-aligned research and b) explores what information that encounter conveys regarding dominant academic discourse of such work. The second reflection conveys my experience of shared suspended temporalities with one toddler, Eva, as we lay on the grass together one summer afternoon and discuss how this experience exemplifies the unique temporalities of childhood that are inaccessible to researchers who are unwilling to set aside their hurry in data collection and fieldwork. In the third, I explore how engaging feminist temporalities in my data collection allowed me to access one of my core research findings of the ethnographic project: Slow Care.

Each narrative is connected to literature in feminist research methods, Slow scholarship, and early childhood research, providing a link between the possibilities conveyed in my experiences and those that have been/are being explored within the larger academic community.

Prioritizing Relational Temporalities in Research

In the second year of my doctoral program, I requested to transfer my graduate assistantship to the early childhood center on campus. As discussions loomed regarding the direction of my future dissertation research, I felt lost: how was I to choose a research topic relevant to teachers and children without knowing them, without having deeply engaged with them personally? So, intending to develop relationships with the teachers and children of the early childhood center, I made my request. The graduate committee response was largely negative: although my advisor understood and respected my request, several other faculty members had voiced concern regarding my commitment to academic research. One, I heard, had even stated that *“If Cassie wants to be a teacher, perhaps a Ph.D. is not for her....”*

Reflecting on this incident now, I am unsurprised by this reaction. I have come to know academia as a space where practitioner work is undervalued (Christianakis, 2008), and relationally grounded work is often viewed through a somewhat suspect lens (Brannely & Barnes, 2022). ‘Real’ research is thought to be objective and detached (Sandelowski, 1986). Further, in a direct reflection of the societal devaluation of early childhood teaching and care labor (Priolella & Davies, 2022), graduate assistantships at the early childhood center were viewed by some faculty as less rigorous and as an unproductive site for developing one’s capacities as a scholar. In the minds of those more removed from contextually based

classroom research, teaching was an activity wholly distinct from that of research—a practice unworthy of the time of a Ph.D. student.

As a former early childhood teacher and a qualitative feminist researcher, however, I knew that building relationships and developing a contextually grounded understanding of my research context was non-negotiable; rather than being misaligned with my work, it was its central foundation. So, with the support of early childhood faculty and the center's director, I persisted in my request. For the year prior to the start of my dissertation research, I worked as a graduate assistant in the campus early education center. During this time, my day-to-day practice was superficially unrelated to the technical procedures of research; I spent more time changing diapers and supervising naps than I did conducting literature reviews. And yet, my work was intimately related to understanding the perspectives and experiences of those with whom I would later conduct research. I came to know the children and developed trusting friendships amongst the staff—not in my role as 'the researcher,' but as a person and a colleague. I participated in professional development and action research seminars, listening closely to the concerns voiced by community members. In short, I became an integrated member of that community, developed an understanding of its inner workings, and fostered relationships with the community members that comprised it.

During my time as a member of that community, I collaborated with teachers to identify a topic highly salient to my research interests and their professional practice—care. Through observation and informal conversations, I developed a grounded understanding of how care was enacted in the classroom contexts, which helped shape my research questions and study design. Further, due to my deep first-hand knowledge of the school community, I

identified potential challenges in the research process (including logistical barriers and the various institutional power dynamics). I developed a research plan that accounted for these elements. For example, I learned that teachers viewed their pedagogical coach as their advocate within the school community. As such, I enlisted the pedagogical coaches to support teachers in their decision of whether or not to participate in the research, knowing that the coaches would help the teachers consider what effect participating in a research project would have on their classroom project and make an informed decision as to whether participation would be in their best interests.

Reflecting on my experience as a graduate assistant in that space, I believe my commitment to a year-long relationship-building preparation for research shows that a Ph.D. is for me. In giving my time to the unhurried process of coming to know that context and those people, I believe that I engaged feminist temporalities in research and learned a valuable lesson in how feminist temporalities allow for deeply respectful relationships with research participants and research context, both. When we enter a teacher's classroom, we ask them to lay their emotions, thoughts, and practice bare before us—does that gift not oblige one provided in return? Do we not owe teachers the courtesy of earning their trust rather than demanding it to be granted at the outset?

Experiencing Toddler Temporalities

“It’s a warm, late summer day, and my eyes are trying to close of their own accord. Not surprising: it is early, and I didn’t sleep well the night before. The warm sun on my skin and the sounds of children’s giggles fill my ears and set my heart at peace. The giggles come from the group holding ice chips; Elliot and Michael had fallen a

few minutes before on the stone playground steps, and their teacher, Shelly had retrieved a bag of ice chips from the school kitchen to soothe their 'owies.' Toddlers are not wont to ignore a novelty in their midst; many of the uninjured children requested an ice chip of their own. They lay on the ground, sucking on them, feeling the cool ice melt on their lips. Julia crawls over and lays down on her back on the grass beside me. I take the invitation to lay down with her, and we look into each other's eyes and smile at each other, our faces only inches apart. I feel so peaceful—warm, sleepy, and full of affection for this child. She soon moves to sit on top of me, each of her legs dangling down on either side of my still-prone body. She traced the ice over my shirt and noticed how the fabric changes color as it absorbs the moisture. Eventually, she lays down on my chest and I wrap my arms around her in a hug. There is trust there, and love, and I feel both deeply....”

Farquhar (2016) discusses various temporalities of childhood that exist alongside the hegemonic cultural construction of time as “teleological, linear, and sequential” (p. 409). These alternative temporalities include ‘disordered’—random creative, and irregular—and ‘distended’—fluid and elastic—time. Human understandings of time are not universal but culturally constructed; as such, they are also *learned*. Very young children are less entangled in the various cultural constructions of time and can experience time differently than adults (Kakkori, 2013). On that summer day, I experienced distended time with Julia—I became immersed in the embodied experience of laying on the turf, feeling her warm hugs envelop me, and watching her draw fleeting designs on my shirt with ice.

Slow Research practices made this shared experience of distended time possible in multiple ways. First, established relationships with the children and teachers of this classroom allowed me to exist naturally in this space: I felt comfortable lying down with the children rather than acting as ‘the researcher,’ with all the formality that role often entails. Further, I spent that moment in an embodied, relational experience without engaging my analytical mind. In doing so, I was able to access the alternative temporalities that are characteristic of a toddler’s experience of the world and much less present in that of an adult. My focus, my experience, and thus what I was able to convey in my research were calibrated to the temporal realities of this moment, this classroom, rather than the hegemonic temporalities of productivity dictated by the neoliberal regime.

Qualitative early childhood research is committed to representing lived experiences within early childhood classrooms. These lived experiences consist of intellectual, relational, and emotional experiences in tandem, each of which must be considered and conveyed. Providing further complexity is that these experiences occur within various temporalities. To engage a trustworthy representation of lived experiences of teachers and young children, researchers must hold the capacity to toggle between temporalities as they are experienced at any given moment. Without the ability to exist in the distended temporal space with Julia, I may have never understood her experience in the way that I did. I do not claim to represent the ‘truth’ of her experience—a claim qualitative researchers would decry—but I believe that I aligned myself more closely with the temporalities that a child might engage and therefore was better able to convey that perspective in my research.

Feminist Research Temporalities as an Avenue Toward Slow Care

In Chapter II of this dissertation, I presented Slow Care as a major finding in my ethnographic exploration of care in this classroom community. That finding emerged gradually throughout the research project, but its origins can be found in my field notes from an early instance of participant observation. On the day in question, I had spent roughly an hour in the afternoon lying on the classroom floor with a few children and the classroom teachers. There was no intention of productivity in my research or the classroom activities during this time—we were simply lying on the floor enjoying each other's company. In my conceptual memo, written after leaving the field, I conveyed the following:

“I am so struck reflecting on the emotional experience that was the informal family-like afternoon.... There wasn’t any structure there. We were just being in relationship and in shared space together. It felt so good to me, and there was an understanding that it was okay that everyone was just enjoying themselves. Why can’t this be childcare? Why do there need to be so many activities and schedules and rushing children from place to place? “

This experience would never have been possible if I had acted according to the norms of patriarchal time and the demands of productivity inherent in academic research. I was not actively ‘researching’ in a way that would have been recognizable to another academic (save those recognizing the value of feminist temporalities in research). If I had been focused on whether this experience would propel me forward in my research, I might have never laid down on the classroom floor to engage in that unstructured, joyful—perhaps even ‘lazy’—shared passing of time. Ultimately, however, this experience catalyzed one of the key

findings of my dissertation research. If I had refused to act in accordance with the ‘tempo giusto’ of that particular afternoon, I would have removed myself from the experience and been unable to understand its import. By allowing for Slow temporalities in my data collection, I was then able to more deeply understand and “write the materiality of [my] local environments” (Ulmer, 2017, p. 201).

Conclusion

This methodological paper relied on autoethnographic analysis to explore the relationship between the temporalities of the early childhood classroom and the temporalities of early childhood research. Through illustrative narratives drawn from field notes, researcher memos, and personal memory, I examined the possibilities of Slow scholarship to allow access to the relational ties and understandings of ‘toddler temporalities’ that I believe are critical to trustworthy insight into, the portrayal of, the experiences of children and teachers in the early childhood classroom context. This argument aligns with feminist scholarship in early childhood research that encourages us to prioritize a relational ontology—a goal incompatible with the demands of neoliberal academic temporal regimes. By slowing our processes of data collection and analysis to that which best matches the needs of the context and individuals at hand—in short, finding the ‘tempo giusto’ of each unique context—we can engage in research that prioritizes respectful relational engagement, emotional and embodied insight, and trustworthy research findings.

As Mountz et al. (2015) remind us, “the ‘slow’ in Slow scholarship is not just about time, but about structures of power and inequality.” Too often, the experiences, desires, and emotions of very young children and their teachers are subordinated to the goals of the

academic community in matters of research; we may seek to extract their knowledge to serve our own interests, preferably at speed. But when the research process is slowed to the pace of trust, and when observations and interpretations are slowed to match the lived experience of the individual whose views we are attempting to convey, we end with a higher quality, more ethical research product that challenges others to view the classroom and its actors as they live it—temporally grounded, contextually aligned, and relationally bound. As Mehrotra (2022) reminds us, ‘how we do the work is the work.’

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CONCLUSION

Implications and Future Directions

This three-part dissertation presented the findings of an 8-month feminist ethnography of care practices in an infant/toddler classroom in the Southeastern United States. The overarching ethnographic study relied on a poststructural epistemological foundation and feminist ethics of care theoretical framework to explore the inherently feminized experience of providing care within that classroom context.

The first manuscript, “Time for Slow Care?” explored the role of time—and particularly, Slowness—as a central element in the classroom teachers’ understandings and practices of care. Within the larger theme of Slow Care, this paper presented two central components—Care as Emotional Presence and Care as Acknowledgement—to elucidate how Slow Care appears in the day-to-day context of the infant/toddler classroom under study. Findings from this article encourage understanding of care centered on slow, relationally guided temporalities. This feminist orientation toward care serves to contest and counter the growing neoliberal pressures of efficiency and productivity in the early childhood classroom. This counter-narrative of Slow temporalities of care holds implications for early childhood classroom pedagogy and offers teachers and policymakers an opportunity to move away from standardization and considerations of economic productivity in favor of more responsive and contextual temporalities.

Additional research is necessary to explore other ways Slow Care may appear in the early childhood classroom and how it may appear differently in different socio-political and cultural contexts. The hurried pace of neoliberalism is highly pronounced in capitalistic Euro-Western cultures. Within these contexts, Slow Care presents as a resistant practice. Would the same be true in cultural contexts that do not prioritize efficiency, productivity, and economic success, like

the United States? Further, would varying socio-economic and/or political orientations of classroom families, administration, and teachers affect the temporalities of care within the early childhood classroom? Also of interest would be exploring how families, administrators, and/or teacher educators influence the temporalities of care that classroom teachers engage with their students.

The second manuscript, “Conflict as Care,” leveraged Chantal Mouffe’s (2000; 2005) theories of the democratic paradox and agonist conflict to interpret one teacher’s understandings of conflict in the classroom of study. Through participant observation and interview data, this paper explored how the lead teacher, Shelly, supported agonist peer conflict in her classroom community. Findings from this paper demonstrate that Shelly understands agonist conflict as a productive process for young children that fosters the development of democratic political subjectivities. This paper encourages reconceptualized understandings of peer conflict in early childhood contexts and insight into how teachers can better support children’s developing political engagement through agonist conflict with their peers. Implications of this research lie in how these reconceptualized understandings of conflict can inform early childhood policy and teaching standards to differentiate between agonist and antagonistic conflict. Through this differentiation, support could be provided for pre-service and in-service teachers to learn to facilitate agonist conflict rather than simply push for resolution upon the assumption that all peer conflicts are antagonistic (and therefore destructive and inappropriate).

Future directions might explore the relationship between teachers’ conceptions of conflict and if/how they enact care during instances of peer conflict in the classroom. This study allowed for an in-depth exploration of conflict and care within the confines of *one* classroom. However,

as established in this manuscript, the subjectivities of all community members affect the nature and direction of conflict experiences. This leads us to ask: how might the relationship between conflict and care change if this study were conducted in a classroom community constituted by different subjectivities? For instance, with predominantly Black, Indigenous, or Latine children and/or teachers? How might the teachers' social and cultural backgrounds affect how they understand peer conflict and intervene in such instances? For instance, would teachers within a low-income rural setting in the US or an urban setting in the Global South society understand the relationship between conflict and political participation care differently than Shelly did?

Chapter Four, "Toddler Temporalities," presented a methodological exploration of the relationship between feminist temporalities in early childhood research and the temporalities of the early childhood classroom. This paper explored the possibilities of Slow scholarship in qualitative early childhood research to allow for a deeper and more trustworthy representation of the unique temporalities of early childhood classrooms and young children. Drawing from my own research experiences, I use this manuscript to situate Slow scholarship in early childhood education as a form of feminist resistance to neoliberal temporal regimes. Future directions for this research would include how Slow research is engaged and experienced in a broad variety of early childhood contexts.

Limitations

This research is limited in that it represents the experiences of progressive White female early childhood educators in their 30s as interpreted by a progressive White female early childhood educator turned researcher in her 30s. The alignment of these subjectivities and positionalities constitutes a limitation for two reasons. First, the considerable overlap in the

subjectivities of the researcher and the classroom teachers may have led to the assumption of shared understandings regarding teacher perspectives and care practices. I attempted to reduce this risk by eliciting teacher explanations before providing my own interpretations during the data collection process and by asking follow-up questions to verify that my analyses matched teacher perspectives. However, there likely were instances within my data collection and analysis processes where my observations and interpretations were grounded in inaccurate understandings of teachers' perspectives, emotions, and behaviors. Had I not shared so many characteristics of subjectivity and socio-political positionality with the teachers, I may not have been likely to fall back on 'shared understanding.'

Next, these shared subjectivities and positionalities perhaps contributed to the relative lack of consideration for how race and class were implicated in the study's findings. Emotion and care are highly racialized and classed phenomena, and it is a limitation of the study that these two sociopolitical categories were not leveraged in data analysis or interpretation of findings. Further, emotion and care are culturally constructed phenomena understood and enacted differently in different cultural contexts—this was not a cross-cultural study by design. Still, I would be remiss in failing to mention how a cross-cultural design could have provided a contrastive analysis of care practices and better elucidated how care and culture are intertwined.

Future studies could also extend this investigation to include considerations of how classroom families and school administrators understood and enacted care within the classroom and school context. These individuals are essential members who are integrated into the classroom's daily functioning, and interviews and observations with families and administrators would have strengthened the study and scope of its findings.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Table A-1: Study Timeline

	Broad Classroom Observation	Targeted Observations	Semi- Structured Interviews	Data Revisiting Interviews	Data Analysis	Member Checks
July '22						
August '22						
September '22						
October '22						
November '22						
December '22						
January '23						
February '23						
March '23						
April '23						
May '23						

Appendix B

Table A-2: Participant Information

Pseudonym	Role	Age During Research	Race
Shelly	Lead Teacher	37 years	White
Maria	Assistant Teacher	30 years	White
Noah	Student/Child	20–26 months	Black
Elliot	Student/Child	18–24 months	White
Lila	Student/Child	20–26 months	Asian
Paige	Student/Child	20–26 months	Asian
Ollie	Student/Child	17 – 22 months	White
Julia	Student/Child	20 – 26 months	White
Hank	Student/Child	14 – 20 months	Latino

Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Goals: Discuss teachers' conceptions of care, community, and conflict. Most of the content will likely be emergent as probes/follow-up questions after teacher responses.

Q1: Care

- What does **care** mean to you in the context of your classroom?
- **Describe your emotions** in moments of care in the classroom?
 - **Can you give a specific example?**
- What **professional** values would you say guide your work as a teacher in regard to care?
- What do you want children to know about care as a result of your work in the classroom?
 - **Can you give an example?**

Q2: Community

- **What does community mean to you in the context of your classroom?**
- **What are key emotions related to 'community' in the classroom?**
 - **Can you give an example?**
- What **professional** values would you say guide your work as a teacher in regard to **building a** classroom community?
- What do you want children to know about care **as related to building a classroom community** as a result of your work in the classroom?

Q3: Conflict

- What does conflict mean to you in the context of your classroom?
- Describe the **emotions you have in moments of conflict, either among children or between you and a child**, in the classroom?
- **What values guide the way you respond to conflict in the classroom?**

Appendix D

Table A-3: Research Phases

Phase One: July - Oct	Phase Two: Oct - Jan	Phase Three: Feb - April
<i>Broad Ethnographic Observation</i>	<i>Teacher Interviews & Focused Observations</i>	<i>Data Revisiting & Member Checks</i>
10-week broad ethnographic participant observation in the target classroom (6-8 hours per week) Research memoing regarding emergent themes in ethnographic field data Informal conversation with the teaching team regarding observations and emerging themes	1:1 semi-structured interviews with full-time teachers (topic: teacher understandings + practices of care, with reference to ethnographic field data) In-vivo coding of teacher interviews to identify themes in teachers' understandings and practices of care Interview care themes used to identify and index salient ethnographic field data. Focused classroom observations (2-4 hours per week) to collect additional video data, which was indexed according to interview-derived themes.	1:1 data revisiting interviews with full-time teachers to member-check interview care themes & give interpretation of field note, photo, and video data salient to themes Theoretical analysis of final care themes; consistent teacher references to time in video revisiting interviews used to identify Slow Pedagogy as the interpretive theory. Member-checking of final themes and theoretical interpretation with full-time teachers

Appendix E

Table A-4: Slow Care Coding Examples

Full Participant Quote	In-Vivo Quote	Initial Theme	Final Theme
for like my nonverbal kids, being able to sit with those children and like looking into their eyes was so valuable...just taking the second to invest in the moment created a whole different feel for what this caring task was meant for	“being able to sit with those children and like looking into their eyes was so valuable...just taking the second to invest in the moment created a whole different feel for what this caring task was meant for”	Care as Presence	Care as Emotional Presence
“a connection of being in the moment, instead of being distracted from them. So taking like putting that person in full vision of like, I'm here with you, and we're gonna do these things together. And I'm not gonna get distracted by the 16 other children while I'm invested in your time at this moment in this task”	“a connection of being in the moment, instead of being distracted from them...putting that person in full vision of like, I'm here with you, and we're gonna do these things together.”	Care as Presence	Care as Emotional Presence
“Anybody can hold a bottle...but if I just take a second to be involved with this moment, sitting here, looking into the child's eyes...”	*“Anybody can hold a bottle...but if I just take a second to be involved with this moment, sitting here, looking into the child's eyes...”	Care as Presence	Care as Emotional Presence

Table A-4 continued

Full Participant Quote	In-Vivo Quote	Initial Theme	Final Theme
“Conflicts are going to happen, and when they do, your job is to help support them, and so validating their emotions and saying, “Oh, it looks like you are feeling sad. Why are you feeling sad? Do you want to tell me?”	“your job is to help support them, and so validating their emotions and saying, “Oh, it looks like you are feeling sad. Why are you feeling sad?”	Care as Validation	Care as Acknowledgement
“When I think of a conflict between children, like if somebody hurt somebody, I would go over and sympathize with the person who got hurt first and acknowledge that that person is feeling sad.”	“like if somebody hurt somebody, I would go over and sympathize with the person who got hurt first and acknowledge that that person is feeling sad.	Care as Acknowledgement	Care as Acknowledgement
Caring is like when a child gets hurt, and I acknowledged that they fell down...it's acknowledgement, it's walking over and saying, ouch, like noticing them feeling like that child was seen and heard is a part of care.”	“Caring is like when a child gets hurt, and I acknowledged that they fell down...it's acknowledgement,	Care as Acknowledgement	Care as Acknowledgement

Appendix F

Table A-5: Conflict Coding Examples

Full Participant Quote	In-Vivo Quote	Initial Theme	Targeted Observation Goals
I think you know it's just part of figuring it out, is recognizing that we don't always get what we want, and helping a child to see that it's okay not to get what we want.	"it's recognizing that we don't always get what we want, and helping a child to see that it's okay not to get what we want."	Conflict is normal & has value	Do teachers allow conflict to occur and treat it as a normal and beneficial experience for children? If so, how and under what circumstances?
Leaving the classroom what I would like for them to be able to do is to really work with each other and see the value in others, and see how to get along with someone, whether you like them or not in that moment. So, you know, we handling this social emotional needs, whether it's expressing how you feel or navigating a conflict or seeking out support when you need it, being able to really handle that part of it.	...what I would like for them to be able to do is to really work with each other and see the value in others, and see how to get along with someone, whether you like them or not in that moment...whether it's expressing how you feel or navigating a conflict or seeking out support when you need it, being able to really handle that part of it.	Conflict is normal & has value	Do teachers allow conflict to occur and treat it as a beneficial experience for children? If so, how?
I think if we were looking at like my ideal world. Um, just such a foreign thing to imagine. You know, having children who can negotiate conflict with each other, or can at least hear the other side, whether they want to agree with them or not is different. Um. So you know, being able to engage in problem solving of some type.	I think if we were looking at like my ideal world...having children who can negotiate conflict with each other, or can at least hear the other side, whether they want to agree with them or not is different...	Conflict is normal & has value	Do teachers allow conflict to occur and treat it as a normal and beneficial experience for children? If so, how?
Conflicts are going to happen, and when they do, your job is to help support them, and so validating their emotions and saying, "Oh, it looks like you are feeling sad. Why are you feeling sad? Do you want to tell me? Or you know, if they're fighting over a toy, you put your hand just gently over that toy. Then you say, "Hey, I see you're fighting over this toy. I'm going to help you, so i'm going to take your hands off, and i'm going to take your hands off and let's figure out how to work with this toy together,"	"Conflicts are going to happy, and when they do, your job is to help support them..."	Teachers' role is to scaffold conflict	What types of scaffolding do teachers use in moments of conflict?

Table A-5 continued

Full Participant Quote	In-Vivo Quote	Initial Theme	Targeted Observation Goals
It is okay for a child to express their feelings, even if it's kicking and screaming...we're here to help you.	It is okay for a child to express their feelings, even if it's kicking and screaming	All emotions are welcome in conflict, but not all actions	How do teachers approach children's emotions during conflict? What types of actions do they allow/disallow during conflict?
And so doing things like, "you wanted *blank* but I can't let you do that. It's not safe, you know, climbing on the table, or pushing your friends down. "I cannot let you push your friends down as much as you want to"	You wanted *blank* but I can't let you do that. It's not safe, you know, climbing on the table, or pushing your friends down.	All emotions are welcome in conflict, but not all actions	How do teachers approach children's emotions during conflict? What types of actions do they allow/disallow during conflict?
And then I, my biggest thing, though, is always validate what they're feeling, because most of the time people want to be seen and heard, and then you can move into solving the problem with them if they need it solved. Or maybe it's just that they needed to be heard.	"my biggest thing...is always validate what they're feeling, because most of the time people want to be seen and heard..."	All emotions are welcome in conflict, but not all actions	How do teachers approach children's emotions during conflict? What types of actions do they allow/disallow during conflict?

Appendix G

Table A-6: Answering the Research Questions

	Data Source (O=observational; R=reflective)						Manuscript	Major Findings
	Field Notes	Informal Conversation	Video/Audio Recordings	Semi-Structured Interviews	Video Revisiting Interviews	Member Checks		
What are teachers' lived experiences of care in this early childhood classroom community?	O	R	O	R	O/R	R	Slow Care Conflict & Care	Difference between caretaking and care Engaging Slow temporalities in acknowledgement and presence Supporting agonist engagement during conflict through emotional scaffolding
What are teachers' understandings of these lived experiences of care?	--	R	R	R	R	R	Slow Care Conflict & Care	Importance of slowing down to be present with the children Responsibility to cultivate 'citizens'

Appendix H

Table A-7: Data Sources and Analysis Overview

	Data Sources	Analysis	Interpretive Theories
Manuscript #1	Semi-Structured Interview	In-vivo coding, thematic analysis, theoretical interpretation	Slow Pedagogy & Ethics of Care
	Field Notes & Conceptual Memos	Indexed for themes from interview data; theoretical interpretation	
	Video Revisiting Interview	In-vivo coding, thematic analysis, theoretical interpretation	
Manuscript #2	Semi-Structured Interview	In-vivo coding + thematic analysis, theoretical interpretation	Mouffe's Democratic Paradox
	Field Notes & Conceptual Memos	Indexed for themes established in semi-structured interview data	
Manuscript #3	Field Notes + Conceptual Memos	Interpretive Theoretical Analysis	Slow Scholarship & Feminist Theory
	Personal Memory		

Appendix I



June 08, 2022
Samara Dawn Akpovo,
UTK - Coll of Education, Hlth, & Human - Child and Family Studies
Re: UTK IRB-22-06966-XP
Study Title: A feminist ethnography of infant/toddler care

Dear Samara Dawn Akpovo:

The UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your application for the above referenced project. It determined that your application is eligible for expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1), Categories 6 and 7. The IRB has reviewed these materials and determined that they do comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects.

Therefore, this letter constitutes full approval by the IRB of your application (version 1.5) as submitted, including the following documents that have been dated and stamped IRB approved:

- Child Consent Form v 1.0
- Student Teacher Consent v 1.0
- Family Consent v 1.0
- Teacher Consent v 1.0
- Cassie S orrels Ltr of Support v 1.0- acknowledged
- Research Project Information-Directors v 1.0
- Student Teacher Cover Letter v 1.0
- Teacher Cover Letter v 1.0
- Parent Cover Letter v 1.0

You are approved to enroll a maximum of auto-fill 50 participants. Approval of this study will be valid from June 08, 2022 to 06/07/2023.

Any revisions in the approved application, consent forms, instruments, recruitment materials, etc., must also be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

Finally, re-approval of your project is required by the IRB in accord with the conditions specified above. You may not continue the research study beyond the time or other limits specified unless you obtain prior written approval of the IRB.

Sincerely,

Lora Beebe, Ph.D., PMHNP-BC, FAAN

Institutional Review Board | Office of Research & Engagement
1534 White Avenue Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
865-974-7697 865-974-7400 fax irb.utk.edu

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Appendix J

An Ethnography of Care in the Infant/Toddler Classroom

Informed Consent – Teacher Participation

You are invited to be part of a research study that is being conducted in the _____ classroom by Cassie Sorrells at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Being in this study is completely voluntary and this form contains information that will help you decide if you want to be part of the research study or not. If you have any questions, please contact Cassie at csorrel4@vols.utk.edu or speak to her at school. You can also contact Cassie's doctoral advisor, Samara Akpovo, who will be supervising the project, at smadrid1@utk.edu.

Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the practices of care in an infant/toddler classroom. This includes how children care for each other, and how teachers care for children. The findings from this research will be used for Cassie's dissertation, will be published in academic journals and/or books, and will be shared at conferences. Findings will also be shared with you by Cassie.

Participation

If you choose to participate, you will join the study for two distinct phases of data collection. In the first phase, Cassie will join your classroom for six to eight months beginning in Summer 2022 for up to 8-10 hours per week to observe, document, and analyze the culture of care in your classroom. Cassie will collect the following data:

- Photographs
- Video and audio recording
- Observation notes

These are all things that are part of your regular activities with the _____ classroom, so participation in this portion of the research will not require any additional time or effort on your part, other than casual classroom conversations (as you might have with student teachers).

Phase Two of the project will take place in Fall 2022. During that phase, I will ask that you and your full-time teaching team (DT & AT) each join me, albeit separately, for 4-6 total meetings, each lasting 1 to 1.5 hours. These meetings will take place over the course of 4 months and will involve reviewing video documentation of the practices of care in the classroom. They will also give me the opportunity to hear your perspectives on and interpretations of the videos. These meetings will occur during your normal work hours and the Early Learning Center will provide coverage for your classroom during this time.

Benefit

Findings from this study will be shared with you through direct communication from Cassie, which will help you to better understand the culture of care in your classroom. Additionally, Cassie will create blog posts and classroom documentation for your classroom so that you can share those findings with the families in your classroom.

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Risks

This research is considered no more than minimal risk, which means there is no more expected risk to you than what you might experience during a typical day. There is the risk of possible loss of confidentiality, as someone could find out you were in the study or see your study information, but we believe that risk is unlikely because of the procedures we will use to protect their information.

Confidentiality

Protecting your identity: If you agree to participate in the research, we will assign you a pseudonym (fake name) and use that instead of your name on all the materials before we begin analyzing them for the research study. We will also use a pseudonym to refer to the Early Learning Center and your classroom and will not name Knoxville as the location of the study in any published or shared work.

Storing of data: All data will be stored in a secure location on the UT campus password protected electronic storage system. Written notes taken during classroom observation will be scanned and uploaded to this password-protected electronic storage system immediately after Cassie leaves the classroom and will be shredded on site at the Early Learning Center. Video and audio recordings will be uploaded on-site and immediately deleted from any device used to record them.

Future Research

The data collected from the study may be used for future research studies or shared with other researchers for use in the future without obtaining additional informed consent from you. If this happens, all your identifiable information will be removed before any future use or sharing with other researchers.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Cassie Sorrells at csorrel4@utk.edu or speak to her at the early learning center. You may also contact Cassie's doctoral supervisor, Samara Madrid Akpovo at smadrid1@utk.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the institutional review board of the University of Tennessee at utkirb@utk.edu or 865-874-7697. You may also contact the IRB with any problems, concerns, or complaints that you have about this research study.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in the study is completely voluntary – it is up to you whether you want to be in this research study. Even if you agree to be in the study now, you may change your mind at any point and stop participating by telling Cassie that you don't want to participate. You will not be treated any differently by Cassie.

If you decide to stop participating during Phase One of the study, Cassie will terminate the project and will no longer collect any data in your classroom and will delete any existing data. If

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you decide to stop participating during Phase Two of the study, Cassie will terminate Phase Two of the project and delete any Phase Two data. In this second case, Cassie will retain Phase One data for analysis, but will not use any of your data (only that of the other classroom members) and will blur your image in any photos or video recordings used for analysis. You may not withdraw consent after both phases of data collection have been completed.

If you agree that to participate, please sign the teacher permission section below on both copies of this form. Return one copy to Cassie and keep one copy for your records. If you do not wish to participate in the research, it is not necessary to do anything, as we cannot use your information without your permission, and this signed consent form.

Teacher Permission

(Please be sure to carefully read each question)

I have read the above information and agree to participate in the study. I have received a copy of this form. I understand that my participation in this research study includes allowing Cassie to use my information for research purposes.

Teacher's Name (printed): _____

Teacher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Permission for use of images

Can the researchers collect and analyze images of you from the _____ classroom for research purposes? **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Teacher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Can the researchers publish images of you and/or share those images at conferences alongside the research findings? *If these images contain your face, it will be blurred or altered so you are not recognizable.* **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Teacher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Permission for use of video

Can the researchers collect and analyze video recording of you from the _____ classroom for research purposes? **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Can the researchers publish video of you and/or share those videos at conferences alongside the research findings? *If these videos contain your face, it will be blurred or altered so you are not recognizable.* **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Teacher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

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Appendix K

An Ethnography of Care in the Infant/Toddler Classroom

Informed Consent – Child Participation

Your child is invited to be part of a research study that is being conducted in the _____ classroom by Cassie Sorrells at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Cassie has been a graduate assistant in your child's classroom since August 2021, and this study will be her dissertation work. Being in this study is completely voluntary and this form contains information that will help you decide if you want your child to be part of the research study or not. If you have any questions, please contact Cassie at csorrel4@vols.utk.edu or speak to her at school. You can also contact Cassie's doctoral advisor, Samara Akpovo, who will be supervising the project, at smadrid1@utk.edu.

Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the practices of care in an infant/toddler classroom. This includes how children care for each other, and how teachers care for children. Data collection in the classroom will take place for 6-8 months, beginning in summer 2022.

This study will not change normal classroom activities in any way – the children will simply go about their normal day at school as Cassie observes and/or takes part in normal classroom activities, as she would during her regular graduate assistant shifts. The findings from this research will be used for Cassie's dissertation, will be published in academic journals and/or books, and will be shared at conferences. Findings will also be shared with you through blog posts and/or classroom documentation.

Participation

If you choose to allow your child to participate, Cassie will observe, document, and analyze how your child engages in the classroom space and how your child's teachers and classmates engage with them. Your classroom teachers, _____ and _____, will also be helping Cassie to analyze and make sense of this information. Cassie will collect the following data:

- Photographs
- Video and audio recording
- Observation notes
- Classroom artifacts (e.g., drawings made by your child, attendance records)

Because these are all things that are part of the regular activities of the _____ classroom, participation in this research will not require any additional time or effort on your child's part.

Benefit

Your child will not receive any direct benefit from you allowing their materials to be used in this research project, but we hope to learn things that will benefit young children and early childhood educators in the future.

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-22-06966-XP
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 06/08/2022
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 06/07/2023

Risks

This research is considered no more than minimal risk, which means there is no more expected risk to you than what your child might experience during a typical day. There is the risk of possible loss of confidentiality, as someone could find out your child was in the study or see their study information, but we believe that risk is unlikely because of the procedures we will use to protect their information.

Confidentiality

Protecting your child's identity: If you and your child agree to participate in the research, we will assign your child a pseudonym (fake name) and use that instead of their name on all the materials before we begin analyzing them for the research study. We will also use a pseudonym to refer to the Early Learning Center and your child's classroom and will not name Knoxville as the location of the study in any published or shared work.

Storing of data: All data will be stored in a secure location on the UT campus password protected electronic storage system. Written notes taken during classroom observation will be scanned and uploaded to this password-protected electronic storage system immediately after Cassie leaves the classroom and will be shredded on site at the Early Learning Center. Video and audio recordings will be uploaded on-site and immediately deleted from any device used to record them.

Future Research

The data collected from the study may be used for future research studies or shared with other researchers for use in the future without obtaining additional informed consent from you. If this happens, all your child's identifiable information will be removed before any future use or sharing with other researchers.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Cassie Sorrells at csorrel4@utk.edu or speak to her at the early learning center. You can also contact Cassie's doctoral advisor, Samara Akpovo, who will be supervising the project, at smadrid1@utk.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the institutional review board of the University of Tennessee at utkirb@utk.edu or 865-874-7697. You may also contact the IRB with any problems, concerns, or complaints that you have about this research study.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in the study is completely voluntary – it is up to you whether you allow your child to be in this research study. Even if you agree to be in the study now, you may change your mind at any point and stop participating by telling Cassie that you don't want to participate. Your child will not be treated any differently by Cassie or their classroom teachers. We all want the very best learning and care environment for your child and respect your decision regarding the study. Please know that your child will be treated the same even if you do not agree for us to use your child's information for research.

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If you decide for your child to stop participating before data collection in the classroom is complete, we will not use your [child's] information for this study, and your child's image will be blurred in any video or picture data that we collected. You may not withdraw consent for your child after data collection in the classroom is complete.

If you agree that your child may participate, please sign the parental permission section below on both copies of this form. Return one copy to Cassie or your classroom teachers and keep one copy for your records. If you do not wish for your child to participate in the research, it is not necessary to do anything, as we cannot use their materials without your permission, and this signed consent form.

Parental Permission

(Please be sure to carefully read each question)

I have read the above information and agree for my child to participate in the study. I have received a copy of this form. I understand that my child's participation in this research study includes allowing Cassie to use my child's information for research purposes.

Child's Name (printed): _____

Parent's Name (printed): _____

Parent's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Permission for use of images

Can the researchers collect and analyze images of your child from the _____ classroom for research purposes? **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Parent's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Can the researchers publish images of your child and/or share those images at conferences alongside the research findings? *If these images contain your child's face, it will be blurred or altered so they are not recognizable.* **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Parent's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Permission for use of video

Can the researchers collect and analyze video recording of your child from the _____ classroom for research purposes? **Yes** _____ **No** _____

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Can the researchers publish video of your child and/or share those videos at conferences alongside the research findings? *If these videos contain your child's face, it will be blurred or altered so they are not recognizable.* **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Parent's Signature: _____ Date: _____

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-22-06966-XP
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IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 06/07/2023

Appendix L

An Ethnography of Care in the Infant/Toddler Classroom

Informed Consent – Parent/Family Participation

You are invited to be part of a research study that is being conducted in the _____ classroom by Cassie Sorrells at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Cassie has been a graduate assistant in your child's classroom since August 2021, and this study will be her dissertation work. Being in this study is completely voluntary and this form contains information that will help you decide if you want to be part of the research study or not. If you have any questions, please contact Cassie at csorrel4@vols.utk.edu or speak to her at school. You can also contact Cassie's doctoral advisor, Samara Akpovo, who will be supervising the project, at smadrid1@utk.edu

Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the practices of care in an infant/toddler classroom. This includes how children care for each other, and how teachers care for children. The findings from this research will be used for Cassie's dissertation, will be published in academic journals and/or books, and will be shared at conferences. Findings will also be shared with you through blog posts and/or classroom documentation.

Participation

If you choose to participate, Cassie will observe, document, and analyze your role in the culture of care in your child's classroom, as evidenced during pick-ups, drop-offs, parent-teacher conferences, family events, and any other instances where you engage with the teachers and/or children. Parents and family members are not the primary focus of this study, so this data will be used to help augment understandings of the classroom culture. Your classroom teachers, _____ and _____, will also be helping Cassie to analyze and make sense of this information. Cassie will collect the following data:

- Photographs
- Video and audio recording
- Observation notes

Because these are all things that are part of your regular activities with the _____ classroom, participation in this research will not require any additional time or effort on your part. If your interactions with the classroom, teachers, and/or children become particularly salient to the story of the culture of care, Cassie may ask (in person or by email) whether you would be open to a short conversation/interview. This conversation would be completely voluntary, would last no more than 1 hour, and would take place in a private location at a time of your choosing. With your consent, it would be audio recorded.

Benefit

Findings from this study will be shared with you through direct communication from Cassie, as well as through the classroom blog and classroom emails. This information will help you to better understand the nature of care in your child's classroom and how your child engages with their teachers and peers.

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IRB APPROVAL DATE: 06/08/2022
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 06/07/2023

Risks

This research is considered no more than minimal risk, which means there is no more expected risk to you than what you might experience during a typical day. There is the risk of possible loss of confidentiality, as someone could find out you were in the study or see your study information, but we believe that risk is unlikely because of the procedures we will use to protect their information.

Confidentiality

Protecting your identity: If you agree to participate in the research, we will assign you a pseudonym (fake name) and use that instead of your name on all the materials before we begin analyzing them for the research study. We will also use a pseudonym to refer to the Early Learning Center and your child's classroom and will not name Knoxville as the location of the study in any published or shared work.

Storing of data: All data will be stored in a secure location on the UT campus password protected electronic storage system. Written notes taken during classroom observation will be scanned and uploaded to this password-protected electronic storage system immediately after Cassie leaves the classroom and will be shredded on site at the Early Learning Center. Video and audio recordings will be uploaded on-site and immediately deleted from any device used to record them.

Future Research

The data collected from the study may be used for future research studies or shared with other researchers for use in the future without obtaining additional informed consent from you. If this happens, all your child's identifiable information will be removed before any future use or sharing with other researchers.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Cassie Sorrells at csorrel4@utk.edu or speak to her at the early learning center. You can also contact Cassie's doctoral advisor, Samara Akpovo, who will be supervising the project, at smadrid1@utk.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the institutional review board of the University of Tennessee at utkirb@utk.edu or 865-874-7697. You may also contact the IRB with any problems, concerns, or complaints that you have about this research study.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in the study is completely voluntary – it is up to you whether you want to be in this research study. Even if you agree to be in the study now, you may change your mind at any point and stop participating by telling Cassie that you don't want to participate. You will not be treated any differently by Cassie or their classroom teachers.

If you agree that to participate, please sign the Family Member permission section below on both copies of this form. Return one copy to Cassie or your classroom teachers and keep one copy for

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your records. If you do not wish to participate in the research, it is not necessary to do anything, as we cannot use your information without your permission, and this signed consent form.

Family Permission

(Please be sure to carefully read each question)

I have read the above information and agree to participate in the study. I have received a copy of this form. I understand that my participation in this research study includes allowing Cassie to use my information for research purposes.

Family Member's Name (printed): _____

Family Member's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Permission for use of images

Can the researchers collect and analyze images of you from the _____ classroom for research purposes? **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Family Member's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Can the researchers publish images of you and/or share those images at conferences alongside the research findings? *If these images contain your face, it will be blurred or altered so you are not recognizable.* **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Family Member's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Permission for use of video

Can the researchers collect and analyze video recording of you from the _____ classroom for research purposes? **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Can the researchers publish video of you and/or share those videos at conferences alongside the research findings? *If these videos contain your face, it will be blurred or altered so you are not recognizable.* **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Family Member's Signature: _____ Date: _____

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-22-06966-XP
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 06/08/2022
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 06/07/2023

Appendix M

An Ethnography of Care in the Infant/Toddler Classroom

Informed Consent – Student Teacher Participation

You are invited to be part of a research study that is being conducted in the _____ classroom by Cassie Sorrells at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Cassie has been a graduate assistant in the _____ classroom since August 2021, and this study will be her dissertation work. Being in this study is completely voluntary and this form contains information that will help you decide if you want to be part of the research study or not. If you have any questions, please contact Cassie at csorrel14@vols.utk.edu or speak to her at school. You can also contact Cassie's doctoral advisor, Samara Akpovo, who will be supervising the project, at smadrid1@utk.edu.

Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the practices of care in an infant/toddler classroom. This includes how children care for each other, and how teachers care for children. The findings from this research will be used for Cassie's dissertation, will be published in academic journals and/or books, and will be shared at conferences. Findings will also be shared with you through blog posts and/or classroom documentation.

Participation

If you choose to participate, Cassie will observe, document, and analyze your role in the culture of care of the _____ classroom. Data collection in the classroom will take place for 6-8 months, beginning in summer 2022, and may last for a portion or the entirety of your time as a student teacher at the ELC. Your classroom teachers, _____ and _____, will be helping Cassie to analyze and make sense of this information. Cassie will collect the following data:

- Photographs
- Video and audio recording
- Observation notes

Because these are all things that are part of your regular activities with the _____ classroom, participation in this research will not require any additional time or effort on your part. If your interactions with the classroom, teachers, and/or children become particularly salient to the story of the culture of care, Cassie may ask (in person or by email) whether you would be open to a short conversation/interview. This conversation would be completely voluntary, would last no more than 1 hour, and would take place a time and place of your choosing. With your consent, it would be audio recorded.

Benefit

Findings from this study will be shared with you through direct communication from Cassie, as well as through the classroom blog and classroom emails. This information will help you to better understand the nature of care in your classroom and how you engage in this culture of care, which may help you to shape your teaching practices moving forward.

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Risks

This research is considered no more than minimal risk, which means there is no more expected risk to you than what you might experience during a typical day. There is the risk of possible loss of confidentiality, as someone could find out you were in the study or see your study information, but we believe that risk is unlikely because of the procedures we will use to protect their information.

Confidentiality

Protecting your identity: If you agree to participate in the research, we will assign you a pseudonym (fake name) and use that instead of your name on all the materials before we begin analyzing them for the research study. We will also use a pseudonym to refer to the Early Learning Center and your classroom and will not name Knoxville as the location of the study in any published or shared work.

Storing of data: All data will be stored in a secure location on the UT campus password protected electronic storage system. Written notes taken during classroom observation will be scanned and uploaded to this password-protected electronic storage system immediately after Cassie leaves the classroom and will be shredded on site at the Early Learning Center. Video and audio recordings will be uploaded on-site and immediately deleted from any device used to record them.

Future Research

The data collected from the study may be used for future research studies or shared with other researchers for use in the future without obtaining additional informed consent from you. If this happens, all your identifiable information will be removed before any future use or sharing with other researchers.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Cassie Sorrells at csorrel4@utk.edu or speak to her at the early learning center. You can also contact Cassie's doctoral advisor, Samara Akpovo, who will be supervising the project, at smadrid1@utk.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the institutional review board of the University of Tennessee at utkirb@utk.edu or 865-874-7697. You may also contact the IRB with any problems, concerns, or complaints that you have about this research study.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in the study is completely voluntary – it is up to you whether you want to be in this research study. Even if you agree to be in the study now, you may change your mind at any point and stop participating by telling Cassie that you don't want to participate. You will not be treated any differently by Cassie or the classroom teachers.

If you decide to stop participating before data collection in the classroom is complete, we will not use your information for this study, and your image will be blurred in any video or picture data that we collected. You may not withdraw consent after data collection in the classroom is complete.

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If you agree that to participate, please sign the student teacher permission section below on both copies of this form. Return one copy to Cassie or your classroom teachers and keep one copy for your records. If you do not wish to participate in the research, it is not necessary to do anything, as we cannot use your information without your permission, and this signed consent form.

Student Teacher Permission

(Please be sure to carefully read each question)

I have read the above information and agree to participate in the study. I have received a copy of this form. I understand that my participation in this research study includes allowing Cassie to use my information for research purposes.

Student Teacher's Name (printed): _____

Student Teacher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Permission for use of images

Can the researchers collect and analyze images of you from the _____ classroom for research purposes? **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Student Teacher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Can the researchers publish images of you and/or share those images at conferences alongside the research findings? *If these images contain your face, it will be blurred or altered so you are not recognizable.* **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Student Teacher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Permission for use of video

Can the researchers collect and analyze video recording of you from the _____ classroom for research purposes? **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Can the researchers publish video of you and/or share those videos at conferences alongside the research findings? *If these videos contain your face, it will be blurred or altered so you are not recognizable.* **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Student Teacher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

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VITA

Cassie Sorrells was born in Charleston, West Virginia. She graduated from West Virginia University in 2012 with a Bachelor of Arts in Multidisciplinary Studies. She received her Master of Arts in Education and Human Development from the University of Colorado Denver in 2017. Cassie is a former early childhood educator and, upon approval of this dissertation, will hold a doctoral degree in Child and Family Studies from the University of Tennessee Knoxville, USA. Her research relies on feminist qualitative methodologies to investigate the sociological and cultural foundation of early care and education in the United States. Her most recent work explores the intersectional and political nature of emotion for young children and teachers in those spaces. She also engages community-based action research to co-construct and explore contextually relevant research questions with classroom teachers.