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Jedi Mind Control, Idiot Compassion, and a Pedagogy of Discomfort: Rethinking Care and the Ethics of Pedagogical Influence

Star Wars: A New Hope for Visual Pedagogies in a Galaxy Far, Far Away

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Abstract

This article brings together the Buddhist philosopher Chögyam Trungpa's notion of *idiot compassion* and a moment of Jedi mind control in *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* to question pedagogy in early childhood education. Through a philosophic playing with theory, the analysis situates a pop culture fragment – the bar scene in which Obi-Wan Kenobi encounters drug dealer Elan Sel'Sabagno – as a site for thinking critically about the ethics of compassion, authority, and pedagogical influence. Drawing on Buddhist philosophy, the article questions whether the Jedi's use of power constitutes compassion or coercion, and how this tension resonates with educational practice. The discussion proposes that idiot compassion, a form of empathy that avoids discomfort but often inadvertently perpetuates harm, has parallels in early education when teachers prioritise being 'nice' over engaging with conflict, inequity, or supporting children's agency. Using a visual analysis of the Star Wars mind control film clip, the article explores how cultural texts can function as pedagogical tools to foster critical reflection. Arguing for a shift from simplistic notions of kindness and care toward a more nuanced, skilful, and intelligent compassion in early childhood pedagogy.

Keywords

Star Wars – idiot compassion – Jedi mind control – early childhood education – philosophy – pedagogy



FEATURE Rebecca Hopkins' article comprises a video, which can be viewed [here](#).

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1 Introduction

The education of young children is often framed through the language of care and kindness (Goldstein, 1998). The discourse of ‘niceness’ remains powerful in conceptions of early childhood teachers, with strong links to compassion (Goldstien, 1998; Goldstein & Lake, 2000; Hard, 2006; Stonehouse, 1989). Even if “being nice all the time is not necessarily beneficial to children” (Ewens, 2019, p. 55). In both policy and practice, early childhood education has long emphasised teachers holding nurturing dispositions, fostering empathetic interactions, and enacting a relational ethic of care.

In Aotearoa New Zealand children attending early education and care services have the “right to experience affection, warmth and consistent care” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 26). There is also an expectation that teachers provide care that is culturally responsive and respectful. Care is positioned within the curriculum as inclusive of caring for children, supporting children to learn self-care, and care for others and the environment. In 2019, the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE) released *He Māpuna*

te Tamaiti – Supporting social and emotional competence in early learning, a resource to help teachers to understand and support “children’s social and emotional competence, engagement and learning” (p. 7). The most recent resource published by the Ministry, *Kōwhiri Whakapae* (MoE, 2025), identifies social and emotional development for targeted learning. *Kōwhiri Whakapae* is intended to support teachers to “recognise children’s capabilities and progress and to respond with effective practices” (p. 4) in relation to the identified learning areas (Social & emotional learning, Oral language & literacy, and Maths, MoE, 2025). While this focus on providing quality care for young children, with a compassionate emphasis, is reasonable and desirable, practices surrounding provision of care are not without complexity.

Care is often talked about in terms of having empathy or being compassionate, for the other or for the self. However, compassion, when unexamined, can mask forms of avoidance, complacency, or even control. Chögyam Trungpa, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher and philosopher, used the term *idiot compassion* to describe this tension. Trungpa (1991) discussed the impulse to act kindly or caringly, but in a way which ultimately perpetuates suffering rather than working with it. His teachings warned against compassion that refuses to confront difficulty, challenge harmful behaviour, disrupt injustice, or that creates dependency rather than encourages empowerment. Trungpa’s (1991) idiot compassion is a form of compassionless compassion, a compassion that lacks skill, “courage and intelligence”, is superficial, and can do “more harm than good” (p. 126). While such a concept may seem unrelated to early childhood settings, teachers encounter decisions daily requiring them to navigate the tension between compassion and control. For example, deciding when or if to intervene in conflicts, how to use their power and when to apply their authority, when to smooth over, minimise and comfort, or when to bring attention to and challenge. In these moments, teachers can potentially fall into Trungpa’s idiot compassion, choosing superficial harmony over unease and discomfort, rather than deeper ethical engagement.

This article explores how the idea of idiot compassion (Trungpa, 1991) – the misguided attempt to relieve suffering without working with it skilfully – works generatively with pedagogies of discomfort (Zembylas, 2005), and suffering (McCaffrey, 2015). In doing so it seeks to outline a thinking of care and the ethics of care, in connection to an ethic of pedagogical influence. Compassion for others is a fundamental element of working well with young children and their families. Care as an approach to the education of young children (Goldstein & Lake, 2000) and the place of love (Grimmer, 2021, 2024, Page, 2011, 2018a, 2018b) are increasingly discussed, and vital, aspects of teaching and the scholarship of teaching. The holistic development of the young child in Aotearoa New Zealand is defined in the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki: He*

whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa Early childhood curriculum (MoE, 2017, hereafter *Te Whāriki*), as an interconnected whole, encompassing cognitive, social, emotional, physical, cultural, and spiritual aspects. This conception brings emotional learning and growth into focus as a key area for attention. This focus on emotional development requires intentional inquiry into, planning for, and assessment of, socio-emotional competence by teachers (MoE, 2017; MoE, 2019; MoE, 2025). Ideas of emotional literacy and competence have become common in educational discourse. However, critique of these are needed in order to grapple with the performative and normalising force these can bring (Zembylas, 2005).

This article approaches these tensions, and the connected dilemmas, by bringing a popular cultural text into dialogue with pedagogy. A scene from *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (Lucas, 2002, hereafter *Attack of the Clones*), in which a Jedi knight encounters a drug dealer. The Jedi, often framed as guardians of peace and justice, embody tensions between compassion and control, nonviolence and force. In the scene, Obi-Wan Kenobi uses a Jedi mind trick of redirecting the drug dealer's behaviour. This cinematic moment is explored as a method to generate questions about compassion, coercion, and the ethics of pedagogical influence. The Star Wars franchise is well known in global pop culture, providing a shared reference point across generations. The bar scene is especially useful to the exploration here because of its ordinariness. It is not a huge battle or intense confrontation, but a fleeting encounter in a crowded public space. In this everydayness, the scene resonates with the small but consequential encounters children and teachers experience daily in early education.

The article unfolds in four parts. First, Trungpa's (1991) concept of idiot compassion is discussed within a broader theoretical frame, connecting it to pedagogies of compassion and relational ethics. Second, the bar scene is described in detail, noting key cinematic moments. Third, the Jedi's use of mind control is explored through the lens of compassion, idiotic (Trungpa, 1991) and critical (Zembylas, 2013), asking whether his actions hold authentic care or a subtle form of coercion. And finally, implications for early childhood pedagogy and practice are posed.

2 The Buddhist Notion of Idiot Compassion and a Pedagogy of Discomfort

Chögyam Trungpa (1991) explained, that unlike intelligent compassion, which requires courage and the willingness to face discomfort, idiot compassion

seeks to preserve harmony. Often at the expense of longer-term development or learning. Trungpa suggested that such misplaced compassion arises when we attempt to protect ourselves from the pain of conflict or the difficulty of saying “no.” In doing so, we may appear caring, but in fact we are being uncaring of the other, and caring for self in a protective and altogether unhelpful manner. For early childhood education, this notion can be used provocatively. Compassion and caring are often promoted in early education practices and pedagogies, associated with kindness, empathy, and relational sensitivity. Yet, when compassion is seen to be ‘keeping the peace,’ by not allowing big emotions and conflict to explode, it risks becoming idiotic in Trungpa’s sense.

Failing to challenge harmful behaviour, overlooking small injustices, or silencing difficult conversations or emotional outbursts are short term solutions to restoring calm but miss opportunities for all parties, children and teachers alike, to grow in emotional intelligence, capability, and confidence in themselves as social beings. For example, teachers may avoid addressing a child’s exclusionary play because it seems kinder not to intervene as the child has a complicated family life, or overlook systemic inequities in the name of protecting harmony. In such cases, compassion masks avoidance. Such responses may be due to lack of professional knowledge in supporting emotional competence, or teachers may themselves be overwhelmed and expressing levels of stress, which make them unable to engage with the complex emotions experienced by children (King & La Paro, 2018).

3 Jedi Mind Control as Pedagogical Provocation

Films, images, and popular culture fragments offer more than illustrative examples, they can act as provocations to disrupt familiar patterns of thought and open space for new questions (see van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2000). The Jedi mind trick is one of the most recognisable tropes of the Star Wars universe. With a simple gesture and calm voice, Jedi implant a suggestion into another’s mind, bending their will, changing actions and outcomes. In the bar scene of *Attack of the Clones* (Lucas, 2002), Obi-Wan Kenobi encounters a drug pusher, Elan Sel’Sabagno, who offers him death sticks. Obi-Wan raises his hand and states, “You don’t want to sell me death sticks” (Lucas, 2020, 50 minutes). Elan Sel’Sabagno repeats the phrase, and Obi-Wan continues, “You want to go home and rethink your life” (Lucas, 2020, 50 minutes). Elan Sel’Sabagno again repeats the words spoken by the Jedi and leaves the bar, subdued and redirected, supposedly in search of new meaning and purpose. According to Star Wars lore Elan Sel’Sabagno did reinvent himself, settling down and starting a



VIDEO 1 Obi-Wan Kenobi uses a Jedi mind trick on a 'death stick' dealer in *Star Wars II – Attack of the Clones*. (See [here](#).)
LUCAS, 2002, 0.50:00

family (Wookieepedia, n.d.). On the surface, this seems an act of compassion. Obi-Wan spares the dealer from arrest or punishment, offering him instead the chance to reconsider his life. Yet the means are unmistakably coercive. Elan Sel'Sabagno does not choose freely; his agency is overridden by the Jedi's power. The action is potentially merciful in intent but ultimately manipulative in execution.

When analysed in detail, this bar scene, whilst lasting not even a minute, contains complex dynamics of power, compassion, and control. To begin, the camera cuts to the death stick dealer, approaching Obi-Wan Kenobi, leaning in with a half-smile as he makes his offer: "You wanna buy some death sticks?" The framing positions the dealer as insistent but non-threatening, a background nuisance in the bustling bar. Obi-Wan remains seated, calm and centred, his expression one of non-engagement. Raising his hand Obi-Wan applies the recognisable gesture of the Jedi mind trick. His voice lowers in tone, and calmly, but firmly suggests Elan Sel'Sabagno does not wish to sell the drug in question. The dealer immediately repeats the words, looking vague and unfocused. Obi-Wan delivers his next line of going home and reconsidering life with faint humour, playing with a darker thread of power and weakness, the dark comedic value flipping the power dynamics between dangerous drug dealer and innocent citizen. Elan Sel'Sabagno repeats the phrase, turns, and walks away. The camera follows him briefly, then returns to the larger bar scene, leaving this micro-encounter as a comic rift in the larger story of dark versus light, good versus evil.

Obi-Wan's use of power could be read as compassionate. He spares the dealer arrest, violence, or humiliation. He offers him a new path, the possibility of rethinking his life, which sounds beneficial and empowering. A close

reading, however, complicates the scene. The means of this compassion is coercion through mind control. Elan Sel'Sabagno does not decide, is not even persuaded, but compelled. His agency is removed. This inconsistency – care enacted through domination – resonates with the dilemma of idiot compassion. Like Trungpa's (1999) notion, it is compassion that avoids the discomfort of real encounter. Obi-Wan does not engage with Elan Sel'Sabagno as a subject, does not challenge the broader culture of drug use, and does not open dialogue. He simply removes Elan Sel'Sabagno with the least friction possible.

4 Rethinking Care and the Ethics of Pedagogical Influence

Teachers, like Jedi, often possess subtle forms of authority that shape children's choices. They use voice, gesture, suggestion, and relational presence to influence behaviour. Much of this influence is unconscious and framed as care. Yet, as Zembylas (2005) argues, relational pedagogy requires critical awareness of how power operates within teacher–student relationships, and in the systems of power governing bodies within educational spaces. When authority is cloaked as kindness, it risks becoming manipulative, even if unintentionally.

King and La Paro (2018) exemplify this issue when reporting on a study of early childhood teachers use of minimising language in response to toddlers' emotional experiences. The study looked at the ways teachers used oral language to intentionally distance themselves from the emotion experienced, refute the realness of the emotion for the child, or to dismiss or end an emotional experience. King and La Paro argued this practice limits the child's positive learning of social competence, emotional regulation, and knowledge of how to be with others. Instead resulting in negative learning experiences, where the child comes to see their emotions as not of value or importance, and that expressing themselves as not appropriate nor welcomed. This is not supportive of children's holistic development, nor focused on their growth as emotional beings. With potential for a new divide between “emotional competent” and “emotional incompetent” opening, comes a “dichotomy [that] has the capacity to be just as colonizing as the IQ has been in the past” (Zembylas, 2005, p. 169). As Zembylas suggests, such a comparison exposes how measures of normative emotional competence, although often framed as caring or supportive, risk reinscribing the same colonial logics of classification and control that underpinned the original use of IQ tests to rank and exclude certain groups.

Obi-Wan's action could be read as compassionate avoidance, similarly to how early childhood teachers can use minimising language when responding to toddlers' emotions. Rather than confronting the systemic issue of drug

dealing, he simply redirects one individual. It is an easy, painless solution, one that appears kind but leaves deeper structures intact. Similarly, in education, teachers may prefer soft interventions that smooth over difficulty without addressing underlying problems, or minimising strategies that create controlled calm, but limit the sometimes messiness of raw learning. However, this approach, “ignores the fact that life and learning is not always nice and there is a lot to be learnt from less than pleasant experiences” (Ewens, 2019, p. 55). The Jedi’s trick thus highlights the thin line between care and control, between compassion and avoidance. The use of the phrase “You’re okay” in response to a child’s ‘out of control’ emotional expression is an example of how the intention to create peace and restore calm, i.e., to stop a child from crying or loudly expressing their emotional turmoil, uses authority or suggestion to manage or manipulate a situation.

Zembylas (2014) reminds us that compassion cannot be separated from politics. Acts of care are never neutral; they are shaped by power relations, cultural expectations, and structural inequities. One way critical compassion differs from idiot compassion is that it embraces confrontation when necessary. It does not equate care with ease; rather, it recognises that authentic care sometimes requires disruption, discomfort, or refusal. And that this can be upsetting.

Compassion, “suffering with,” is bound to suffering and arises in response to suffering. If suffering is part of the human condition, an aspect of experience that calls for understanding and not only complaint, rejection, and avoidance, then compassion cannot be simply a countervailing fix for suffering. If suffering is at least in some aspects pedagogic through its intimate place in ecologies of human life, then compassion also has to be honoured without idealization, along with its aporias, shadows, and absences.

MCCAFFREY, 2015, p. 19

For early childhood teachers, critical compassion could mean engaging directly with issues such as exclusion, bias, or injustice in the learning environment. It may mean recognising children as capable of complex ethical dialogue, rather than protecting them from every difficulty. Principles that guide *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), *manaakitanga* (care and hospitality) and *whakamana* (empowerment), echo these philosophies. They challenge us to balance empathy with a commitment to fostering children’s agency through caring and empowering relationships.

Compassion in education must grapple with the politics of emotion (Zembylas, 2029), asking not simply how to soothe but how to respond ethically to difference, conflict, and inequity. From this perspective, Obi-Wan's intervention appears hollow. It avoids violence, but it also silences, denying voice or agency. Taken together, Trungpa's idiot compassion, the Jedi's mind trick, and the insights of Zembylas provide provocative questions for teachers. They invite us to ask: when does compassion become avoidance? When does influence become coercion? And how might teachers cultivate practices of critical compassion that resist a superficial compassion?

5 Critical Compassion as Pedagogical Practice

As part of a study into preservice elementary teachers Goldstein and Lake (2000) collected students' reflections in e-journals. One of the participants captured the tension between idiot compassion and critical compassion in the statement that:

I've learned that caring doesn't mean that you are nice to someone just for the sake of being nice. I've learned that caring is also being hard on someone because you know that they can do better, or challenging someone because you want them to learn. Caring involves truly wanting them to succeed.

GOLDSTEIN AND LAKE, 2000, p. 868

The Jedi's mind control trick serves as a reminder of the subtle ways authority operates in pedagogy. Teachers do not need supernatural powers to influence children, tone of voice, body posture, or the framing of choices can all act as forms of persuasion. While adult influence is inevitable in educational settings, it becomes ethically troubling when cloaked as compassion.

Just as Obi-Wan's 'care' is indistinguishable from coercion, teachers may unintentionally manipulate, rather than support children. Recognising this risk requires a critically reflective stance (Zembylas, 2014b) to look at authority and the use of power. Teachers cannot abdicate authority. They are responsible for maintaining safe environments that provide calm and beneficial learning spaces. But they can exercise authority and use power with transparency and responsiveness, rather than concealed beneath gestures of niceness. A raised eyebrow or soothing voice may signal care but can also enforce compliance.

6 Conclusion

The bar scene from *Attack of the Clones* (Lucas, 2002) is a fleeting moment in a larger narrative, designed to amuse more than to educate. Yet, when placed in dialogue with Chögyam Trungpa's notion of idiot compassion and with contemporary educational theory, it becomes a pedagogical resource that provides another way of thinking about compassion and care. It shows compassion entangled with control. What appears benevolent is also coercive. What looks like care is simultaneously avoidance. Trungpa's (1999) critique of compassion provides a lens for understanding this tension. Compassion that seeks to avoid discomfort or conflict risks becoming complicity. Obi-Wan spares Elan Sel'Sabagno violence and punishment but denies him voice, resolving the situation without engaging its complexity. In educational practice, similar dynamics unfold when teachers prioritise harmony over justice, niceness over honesty, or distraction over confrontation. These gestures may feel compassionate but can in fact perpetuate inequities, limit authentic learning, and silence agency.

Zembylas' (2005, 2013, 2014) work on affect and the politics of emotion underlines this point. Zembylas (2005) reminds us that compassion is never neutral. It is always entangled with power, with what we are willing (or able) to see and not see, with what we are prepared to feel and not feel. How we empathise with the other is an important dimension to consider.

Empathetic identification with the plight of others, then, is not a sentimental recognition of potential sameness – you are in pain and so am I, so we both suffer the same – but a realization of our own common humanity, while acknowledging asymmetries of suffering, inequality, and injustice.

ZEMBYLAS, 2013, p. 513

Idiot compassion, then, is not simply a personal act but a political posture, one that privileges comfort over justice. In contrast, intelligent compassion asks that teachers confront difficulty, sit with discomfort, and acknowledge suffering rather than bypass it.

Taken together, these insights challenge us to reconsider the role of compassion in early childhood pedagogy. Rather than equating compassion with niceness, teachers can practice critical compassion. An approach to care that is empathetic, but not naïve, that is courageous enough to confront conflict, and that respects agency, even when guiding or correcting. This does not mean abandoning compassion, but deepening it and making it intelligent,

recognising that authentic compassion sometimes requires disruption, refusal, or saying no (Trungpa, 1999). Ultimately, this article has argued for a pedagogy of skilful, intelligent compassion in early education. A compassion that resists the superficial comforts of idiot compassion and the hidden coercions of authority masked as care. Such a pedagogy is relational, affective, and political. It recognises the inevitable presence of power but seeks to enact it ethically, with transparency, attunement, and attentiveness.

In a world where early childhood education is increasingly framed in terms of measurable outcomes and standardised practices, including social emotional competency, the need for such philosophic inquiry is evident. Thinking critically, and through different lenses, reminds us that pedagogy is not only about what is taught, but how one relates, how care is enacted, and how power is used. For teachers, who play fundamental roles in supporting young children to learn about themselves as social beings, remaining curious about how to work with children's emotions, resisting the comfort of idiot compassion, or the seduction of hidden coercion, is central. A way to do this is to cultivate critical compassion in daily practice. This may be neither easy nor comfortable.

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