*Article*

Policy Futures in Education

Policy Futures in Education
2022, Vol. 20(8) 907–921

DOI: 10.1177/14782103211064440
journals.sagepub.com/home/pfe
SAGE

# Communities of care: A collective writing project on philosophies, politics and pedagogies of care and education in the early years

**Joanne Ailwood**
The University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW, Australia

**I-Fang Lee**
The University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW, Australia

**Sonja Arndt**
The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

**Marek Tesar**
The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

**Teresa K Aslanian**
The University of South-Eastern Norway, Notodden, Norway

**Andrew Gibbons**
Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

**Lucinda Heimer**
The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Whitewater, WI, USA

## Abstract

This collective writing project considers the central issue of how we account for, understand, and talk about, the professional work of care in early childhood education. As an international collective, we stake out some of the messiness, the specificities and complexities of care in early childhood education. Each scholar explores the issue of foregrounding care in the professional work of early childhood educators and reflects on the complexities of care in early childhood education and care. While these musing are collected together in this paper, they are each a standalone provocation to grapple with diverse issues of care in relation to etymology, policy, risk, relationships, power, and

**Corresponding author:**
Joanne Ailwood, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan, NSW 2308, Au.
Email: jo.ailwood@newcastle.edu.au

racism. As a collective, we explore ways of engaging in the messiness of care and education with a spirit of vulnerability and the courage of risk taking to unpack care in early childhood education.

**Keywords**
Care, relationships, education, early childhood

## Introduction

This collective writing project considers the central issue of how we account for, understand, and talk about, the professional work of care in early childhood education. The collective grew from an international research network with shared research interests on the issue of care in the field of early childhood education and care. We began by responding to the question of how we can engage in the messiness of care and education with a spirit of vulnerability and the courage of risk taking in the early years. Each contributor was invited to explore the issue of foregrounding care in the professional work of early childhood educators; and while these musing are collected together in this paper, they are each a standalone provocation. As an international collective, we are staking out some of the messiness, the specificities and complexities of care we are thinking through in early childhood education. The collective grapples with diverse issues of care in relation to etymology, policy, risk, relationships, power and racism as we explore the issue of how we account for, understand and talk about, the professional work of care in early childhood education.

## Foregrounding the professional work of care in early childhood education

Joanne Ailwood
The University of Newcastle, Australia

Care is central to the provision of early education, yet it is an aspect of early childhood educators' work that is diminished and devalued as a professional practice. Instead, the dominant cultural assumption that caring for young children is natural or intuitive, especially for women, is asserted. The structure and delivery of care in institutional settings, such as early childhood education, is value-laden and complex, requiring deep reflection and attention to its multiplicity and practices. To enable such depth of reflection and analysis, the field of early childhood education requires a shift to reclaim and foreground care, building a professional vocabulary that reflects the fundamental importance of care for the provision of early childhood education for children and families.

Recognising and valuing the moral, ethical and bodily caring work that early childhood educators do on a daily and ongoing basis is fundamental to building the esteem of early childhood education as professional practice. As Tronto (2010) has argued, institutional care is not the equivalent of family or home care. Rather, care is enacted within relationships with the attendant particularities of institutional or personal politics, including power relationships. Care, therefore, is relational, situated, contextual and messy (Puig De la Bellacasa, 2017). In the case of early childhood education, care is situated and enacted in institutional settings that are bound up in complex layers of relationships amongst staff, children and families.

Caring work in early childhood settings is often subtle work, for example, when working with pre-verbal infants caring is dependent on deep relationships that enable a teacher to recognise and respond to the infant's cues. This subtle work is crucial to caring relationships and education

provision, but is also undermined, undervalued and marginalised in international educational and policy discourses. This marginalisation is particularly problematic when there are multilayered philosophical and ethical questions to be considered in terms of how adults can even 'know' an infant (Peters, 2020). One example of this problematic marginalisation the work of care is during the COVID-19 pandemic. While early childhood educators were required to stay at work to care for and educate the children of frontline workers, such as health care workers, public transport workers, cleaners or essential retail workers – they were not, in Australia at least, ever considered frontline workers themselves. The essential work of early childhood education supporting families and creating safe communities for children was not only silenced and marginalised, it was at various points actively excluded from government business and income support programs during lockdown periods (Bryant, 2020).

It might also be argued that talking exclusively of education – as other sectors of the broader field of education can – is an indicator of their historical, social and institutional privilege. To conceptualise education as if it can be decoupled from caring relationships, and thereby reinforcing the invisibility of care, acts to not only shore up the dominance of 'education' being *the* professional work, it erodes the most basic and human precursor of positive experiences of education – the need for caring relationships that sustain us and support our growth. The ongoing exchange of caring relationships as they are woven into educational settings are evident in all teaching activities whether we are supervising a PhD candidate or supporting a toddler to eat independently. Reclaiming and foregrounding the work of care as a professional practice is one way to push back against what Connell (2013) calls the 'neo-liberal cascade' of regulation and marketisation in the provision of education.

Exploring the matter of care in early childhood education and care is important if we are to live well in this world. What happens to our thinking about the professional work of early childhood educators when we begin with care as a professional practice of ethical and moral decision making? What if rather than thinking 'it's more than just care' in the early years – we were to instead prioritise care. If we picked up the conceptual tools shared with us by many feminists who examine the ethics of care, or if we saw 'radical care as a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds' (Hobart and Kneese, 2020: 2). We could explore the opportunities for philosophical and professional thinking with care as a central way forward through precarious worlds and early years work/learning places to foreground the ways in which teacher-child-family care relationships are essential.

## Care as a risky business

Sonja Arndt
The University of Melbourne

The questions in the opening paragraphs to this paper unsettle what care is. What is understood as care? How does it work, feel or look? What do we do with care, who does it and who benefits from it? How we respond to these questions about care always depends, of course, on the particular localities, situations, places and communities we are considering. What care is or how it feels depends on the relationships, between the carer and the cared for, with each other and with the wider surroundings. Who even are they, carer, or the cared for? It depends on the values with which we/they are held within our or each other's worlds. Their relationships between each other might be contingent on the attitudes towards carer and cared for in those wider worlds. When we consider how different societies treat, value or care for young children, early childhood teachers and the environment – the natural and the built, human-made and colonised – in which they live, inter and

intra-relate, for example, there may be vast discrepancies between the kind of care enabled by the environment and the care intentions of the teachers in the environment.

Societal values permeate early childhood settings, philosophies and practices. In recent times, it might appear that in some ways care relationships are at risk of erasure. In the face of increased focus on profit driven early childhood education, coupled even more recently with the Covid-19 pandemic, lengthy lockdowns and the balancing acts required to sustain livelihoods and whole economies, societies in many countries have relied on early childhood settings to remain open to look after the young children of essential workers (Arndt, et al., 2020). Not being considered essential themselves perpetuates an already common conception of early childhood teachers as somehow inferior in the hierarchy of education and of society. Is the notion of care itself exacerbating the problem? If teachers are seen as 'just' carers how does this further de-elevate their status? And if early education is seen as a business, the erasure of care might risk both the business and the educational success it sells …

Perhaps the risky business of care needs further interrogation through the notion of care as an ethical engagement. This is not a new concept! But it seems to be slipping down the list of importance. Seen through an ethical lens, then, perhaps what needs to be (re)elevated, given more attention in the public arena, media and in initial teacher education programmes, is the idea that care involves early childhood teachers in making ethical decisions, that is, exercising judgements (Langford and White, 2019). That is, it requires not only a way of thinking, an orientation, but a very deep way of understanding – children, contexts, situations, place, human and more-than-human beings, and weighing up consequences. For teachers to exercise judgement requires them to act on their own ethical and moral commitments, to expose vulnerabilities, and to take risks in their pedagogies and practices. Care for them too is a risky business.

As an ethical orientation, the risky business of teachers' care underpins and informs their everyday relationships, planning and interactions in their settings. Arndt (2020) and Puig De la Bellacasa (2017) have previously argued for understandings of care as orientations and acts that aim or work to maintain the world in which we live 'as well as possible' (p. 3). To risk exposing their own ethical orientations in the judgements, they exercise reveals teachers' views of the world and how it should be maintained, in what ways, to what ends and for what purpose. Orientations towards the maintenance of the 'world' do not occur in one instance, and then remain stagnant. Rather, as a part of an ongoing shaping and forming of subjectivities, professional and personal identities and ways of being and relating in the world, they are constantly in construction, with and through encounters in the world (Kristeva, 1991; Braidotti, 2013). Elevating the necessity and sheer value of this ongoing construction and process of formation, of the relating and re-relating in different ways in response to different situations in the very local and also the wider world, is perhaps what is needed to (re)emphasise care in the world, and specifically in early childhood education. And that is a risky business.

## Caring for 'care' in early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki

Marek Tesar
The University of Auckland

*Te Whāriki*, the Early Childhood Curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand, on the surface pursues the ideological position that merging education and care is both a curriculum and a pedagogical notion, and that both of these ideas matter. The curriculum framework states that 'An ECE setting is any place where young children receive education and care' (Ministry of Education, p. 7), placing education and care supposedly on an equal standing. However, at the same time, this phrase also

emphasises and utilises the phrase Early Childhood Education, and its associated abbreviation, 'ECE'. In short, while care is mentioned many times and supposedly as central in the early childhood curriculum framework, in the naming of the field and occupation it is positioned as secondary, and then disappears completely in reference to the sector or abbreviation ('ECE'). Even groups of teachers and owners of early years settings refer to 'Early Childhood Education' and 'ECE'. Care is not only absent, but care has disappeared from outward discursive assumptions about the field and what it represents. The important narrative of 'We are not babysitters, we are teachers' has potentially contributed to the disappearance of care, and as such, as Ailwood (2020) positions care as cartographies of power and politics, one wonders if we are missing in Aotearoa New Zealand an important debate. The hierarchy in Aotearoa New Zealand is clear within the statement: 'Early Childhood Education (ECE) includes all types of licensed and regulated early childhood education provision, for example, education and care centres'.

However, perhaps too much emphasis has been given to both notions of 'education' and 'care', and not enough emphasis has been given to 'and'. It is remarkable how comfortably that 'and' sits in between 'education' and 'care'. There is clearly need to question and interrogate that 'and' and how it operates. 'And', or an 'ampersand', is in dire need of problematising regarding what discourses and practices it continues to offer. 'And' is creative, it is connecting and it is multiplying, but at the same time it offers blanket cover allowing us to continue to question the relationship. It may not provide any ontological, epistemological or axiological openings, but it does offer potential for hierarchy. Also, it illustrates the importance of using 'philosophy as a method', in relation to concepts that have real implications for practice (Tesar, 2021). The first proposition of this section is thus not to take 'and' in relation to education and care for granted.

The second proposition is to consider what are some of the manifestations of 'care' in the curriculum framework that influence mundane pedagogies in early years settings. Occasionally, 'care' becomes an adjective, shaping the subjective positioning of a teacher. In the curriculum framework, there are 'caregiving practices', there is 'careful supervision', and there is also 'care' on its own. In the document, care as a noun becomes associated with adjectives such as 'attentive', 'individual', 'consistent', 'physical'. And we can also sense where the curriculum framework is considering a critical point: self-care skills. We can read about 'everyday' or 'calming' caregiving practices.

Discourses and manifestations of care in the curriculum document portray ideas why 'care' comes after 'and'; and certainly why it comes after 'education' when we use the phrase about 'education and care services'. Care is present in another concept in the curriculum framework; 'career', which perhaps does not relate to notion of 'care' directly; but should there not be 'care' and 'self-care' present when it comes to teachers and their professional careers? There are also other aspects that the space of this short piece could not cover in full. But the above discussion hopefully starts that conversation. One of them is the 'economy of care', where thinking about associated discourses of infantology could be very helpful (Peters, 2020). The other is associated with the Covid-19 outbreak – and what it may mean for the new-normality of 'care' or what 'care' we can find in discourses of government newspeak (Gibbons and Tesar, 2021). We should not give up on the 'and' or on 'care' in early childhood settings or curriculum frameworks in Aotearoa New Zealand, and beyond.

## Stargazing at care and education

Teresa K. Aslanian
The University of South-Eastern Norway

Care is a fundamental aspect in the Norwegian ECE tradition. However, the position of care in ECE education policy and research is nebulous. While considered central to practice, it is often absent as an area for development in ECE policy, and is far more seldom the subject of research than for example the subject of learning in early childhood. The ways policymakers, researchers and practitioners account for, understand and talk about care relates to the way we talk about, account for and understand education. Sometimes to see a weakly visible constellation of stars, one has to look just beside it – not directly at it. In this text, I want to look at 'education', in order to better see 'care'.

It has been pointed out that the word 'education' comes from Latin educare 'bring up, rear, educate' and educere 'bring out, lead forth' education (Rost, 1979). The word education exists in varied forms across the globe and usually relates to the way humans rear each other toward a kind of ideal form. What is ideal is culturally and historically dependent. The two meanings have often been seized upon to argue for an idea of education as either bringing out that which already is within a person, or as a process of shaping and forming people (Bass and Good, 2004). What happens when we think about care and education in light of both of these meanings: education as a bringing out that which is already within and to shape and form. From a biosocial perspective, the education process involves both what is 'already within the child', a person's biological design and potential and what the child meets in their environment that intra-acts with these potentialities (Youdell and Lindley, 2019).

Etymology cannot give information about the 'true' meaning of a word, but looking at the roots of a word can help us to think about what we mean with the words we use by understanding what we meant by them before. Older word meanings reflect historical places and ideas and can help us understand current values and assumptions by comparing how the word has been endowed with meaning today in light of its first recorded meaning. Are care and education *necessarily* distinct from each other? If not, what are we saying today, when we say 'education' that renders care nebulous?

Ideas that instigated the first uses of educere and educare are inaccessible to us. Ideas that colour our use of those words today are, for example, democracy, technological progress and globalisation. These ideas changed the way we perform education, as well as the way we *hear* and understand the word education and in turn, the way we hear and understand the word care. Early childhood education pioneers, such as Pestalozzi and Froebel, did not work ceaselessly and passionately so that children would be better prepared to participate in democracy, or to enter the workforce. On the contrary, early childhood education was the product of the Romantic era, an act of love for the child as a defense against the dehumanising effects of modernity. Pestalozzi exclaimed that love, not teaching was the essence of education (Pestalozzi et al, 1951). For Froebel, the goal of education was for children to realise their inner nature (Froebel, 2005) and Montessori believed children held the keys to love and the betterment of humanity (Montessori, 1966). For early childhood pioneers, education in early childhood was about caring with song, with access to nature, with tactile, sensorial and intellectual stimulation, and with educators' interest in children and their happiness (Aslanian, 2015). I wonder if the problem is not only how policymakers, researchers and practitioners account for, understand and talk about care but also how we account for, understand and talk about education. Perhaps through shifting our careful gaze to education, the 'shape' of care as fundamental value in early childhood education may become more clear.

## Caring for professional vocabularies as an essence of care

Andrew Gibbons
Auckland University of Technology

In early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, the early childhood curriculum is articulated as a complex of 'people, places and things' that are engaged in 'responsive and reciprocal

relationships' (Ministry of Education, 2017: 21). Much of the emphasis of the child's relationship with people, places and things positions people, places and things as made available, exploitable, for the child's learning and development – a very 'modern' technological model of teaching and learning (Heidegger, 1977). This particular phrasing on page 21 of the curriculum, in contrast, invites a nuanced understanding of the interconnections and associations that weave things, places and people together – an emphasis that invites more care within 'the whole' of curriculum in early childhood centre communities.

As a theory, this formulation of reciprocity and relationship between people, places and things can be taken as the way things are. In other words, whether kaiako choose to notice, recognise and respond (Ministry of Education, 2017) to the complex reciprocity of care between the purple tricycle and the newly developed suburb and the three-year-old child, or not, that care *is*. Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, the theory can invite kaiako to care for this reciprocity – to actually engage in the care of noticing, recognising and responding. One approach to this care is through language and the ways in which kaiako care with, for and through language.

For the reader unfamiliar with the word 'kaiako', this has pseudo-officially replaced the word 'teacher' in the early childhood sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. In the curriculum glossary, kaiako is explained as 'teacher(s)' (Ministry of Education, 2017: 66). In the introduction, however, the Ministry of Education states: 'Teachers, educators and kaiako in ECE settings work together' (2017: 6). The apparent, albeit subtle, confusion around a new vocabulary for early childhood professionals evidences an ongoing challenge for a profession that voices itself as bicultural in a nation formed by the agreement and commitment of a treaty partnership. That partnership has lost a lot in translation. There is, at times, little apparent care for the language of partnership when words enter professional vocabulary, including words that have something to say about the practices of teaching and caring. This lack of care can also be explored in the use of the word 'hauora' in the early childhood curriculum. Unlike kaiako, hauora is not translated in the glossary. This could be seen as evidence of concern for the limits of historical translations of hauora with wellbeing (see for instance Heaton, 2011; Stewart, 2021). However, Heaton (2011) argues that the 'use of hauora in curricula inevitably involves a hegemonic struggle over how hauora is defined and whose voices are heard and whose are silenced' (p. 110). Hauora is subjected to the hegemony of 'Eurocentric thought' (Heaton, 2011: 109) and to the 'rules' of English language in which hauora, and kaiako, find themselves being inserted.

When hauora and kaiako appear in the curriculum, they are assimilated into a professional vocabulary. That vocabulary may now be seen to have expanded its cultural inclusivity, and may also be seen to provide more nuance and complexity for the ways in which kaiako understand learning, teaching and, importantly here, caring. These possibilities demand a care for professional vocabulary that avoids the shallow application of technical jargon. To care for the language of kaiako for instance, demands:

1. Research: Ako is a binary idea. Stewart (2021: 64) explains that ako is a word that has 'two 'opposite' meanings'. Ako means both to teach and to learn and one knows the difference based on the context of its use.
2. Politics: Ako has come to mean, in curriculum speak, that teaching and learning occur at the same time. This blurring of teaching and learning, according to Stewart (2021), has had the effect of undermining the teaching profession.
3. Philosophy: 'Māori traditions are structured by a corpus of originary and nature narratives that reflect the underlying concept of kinship between human beings and all the rest of the elements of the natural world in which we live' (Stewart, 2021: 34).

Failing to take care with language as it enters into a professional vocabulary reproduces orthodox ways of knowing. 'Tensions and contradictions are inevitable when epistemological concepts are imported from one language and cultural context into another with an expectation of developing a common meaning' (Heaton, 2011: 99). Key here is the problem of 'importing' and the intentions of importation. Importing does not occur only across cultures, it also occurs across disciplines and practices. Care might be inserted into the vocabulary of kaiako in a way that assimilates care to the production of learning outcomes in the minds and bodies of the child. The allure of a common meaning is key here too. When concepts are imported, the ethics of importing impact on the communities for whom the concepts have been imported and from whom they have been exported.

While the presence of kaiako and hauora 'recognise the importance of valuing New Zealand's bicultural heritage' (Heaton, 2011: 100), if they are not cared for, then that recognition is shallow at best, colonising at worst, maintaining the 'dominant culture and language at the centre' (Heaton, 2011: 101). Rather, as Heaton recognises following the work of Metge, 'within languages subtle and dramatic changes in word meaning are always in progress' (2011: 102). Given this view, the problem of translation is not so much evident in any disagreement regarding definitions, but rather in the intentions and applications of the translations.

To understand intentions, the problem of a professional vocabulary of care in the early childhood profession in Aotearoa New Zealand can be explored through the experiences of teachers whose first language is not English. Speakers of languages other than English find themselves pushed out of the profession by the professional bodies who produce language roadblocks (Paeai-Foroti and Powell, 2021). Cultural identity through a connection to elders is crucial to care (Paeai-Foroti and Powell, 2021) and in this essential connection language plays a vital role. Yet, there appears to be little interest in caring for language. Language can only be understood technically, to effect an outcome. Debating meaning becomes obstructive to learning outcomes. This is an educational comedy and tragedy that is evident in the tendency to insert new language into professional vocabularies with little care (see for instance Gibbons et al. 2020).

To take more care, a vocabulary of care demands a care for language. For instance, through feminist and new materialist work kaiako may 'unpack with more care' the complex 'inextricability' of people, places and things: 'If the body that I am extends through and beyond me in very material ways, how are my obligations to others, as well as my understanding of self and my 'location', both complicated and enriched?' (Neimanis, 2013: 26). When unpacking with more care, professionals can be sensitive to tendencies to gloss over the language, at best, and at worst to any deployment of a vocabulary of care that orders relationships, maintains exclusions and enacts normalisations. Look for instance at the disciplines of philosophy and pedagogy and their functioning to determine who can and who cannot care about caring. This is philosophical work as caring work, that keeps open to the divisive and obstructive effects of professional vocabularies of care for communities that really, actually, already care.

## Re(con)figuring care and care work: Social politics of caring

I-Fang Lee

The University of Newcastle, Australia

In the field of Australian early childhood education and care, nested within the neoliberal socio-cultural and socio-political system of reasoning, current waves of social administration and educational policies have contributed to legitimatise a dangerous divide between education and care in the early years. A shallow notion of education is about enhancing children's learning outcomes or achieving developmental milestones to be considered as a public interest whereas a narrowed

understanding about care in the early years has been reduced to childminding or babysitting as a private/individual choice. Ironically, the concept of care and the work of care are thought to be 'unprofessional' but filled with gendered moral obligations (Duncan et al., 2004). Historically but somewhat problematicly, care and caring for young children have been morally constructed as 'mothers' work' only. An interplay between a dominant construction of motherhood and a gendered perspective of parenting and childcare is at work to perpetuate an implicit socio-political appropriation of human's biological 'natural instinct' to define who should be carers, who would be 'better' carers, where should care work be carried out, and how care work should be organised. Therefore, when a mother cannot 'care for her young ones' due to a variety of different reasons, then the extended 'female' family members such as grandparents are 'naturally' default to be the carers. This common socio-cultural logic about the politics of care and ways of caring for our young children has laced in multiple threads of reasoning for new social and family policies.

When it comes to social and family policy making process to discuss childcare in Australia, implications of morality and ethics are manifested through complex political economic discourse involving policies and ways of governing. Moreover, as issues of affordability and accessibility of childcare have gained much socio-political discussion, the concept of 'childcare' has been positioned within messy knots of family policy, types of non-migration visas (i.e. Sponsored (Grand) Parent visa, Working Holiday visa for au pairs) and government childcare subsidy changes. For instance, the latest iteration of Child Care Subsidy (CCS) is a means tested social welfare/administration policy in which family activity test for parents (paid labour for work or recognised study) and combined family income are the main factors affecting the percentage of CCS payments. The rules of CCS illustrate a welfare-to-work rationality that have positioned the discussions about care within a wider neoliberal socio-political imaginary in Australia. This type of social policy has become a dominant and popular political rationality in shifting and governing family practices (for examples, see Daly, 2010; McDowell, 2005).

Providing care requires a deep(er) philosophical reflection to unpack why we do what we do. The concept of care and the work of care are situated within the matrix of power positions and relations. Who should and can provide the 'care' with respect and love for other people's children is a significant beginning question from a critical perspective with an emphasis on ethics to unpack the construction of the 'Other' in social policies. To be critical, careful and ethical with how care is conceptualised and how care work can be planned or organised, a search for a different onto-epistemological 'home' to challenge the dominant understanding about care requires a different philosophical approach. To reconceptualise care and unpack care work in the early years, some beginning philosophical explorations may begin by re-examining who are the carers, how are the carers socially, culturally, economically and politically positioned and constructed. In a complex and challenging time, discussions of and about 'care' cannot be simplified through the logic of a Cartesian dualism. As the world has been experiencing ongoing waves of COVID-19 pandemic, the notions of care and the work of care need to be unpacked and de-stabilised. In seeking to expand our worldviews about care, we need to re-examine the dominant socio-political discourses through which a dangerous universal truth of care and about caring is being (re)defined and mobilised through of social policies.

## Care at the nexus of the educational crossroads

Lucinda G. Heimer
University of Wisconsin - Whitewater

The COVID pandemic has created ruptures across the globe. In a time requiring care on all levels, how are early childhood educators defined and positioned in the U.S.? U.S. headlines suggest a renewed focus on the role of childcare. Local papers in the Midwest exclaim that 'Crises Collide' as the need for childcare for employees to return to work is accentuated by the health crisis (Milwaukee Business Journal, 9/11/20). The New York Times (8/7/2020) asks 'Why Are Child Care Programs Open When Schools Are Not?' calling out the divide between what is understood as daycare versus formal education systems. Throughout the pandemic, early childhood education (ECE) has been deemed 'essential' and yet direct support and care for teachers caring for the youngest citizens is minimal.

The divide between care and education in the U.S. is centuries old and originates in domestic care work. Issues of race and class emerged more recently in the 1960s–70s as compensatory early childhood programs were created (e.g. Head Start). In addition, university lab preschools contributed to the care and education divide emphasising the importance of theoretical models from psychology to create legitimacy as educators. Simultaneously, labour laws ignored the need to protect care workers (Garboden Murray, 2021). Today, the divide between care and education is accentuated by the need for credentials, or lack thereof, within the profession. For example, minimal certification is required when caring for infants and toddlers. However, bachelor's degrees and licenses are required for teachers in 'formal' K-12 classrooms. This divide is manufactured and counterproductive. When considering reform, terminology matters. The term UPK (Universal Pre-Kindergarten) is often used to describe publicly funded preschool in the U.S. In recent work, scholars have pushed against the conflation of preschool and kindergarten in the hopes to set early education and care apart from standardised systems (Heimer and Ramminger, 2020). Debates of care versus education seek to create hierarchies of legitimacy within the profession (Garboden Murray, 2021). Simple semantic turns such as the use of Universal Preschool versus UPK supports the desire to push early education approaches up (curriculum, care, family involvement) versus pushing standardisation down. Early care is a separate system intersecting at kindergarten, and yet not to be subsumed into the terminology of K12 formal education systems.

Early childhood education in the U.S. is governed by myriad agencies and institutions across developmental levels and sectors including Head Start, state and local licensing agencies, tribal/district policy guidelines and private non- and for-profit regulatory agencies. In this time of increased attention on the need for care, early childhood educators have an opportunity to replace the irrelevant formal education paradigm in the U.S. Specifically within ECE, the strengths of relationship-based approaches centring care are emphasised, educators and caregivers seek to meet the individual needs of children and an array of education options and settings for families that honours economic, racial and cultural needs are offered. Tenets of early childhood education and care strive to centre care as an action, an attitude and an ethic (Garboden Murray, 2021). Care as multifaceted and illusive complicates notions of influence within educational settings.

The U.S. is a colonised nation of Indigenous peoples, formerly enslaved African Americans, settlers and immigrants. The public education system, originating with Horace Mann, was created as an equitable system. However, U.S. public education has proven to be discriminatory as illustrated through the achievement gap and an education debt owed to Black, Indigenous and students of colour. Attention to the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of students is lost in translation to standardised learning and assessment. With consideration of teaching as a caring profession, those who care for and teach young children in the U.S. have been historically undervalued. Across the PreK-12 development levels of education, early childhood educators are the most racially diverse and the lowest paid (Whitebook et al., 2018). This intersection of race, position, and compensation for work, calls into question the value of care in U.S. education systems.

> To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin (hooks, 1994, p.13).

hooks, weaves together care, education and learning in authentic ways. Too often this approach is undermined by the commodification of care, or teaching to achieve quantifiable student outcomes. Through unchecked care for children, teachers run the risk of turning care into salvation. This individual propensity to save is supported by evolutionary theory presenting whites as empathic, along with decades of neoliberal legislation (the New Deal) enacted in the U.S. from the 1930s through the 60s. Such acts created an environment in which whites were cared for and regarded as superior caregivers while other deserving populations were excluded, thus shaping a racial narrative attached to care (Seiler, 2020). Investigating intention and integrity of care as it relates to race helps to expose salvation narratives in early education. How might we reframe care as the nucleus for learning, or the fabric of the culture, and as a way to nurture each child toward their best self?

Dahlberg and Moss (2005) propose that early education has an 'ethical' element. One that 'foregrounds a relationship to the Other' (p. 13). Centring the need for reciprocity in education, Freire (1978) suggests that a praxis that honours reciprocal benefit for the 'helped and helping' offers the possibility to address domination by the helper. Prioritising the relationship makes sense for our work with young children. Addressing issues of equity and racism depends on heightened awareness of our own biases and discriminatory behaviour as well as legal and financial infrastructures to deem this work essential. Equity is an ideal; an imbalance is created based on identity politics and histories of colonisation and racism. During the pandemic the location of children in schools and care settings, virtually or in person, increases awareness of and attention on early childhood. In early childhood education, are we relegated to essential but misunderstood roles or are we able to filter notions of care into the more formal systems of education? Through consideration of perspective taking, toward equity to advocate in ECE, care plays a key role.

## Conclusion

Joanne Ailwood and I-Fang Lee
The University of Newcastle, Australia

Care matters in the early years. While the COVID-19 pandemic served to emphasise social fissures and disadvantage, it also emphasised the need for a reconceptualising of how to live well in this world. The international scholars collected here argue that responsive, thoughtful and ethically engaged practices of care are necessary to build and sustain pedagogies and relationships with colleagues, families and children in the early childhood education and care sector. Referencing the geopolitical spaces of Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Norway and the USA, we are drawing from multiple threads of ontology, etymology and epistemology to expand as well as to interrupt dominate constructions of care and care work. Inviting and daring to explore different philosophies. To understand and to discuss care, we need to be critical and reflexive in rethinking the ways we talk and think about care as well as unpacking the ways care is practiced and enacted. Building a serious and professional vocabulary for care requires that we are alert to the politics of relationships of care, especially in settler colonies where Indigenous children were routinely removed from their families in the name of care.

In early childhood education and care policy and curriculum, the work of care is often reduced to a narrow understanding of the routine work of maintaining and regulating small bodies. While this practical care is no doubt essential, it perpetuates a reductionist understanding that marginalises care as a key component of the complex professional space in which early childhood educators work.

This collective challenges the marginalisation of care, arguing instead that care in these complex professional spaces requires significant levels of professional knowledge and ethical decision making.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

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

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by The University of Newcastle, Faculty of Education and the Arts.

## ORCID iDs

Joanne Ailwood https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2015-3824
I-Fang Lee https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9773-5115
Sonja Arndt https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0778-1850

## References

Aslanian TK (2015) Getting behind discourses of love, care and maternalism in early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 16(2): 153–165. DOI: 10.1177/1463949115585672.

Ailwood J (2020) Care: cartographies of power and politics in ECEC. *Global Studies of Childhood* 10(4): 339–346.

Arndt S (2020) Diffracting relationalities in early years pedagogies of care. *Global Studies of Childhood* 10(4): 347–357. DOI: 10.1177/2043610620974016.

Arndt S, Smith K, Urban M, et al. (2020) Reconceptualising and (re)forming early childhood professional identities: ongoing transnational policy discussions. *Policy Futures in Education* 19: 406–423. DOI: 10.1177/1478210320976015.

Bass RV and Good JW (2004) Educare and educere: is a balance possible in the educational system?. *The Educational Forum* 68: 161–168.

Braidotti R (2013) *The Posthuman*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Bryant L (2020) Politics of care in the early years in Australia since the pandemic. *Global Studies of Childhood* 10(4): 401–402.

Connell R (2013) The neoliberal cascade and education: an essay on the market agenda and its consequences. *Critical Studies in Education* 54(2): 99–112.

Dahlberg G and Moss P (2005) *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education*. New York, NY: Routledge Falmer.

Daly M (2010) Shifts in family policy in the UK under New Labour. *Journal of European Social Policy* 20(5): 254–265.

Duncan S, Edwards R, Reynolds T, et al. (2004) Mothers and child care: policies, values and theories. *Children & Society* 18(4): 254–265.

Heimer Lucinda and Ramminger Elizabeth (2020) *Reshaping Universal Preschool: Critical Perspectives on Power and Policy*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Hobart HJK and Kneese T (2020) Radical care: survival strategies for uncertain times. *Social Text 142* 38(1): 16.

hooks b (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Freire P (1978) *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*. New York, NY: Seabury Press.
Froebel F (2005) *The Education of Man (W. N. Hailman Trans)*.Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.
Garboden Murray C (2021) *Illuminating Care: The Pedagogy and Practice of Care in Early Childhood Communities*. Lincoln: Exchange Press.
Gibbons A, Tesar M, Pasley A, et al. (2020) Language strategies for "Early Childhood Education"? newspeak and he taonga te tamaiti. *Early Childhood Folio* 24(2): 9–14.
Gibbons A and Tesar M (2021) The 'new normal' and new normalisations in early childhood education policy in Aotearoa New Zealand: a post-COVID 19 perspective?. *New Zealand Annual Review of Education* 25: 5–19. DOI: 10.26686/nzaroe.v25.6911.
Heaton S (2011) The co-opting of hauora into curricula. *Curriculum Matters* 7: 99–117. DOI: 10.18296/cm.0130.
Heidegger M (1977) The question concerning technology (trans. W. Lovitt). In: M. Heidegger (ed) *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1–49.
Kristeva J (1991) *Strangers to Ourselves*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
Langford R and White J (2019) Conceptualizing care as being and doing in ethical interactions and sustained care relationships in the early childhood institution. In: R Langford (ed) *Theorizing Feminist Ethics of Care in Early Childhood Practice: Possibilities and Dangers*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 59–78.
McDowell L (2005) Love, money, and gender divisions of labour: some critical reflections on welfare-to-work policies in the UK. *Journal of Economic Geography* 5(3): 365–379.
Ministry of Education (2017) *Te Whāriki He Whāriki Mātauranga Mō Ngā Mokopuna O Aotearoa Early Childhood Curriculum*. New Zealand Government.
Montessori M (1966) *The Secret of Childhood*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
Neimanis A (2013) Feminist subjectivity, watered. *Federal Register* 103(1): 23–41.
Paeai-Foroti I and Powell C (2021, October 12) Systems change in action: wellness, fellowship and better learning outcomes from West Auckland Samoan ECE collective. In: Healthy Families Waitakare Webinar. Available at: https://www.healthyfamilieswaitakere.org.nz/systems-change-in-action-2021but.
Puig de la Bellacasa M (2017) *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More-Than-Human Worlds*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Peters MA (2020) Infantologies. An EPAT collective writing project. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 1–19. doi: 10.1080/00131857.2020.1835648.
Pestalozzi H, Norden H and Norden R (1951) *The Education of Man*. New York, NY: Philosophical Library.
Rost H.T.D (1979) The magnificent tangle that is education. *The Journal of Educational Thought* 13(1): 53–59.
Seiler C (2020) The origins of white care. *Social Text* 38(1): 17–38.
Stewart GT (2021) *Māori Philosophy: Indigenous Thinking from Aotearoa*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
Tesar M (2021) "Philosophy as a method": tracing the histories of intersections of "Philosophy," 'Methodology," and "Education". *Quintessence International* 27(5): 544–553. DOI: 10.1177/1077800420934144.
Tronto JC (2010) Creating caring institutions: politics, plurality, and purpose. *Ethics and Social Welfare* 4(2): 158–171.
Whitebook M, McLean C, Austin LJE, et al. (2018) *Early Childhood Workforce Index - 2018 Wisconsin*. Berkeley, CABerkeley: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California. https://cscce.berkeley.edu/files/2018/06/2018-Index-Wisconsin.pdf.
Youdell D and Lindley MR (2019) *Biosocial Education: The Social and Biological Entanglements of Learning*. Routledge.

## Author Biographies

Joanne Ailwood Associate Professor in the School of Education, the University of Newcastle, Australia. Joanne's teaching and research has made national and international contributions in the fields of early childhood education and teacher education. She has collaborated as chief investigator on nationally funded research teams to build knowledge about teachers' work and children's experiences of early childhood education. Joanne's most recent work investigates how we account for the work of care in the early years. She has led initial teacher education programmes for early childhood education and currently teaches into a range of early childhood courses and leads the honours programme. Joanne has worked with teachers and schools in Zimbabwe and has published in the fields of history and policies of education, early childhood education, and international teacher education.

I-Fang Lee Associate Professor in the School of Education, the University of Newcastle, Australia. She is an intercultural, international and inter-disciplinary researcher whose research focus on contemporary issues in early childhood care and education with a strong emphasis on equity. I-Fang's academic journey has spanned the USA, Hong Kong, Singapore and Australia, where she has been involved in developing and implementing several international projects in collaboration with global scholars. Most recently, building a team of international researchers, I-Fang is a chief investigator for a multi-year, multi-site ARC Discovery Project: Global Childhoods in the Asian Century: Connecting Policy, Educational Experiences and Everyday Lifeworlds of Children in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore. I-Fang has been a program convenor for Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood/Primary) (Honours) and Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood/Primary).

Sonja Arndt Senior Lecturer in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne. Her teaching and research have intersected early childhood education, childhood studies, research methods and philosophy of education for over 30 years. She is currently the Vice President of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia (PESA) and Chair of the Foucault and Contemporary Theories in Education SIG at AERA. Sonja is a co-editor of the Springer book series: Children: Global posthumanist perspectives and materialist theories. Sonja's research on teacher otherness has made significant contributions in diverse countries, including leading change in teacher education in Indonesia, and the publication of local language children's books.

Marek Tesar Associate Professor and the Associate Dean International at the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland. His current scholarship is in early childhood education in both New Zealand as well as in cross-country contexts. His work focuses on educational policy, philosophy, pedagogy, methodology and curriculum, and draws on his background as a qualified teacher as well as his extensive knowledge of international education systems. Marek's scholarship and activism merges theoretical work with a practical focus on the everyday lives of children and their childhoods in Aotearoa New Zealand and overseas. He has published over 100 peer-reviewed publications. He edits 3 educational book series with renowned publishers, is Editor of 6 academic journals, and sits on 20 international editorial boards. In 2016, Marek led a team of international and local experts in Indonesia to establish a research centre of excellence for early childhood education, care and parenting, that serves the South-East Asia region (SEAMEO).

Teresa K. Aslanian Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of South-Eastern Norway. Her research is included in recent knowledge briefs on the role of kindergarten teachers published by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. Aslanian connects the

holistic tradition with concepts of plasticity and entanglement, paying special interest to the main pedagogic concepts of love, care, play and learning. A trained ECEC educator with 15 years in the field, Aslanian combines practical field experience with expert knowledge on pedagogy and plasticity as a biological and methodological concept. Aslanian currently leads an internally-funded project Norwegian Kindergartens as Distinctive Learning Environments, and has recently concluded the project Children and Animal Relationships in Early Childhood Education and Care. Both projects have resulted in recent published research articles.

Andrew Gibbons Professor in the School of Education, Auckland University of Technology. He is a philosopher of education and philosopher of technology with a lifelong commitment to Early Childhood Education (ECE). As an early childhood teacher, teacher educator and as a professor, I am committed to advocacy and leadership by generating new, alternative and philosophical approaches to recognising and responding to the critical and complex issues and aspirations of ECE. I strategically develop projects that intersect diverse fields and disciplines, in recognition of how diverse philosophical strands are exceptionally impactful when woven together in ECE research and practice. This weaving has produced conceptual tools for enriching our collective understanding and experience of education and childhood.

Lucinda G. Heimer Professor in Early Childhood Education and Department Chair, School of Curriculum and Instruction in the School of Education and Professional Studies, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Creating pathways for future teachers to earn credentials to teach in their home communities is at the heart of her work toward equity in early education. Her experience includes teaching preschool and elementary school children and directing university lab and parent cooperative preschools. Her appreciation for the complexity of collaboration and issues of equity runs deep. Lucinda has published on topics including early childhood education policy, interdisciplinary curriculum, collaboration and race in peer-reviewed journals, as well as authored chapters in edited texts. She has presented her research using ethnographic approaches and applying critical theory to illuminate practicing and future teacher perspectives regarding identity, race and social justice in early education.