

How can early childhood teachers reclaim caring? A crucial and complex aspect of early childhood teaching. ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

This blog post explores productive ways to rethink the central, but **contested, concept of caring** in early childhood teaching. Caring is seen as crucial to children's physical and emotional wellbeing but at the same time is undervalued as separate from education and is more difficult to measure. Often, care in early childhood teaching is seen as involving the relationship between a caring teacher and a child who is cared-for. Yet, **reconceptualising care as complex, dynamic, and problematic**, and as a concept not beginning and ending in human relationships, offers opportunities for early childhood teachers to reclaim care from the margins it has been relegated to. From a posthumanist perspective, caring can be understood as a thick mesh of relational obligation in networks that include humans, non-humans, matter, ideas, and emotions.

Emotions in Early Childhood Teaching

In my doctoral research into emotions in early childhood teaching, I found that how participants considered their emotion experiences as teachers often pointed to the **importance of love and care for early childhood professionals**. Using theoretical concepts from French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, I analysed data from observations and conversations with teachers working in an early childhood centre. During a conversation with an early childhood teacher, Mila (pseudonym), my attention was caught by her emotional response in her narrative of a teaching situation when she exclaimed, "I don't care" to two children. Mila was shocked when the children threw a mixture of bark, rice, and water over another child and her exclamation came when the children blamed each other. Mila felt her response was justified but unprofessional. I wondered how caring and not-caring played out for Mila, and what this might mean for **how caring is understood in early childhood teaching**. I used rhizoanalysis and cartographic approaches to analyse this data excerpt. In rhizoanalysis, I noticed how bodies and materials affect each other, and how these affects are enhanced and constrained. My cartographies were like maps, where I used particular concepts from Deleuze's writing to notice connections within data. I found that Deleuze's concept of sense led me to paradox, and then to problem, and this provided useful tools to think about care.

Rhizoanalysis Showed Caring as Negotiated Locally

Rhizoanalysis shows caring in these data to be negotiated in ways that are very **localised and responsive to a specific situation**. This approach uses Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of rhizomatic assemblage and affect. Rhizomatic assemblages are complex, everchanging networks that include relationships among humans, non-human bodies, and matter. **Affect is the force that flows** among these bodies, as they affect and are being affected by each other. These affective flows are enabled and constrained by **macropolitical forces** (such as rules and regulations) and **micropolitical forces** (such as how individual teachers respond to teaching situations). In rhizoanalysis, affective flows are mapped, and macro- and micro-political forces are traced. In this rhizoanalysis, caring is produced in the interplay between how affective flows make things happen (mapping) as well as how caring is controlled and constrained (tracing). Affect flows in this assemblage as bark, rice, and water are produced as missiles connected to children's arm muscles, and the fun and excitement of hiding and surprising other children. The mixture flies through the air and produces a hurt and upset child, Mila's emotions of shock and disappointment, and her exclamation of "I don't care". Macro forces that enable and constrain **affective flows here include regulations about playground safety**, policies regarding **supervision**, and expectations that teachers will **keep children safe and encourage acceptable behaviour**. At a micropolitical level, Mila describes how upset she is that the children's behaviour is at odds with the culture of respect valued in this centre. She is ambivalent about using language she regards as unprofessional. Through this analysis, caring can be seen to be uncertain, negotiated, and political.

Cartographic Approaches Showed Caring as Negotiated Among Tensions Within Specific Teaching Situations

The second analytic approach is a cartographic approach that uses Deleuze's concepts of sense, paradox, and problem. For Deleuze, sense is something that is sensed in-between language and bodies. This is **the 'something else' that language does** besides tell us things, and it can be associated with intensities that we sense. I gained an understanding how sense arises in Mila's situation by working out the verb infinitives that express 'what is going on' as expressed in her conversation with me. Mila strives to be **a teacher who cares about children** and wishes to keep them safe, who teaches and guides children, and who wants to be regarded as acting and speaking professionally. Intensities

produced in relations among verb infinitives 'to care, to teach, to watch, and to guide' are in tension with intensities produced in relations among verb infinitives 'to be affected emotionally, to respond emotionally, to regulate emotions, and to act and speak professionally'. Although difficult to articulate, this process gives a 'sense of the sense' being produced. *Mila is a teacher who clearly does care*, and her exclamation "I don't care" is a paradox expressing intensities and tensions. The analysis has built on sense produced in intensities of 'what is going on' and brings into focus a paradox of a caring teacher saying she does not care (and feeling very uncomfortable about that).

There is a problem of caring in early childhood teaching here. Deleuze understands problems as knotty, recurring puzzles that cannot be resolved once and for all but continue to return in different guises. The problem here concerns early childhood teachers *negotiating tensions among professional responsibilities* to care for children by guiding behaviour and being warm and positive. Mila responds with an exclamation of unprofessional language to guide children's behaviour, in tension with expectations that good early childhood teachers manage their emotions and their language professionally. Other teachers who encounter this problem when it recurs in their professional lives will *respond in diverse ways*. As the rhizoanalysis also did, this analysis has shown how care is enacted in specific teaching situations in localised and continuously negotiated ways.

Rethinking Caring in Early Childhood Teaching

These analyses have shown how posthumanist theories from Deleuze and Guattari can be used to *rethink caring in early childhood teaching* in terms of a thick mesh of relational obligation involving humans and other-than-humans. In this example, *complexities and specificities of caring* were explored through fine-grained analysis of a small data excerpt using two analytic approaches: rhizoanalysis and cartography of sense, paradox, and problem. Discussions informed by these concepts among early childhood teachers and teacher educators may provide opportunities to think of themselves as always becoming within networks of relations, and to *respond to recurring caring problems with openness* to sense, paradox, and new ways of becoming early childhood teachers.

Alison Warren is a senior lecturer at Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand in Nelson. She completed her PhD from University of Canterbury in 2019, supervised by Professor Peter Roberts and the late Professor Kathleen Quinlivan. Her thesis used concepts from Deleuze and Guattari to explore emotions in early childhood teaching. She is interested in using posthumanist and new materialist theories in thinking about early childhood education.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

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