

# Exploring Early Childhood Professionalism through Video-cued Multivocal Ethnography in the U.S. and China

Yue Qi

*The Pennsylvania State University*

ORCID: 0009-0001-5168-7952

## Author's Note

Yue Qi is currently a PhD candidate in Early Childhood Education and Comparative and International Education at Penn State University. This article is a critical component of her dissertation, which examines the complexities of early childhood teachers' lived experiences and professional roles within and across majority and minority communities in the U.S. and China. Through rich, detailed accounts of four distinct groups of educators, her dissertation questions hegemonic discourses of globalization and the notion of universal truths about early childhood teaching practices. It reveals how global, national, and local contexts influence the definition of professionalism and the specific challenges educators face within the local communities. For questions or further connections, please contact [yueqi@psu.edu](mailto:yueqi@psu.edu)

## Abstract

This article is based on a multi-year, cross-cultural ethnographic study examining early childhood teachers' practices in public education settings in the U.S. and China. Drawing on years of fieldwork and video-cued interviews, this study investigates how early childhood teachers in diverse cultural contexts perceive and enact professionalism in their daily practices and navigate top-down discourses within a neoliberal framework. Using poststructuralist and intersectional feminist lenses, it critically examines how teachers (re)construct the meaning of their practices within local communities and negotiate experiences of oppression and vulnerability related to gender, race, and ethnicity in their roles. Adopting Video-cued Multivocal Ethnography to capture diverse voices, this study explores the intersection of teaching practices, challenging hegemonic discourses of professionalism and the concept of universal truths of early childhood teaching. It highlights the need to recenter local and culturally specific narratives, offering insights to create a more sustainable and equitable environment for professionals from diverse backgrounds.

**Keyword:** early childhood teachers' professionalism, early childhood workforce, videocued multivocal ethnography, cross-cultural study

## Introduction

Recent research consistently highlights the critical role of early childhood educators in fostering young children's development, including cognitive, social-emotional, linguistic, and self-regulation skills (Bakken et al., 2017; Trawick-Smith, 2014). Despite the growing recognition of early childhood educators' indispensable role in maintaining early childhood education quality, they are often undervalued, and their working conditions remain poor (Mitter & Putcha, 2018; Henward & Qi, 2024). Compared to elementary and secondary schools, the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce suffers from higher turnover rates, lower compensation, inconsistent entry requirements, and limited opportunities for professional development, making it difficult to retain qualified

teachers (Eadie et al., 2021; Gomez et al., 2015). A 2021 U.S. labor report indicates that preschool teachers' median annual wage was \$30,210, significantly lower than the \$61,030 median for teachers across all levels (US BLS, 2022). These long-standing issues were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, with increased unemployment, reduced salaries, and heightened emotional burnout, drawing attention to the early childhood workforce in local contexts (Lee & Parolin, 2021; Smith & Granja, 2021). These severe inequities in the early childhood workforce have contributed to persistent staffing shortages and, due to changes, claims of declining quality, with negative consequences for children and families (Markowitz, 2024).

ECEC has been run over and shaped by the highly gendered form of labor within the workforce (Wingfield, 2010). In 2021, women comprised 96.8% of U.S. preschool and kindergarten teachers, with 38% identifying as women of color, indicating higher racial diversity than the general population (US BLS, 2022; NSECE, 2023). In China, as in many countries around the world, gender roles have shaped the labor division, with women primarily responsible for household work and childcare, while men manage external affairs, reflecting conventional norms within Chinese society (Gao, 2015; Liu et al., 2013).

Across the U.S. and China, as well as other parts of the world, there has been a deeply entrenched perception categorizing women early childhood teachers as babysitters and semi-professionals, stemming from the biological association between women and childrearing (Goldstein, 1993; Wong, 2022). Consequently, these educators are often mistakenly seen as engaging solely in "natural" childcare duties, without acquiring specialized knowledge and skills. The long-standing challenges and undervalued labor faced by ECE professionals reflect the systemic oppression and exploitation of women (Hennessy, 1990). The early childhood workplace exemplifies the material realities of intersecting oppression, intensified by the power dynamics tied to teachers' intersecting identities and their varying levels of marginalization. For instance, research highlights the disproportionate impact on the emotional well-being of early childhood teachers of color, emphasizing the need to address the distinct challenges faced by educators from marginalized communities (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022; Henward & Qi, 2024).

Despite efforts to enhance teachers' quality and well-being, insufficient attention has been given to how early childhood educators enact and negotiate their professional roles amid growing accountability pressures within and across local communities. Delpit (1988) noted that cultural groups hold distinct views on what defines a good teacher, shaped by intertwined historical, socio-political, economic, and cultural factors that form dominant views on teachers' professional roles. Research, therefore, must foster dialogue that bridges local and global perspectives, historical contexts, and the contemporary experiences of early childhood teachers facing oppression and vulnerability (Parekh & Wilcox, 2018). Ongoing concerns highlight the need to balance the global circulation of ECE practices with local beliefs and cultural traditions, as globalization risks standardizing practices and fostering cultural homogeneity (Choy, 2017).

This discussion surrounding the ECE workforce and profession is longstanding, yet the detrimental impacts of a strained workforce continue to affect educators, families, and children, particularly in marginalized communities (Qi & Henward, 2025). To better understand the lived experiences of early childhood teachers and address enduring workforce challenges within and cross-cultural contexts, I started this multi-year, crosscultural comparative ethnographic study, examining the teaching practices of women teachers in public early childhood education systems in the U.S. and China. This study focuses on tensions that arise when top-down standardization driven by neoliberal

forces conflicts with teachers' professional values and practices in local communities. It emphasizes the need to reframe and understand early childhood teachers' experiences in the context of shifting global and local dynamics, contributing a critical, comparative perspective on early childhood professionalism and the broader workforce in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Challenging hegemonic discourses shaped by market-oriented ideologies and entrenched power structures on early childhood teachers, this article highlights the compounded barriers and intersecting oppressions faced by women teachers from diverse backgrounds. It underscores the urgency of equity and inclusivity in the workforce as we collectively recover from the pandemic's impact, advocating for a more humanistic and comprehensive approach to professionalism.

### **Framing the study**

Care, patience, and love are critical components of the ECE profession and are regarded as aspects of a feminist ethics of care, which has often been undervalued (Osgood, 2010). Crediting love in the workplace is challenging, given its complex nature and the difficulty of measuring it, especially in the context of neoliberalism and a culture of accountability (Lehrer, 2020; Qi & Henward, in press). Yet, the capacity for human love can be understood through material practices involving the occurrence of embodied experiences of love. This perspective aligns with the concept of the performativity of love, which emphasizes managing impressions and expressing loving actions appropriately (Ferguson, 2013; Jónasdóttir & Ferguson, 2014). Conceptualizing love within the complex lives of ECE professionals is crucial (Gratzke, 2017; Page, 2018). The humanized mode of ECE professionalism, which emphasizes relation care, empathy, and the recognitions of educators' emotional labor as central to their work, requires consideration of love practices and management of loving actions to address the unremunerated emotional labor in the field. It moves beyond traditional definitions of professionalism that prioritize technical competence, efficiency, and rigid standards.

Notably, love practices also engage in intense emotional labor (Hargreaves, 2000). Emotional labor is a concept and practice coined by sociologists and labor studies researchers to describe how professions require workers to perform certain behaviors, suppress feelings or emotions that run counter to expectations, and consume themselves in the name of workforce professionalism (Hochschild, 2012). Emotional labor has been associated with the daily work of early childhood teachers and plays a significant role in shaping their professional identity (Ward, 2018), along with the demanding physical and intellectual requirements of the profession (Hargreaves, 2000). However, the unremunerative emotional labor of early childhood educators has been significantly devalued, marginalized, and discredited under neoliberal and managerialist influences that emphasize public standardization and accountability through performance standards, evaluations, and measurements (Osgood, 2010). This deficit perspective fails to address the chronic problem of high teacher turnover in the early childhood field and does not account for the highly gendered and racialized division of labor among teachers.

Neoliberalism and the culture of accountability have increasingly shaped early childhood teachers' professionalism through external pressures and standardized measurements (Hargreaves, 2000; Sachs, 2016). Teaching quality is often defined by adherence to standards and evidence-based approaches, emphasizing outcomes and external scrutiny (Osgood, 2010; Urban, 2013; Scharer, 2024). However, as teachers internalize these norms, they also exercise agency in adapting them to their daily practice. Francis' (2001) agency framework offers a critical lens on dominant "professionalism" in early childhood education, emphasizing teachers' lived experiences and beliefs as they reconstruct their professional identities within local contexts—a process Osgood (2010) calls

"professionalism from within" (Löfgren, 2015). Rather than opposing external standards, this perspective explores the tensions between external and internal values, focusing on how teachers negotiate these "regimes of truth" within their roles in local communities.

Interpreting and analyzing teachers' experiences requires an examination of the specific cultural, social, and historical contexts in which they work and live. To challenge universal and decontextualized notions of ECE professionalism and teaching practices, this study grounds understanding in the lived experiences of early childhood practitioners within the contexts of the U.S. and China. China operates the world's largest early childhood education system, serving children up to 6 or 7 years old (Feng, 2017). It features two main program types: nurseries for children aged 0-3 and *you'er yuan* (kindergarten) for those aged 3-6 (Xie & Li, 2020; Feng, 2017). In the U.S., early childhood education serves children from birth to age eight, primarily through childcare centers, preschools, and kindergartens. Head Start is the largest federal early intervention program in the U.S., primarily serving children aged 3-5 from families living below the federal poverty level or with special needs (Wells, 2015; Rose, 2010; Barnett, 2010). Established as a critical component of Johnson's War on Poverty, the Head Start program was designed to reduce socioeconomic disparities through a holistic approach, providing education, health, social, and nutritional services (Bierman et al., 2008; Zigler & Styfco, 2010; Wells, 2015; Freitas et al., 2008). The historical and socio-cultural contexts of these two countries provide great opportunities to explore how these factors shape the perceptions and practices of early childhood professionals within and across these contexts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To develop a comprehensive understanding and interpretation of the diverse lived experiences of early childhood teachers in different contexts, this study adopts a poststructuralist feminist framework with an intersectional lens to center the voices and counternarratives of individuals from diverse backgrounds. Poststructuralist feminist theory primarily focuses on issues of power, gender, and discourses in teachers' daily lives, countering the essentialist view of women teachers' experiences (Willett & Etowa, 2023). It highlights the complex dynamics of gender relations, developing an understanding of "how power within discourse is constituted and opening up possibilities for creating new discourses through which the individual can become reconstituted" (Osgood, 2006, p. 10). Adopting a poststructuralist lens in this study affords a critical understanding of how early childhood teachers perceive and construct meaning in their professional roles, negotiating between external agendas and their own professional knowledge and working ethos within local communities (Scharer, 2024).

While a poststructural perspective primarily analyzes micro-level resistance to oppression, intersectionality is to address macro-level power structures and oppression (Mann, 2013; Willett & Etowa, 2023). Rather than categorizing all women into a single group, intersectionality acknowledges and examines a diverse range of social constructs and individual identities. For instance, research demonstrates that women from minority groups face multiple layers of subordination, further intensified by institutional norms rooted in non-intersectional paradigms (Cho et al., 2013). Intersectionality has emerged as a pivotal framework, providing a convergent space for examining the interplay and tensions among various forms of inequality (Crenshaw, 2013). Integrating intersectional and poststructural perspectives has been explored in addressing social justice issues in fields like women's health and nursing, which similarly comprise a workforce dominated by women (Willett & Etowa, 2023). Breengaard (2015) and Staunæs (2003) demonstrate how a combined framework of poststructuralism and intersectionality enables analysis at

both macro and micro levels of marginalized women's experiences. This innovative approach fosters a more comprehensive understanding by shifting between individual and institutional levels of analysis.

### **Methodology**

In an increasingly globalized era, the experiences of children, parents, and practitioners are far from uniform but instead shaped by factors such as class, race, gender, and intersecting forms of oppression, which create diverse and complex realities. Across different contexts, there exists a range of perspectives on the characteristics and qualities that define a qualified early childhood educator. To challenge universal and decontextualized conceptions of ECE professionalism and teaching practices, this study focuses on the lived experiences of ECE practitioners in the U.S. and China, grounding the understanding in the local socio-political contexts in which they operate.

This study adopts Video-cued Multivocal Ethnography (VCME), a method developed by Joseph Tobin and colleagues in the 1980s, to capture diverse perspectives from early childhood practitioners in two countries, gaining insights into teachers' lived experiences and perspectives within and beyond their local contexts (Henward et al., 2019; Tobin, 2019; Tobin & Hsueh, 2014). Adapting the VCME approach, I videotaped teachers' daily practices, capturing various vignettes—such as the morning routine, planning and teaching, playtime, group activities, lunchtime, nap time, parent communication, and end-of-class activities at each site. The stages of the data collection process included site selection, participant observation (field notes), video filming, video editing, individual and focus group interviews, and comparative analysis. The video, capturing teachers' daily practices and lived experiences, was recorded at each site during the second half of my stay. Once the footage was collected, it was edited into a 12- to 15-minute video. I then presented this video to groups of participants from both the same community and the other site, prompting discussions based on their reactions and encouraging them to connect the content to their own practices and beliefs.

Fieldwork for this research was conducted between 2022 and 2024 and included participant observation, multiple rounds of ethnographic interviews, and video-cued interviews (both individual and focus group). The research sites were purposefully selected to include teachers in public early childhood settings in the U.S. and China. Due to time and budget constraints, private early childhood settings were excluded from this study but may be considered for future research. The research sites included a college town with a predominantly white population, a semi-rural prairie town with a significant Hispanic community in the Northeastern U.S., a suburban area in Jiangsu Province, and a Mongolia community in northern China. The fieldwork involved participant observation and rounds of ethnographic interviews. One teacher's daily practice from each country was primarily recorded on video. Additionally, directors and groups of early childhood teachers from both majority and minority racial/ethnic backgrounds were interviewed to share their thoughts, insights, and comments on the corresponding video. This video was then shown to teachers in the counterpart country to facilitate further discussion. The interviews were ongoing, and the data were transcribed, coded, categorized, and analyzed. I reviewed the transcripts and field notes to identify emergent themes and questions, which helped organize further patterns for analysis. Additionally, the field notes and memos contributed to the discussion, coding, and reflection. All informants' names are pseudonyms in this study.

In triangulating data, I analyzed field notes, interview and focus group transcripts, and policy documents. In ethnography, data analysis is not confined to a discrete phase; rather,

it is an ongoing, iterative, and recursive process. After producing each transcript and field note, I employed open coding for content analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). To ensure trustworthiness, I utilized member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing (Charmaz, 2006) and triangulated data both within and across sites. Following the initial analysis, I returned to each program to share the findings and discuss the next steps.

Moving to the interpretation stage, I draw on Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and contextuality to frame the data generated from multiple layers of voices and interpret their meanings. This approach transcends mechanical linguistic analysis and delves into the critical aspects of the texts. Bakhtin's notion of dialogism posits that speech is highly contextual, shaped through continuous interactions and the assimilation of others' voices (Cohen & Uhry, 2007). His concept of contextuality requires researchers to explore how participants' practices and thoughts connect with broader issues. By framing data derived from dialogues and observations, my analysis generates insights by situating the meanings of words in a contextual and co-constructed manner with participating teachers.

### **Positionality**

Positionality is not only about who the researcher is but also about the context in which the research is conducted. As Boveda and Annamma (2023) note, “positionality statements must be more than a listing of identities or a claim on authority through the naming of professional proximity to marginalized communities” (p. 306). In this study, it's not simply about my ability to speak Mandarin and English that facilitates my research; rather, it is critical to examine how my experiences in two social-cultural settings have shaped the lens through which I conduct the research. This includes understanding what I compare, why I make those comparisons, and exploring both the commonalities and disparities that have emerged in different contexts. As a Chinese early childhood educator who has transitioned into a researcher and teacher educator, my training and teaching experiences across various parts of the U.S. have made what was once familiar seem strange upon my return home. Straddling two distinct cultural and educational environments, my positionality as an “in-between” has strengthened my sensitivity to tacit cultural codes and enhanced my ability to contribute to the crosscultural aspects of my research. While my “in-between” positionality is a significant asset, it also necessitates self-reflection and awareness to address potential biases and omissions.

### **Findings Gendered Performance of Early Childhood Profession**

In early childhood settings, teachers are always expected to express affective emotions, warmth, and compassion, which may require changes in their outward appearances, such as facial expressions and voice tones, to convey the expected or required professional demeanor. This process has created tensions between the feelings teachers are expected to express and what they actually experience (Zhang et al, 2020). The daily practices of early childhood teachers in this study involve a large amount of embodied experience of gendered practices. When conducting video-cued interviews with a group of early childhood teachers in Jiangsu, China, they pointed out a scene where Yang *Laoshi's* (*laoshi* is the term that teachers are mostly called in China) appearance during outdoor play in the video contravened their requirements and regulations for early childhood teachers. In this scene, children are running and playing outdoors on the playground while teachers, wearing hats, masks, or sun protection clothing, stand aside to monitor their safety. As Wang *Laoshi* noted,

Recently, our kindergarten has explicitly prohibited teachers from wearing sun protection clothing and hats...The current requirement is

that teachers must dress the same as the children. If you want to wear a hat or sun protection clothing, all the children must also wear hats and sun protection clothing.

In this case, the compassion and empathy required in the early childhood profession extend beyond the emotional level to the material practice level. This necessitates that teachers act and demonstrate their professional ethics of care in daily activities, which are monitored by stakeholders such as institutions, programs, and parents. This performativity of the early childhood profession involves managing impressions and appropriately expressing actions that meet the public image of early childhood professionals.

While watching a video clip from a U.S. preschool, *Li Laoshi* and *Wang Laoshi* expressed surprise at the nail polish worn by Ms. Hathaway, a Head Start teacher in Northeastern U.S., as such adornments are not permitted in their own contexts. They highlighted the specific requirements for early childhood teachers' appearance and dress codes at their schools. *Li Laoshi* noted,

As for nail art, it's mainly because parents might have concerns; children themselves wouldn't be aware of this issue. However, children might get distracted by shiny and flashy things... Teachers are not allowed to wear short skirts; anything above the knee is not permitted. It's more about the image we want to project at our kindergarten. Short skirts might show more skin and could lead to accidental exposure. Also, sharp rings on fingers can cause scratches, and bracelets may bump and scratch.

*Wang Laoshi* added, "The clothing should not reveal your waist when you raise your hands. This is generally the requirement, and all hair must be tied up."

The conversations here focus on the institutional requirements shaping the daily practices of early childhood teachers, with the aim of projecting a "good" image of the entire early childhood professional community in local context. This standard image of the early childhood teacher is defined by specific expectations related to appearance, attire, facial expressions, and teaching practices. The emphasis on image extends beyond the individual teacher, as it also seeks to present a positive representation of the school and the broader early childhood workforce. When exploring the lived experiences of early childhood practitioners and the nature of their profession, it becomes challenging to impose extensive gendered and emotional expectations without acknowledging the complexities inherent in their roles. In the following section, I will mainly address how teachers' daily practices reflect these dynamics in different cultural communities.

### **Reinterpreting Teaching Practices Across Contexts**

During lunch time in *Yang Laoshi's* class, Dou Dou (5-year-old) was picky about vegetables in her bowl. *Yang Laoshi* approached Dou Dou and used chopsticks to serve a piece of vegetable into Dou Dou's bowl of rice, Dou Dou waved her hands and shook her head in refusal. *Yang Laoshi* gently picked up the vegetable and made a characteristic sound—"aw" (a cue often used in China to encourage children to open their mouths). Dou Dou, however, turned her head and body away. Observing this, *Yang Laoshi* set the chopsticks and bowl down, squatted beside Dou Dou, and began the conversation with Dou Dou. "Does your brother eat vegetables?" *Yang Laoshi* asked, referring to Dou Dou's sibling (who was also in *Yang Laoshi's* class). "He added a lot of vegetable to his bowl," she continued, picking up another piece and holding it out. "This towel gourd is very soft

and tastes like ice cream." Dou Dou hesitated for a few seconds but eventually took the piece and ate it. Yang *Laoshi* asked, "Was it tasty and soft? Just one more bite, okay? Finish these two pieces," she said, pointing to the remaining towel gourd in Dou Dou's bowl. "You don't have to eat all of the rest – just finish what's in your bowl."

While observing this video scene, teachers at other sites in China expressed similar concerns about children becoming increasingly picky with food, raising worries about the potential negative impact on their health. They also pointed out issues with parents who are always worried about their children's eating habits. In Chinese culture, the traditional connection between food and human well-being is reflected in phrases such as "Food is everything to the people" and "Every single grain is the fruit of hard work". These phrases emphasize the importance of food as a necessity and a key factor in people's well-being and stability. This cultural value is also evident in daily practices in early childhood classrooms in China, where teachers encourage children to eat and make an effort not to waste food unless absolutely necessary.

This lunch scene also garnered the attention and discussions of several U.S. teachers. As Ms. Hathaway commented on this scene,

...you can't force the kid. We encourage them to try, as this is for healthy bodies. I tell them they can kiss it, so it touches their lips, or it is just a little nibble. So, it's one of those things we encourage, but we don't make any kid try it. I had one this year who said, 'I don't like it,' and we asked, 'Have you tried it?' He said no. We said, 'Why don't you try just a little bite?' So, we cut a little bit. I said, 'Try this little bite,' and then he realized he liked something like pierogies. He had no clue; he loved pierogies and ate all of them after we had him try a little bite. So, we definitely encourage, 'Hey, why don't you try it? Just see what you think. If you've never had it, you don't know if you like it or not.' But we don't force them to eat anything.

Each time Ms. Hathaway mentioned the word "encourage," she pronounced it slowly and with emphasis. From her perspective, Yang *Laoshi* was forcing Dou Dou to try the food rather than "encouraging" her. As Ms. Hathaway illustrated through her examples of practice, her approach to encouragement is primarily verbal, without involving direct actions to prompt children to eat. The final decision on whether or not to eat rests with the children; if they choose not to eat, teachers do not pursue further conversation or action on the matter.

While watching the scene, Ms. Camila, an early childhood teacher in a Hispanic community in the Northeastern U.S., shared her perspective and experiences, drawing on her multicultural background from both the U.S. and her home cultures of Puerto Rico and Mexico:

So that is different. See, this is where I'm gonna culturally divide myself, because I am Puerto Rican and Mexican, but I am American more because I was born here in the United States. The thing is, culturally, my Hispanic side—we do that, right? Where you have to eat what you're provided. But over here, on the U.S. side, we don't do that. If they don't want it, we provide them the option to eat it. So I feel like culturally, we judge that because it's like, why would you talk about food? Now, let's say today we have chicken strips, which they love, and wax beans. If they finish the chicken, I say, 'You at least have to try a little bit of the green bean.' And it's like, okay, but some of them choose not to. So, then I still give them more chicken because I can't say no to giving them more

food. In that way, it is kind of a struggle because my culture's one more kick in. It can be like; you know how many kids would love to have this? And just because—that's something about the U.S.—we throw out so much food because some of those principles are not taught.

In Ms. Camila's context, her understanding drew from both her Hispanic background and her experiences and training in the dominant U.S.-based (white middle-class) early childhood practices and principles, reflecting the multiple layers of interpretation regarding the lunch scene. While she adhered to the fundamental principle of respecting children's decisions in Head Start settings, she experienced an internal struggle with the disconnect between this principle and her home cultures' values regarding food practices.

In this lunch scene, we observe how early childhood educators at U.S. sites interpret Yang *Laoshi's* teaching practice and how teachers from different socio-cultural contexts adapt their strategies to prompt children to try new foods in local communities. Underlying the scene are the ways in which food practices convey meanings that are deeply rooted in historical, socio-cultural (Guerrero, 2019), and policy systems. The cultural significance of food extends beyond its superficial role as mere sustenance in the Chinese context. Food also functions as a medium to instill traditional Chinese values of gratitude, humility, and respect for the land and farmers who cultivate it. These moral and ethical values of gratitude and frugality are rooted in Confucian philosophy, which has been shown in the scene that wasting food disrespects the farmer's hard work and the land and resources that contribute to food production.

The various voices and perspectives in this lunchtime scene offer a concrete example of how teachers from diverse socio-cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds understand teaching professionalism through a culturally relative and intersectional lens. Food, in instance, holds cultural significance in marking socio-cultural identity (Shugart, 2008). It is not just a matter of sustenance but carries "a social dimension of the utmost importance" (Douglas, 1982, p. 82) and represents "a cultural domain that is often elaborated into complex systems of meaning" (Goode, 1992, p. 233). Situating this scene within a broader structured system across two countries enables us to contextualize the multiple forces and discourses influencing teaching practices. It also highlights how these factors intersect to define teachers' professionalism within each country and community. By incorporating diverse perspectives into a broader framework, we can examine how the cultural ecological system shapes teachers' views and daily practices across various countries and communities.

### **Teachers' Counternarratives**

The counternarrative on early childhood professionalism is evident in teachers' awareness of their emotional well-being, which is significantly affected by unequal working conditions, such as stringent regulations on work hours and underpayment that do not reflect their workload. A Hispanic Head Start teacher in the Northeast U.S., Ms. Lucia, expressed her concerns about the invisible and underrecognized emotional labor both during and outside of their required working hours,

You're thinking, how will this child be doing? How can I work better? What can I do differently? And you're worried about your child—maybe they fell down or something. It wasn't bad, but they were crying, and you're thinking, I hope they feel better. So, it's like you carry the work home without carrying your computer.

In the U.S., this is especially evident in Head Start programs, where teachers primarily work with children from low-income families. Teachers in these programs often face significant challenges due to limited support and recognition. Supporting children from low-income households, immigrant backgrounds, and diverse linguistic and cultural contexts demands that early childhood teachers dedicate additional professional effort, time, and intellectual and emotional labor to their work. The Head Start site where I conducted this research also implements the Individualized Education Program (IEP), adding another layer of complexity to their professional responsibilities. Teachers are required to manage the dual workload of working with children from low-income families who may have special learning and developmental needs, while also completing documentation for both the Head Start program and the IEP.

In addition to their awareness of the unequal working conditions, early childhood teachers in this study also take actions to make professional judgments that sometimes challenge top-down directives in order to benefit the children in their classes. Identifying these “gray areas” can help us understand these dynamics within the localized context. The term “gray areas,” as used here, conveys the idea that there are ambiguous or complex situations where standard guidelines or regulations may not fully apply, requiring teachers to use their professional judgment to make decisions. It captures the complexity and the need for nuanced understanding in handling diverse and challenging classroom dynamics.

According to Head Start regulations, certain materials are either prohibited or discouraged for use in the classroom. Ms. Hathaway shared her story that,

With anything in our sensory tables or similar activities, we can't have any food. We can't put dried rice or beans or anything like that in it because of Head Start standards. Food cannot be used in any other way other than eating. I've even done stamp painting with vegetables, but they don't want us to do that. The reason is that they don't want kids to think it's wasting food, especially for Head Start kids who are low income. They might see it as throwing out food. I've done broccoli paintings and stamping, but a lot of times, I'll do it in conjunction with something else. If we've had broccoli for lunch and it's getting old, I'll say, 'Look, we can do paintings with it.' I try to make it make sense and not seem like we're just buying food to use for other purposes.

In the narratives, we observe how Ms. Hathaway exercises her professional judgment regarding the use of vegetables in art activities. Aware of the developmental benefits for the children and ensuring careful supervision for safety, she opted to modify the program's regulations rather than strictly adhere to them. At first glance, this practice might seem to contravene established regulations or teaching ethics. However, by considering teachers' narratives and broadening our understanding of the teaching profession through a more humanized lens, we uncover a more nuanced space for professional discretion and ethical decision-making in daily classrooms. These episodes illustrate the concept of "professionalism from within," as Ms. Hathaway navigates and negotiates top-down standards, making informed judgments and adjustments rooted in her ethical considerations and professional practices.

## **Conclusion**

Drawing on data from a cross-cultural ethnographic study in the U.S. and China, this article explores the diverse lived experiences and counter-narratives of early childhood teachers, challenging the dominant, universal notion of early childhood professionalism.

Through intersectional interpretations of teaching practices across contexts, this study emphasizes the significance of understanding teachers' professional values and practices in their local communities. By situating teachers' voices within broader discussions of intersectionality, it reveals the ways in which both the structured systems and daily discursive practices shape early childhood teachers' professionalism in local context. It also elaborates how teachers play their agency to negotiate with neoliberal forces and external scrutiny of their professionalism. The findings underscore the urgent need to address the unique challenges faced by women early childhood practitioners, particularly concerning their well-being and unremunerated labor inherent in their roles within the workforce.

Shifting between global and local contexts, this cross-cultural perspective illustrates how global forces like neoliberalism intersect with local dynamics to shape the daily practices of early childhood educators. Acknowledging this multilayered cultural ecology is crucial for developing inclusive and equitable policies that respect the unique challenges and contributions of early childhood practitioners while addressing broader systemic pressures.

Moving forward, this study advocates for a reconceptualization of early childhood professionalism, suggesting a more humanized approach that prioritizes the voices of practitioners and their feminist ethics of care within local contexts. Recognizing the complexity of the early childhood profession and fostering collaborative work among policymakers, researchers, and practitioners is essential for transforming and improving the well-being of practitioners and the overall workforce. As teacher educators and researchers, our shared commitment to improving the well-being of early childhood practitioners and fostering the humanization of the ECE workforce is indispensable. Achieving this requires us to engage with critical pedagogical approaches and reimagine both ECE practices, policies, regulations, and credentialing systems to better align with the needs of early childhood educators and local communities.

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