

Critical reflections on care and dyadic relationships in a toddler group

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Abstract: Authors explore role and status of care in a toddler classroom and ways dyadic relationships between children and their educator mirror care processes. Specifically, they investigated the care, and the characteristics of the dyadic relationships established by the educators with the children, with the aim to understand the values of care being played out in the practices that sustained them and their role in the development of the children's emancipation, here understood as the process of growing in autonomy and power over their lives. The case study was conducted in a class of children aged two to three years old. Class was part of a nursery school located in the Greek municipality of Ioannina. Data was collected through non-participant observation, using field notes. Results have revealed that care experiences offered by early childhood educators to toddlers represent important contexts for children's early affective and autonomy development. Educators become a figure of subsidiary secure attachment, particularly during stressful situations and these care experiences. The dyads established between the child and the educator in care situations strengthen safe attachments if the adult respects the children's bodies, rhythms, necessities, and interests. These safe relationships benefit all children, including those who experience social problems at home. Children could develop negative expectations and fear about interpersonal relationships and conflictive behaviors of all kinds if established relationships with them are hostile. Results indicate that secure attachments are formed only when educators empower children. In that sense, results highlight that education and care are strongly interrelated.

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Introduction

One of the thorny issues that surrounds early childhood education and care (hereafter referred to as ECEC) is that of the conceptual and structural dichotomy between care and education (Vandenbroeck, 2006). Specifically, although ECEC has a legitimate aspiration to be a "caring profession" and even though neurobiological research has provided scientific evidence of the importance of care, traditional interpretations maintain a lower status of care. Care is viewed as custodial in nature and linked to welfare and it is defined as meeting children's physical needs. Also, from a traditional perspective supported by patriarchy, tasks linked to care are considered simple and easy to carry out, closely connected to the work of women and motherhood.

On the contrary, contemporary research suggests that during care children are active subjects that meet adults and jointly develop empathy and relational competencies, and that care fulfils not merely physical needs but also spiritual or psychological needs (Lindgren, 2001 cited in Löfgren, 2016). According to Cameron (2004, p. 144) "pedagogic care is about meeting everyday needs for health, education, relationships, intimacy and understanding through a variety of means".

Acknowledging the importance of caring moments and practices in ECEC, the present study aimed at exploring the role and status of care and the weight of dyadic relationships on care in a toddler classroom with children aged two and three years old. The overall objective of the study was to explore the values of

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care being played out in the practices that sustained them and their role in the development of children's emancipation, understood as the process of gaining autonomy and power over their lives. To do this, we carried out observations over the course of one month in a nursery school. We focused on classroom activities, food events, toilet and nappy change situations, and the playground. We asked ourselves about the relationships that the educators established with the children and how they were able to combine individualized attention with shared attention. We were interested in discovering the educators' strategies to build and strengthen secure attachments with children.

Our article collects, on the one hand, a theoretical foundation based on relevant work that has been conducted around care and the establishment of secure attachments by children with for them significant adults, among whom are educators. On the other hand, its purpose is to offer some relevant categories that could contribute to shedding light on the characteristics of learning environments capable of promoting the construction of secure attachments in nursery schools, both within the framework of individual and collective relationships established with children.

Value and Meaning of Caring

Caring is a specific activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. The world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to weave into a complex web that sustains life. Care responds to a social commitment to the common good and is thus a consequence of human interdependence (Tronto, 2010). Care, therefore, is an issue for all human beings and affects our life. Thus, care must be understood as something inherent to the socio-political context of democratic citizenship that engages all human beings (Tronto, 1993; Sevenhuijsen, 1998). According to Tronto (2017), care theory offers a more complete picture of human life because it places relationships and their completion as a central issue in our world. The democratic revolution, he argues, will be incomplete if it does not include everyone in the debates about the allocation of care responsibilities in society, which, of course, goes beyond human beings.

Although care is closely linked to parenthood, as parents play a fundamental role in their children's upbringing, care is an important element and practice that takes place in other systems in which children participate. The preschool program is one fundamental system in which children participate and interact with other human beings. Care between and among the players in the system (that is educators, children themselves, parents, and other actors in the community) influences children's emancipation, understood as the process of developing autonomy and power over their lives.

Despite the importance of care, in recent years we have witnessed a separation of care from school life and the triumph of an academization in the content of ECEC itself. This academization separates children from their educators and from their families, favoring little or no participation of the latter in school, creating a favorable territory for disagreements and confrontations. The 'need' to devalue and exclude care from the ECEC discourse is evident not only to the practice and the policies across countries (Rentzou, 2017; 2020), but also to the discourse used by the ECEC professionals, themselves. Expressions such as: "we are not babysitters", "we are not here to look after children" or "we are not a nursery" give much food for thought about the role that these professionals attribute to care in their work of educating.

This type of discourse reappeared with force in times of pandemic. The fear of becoming infected tinged human approaches and relationships. Not touching, or doing so very cautiously and under certain conditions, together with the dubious guarantees of the school environment's healthiness in the face of the coronavirus (Collins, 2020) increased animosity towards care. Thus, insufficient care is prolonged and strengthened when such perceptions of the pandemic continue to circulate.

In the case of older children (kindergarten), ECEC is inhabited by teachers with conflicting positions on care (Rentzou, 2017; Sánchez Blanco, 2009; 2019). There are some who refuse to provide certain bodily care to bodily functions related to the hygiene and feeding of children. Some organizations such as the teaching unions could support these kinds of teaching decisions about neglect body care in countries such as Spain and Greece. These teaching considerations should be criticized, questioned, and stopped by

education administration because it is helping to legitimize neglect and, especially if this discourse is supported in teachers' meetings where decisions about practices are taken. Also, this situation adds pressure for families as children's independence is considered very important to start kindergarten. It is mainly manifested in insistently supporting the child's ability to manage hygiene using the bathroom and washing hands (Jose et al., 2022). Families spend a lot of time training their children on managing toilet, but it is not a guarantee of getting it and however could produce insecurity which is an obstacle for the develop of emancipatory processes.

Such a context adds pressure on the youngest children to acquire early autonomy in certain bodily self-care before they move from nursery school to kindergarten. In this context, educators work intensively in nursery school to accelerate learning about autonomy in bodily functions, which often clashes with the children's developmental characteristics. That scenery gives way to the demand for speed in these physiological learning processes, which oppresses many children, provoking strong childhood insecurities that alter their development at all levels. Only children diagnosed with special educational needs are lucky when they have specific caregivers who attend to their bodily needs. The loving and respectful bodily treatment that all children should receive in such circumstances, if not provided, is capable of provoking disaffection in children and families themselves. Accelerating control of bodily functions such as urination and defecation is a powerful source of stress that leaves all kinds of marks on children (Siegel, 2020).

The civilizing power of body care (Elias, 2000) started to be studied several decades ago. These studies revealed harsh control and repression that educators' practices could produce over children's bodies (biopower), in institutions such as schools (Foucault, 1980; Cisney & Morar, 2015). Tobin's research (2014) illuminates us about how culture and repression can take control over teaching practices in childcare situations across the world.

Besides, academic life being imposed over care is disastrous (Aslanian, 2015), as it leads to the disembodiment of education, "with the body being subordinate to the mind" (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2016). If educators relegate childcare practices exclusively to the home, to the private sphere, and academize preschool programs, they distance themselves from the possibility of establishing a shared responsibility for care (Van Laere et al., 2018), that is so essential to nurture our condition as human beings.

Care and Education

Care is an inseparable part of education and, moreover, when we value care, we are valuing the role of women who did so much to protect life (Braidotti, 2021). However, the productive public-school sector dedicated to ECEC has come to proclaim itself to be of high quality by presenting education and care as distinct, yet necessary. As such, in most European countries with a liberal market economy the split system is adopted and the dichotomy is evident (Rentzou, 2017) at many levels (administrative, preschool programs, ECEC curricula and educational/pedagogical approaches, early childhood educators' preparation). The claim that early education should incorporate both education and care is a split in itself. It is a contradiction because there is no education without care and there is no care without education. This split between care and education (Sims, 2014; Taggart, 2011) has been used to facilitate the promotion of schools in the education market (Gibbons, 2020). Yet, as already stated, care is inherent to teaching practices that are addressed to young children. Educators, teachers, have a moral responsibility to care for their pupils, to build relationships that foster reciprocity and mutual respect (Mahfouz et al., 2024).

To understand the importance of ECEC and the central role of care within ECEC theory and practice, it is important to inform our nomenclature (Rentzou, 2020; Sánchez Blanco, 2019) and move beyond traditional interpretations. Care is far from defending discourses of childhoods as utterly vulnerable and passive. On the other hand, it questions teaching practices based on the surrogate mother model that only insist on historical reminiscences, considering teaching work with young children as an extension of motherhood. The school, from the earliest ages, must educate to care and care to educate, but not to replace families, but to build with them democratic environments, true learning communities (Dewey, 1944). To insist on replacing mothers, fathers, relatives, who care for the child, breaks the emancipating project of the subjects.

In the education of children, all roles are important, whether they are directly part of the school, or part of the family or the local neighbourhood. At school, children are educated by being cared in community and based on democratic practices. All this makes it possible for the subjects to build an awareness of themselves as subjects with rights, learning to demand and claim their fulfilment (Taggart, 2016), in connection with the world around them and further away, without losing sight of the fact that care must go beyond human beings. Life thrives, Lovelock (2020) and Mancuso (2020) argue, in an interrelated way; after all living beings are related (Haraway, 2016).

Care is not a matter of two, but of more subjects, even if in the first months, we recall, again, the mother-baby dyad as a model of relationship is extraordinarily valuable, important, and decisive for both parties. However, as the children lead a collective life at school, it is necessary that this dyad must be transcended by other forms of care (Aslanian & Moxnes, 2020). These forms are closely related to a collective and cooperative, democratic, happening, where the child is an active part of a learning community. Care must involve not only educators, all school staff, and families, but also all citizens, starting with the neighborhood and the locality where the school is located.

Care as part of education weaves a whole network linking the people closest to the child and those furthest away from him/her. They all contribute to the development of the child's emancipatory project as a human being. However, at specific, intimate moments, the child requires dyads; for example, in intimate bodily care that requires close contact between the educator and the child. Bathing, changing nappies, feeding, sleeping, may represent some examples of the earliest ages, to which Pikler (2007), among other researchers with psychoanalytical roots, referred to years ago.

Even in a dyad, if we analyze the relationship in depth, we will realize that care goes beyond the mother; also, the sibling, or the father, the grandfather or grandmother, the uncle or aunt who get involved, to give a few examples, have a transcendental role: they support the mother in her actions of caring for the baby. Dyad as an exclusive aspiration to reproduce the exclusive prototype of care in schools should be questioned. Relationships must move towards models of relationships with children based on shared responsibilities and commitments where the whole community is involved in the care of children (Nodding, 2013). The care of children should not be the exclusive patrimony of the family, the school, paediatricians, etc. Everyone, citizens in general, must take responsibility for their care, beyond the family, because at the end of the day, we are all part of the great human family.

The relationships established in direct care involve intimacy, closeness, concern, as well as ethical acts of empathy and compassion, as Cekaite and Bergnehr (2018), and Brenne and Åmot, I (2024) point out, where verbal and non-verbal communication plays a very important role. However, moral panics (Tobin, 1997) and the media that whip them up in this regard represent a major obstacle to bodily contact with children in care situations. The fact that no-touch policies are being implemented in schools and administrations is disastrous. Touch affectionately and respectfully children's body has a crucial role for infant learning experiences about love and life (Odent, 2012). There is no shortage of studies that support the importance of relational care and bodily closeness being embedded in settings for the benefits they bring to children (Goodwin, 2017), contrary to ideas that link professionalism with emotional distance, lack of physical contact and the predominance of purely didactic encounters (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018). Byung-Chul Han (2024) argues that poverty of contact makes us sick, to the extent that if we lack contact, we become irretrievably trapped in our ego.

Method

The present research study is based in a critical paradigm, using ethnography and qualitative research methods. Ethnography is a particularly useful method for the study of childhood since it allows the researcher to observe life as it happens and to consider children's voice in the production of research data.

Participants and Methodological Issues

Our observations took place in a childcare center. It enrolls children aged from 6 months to 4 years of age and operates from 7:00 to 16:00. It enrolls children of typical development and also children with disabilities and special educational needs. Our case study took place in one toddler classroom of a Greek nursery school in the municipality of Ioannina. 15 two- and three-year-old children were enrolled in the classroom. Two university graduate educators worked in this specific class. Occasionally, undergraduate students, who are involved in their teaching practicums, were visiting the class.

Method and Process Followed in the Study

Children arrive at the center between 7:00 and 9:00 am. After their breakfast, children participate in different adult-led and child-led activities, from 9:30 to 12:00. After the circle time, during which children are signing, are saying good morning and discuss with their educators about the selected topic, children are playing freely in the learning centers that exist in the classroom, in small groups. While children are playing freely, educators call dyads of children to perform activities (e.g., hands and crafts). From 11:00 to 11:45 children engage either in kinetic activities or in free play inside the classroom or in the yard, depending on the weather. From 12:00 to 12:45 children are having lunch. After lunch, educators are reading fairy tales to children. Departure time starts from 13:00. Children who depart later can play freely.

Data was collected using field notes (Goetz & Lecompte, 1993). Only one of the researchers stayed in the classroom. The non-participatory observation process which lasted one month took place from chairs located in a fixed space within the classroom, as agreed with the educators of the class. Researchers only have permission to attend one children's classroom and write about it. Parents did not want the researcher to take photos or records videos. The purpose of the study was to take the natural state of events undisturbed by the researcher (Clark et al., 2017; Hammersley, 2019). Only interactions with children happened if they took the initiative and asked or demanded something (for example, if they give water to the researcher in a pretended play, or if they give him a hug). If one child took the researcher's pen, it was interpreted that it was because he/she wanted to stop writing in the diary, and it must be respected.

Classroom life was always respected. Therefore, all researcher's actions were fully subordinated to the initiatives of children and educators. In the case of the playground site, the location where the researcher was sitting was chosen by the researcher and in line with the patterns of respect for the life of the participants described above.

The acceptance of female researchers in school would be facilitated, in a way, by that collective unconscious constructed from the tradition of ancient Greece itself, configured from philoxenia or love of the stranger - any guest could be a covert god - (Tamás, 2022), it would positively influence our acceptance of the researcher on stage. Likewise, the triangulation process would be possible thanks to the meetings and discussions held with the school management and the dialogic nature of the research (Freire & Faundez, 1989), which favors the exchanges and critical reflections shared by the researchers on the observations made. Head-teachers and educators offered us valuable information about life at school. We had meetings with educators during children's free play in the school entrance hall, while they were waiting for families came to pick up their sons/daughters. Also, we had meetings with head-teachers during their break-time in the morning. They were very interested in improving teaching practices at their school. They considered that our conversations together about our observations could give them ideas for doing it.

Our observations were carried out during the morning, between 10 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. The periods of time for our work in the nursery school were decided by the head-teachers. Critical reflection about what was happening in the scenario were reviewed with educators and headteachers at the end of our observations whenever they had time and interest for doing it. We never disturbed their work unless they wanted to ask us and have a meeting with us. Therefore, our research was subordinated to head-teachers and educators' obligations at school. To analyze the results, the researchers carefully reviewed all the field notes written during the observations. Our field notes were reviewed trying to find significant categories

and we found that there were differences between what happened inside or outside of the classroom about the relationships between children and educators. We carried out exchanges and discussions about it and contrasted it with the information obtained in the triangulation process carried out with head-teachers and educators.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to conducting the research an ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Ioannina was gained. In addition, and after receiving the approval, a consent letter was prepared and sent to the parents of the children who were enrolled in this specific classroom. Parents were informed about the research, the aims of the research and the research processes. Only children whose parents gave consent to participate in the research were observed. The agreement was to maintain anonymity and confidentiality, as well as to record our observations by using exclusively the qualitative research field diary (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

As agreed with the families, photographs and audio and image recordings were totally excluded from our records, to always guarantee the anonymity of the participants. In addition, one girl was excluded from our records, because although the family accepted our presence, they did not want written information to be collected from her. The researcher who conducted the observation process in the classroom was sensitive to the children's reactions, stopping the writing of notes when one of them, showing curiosity, interacted with her. It stopped, too, when a child showed signs of discomfort through actions such as picking up their pen or showing anger or displeasure through facial expressions. Children's right to participate, therefore, would be always respected (Clark et al., 2017). Finally, it is relevant to note that the two researchers, who involved in this study, belong to different cultural contexts, so it was necessary to attend to power relations, exercising sound culturally responsive judgements (Xu & Stahl, 2022).

Results

Dyads and Life in Common

In their practices and discourses, educators show deep-rooted conceptions of the child as a very vulnerable person in need of protection and who requires the educators to put themselves in the role of a surrogate mother. Educators take on this role, especially with those children who are in the transition period, as they cry inconsolably often, and they constantly demand educators' attention. The role of the surrogate mother also reappears when any of the children fall and accidentally hit themselves, even if it is very slightly. Overprotection and avoidance of physical harm and frustration very often act as the driving force behind their actions as educators. Our observations allow us to affirm that when these situations arise, educators assume the model of a mother-baby dyad with the child, without considering children's chronological age and the child's relationships with other members of the classroom. During this time, the rest of the people in the classroom, either they are children or adults, are left out of the relationship and the collective activity does not stop. On the contrary, the activity continues to be driven by the other educator and the rest of the children are becoming mere spectators of this dyadic relationship between the educator and the child that hit or is in discomfort: a relationship that is so intimate and so close.

In addition, there are occasions when one of the educators leaves the classroom with the child who experiences discomfort, individually, without the rest of the children or the other educator intervening. Care, in this case, is not visible. It is because the relationship is hidden, it becomes part of the territory imagined by the rest of the children, and the adults who remain in the classroom. There seems to be a tacit agreement between educators not to meddle when one of them is attending to a child in circumstances such as those narrated; or in any other conflictive situation that may arise.

In addition, our observations indicate that children use body language to show to their educator what they need and want. Children's body gestures of outstretched arms or glances directed at one of the educators are extraordinarily powerful in deciding which of them is going to be involved in that dyad, in

that unique and individualized attention. At such times, the rest of the class remains on the sidelines, with no other child deciding to claim attention at the same time. In this way, they respect each other's need for support. Children show us, in this way, that they understand the needs of the other and that they empathize with their peers, an aspect that is very valuable for human development.

The snot spread on the face; the feigned accidents like small falls and blows; the crying and the throwing of some objects are used by these children to capture all the attention and claim the presence of the educator with mother role. Sometimes, children stop to attend the educator to pay attention to the woman who cleans and is sweeping meticulously the floor. The child looks at this woman and she smiles. This withdrawal of the child's attention from the educator makes her react by focusing even more on the child.

The rags, pacifiers and small toys brought from home contribute to calm the child while the real mother-baby dyad is not present, and that dyad symbolically maintained with the educator is not possible. All these objects stick to the children's body as all of them were extensions of it. Pacifiers have chains or ribbons that prevent to get lost, hanging from the child's body. Rags or blankets have a sewn string through which the child passes his hand so that he/she cannot lose this object. This does not happen with personal toys, because when the child lets go of it, it detaches itself from his body. The mother-baby dyad is powerfully maintained through the pacifier and the blanket, but not through the toy that serves to initiate separation from home when it is released and placed on the table or on the floor.

Finally, when the educators decide, in a collaborative way, to take care of the class as a collective, they propose games that break the dyad. Then the right to play emerges as an imperative need of children. If educators get to leave behind the role of mothers, children gain autonomy and control over their games.

Educators also seek to provide community care in the classroom, during collective activities. This search is carried out jointly by both educators and the participation of the undergraduate students if they are present. Sometimes a child decides to sit on the lap of an adult in the class looking for safety. The signs of acceptance of this behavior by all those present are more than evident. It is the needs of the children that condition the pedagogical decisions to move from shared attention to individualized attention based on the mother-baby dyad model.

There is, however, no shortage of children who claim the dyad as a way of relating to the educator in the collective games in the space of the carpet. Thus, if they are sitting, they seek to place themselves between the educator's legs. The educator consents, but that does not stop her introducing and continuing the game she brought to propose to the whole class. Both educators know very well when to leave if one is leading an activity so as not to cause chaos and that the children always know who is leading the way in the collective proposals.

It is common for the children who join later to disconnect from the collective proposals and turn their gaze to the other educator who does not lead the activity. In that case, the child is attended by her using a separate activity invented and directed by the child; or another one invented by educator with the purpose of not making too much noise and not disturbing the educators who are in interaction with the rest of the classroom. In this way, collective activity and mother-baby dyad coexist in unison without disturbing each other. If the child chooses to sit on the lap of the person who leads the activity, he or she must be satisfied with physical contact, because at that moment the educator is involved to attend to the group collectively. Some end up heartbroken because they fail to capture the educator's full attention. When undergraduate students were present, the educators involved them to attend individually to children who needed it.

Classroom life and practices also include time for children to take care of each other. However, these are scarce. Each day, one of them, according to a predetermined shift (order of the list of names), performs functions designed to take care of the others. The care consists of providing them with the water canteens. This happens after eating or when entering the garden. Children's pleasure is great, because it is a very special moment to interact with the classmates and make them happy by offering them something they

need. Taking care of oneself is also practiced in the class by spontaneously using the canteen when they are thirsty or going to the bathroom (those who are not wearing a diaper) when they feel like it. Taking care of oneself in one's own needs and those of others strengthens empathetic relationships in the classroom.

God appears in the discourse as a great caregiver. Every day, children are put in a position to say thank you for the food they are going to receive, minutes before the food arrives. We remember that Greece is an Orthodox state. There are no bibs or napkins, only wet wipes, if the children fill up with food, it stains their clothes, face, or hands. The care of clothes is not important, their effort as educators is focused and destined to take care of the child's body. Thus, if it gets wet or dirty, it is changed without delay, without this being a problem. They also make sure that clothes are tucked between pants or leggings. This is intended to protect the children from colds. Their hair is often stroked and combed, in the case of wearing it long and with bobby pins or pigtails, trying to remove it from the eyes. Bracelets on pupils' wrists are common, and no one seems to be bothered by it, even if it distracts them in the task of washing and drying their hands. Many of them serve as amulets given by family members to protect them.

Outside the Classroom

Children take advantage of the opportunity to go out to the outdoor spaces and perceive new challenges. However, their educators do not break with that culture of absolute overprotection that translates into suffocating care practices, which have nothing to do with care and generate relationships of dependence and domination. Educators experience many fears on the outside and they manifest it, trying to recover dyads with children, especially with the youngest. They feel that a thousand dangers lie in wait for the children, and that outside children can suffer more damage than inside the classroom. On the other hand, they get into the anthills, observe and touch the ants at the risk of being pecked, chase the bumblebees, dip their hands in the earth, even though they are given sticks and tools to avoid it, look for puddles and thistles to test if they puncture and are occupied by the most rugged terrain, as opposed to the areas of rubber soil, to wander and jump.

Educators get stressed when they try to control that life that emerges in fullness in the outdoor spaces and that escapes from the dyadic relationship by entering fully into the relationship with their peers. The fact that families are overprotective does not help the educators to exploit the outdoor environment as much as they would like to do. So, they prefer to populate those less risky spaces and areas with rubber flooring in the playground, organizing activities in them to attract children. By doing so, educators hope that they will desert the riskiest places. The place preferred by them, but not by most of the children, is undoubtedly a circular gazebo with seating around it. Once they manage to gather everyone there, getting them to sit down, they relax and calm down. Bodily control over bodies reaches its fullness on the playground. There, the educators are free from anxieties and shocks.

Hygiene situations happen collectively in other room, outside of the classroom. There are two spaces, which are perfectly divided. The space for changing diapers and the space with the toilets. While in one of the groups there are waits, as the educator must attend to the children individually, in the other space the children take the initiative and are given the freedom to develop autonomously according to their needs. Educators divide the task, so that while one oversees changing diapers, the other oversees those who are autonomous and do not wear diapers. She also takes care of hand washing. The roles are exchanged by the day. During the diaper change, a group of children sit waiting for their turn. Even from the changing table, the educator encourages them to sing a song to liven up the wait.

The educator believes that children cannot tolerate waiting. This perception does not conform to reality, for they themselves can wait to interact with each other. The perception of children as incapable makes educators get involved with both the child who is changing and the group they are expecting. This situation causes a loss of personalized attention to the child being changed. Thus, it loses sight of the fact that the children who wait enjoy watching as it changes. And the child that is lying down while being changed enjoys being turned around and looking at his/her classmates. He/She even makes eye contact with them. One of the games that is done while waiting for the diaper is made using gestures with their

hands. With their hands occupied, children are less likely to use them to explore and manipulate.

In the toilet, there is a group of children who have autonomy for using them. The educator insists on illuminating the situation, on making it visible. The light on makes everyone see each other very well. The naked body, the genitals are not objecting of taboo, even the educator asks a child to take paper to another who is demanding it to clean himself. The naked body in ancient Greece was far from taboos. Here the bathrooms do not have a curtain or door. This allows for a public display of the body without anyone seeming to be bothered. It is also a time that children use to explore themselves and compare themselves bodily, as well as to show off their underwear.

Finally, in this space educators encourage children's autonomy: pulling their clothes up and down or lifting their sleeves or rubbing their hands with soap. Bodily freedom in the toilet far surpasses the freedom granted to children at other times at the classroom or playground, where the majority of activities are directed by educators. Finally, in the bathroom, the children experience freedom to move without the educator's control. She accompanies them in their actions, facilitating their realization, but giving them power over their actions. However, she always turns on the tap, just as she runs the soap dispenser.

Conclusion and Discussion

A revival of the exclusivist mother-baby dyad model advocated by Bowlby's studies (1944) and refuted by Ainsworth (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1973) appear on participant educators' practices. Especially, it is present, during the time of the playground and spread to any kind of activity outside, producing high self-demands in dyads, high expectations, guilt, self-exploitation, and a lot of stress. It is true that this type of conception about being a mother at nursery school led educators to be excessively controlling of children's behavior, especially with those who were most in need of their care. However, in occasions, the educators who participated in the present study seem to be able to adapt to the knowledge of later studies of attachment relationships in the context of which the educator becomes a secure attachment figure, even when they share their time with a collective of children (Elfer et al., 2012). This happens when they focus on body care activities, such as changing nappies.

Accepting the need for dyad relationships in ECEC at specific times as a child's need is especially important. The presence of two educators as educative couple, facilitates this kind of relationships. However, the dyads maintained over time by educators as a mode of exclusivist relationship disturb the development of the childhoods because the emancipatory process of the children is disrupted. Requiring educators to be mothers of children and take care of them as their family is impossible and counterproductive. Early childhood education is a totally different environment, where children are cared in a context of collective life with other classmates and adults. The challenge is to create an environment where every child is respected on her/his needs and rhythm, in a collective context with several children (Degotardi, 2017). It could be more possible if the ratio in the classrooms is reduced and educational couples of educators work in a cooperative way in the classroom and, in general, during the school life. Likewise, educators would have to respect the affective attachment relationships that children establish with educators. Children choose which educator they bond emotionally with.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that there are contexts, experiences, where dyads must be respected by educators because they favor the encounter, the construction of bonds, of secure attachment that will extend to other human relationships throughout life and where the development of empathy as a capacity is essential. This is the case in situations where children individually demand to be cared for bodily. The situations of food, sleep, hygiene, bodily accidents, pain, illness, among other situations, are excellent examples where these dyads are crucial in the school life of toddler, such as those participating in our research. This means that there are moments in which the child must be attended to in a totally individualized way in his or her bodily needs, using the dyad as a model of relationship. Each child will wait for his or her moment to be attended to, but all of them, in the end, will be able to enjoy this privileged attention to their bodily needs. It is thus a matter of waiting tinged with hope because they have learned to trust their educator and to trust that this respectful, personalized attention will take place.

The need to care and to be cared must become embedded in children's identities, both in girls and boys, and regardless of the family's financial resources. The very outsourcing of care in economically solvent families because it is considered a minor task, does not help in this regard. Offering children experiences in which they are being cared and take care for their peers or adults in nursery school in a respectful way will encourage them to be empathetic towards others (Sánchez Blanco, 2013). This is why the distribution of water bottles to classmates, as well as all helping situations, is so important in the group of pupils observed. In this way, it is essential to promote activities in early childhood education based on caring for others, whether they are peers or adults, and not just directed at oneself.

However, it is important not to lose sight of the caregiving situations that children may be involved in. There are care situations for which they are not prepared, such as looking after the youngest baby while their parents are attending to other tasks. Children, in this case, feel overwhelmed by the high demands of the task. If the baby cries and there is no adult around, they will try to do what their parents do, for example, rocking or putting the dummy in the baby's mouth. If this is not effective, they will feel desolate and overwhelmed. Their emancipation process will be compromised as they will experience deep insecurity and anxiety. On the contrary, helping by providing objects within reach, while, for example, the father is changing the baby's nappies, is acceptable. In these cases, children feel useful and valuable in taking care of the brother or sister baby.

(Pre)school experiences that involve rethinking traditional roles in relation to care have a great value for children's education because they help them to build identities free of stereotypes. It was an important question which appeared in conversations maintained with educators and head teachers. Having male educators or a male cooker chef working at nursery school, for example, would help in this hard task. In the classroom in which the present case study was conducted, the cook represented a powerful reference point for producing this type of rupture. However, there are families who have male educators in early childhood as focus of their criticism. Moral panics fueled by traditions and the very news of pedophilia can make families look with suspicion at male educators who educate by providing bodily care for children at nursery school. Also, it does not help to break stereotypes if parents consider that to establish secure attachments is easier if the educator is a woman and not a man. Encouraging fathers or grandfathers in families to take care of their children's bodies is crucial to change this kind of ideas. Also, it is helpful if women in the family trust males offering physical care to infants and toddlers. It contributes to breaking down all the prejudices we are referring to. This is evidenced by some of the discussions held with the principals of the nursery school researched.

There is another interesting discussion which appears in our conversation maintained with educators which is hiding some prejudices about the power of personal experiences of raising children. Personal experiences of educators caring for their own children at home does not seem to make educators more competent in their work and help to build more secure attachments with children. These kinds of prejudices represent an obstacle. It hinders relationships between educators, especially if educators with and without offspring coexist in classrooms. Stereotypes and prejudices must be overcome. Relationships with families can also be affected, especially when families distrust the practices of educators who do not have experiences of parenting children (Višnjić-Jevtić, 2021). Such considerations cannot serve as criteria to legitimize teaching practices and their justifications.

Besides, distancing oneself from the vision of childcare as an inescapable commitment in ECEC, putting academic matters first, is a disaster for the development of humanity. Academization puts obstacles and barriers to the construction of emotional relationships between educators and children. The establishment of emotional ties between educators and pupils must be encouraged and protected by educators. The construction of knowledge is always linked to affection and body care plays a very important role in this construction. Educators must never forget that knowledge ever happens by embodied way. However, it seems to be in the sight of many preschool programs and teachers in kindergarten, who perceive themselves as totally independent and alien to these care practices. The care practices are considered as an extra service and attributed to internal and external caregivers, depending

on whether they are the children, officially defined as functionally diverse. Teachers and educators who participated in our research wished for better working conditions, aimed at reducing ratios, based, among other things, on the demand for care as an essential part of pedagogical practices. Children need to be care supported by deliberative and reflective practices at school which protect their interest and autonomy initiatives. To have time, slow the life at school, as Clark (2023) points out, and to reduce ratios, as we said before, facilitate that children are listened to and respected.

It is worth pointing out behind much of the considerations which were commented in our article lies a devaluation of the work of early childhood educators. In our research, educators reclaim a greater appreciation of their work by families and society in general, which should be translated into better working conditions. Being a woman and having children does not represent sine qua non conditions to establish secure attachment with children and better care in nursery schools. Nor male educators are less competent than female educators and both can be equally competent to educate, and care having or not children. The deliberation of historical processes, such as those described in our paper (patriarchy, classism, gender discrimination) together with the development of critical thinking and critical pedagogy, can protect professionals in ECEC so that this historical burden does not make a dent in pedagogical practices and responsibilities, precisely because of its potential to produce critical reflections and transformations.

Finally, we cannot forget that caring is part of the human condition. It requires commitment, ethics, and empathy. Care as a democratic practice requires that we always keep in focus and at the center of our reflection the power dynamics that exist in the relationships that are established to care and be cared for if we pursuit to contribute to develop the children's emancipatory process. This implies giving power and decision-making capacity to young children in the care activities carried out by adults regarding their bodies. Educators should respect, for example, the waiting time that some children want before changing their diapers. There are times, too, that they do not wish that adults clean their snot, or they don't want to eat more. Their body language must be understood because through it they express their desires long before using verbal language. The link established by children with educators through cares situations must contribute to the development of children as autonomous world citizens, with the capacity to make critical judgements and decisions. The secure attachments that have been built up are extraordinarily conducive to all of this. It is why it is so important that this kind of attachment forms the backbone of children's school life in institutions such as nursery schools.

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