Reconciling Caring and Market Imperatives in Global Early Childhood Education and Care Practice: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Globally, early childhood education and care (ECEC) practitioners face the unique challenge of balancing market-driven demands with caregiving imperatives, navigating these competing rationalities in complex and multifaceted ways. This study systematically reviews 32 empirical accounts from academic scholarship to answer the question: *how do early childhood practitioners balance the market imperative with the imperative to care?* Educator efforts are dimensionalized according to three levels of professional engagement: micro- (interpersonal, caring-learning interactions), meso- (organizational and community-level engagement), and macro- (collective or national systems of provisioning and governance). Grounded in the concept of discursive governance, the discussion examines how market and caregiving imperatives are negotiated at both interpersonal and structural levels within ECEC. The findings highlight how educators prioritize care when resisting commodification pressures, illustrating the relational nature of teaching and learning and the importance of stakeholder governance for meaningful early learning experiences. Embracing the complexity and multiplicity of these negotiation efforts is crucial for advancing equitable ECEC experiences, recognizing that education depends on the balancing of both economic and social imperatives to sustain social reproduction and cohesion in liberal market economies.

Keywords

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), neoliberalism, resistance, practitioners, care

Introduction

Historically, governance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for pre-primary children (ages 0-5) have given primacy to market imperatives, as the sector is central to enabling dual-parent workforce participation (Vandenbroeck et al., 2023). In recent decades, neoliberalism has led to the commodification of ECEC in liberal market economies globally, where the logic of private sector competition shapes the nature of and access to essential services while limiting the role of public support (Moss, 2017; Omwami, et al., 2020; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Richardson, 2022; Urban, 2022; Vandenbroeck et al., 2023). Critical and comparative early childhood scholars contend that market governance of ECEC services distinctly undermines the capacity to maintain caring imperatives in ECEC practice, because it constructs children as passive, parents as consumers, and educators as technicians of pre-determined, narrowly defined outcomes (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Urban, 2022; Vandenbroeck et al., 2023). In these contexts, early childhood educators face unique challenges negotiating the competing rationalities governing their pedagogical practices – the market and care imperative – as they manifest in complex and multifaceted ways. This review illustrates how ECEC professionals mediate the demands of commodification in their practice, responding to market logic at interpersonal and structural levels by centering caregiving imperatives in the negotiation of early learning prerogatives.

Discussions regarding the adverse impacts of neoliberal governance in ECEC is abundant and growing (Moss, 2017; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Urban, 2022), alongside efforts made to resist market imperatives and de-commodify the early childhood sector globally (Richardson et al., 2023; Vandenbroeck et al., 2023). This paper compiles emerging empirical accounts of how caregiving educators navigate the multiple rationalities governing their practice through a systematic literature review exploring: *in what ways do early childhood practitioners reconcile the market imperative with the imperative to care?* I propose that efforts to reconcile competing logics can be conceptualized along three dimensions of professional engagement: at micro- (interpersonal, caring-learning interactions), meso- (organizational, community-level engagement), and macro-levels (addressing national systems of provisioning, acquiring autonomy over ECEC governance and practice). Such cases include how children orient their understanding of competition, how practitioners collaborate to contextualize learning goals, or even wholesale contestation of inappropriate surveillance and evaluation standards. The examples reviewed span diverse global contexts, highlighting the universal challenge of reconciling market and caring imperatives in ECEC.

In the following sections, I elaborate on the role of market and caring imperatives as governing rationalities, discuss the methodology guiding my literature review, and offer a theoretical framing to synthesize my findings. Ultimately, the goal in reconciling these imperatives is not to replace one dominant logic for another (Moss, 2014; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021), but to demonstrate how tensions dictating ECEC priorities can be resisted, reconciled, and negotiated to avoid inequitable

early learning opportunities and support wellbeing. Above all, the aim of this review is to communicate the multiplicity of ECEC approaches that meaningfully respond to the local and individual needs of the communities from whom children learn.

Conceptual Framework

Market and Caring Imperatives as Governing Rationalities

The following analysis is grounded in a conceptual understanding of governance as discursive, articulated by Foucault (1971) as the 'regimes of truth' we circulate – in other words, the stories we tell ourselves and others about the way the world works. These constructions not only regulate our behavior, but also "create the possibility of the very behavior that they regulate," manifesting both interpersonally and structurally (Foucault, 1971, p.8). Hegemonic discourses become *governing rationalities,* orienting our ways of thinking, being, and relating; we consider them 'common sense' and often assume no alternatives [i.e. answering 'why/how come?' questions with 'that's just the way it is']. Globally, the discursive hegemony of *neoliberalism* – a political economic reasoning placing the responsibility for wellbeing, success, and care squarely on the individual – has led to the commodification of universally needed and often communally provided resources (e.g. health, education). Brown (2017) articulates how neoliberalism functions as a *governing rationality* in decision-making, extending "market logic into every sphere of human life" by emphasizing competition and self-investment, formulating "everything, everywhere, in terms of capital investment and appreciation" (p.176). As a result, economic individualism weakens commitment toward social wellbeing, assuming

we can and must succeed without the support of communal care infrastructure. According to Ball (2016), "neoliberalism is a political project that attempts to create a social reality that it suggests already exists, stating that competition is the basis of social relations while fostering those same relations" (cited in Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p.xvii). By disincentivizing public responsibility and commodifying resources such as care and education, market logic reconstructs social services into profit-seeking firms to maintain operational expenses.

Indeed, commodifying ECEC has contributed to the expansion of services globally, promoting dual-parent workforce participation and educational socialization for pre-primary children (Moss, 2017). Childcare is unfortunately an imperfect market; especially in the United States where its operational costs far exceed what average households can compensate while its workforce remain some of the lowest-paid educators (McLean et al., 2021). Neoliberalism's technical and managerial *language of evaluation* plays a central role in shaping ECEC priorities, obscuring how quality is "a function of political choices and paradigmatic positions, [where] approaches to evaluation and assessment [are] a value-based set of practices, embedded in models of governance" (Vandenbroek et al., 2023, p.84). Around the world, educators respond to market demands on a daily basis by centering caring practices in their relationships with children and their communities (Richardson et al., 2022, 2023; Urban et al., 2023; Vandenbroeck et al., 2023; Yelland et al., 2021; Zechner, 2022). Governance and learning are both relational and discursive processes (Freire, 2000; Foucault, 1971); "the subject is governed by others but at the same time by the self" therefore "it is the governing of the self via the embodying of neoliberal subjectivities that can be resisted"

(Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p.155). By foregrounding the relational nature of ECEC, we can examine the conditions that hinder and support care as early educators balance the demands of commodification.

Grounded in the 'ethics of care' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Noddings, 2013), the integrity of *caring imperatives,* according to Tronto (2013), rests on "attentiveness (noticing need), responsibility (to meet the need), competence (caregiving/allocation of resources), [mutual] responsiveness, and solidarity (democratic stakeholder participation)" (as cited in Richardson, 2022, p. 111). The imperative to care prioritizes meaningful relationships and relies on "a high degree of openness, emotional reflection, intellectual knowledge and awareness of the broader sociopolitical context" (Urban, 2022, p.386). Black feminist theories of embodied pedagogy add that when schooling "centers on the mastery of particular knowledges rather than practices and principles of sharing and relationality," education becomes fragmented and the "approach to knowledge [acquisition] truncates lived experiences from teaching and learning" (Brady, 2022, p. 396). When educators push back against the uncritical adoption of positivist quality standards and incorporate knowledge gained through practice experience, they "create avenues to disrupt taken-for-granted norms and conceptions of family and childhood" by deconstructing fixed perspectives to highlight the multifaceted nature of children's competencies (Brady, 2022, p. 403). This contributes to *the politics of refusal,* whereby challenging the imposition of uniform or deterministic assessment, practitioners can meaningfully scaffold learning experiences by embracing complexity and spontaneity. The problem is not measurement itself, but "excessive and inappropriate measurement" that reinforces "undeclared [positions] assumed to be

shared by all, [such that] the existence of alternatives is ignored" (Robert-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 28). As a result, the critical reflection of discursive logics governing ECEC support "the constitution of active and related subjects and the avoidance of arbitrary and unnecessary forms of authority" (Collet-Sabe & Ball, 2024, p. 7).

Reconciling the market and caring imperatives is a challenging and imperfect endeavor. While often rendered invisible in critical analyses of neoliberalism, there are numerous instances of resistance to economized logics in education spaces around the world. This review aims to highlight the complexity of negotiating competing logics by elevating such efforts as they are captured in academic scholarship.

Methodology

This systematic literature review focuses on literature that details educator experiences with reference to the challenges of market logic in ECEC governance. This review considers peer-reviewed literature published in the last five years (2019-2024), acquired from January through April 2024. The scope of this study focuses solely on educators (also referred to as practitioners or teachers) as the unit of analysis, excluding other relevant actors such as children, parents, and policymakers, whose perspectives and roles, while important, are beyond the bounds of this investigation. I have also excluded literature that documents the ills of neoliberal education governance without empirically illustrating how they are mediated in practice, selecting only those which provide vignettes of reconciliation efforts by practitioners specifically. Another rich dimension excluded from the review are community efforts which aim to re-examine considerations of who counts as an early

childhood practitioner across various formal and informal ECEC contexts (Arndt et al., 2018, 2021). This review also does not specifically aim to engage with ongoing academic and global policy interrogations of 'quality' in ECEC, although certainly related and valuable as an avenue for further synthesis (Cannella et al., 2016; OECD, 2022; Urban, 2022).

I searched the UCLA online library database using keywords related to early childhood education and care (ECEC), workforce, governance, de/commodification, and resistance. From 436 results, I applied the exclusion criteria to narrow the scope to 32 sources, including 14 from the search, 10 from a volume on ECEC decommodification, 7 from one on global childhoods, and 1 on international ECEC perspectives. Each example examines how practitioners resist market imperatives, which I categorized into three dimensions of professional engagement: micro (n=14), meso (n=12), and macro (n=6). The following section further elaborates on these dimensions and situates notions of resistance, reconciliation, and negotiation to clarify its presentation at each level in the literature.

Theoretical Framework

This review of competing rationalities is organized into three levels of professional ECEC practice: (a) micro-level, interpersonal interactions occurring in early childhood spaces, (b) meso-level, where practitioner engagement constitutes organized and collaborative efforts, and (c) macro-level, where imperatives are addressed at a systems-level of governance. As Vélez-Agosto et al. (2017) maintain in their revision of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) bioecological theory of human development, which incorporates the central role of culture across the micro-, meso-, and macro-systems, these dimensions are not mutually exclusive.

The "communities, settings, and social institutions" that shape children's development and the imperatives of ECEC practice are "constantly being transformed by the cultural system in a reciprocal way...not bounded by separate entities but [flowing] into one another" (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017, p.906). Although one cannot neatly separate the spheres in which such socialization practices operate, framing ECEC practices into these three dimensions of engagement helps to delineate how educator experiences are represented within academic scholarship. Examining variability across ECEC spaces has also been fruitful for uncovering socio-political imperatives (Tobin, 2022) but is still understudied because of tendencies to focus on national systems rather than local community-based or informal ECEC contexts (Tonyan, 2015). Further, the international comparative approach utilized by this review is valuable for presenting variation in ways that avoid reductive assumptions resulting from methodological nationalism (Guevarra, 2022). By exploring differences, one can also expand considerations of possibilities in early childhood practice by contesting unquestioned truths and demonstrating that despite the dominance of western developmentalism, "there is no one best way for children to develop" (Rogoff, 2003, p.4) Taking a *science of difference* approach (Novóa, 2018), the juxtaposition of deeply contextualized experiences also reveals similarities between how care imperatives are enacted to resist the hegemony of market logics in ECEC governance and provision around the world.

Findings

Micro-level (n=14)

Efforts to reconcile competing imperatives in ECEC practice are characterized in a number of ways at the micro-level, namely in accounts of how educators subvert rigid curricular or assessment demands (Archer, 2022; Bradbury, 2019; Giamminuti et al., 2022; Richardson, 2022), by employing criticality of neoliberal imperatives in pedagogical practice (Beneke et al., 2022; Lee, 2021), centering decolonial praxis as resistance (Diaz-Diaz, 2021; Lees et a., 2023; Nxumalo & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2023), or by articulating how constructions of professional identity are renegotiated in commodified contexts (Bailey et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2020; Smith, 2023; Sumsion, 2019; Taggart, 2022).

Archer (2022) illustrates empirically how some educators in early childhood classrooms push back against accountability measures constraining their pedagogical priorities in the UK, by integrating formal math and phonics lessons into "children's free choices and play" (p.439). Similarly, Bradbury (2019) presents a case of how teachers subverted a new and controversial policy in an English preschool classroom, drawing strength from their professional knowledge and experiences emphasizing ethics of care. Their qualitative analysis concluded that when teachers engaged in counter-approaches, they were at times positioned as resistant to statutory assessment which sometimes resulted in emotional and professional costs. Bradbury (2019) presents the idea of 'compliant resistant,' where resistance may be central to educator identity but sometimes backfires in ways that further enforce the problematic policy.

Many authors further highlight how educators center criticality in their practice. Giamminuti et al. (2022) offer a vignette from project in Reggio Emilia, Italy where educators engage with children's understandings of waste, constructing teaching moments that refuted dogmas regarding children's interests,

implementation, and methods to center "obligations of care" in teaching and learning objectives. Richardson (2022) explores how the care imperative manifests differently in public and private ECEC systems, sharing practitioner experiences from public ECE programs in Denmark and for-profit childcare chains in Ontario, Canada. She demonstrates how educators in both contexts similarly resist neoliberal imperatives and concludes that while at odds, the two imperatives do not absolutely preclude one another. For instance, Danish pedagogues noted how they deprioritized paperwork asked to 'prove' developmental outcomes, focusing instead on meaningful and sustained interactions with the children. One educator shared how the staff "are not actually using the iPad" implemented to "write messages" about the children because they prefer instead to speak directly with the parents (Richardson, 2022, p.119). Practitioners in the Ontario context revealed that even if it meant they might "get in trouble," they resisted the protocol that required corporate management to meditate their communication with parents and would "do it anyway" by building individual rapport with families and fellow staff (Richardson, 2022, p.120).

Beneke et al. (2022) and Lee (2021) conceptualize resisting neoliberal imperatives in the context of disability or special education early education practice. Beneke et al. (2022) share how teachers resist notions of quality and success that predefine their practice and marginalized children with disabilities by "reclaiming and enacting" caring practices, presenting educator reflections on modeling critical reflexivity for their colleagues and children (p.1237). Lee's (2021) study focusing on how teachers instruct and accommodate children classified as ADHD – a category of behavior that reifies normative assumptions of

appropriate learning behaviors – found that between early educators and primary school teachers, early educators were more concerned with restructuring routines and activities to accommodate the child than adjusting the child to fit standards. She emphasized the difference educator dispositions made especially for Black and brown children in the US who are disproportionately affected by harmful imperatives orienting instruction and accommodation practices in early education contexts (Lee, 2021).

Diaz-Diaz (2021) documents how early childhood practitioners mediate children's understandings of challenging conditions witnessed on neighborhood walks, such as homelessness. Practitioners had to reconcile notions of safety and avoid reifying harmful narratives in order to contextualize children's questions such as "why was the man yelling?" Diaz-Diaz discusses how educators navigated the tension between practitioners' goals to meaningfully expose children to diverse circumstances while mediating their interpretations in ways that may also "face the trouble of a settler colonial past" (2021, p.544). Lees et al. (2023) and Nxumalo & Pacini-Ketchabaw (2023) further contextualize how competing caring and neoliberal imperatives play out in the development of practitioners' critical consciousness. Nxumalo & Pacini-Ketchabaw detail their own praxis that functions as resistance to neoliberal constructions of multiculturalism for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) early educators in Canada, illustrating an interconnected pedagogical orientation that centers Black storying and expands epistemologies drawn upon in ECEC practice (2023). Lees et al. (2023) find that while the early educators included in their study developed a degree of critical consciousness to name settler-colonial constructs impacting their

practice, their limited opportunities at continued engagement with like-minded educators made it difficult to maintain criticality.

This final group of micro-resistance examples build on notions of educator identity positioning and how negotiating neoliberal identity constructions in ECEC contexts further serve to complicate the dominance of economic logics dictating educational practice. Smith (2023) offers a vignette of an Australian classroom where an educator's response to a child cheating at cards mediated children's understandings of success, by rewarding particular notions of individualism at the expense of ensuring belonging and inclusion. Smith (2023) builds on the example to illustrate how taken for granted development logics orient how adults listen to, assess, and report on children. Sumsion (2019) focuses on how the relationship between ideology in policy and practice is non-linear and shares how multilayered market imperatives are contested and negotiated in ECEC spaces globally. The article reviews studies that present reflections on educator practices in Anglo-Saxon, Nordic, and East Asian countries to contextualize the role international, national, and local/cultural policy discourses play on the dispositions inhabited by practitioners (Sumsion, 2019). Roger et al. (2020) demonstrate how professional peer relationships and parent testimonies bolster self-efficacy of ECEs in Italy, Canada, and Australia, when educators question their strengths in the face of neoliberal demands. Lastly, Bailey et al (2021) and Taggart (2022) draw on examples from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, California, and Switzerland to demonstrate how educators' commitments to ethical caring and loving practices maintain resistance to economized education imperatives, even when notions of care are commodified because of how "deeply contextualized loving

orientations" model community in ways that counter neoliberal prerogatives.

The examples at the micro-level demonstrate how educators navigate the pressures of market imperatives through everyday acts of resistance, centering care and relationality in their pedagogical practices. These efforts highlight the importance of critical reflexivity, decolonial praxis, and creative negotiation of professional identities to sustain caring interactions despite systemic constraints. Collectively, these cases emphasize that even within the confines of rigid systems, educators can enact meaningful resistance by prioritizing the well-being and dignity of children and families.

Meso-level (n=12)

At the meso-level, practitioners demonstrate the power of collective organizing and community advocacy to counter market narratives and reinforce care-driven priorities. Examples of educator resistance to neoliberal imperatives at this level are characterized by professional organization efforts to politicize challenges affecting ECEC practice (Berget, 2023; Lund, 2023; Otterstad & Elmenhorst, 2021; Whitebook, 2023), fostering community through advocacy (Arndt et al., 2023; Richardson et al., 2023a; Richardson et al., 2023b), reconciling shifting professional identities as leaders and business managers (Fairchild, 2019; Kamenarac, 2023; Kamenarac et al, 2023), or through collaboration with stakeholders to develop pedagogical priorities (Adriany, 2023; Peters et al., 2021).The variety of examples from countries such as Norway, Canada, and Indonesia underscores the global resonance of these resistance efforts, revealing shared values despite differing cultural contexts.

Driven by the imperative to care and rooted in the lived experiences of caregivers, Berget (2023) and Otterstad & Elmenhorst (2021) document how early educators collectively mobilized to resist school readiness agendas imposed by policy makers in the Norwegian *#barnehageopprør2016* movement (2016 Norwegian Kindergarten Riots). In response to political proposals that included accountability testing for 5-year-olds language skills, a Facebook group initially consisting of 11 early educators emerged to discuss collaborative resistance (Otterstad & Elmhorst, 2021). Both articles are written from the perspective of early educators involved in the movement, recounting how practitioners leveraged the power of social media and community engagement to politicize the neoliberalization of ECEC spaces and illustrate how attentiveness to the needs of caregivers and receivers enabled policy changes (Berget, 2023; Otterstad & Elmenhorst, 2021). Lund (2023) stories the work of a Danish early educator union to raise salaries of ECEC professionals and resist positioning ECEC services as a means for making financial returns for individual owners and shareholders through collective organization, documentation, and commitment to values of Danish welfare society. Similarly, Whitebook (2023) highlights the history of the US National Association for Young Children's Education (NAEYC)'s Childcare Employee Caucus, where educators met annually in the late 20th century to develop political campaigns and collective strategies to address challenges to their caring commitments. As educator efforts to organize has taken different shape since the COVID-19 pandemic, Whitebook emphasizes the role these coalitions play in resisting the market imperatives conditioning educator practice at regional levels around the US and the need for an "organizational home" to unite such efforts and build a national network (2023, p.178).

Organizing efforts made by educators to reconcile competing imperatives also take place at sub-national scales; Arndt et al. (2023) share stories of grassroots resistance to neoliberal educator identity constructions from practitioner mentoring program that enabled them to subvert the westernization of the ECEC sector in an Indonesian community, by re-centering relevant, locally informed and culturally appropriate practices. Richardson et al. (2023a) demonstrate how the professional Association of Early Childhood Educators in Ontario, Canada (AECEO) organized to resist the commodification of the sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, producing policy reports and recommendations which captured and communicated practitioner narratives speaking to the precarity imposed by neoliberal working conditions. In a related publication, Richardson et al. (2023b) contextualize educators' "caring activism," illustrating how practitioner advocacy efforts modeled community-building in ways that resist individualist thinking by enacting ethics of care.

Another key dimension of neoliberalism conditioning early childhood practice is the shifting roles educators are tasked with regarding the administration of ECEC services, one that Fairchild (2019) empirically demonstrates are marked by both ontological imperatives and non-human constraints, mediating practitioner interactions with policy, markets, and pedagogies. Fairchild contends that engagement with the profession does not necessarily operate on performance and resistance binaries, expanding on notions of resistance to highlight how personal imperatives are one of many factors shaping the "micropolitics" of ECEC leadership and governance (2019). Kamenerac (2023) and Kamenarac et al. (2023) explore how educator personal prerogatives mediate the imperatives to

become "business managers'' of commodified ECEC services in New Zealand. The former publication responds to the argument that the construction of teachers as business managers "alters core professional ethical values underpinning the teaching profession," maintaining it is not the only identity that emerges in neoliberal ECEC contexts (Kamenarac, 2023, p.268). The author argues that when teacher identities are repositioned from 'employees' and 'business managers' to 'advocate-activist teachers,' their ethical obligations enable them to individually and collectively practice and create alternative ways of being, thinking, and acting in commodified ECEC spaces. Kamenarac et al. (2023) stories efforts of an educator-business manager whose moral professional obligation enabled her to develop a deep understanding of government funding structures to the point where her confidence in the operational imperatives of her program allowed her to offer sliding scale services on a case-by-case basis for low-income families. They demonstrate how the "business side" of their job was driven by the market imperative only to the point where they could maintain affordable working conditions and avoid accumulating excessive profits in order to prioritize funding for children and families in need of care services (Kamenarac et al. 2023).

Recentering caring imperatives in neoliberal ECEC contexts is a valuable yet imperfect endeavor, one that Adriany (2023) shows is complicated by religious and cultural conceptions of care work in the Indonesian context. The market imperative is so pervasive in Indonesian ECEC that access to and content of services is primarily dictated by a State focus on standards and assessment, where "almost all aspects of children's development have to be measured" (Adriany, 2023, p.52). However, the entrance of religious principles in ECEC practice

– while internalizing the belief for many female practitioners that their low salaries are justified due to gendered notions of duty – has presented an opportunity to emphasize children's spiritual development and go beyond 'measurable' economic meanings of education (Adriany, 2023). The author notes that educators' mediation of competing imperatives in these contexts work to reconstruct neoliberal subjectification on some levels but may serve to reify challenging conditions on others (Adriany, 2023). Still, this example demonstrates the role collective educator dispositions play in reorienting imperatives in early childhood practice. Peters et al. (2021) echo this sentiment with an example of a partnership between early educators, university researchers, and children to de-emphasize notions of competition and individualism through education in Tampa, Florida. Practitioners engaged children in a project on sustainability aimed at fostering community and awareness of their position within the living environment. They came away from the project with ideas for sustainable lifestyle practices that addressed how the development of interdependent dispositions over neoliberal, individualist onto-epistemologies can be mediated by intentional and communal ECEC practices (Peters et al. 2021).

At the meso-level, the collective efforts of educators illustrate the power of organizing and advocacy to resist the commodification of ECEC. From grassroots movements to professional networks, these examples reveal how community-driven initiatives can challenge neoliberal imperatives and foster alternative models of care and governance. By leveraging solidarity and collaboration, educators transform their professional identities and create spaces for collective action, demonstrating the critical role of community-

level engagement in sustaining equitable ECEC practices.

Macro-level (n=6)

Resistance to the system-level embeddedness of neoliberal rationalities dominating ECEC governance has taken shape in a number of profound ways around the world. In this section, I present examples where early childhood practitioners are active agents in the development of autonomous models of ECEC governance and provision, either via grassroots efforts to develop collective education systems (Giamminuti, 2021; McMillan, 2023; Teasley, 2020; Zechner, 2022), or by contributing to the design of integrated national policy approaches (Odulowu, 2023; Urban et al., 2023).

The first case is globally recognized as a distinct approach to democratic ECEC governance, the educational project of Reggio Emilia, Italy where the *pedagogista* role emerged in the 1970s to coordinate the participatory, political, and collaborative values embedded in the cooperative education model (Giamminuti, 2021). Elements from the town's approach have been incorporated into progressive early childhood models around the world, but what makes the project unique is the absence of hierarchical governance in the provision of education. *Pedagogistas* coordinate participatory governance between educators, families, children, and community members to center "practices of encountering the thinking of others" and engaging in collective daily debate in schools (Giamminuti, 2021, p.276). Pedagogical imperatives for early childhood education practice in Reggio Emilia are driven by the notion of education as a common good, "aligned with a democratic stance" that "would not sit well with a school-business competing for consumers" (Giamminuti, 2021, p.276). Community participation in the project of care

and education for young children is also a key feature of Kōhanga reo, a symbol of Māori resistance to neo-colonial, capitalist education doctrines that severed Māori children from their cultural roots (McMillan, 2023). One example illustrating how autonomy over assessment is able to center holistic development comes from a teacher who felt pride in her student for "making sense of her environment, using her body and emotions to guide her" (McMillan, 2023, p.46). The teacher points to the connection with Papatūānuku (earth mother) which helped the child figure out how to ride her bike among her peers, when she observed her surroundings and tested her limits before determining she felt safe to go.

Teasley (2020) theorizes the notion of the *commons* and presents various global cases of localized, collective struggles to mobilize against commodification and organize communal ECEC systems. Among such cases, they emphasize efforts made by a Spanish community to arrange collective ECEC services. Zechner (2022) focuses on how a community in Barcelona responds to the social reproduction imperative of childcare, by partnering with mothers and trained educators to organize a childcare commons according to principles of local solidarity economies. Zechner conceptualizes autonomy "not as separateness or sovereignty but a means to deal with various interdependencies and processes" of self-governance, illustrating how the coordinated effort of commoning care groups situate "economies of care within, against, and beyond economies of capital" (2022, pp.41-42). By developing mutual support structures, educators and families in this particular context were able to resist the "individualizing and precarity of modern urban parenting" and reconceptualize the consumer model of ECEC (Zechner, 2022, p.31).

The final two examples demonstrate efforts to re/orient national education policy frameworks away from neoliberal education imperatives. Oduluwu (2023) shares how tenets from the Yoruba indigenous approach to early childhood education, practiced by groups native to modern-day Nigeria, were incorporated into education models in Nigeria and some other African states thanks to collaboration between a task force of teachers and education working groups. They developed a complementary framework for indigenous education that incorporated individual-based assessment (resisting standardization), collective responsibility, and locally responsive activities to support enculturation, curiosity, innovation, and resilience in an evolving world. Urban et al. (2023) evaluate how the 'Nordic model' operates as a discursive space with a distinct, coherent approach to governance that emphasizes decentralization and values local democracy. Their study contextualizes perspectives on evaluation from ECEC actors, including practitioners who emphasize how the focus of assessment should not be the children, rather the environment and practices facilitating their early education (Urban et al., 2023).

The macro-level cases showcase how practitioners contribute to systemic transformations in ECEC governance, advocating for democratic, locally driven, and culturally rooted models of care. These examples—from the participatory governance of Reggio Emilia to community-driven childcare commons in Barcelona—illustrate that resistance to neoliberal imperatives is possible through collective efforts that prioritize autonomy and interdependence. By reimagining ECEC as a shared public good, these initiatives offer a hopeful vision for addressing structural inequities and advancing global equity in early childhood education.

Discussion and Analysis

ECEC professionals play a central role in children's social development, informing their emerging worldviews and interpersonal dispositions as global citizens. The findings from this systematic literature review provide insights into how practitioners reconcile the tensions between raising children in competitive market economies and the caring imperatives central to social cohesion and reproduction. The interplay between micro-, meso-, and macro-level efforts reveals a dynamic, interconnected process and while the contexts and scales of these efforts differ, common themes emerge, highlighting shared strategies for resisting commodification and advancing care-focused practices. Across all levels, practitioners consistently prioritize care, relationality, and collective action as counterpoints to neoliberal logics of efficiency, standardization, and competition. The imperative to care emerges as a foundational principle, emphasizing relationality and attentiveness to the needs of children, families, and communities.

Foucault's (1971) 'regimes of truth' concept offers a useful framework for understanding how market and caring imperatives function as governing rationalities in ECEC. Regimes of truth refer to the dominant discourses that shape what is considered legitimate knowledge and practice within a given context. In neoliberal ECEC governance, market-driven logics position economic efficiency, individual responsibility, and competition as self-evident truths, structuring how early education services are organized, funded, and assessed. These discourses obscure alternative rationalities, such as those rooted in relational care ethics (Tronto, 2013; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005), by marginalizing them as inefficient or unmeasurable (Brown, 2017; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). However, the

findings of this review demonstrate how educators actively disrupt and renegotiate these dominant regimes of truth through their daily practices and collective advocacy.

At the micro-level, educators employ relational pedagogies that resist rigid standards, while at the meso and macro levels, care values underpin advocacy and governance efforts. This commitment to care is coupled with critical reflexivity, as practitioners reflect on their roles within systems shaped by market imperatives. Such reflection allows them to challenge dominant narratives, envision alternatives, and advocate for practices that center care. Solidarity and collective action further reinforce these efforts, with grassroots organizing at the meso level amplifying micro-level initiatives and macro-level movements leveraging collective advocacy to transform systemic structures. Finally, contextual adaptation underscores the deeply situated nature of resistance, as practitioners tailor strategies to fit specific cultural, social, and institutional contexts. These interconnected threads illustrate how actions at one level inform and strengthen efforts at others, creating a dynamic, multi-scalar process of resistance and negotiation.

While the literature emphasizes the incompatibility of market governance with caregiving objectives, ECEC offers unique political sites capable of "generating a multiplicity of local modern rationalities" where "inevitable and homogenizing" ideas are contested and deliberated in service of community imperatives (McGrath, 2021, pp.43-44). Indeed, emphasis on human capital investment has drawn significant resources for ECEC (Moss, 2017), but it is often accompanied by normative managerial logics that impair caring educational prerogatives. Mazzucato (2024) critiques the binary framing of state versus market, arguing that proactive

governance must set ambitious, shared objectives to promote collective action. Negotiation, as she notes, is about "proactively setting a direction" to foster sustainable long-term outcomes (Mazzucato, 2024, p.11). This aligns with examples from the macro level, where collective governance models, as Zechner (2022) and Giamminuti observed in Barcelona and Reggio Emilia respectively, illustrate how participatory approaches enable equitable and sustainable care systems. As Ostrom (2010) asserts, "the collective management of shared resources is often most successful when conducted on a small scale" (as cited in Mazzucato, 2024, p.12). Ultimately, supporting access and quality in ECEC – particularly as a global United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) – requires deliberate "negotiation of the objectives at certain levels" where stakeholders actively collaborate to manage community resources (Mazzucato, 2024, p.13). By foregrounding the relational nature of governance and learning, this analysis reveals how ECEC professionals contest taken-for-granted market rationalities and reclaim agency over their practice. As Foucault (1971) suggests, governance is not merely about compliance with dominant rationalities but also about the capacity to resist, redefine, and reimagine alternative ways of organizing social life. In this light, ECEC serves as a critical site where competing regimes of truth are actively contested, and where care is continually reaffirmed as an indispensable social good.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review explored how early childhood practitioners reconcile the market imperative with the imperative to care. The findings underscore the significance of promoting care-centered

imperatives as educators navigate the intersecting demands of their profession. Across micro-, meso-, and macro-levels, practitioners employ shared strategies of relationality, critical reflexivity, and collective action to resist commodification and advance equitable ECEC practices. These efforts illustrate that the discursive hegemony of neoliberal governance ultimately can be countered through relational and community-driven approaches (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Vandenbroeck et al., 2023). As Mazzucato (2024) notes, advancing sustainable and equitable systems requires ambitious, collaborative governance structures that align stakeholders around shared goals. Similarly, McGrath (2021) highlights the importance of embracing multiple rationalities to navigate competing imperatives without reducing ECEC to purely economic objectives. These examples demonstrate that hope lies in the complexity and multiplicity of negotiation efforts—stories of resistance and reconciliation provide a roadmap for fostering equitable early learning opportunities and sustaining well-being for children, families, and communities worldwide. By reimagining ECEC governance as a collective good, these efforts challenge neoliberal norms and inspire a future where care and equity are central to education systems.

A defining feature of this review is the global scope of its examples, spanning diverse cultural, political, and economic contexts. The presence of shared strategies across such a range of settings underscores the commonality of the tensions between market and caring imperatives in ECEC. Despite differences in governance structures and cultural norms, practitioners worldwide demonstrate a shared commitment to centering care in the face of commodification. This global resonance suggests that the challenges and strategies identified in this review are not isolated phenomena but part of a broader, transnational struggle to reimagine ECEC as a public good rooted in relationality and equity. Looking ahead, a key question remains: what strategies can further empower ECEC practitioners to sustain these efforts? What policies and practices can support the decommodification of ECEC without compromising accessibility or quality? By fostering solidarity among educators, families, and policymakers, we can reimagine ECEC as a space of equity, care, and hope—one that resists the negative consequences of commodification while nurturing the well-being of children and communities alike.

The purpose of presenting these resistance efforts is not to privilege one imperative over another but to emphasize the role of practitioners as active agents shaping ECEC governance. At all levels, *tools of resistance*, per Roberts-Holmes & Moss (2021), such as critical reflexivity, interpersonal dialogue, writing, and community organizing enable practitioners to resist market pressures while fostering care-centered practices. These efforts expose the blind spots of market-driven governance and challenge the inequalities that undermine the very social fabric capitalism depends on to sustain itself.

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