# Staying Alongside: Care, Precarity, and the Politics of Proximity in Early Childhood Scholarship

Shana E. DeVlieger
*NYU Steinhardt*
*ORCID # 0000-0003-3742-6315*

**Abstract**

This essay considers what early childhood scholars owe to caregivers whose labor sustains both children's lives and the knowledge produced about them in the academy. I draw on personal reflections from two years living inside a preschool while completing a PhD in education. This unconventional arrangement was made possible by trust, generosity, and the economic precarity surrounding early childhood and graduate work. Daily life in the preschool made academic abstraction difficult: policy appeared in family absences, care in after-hours labor, and knowledge in the improvisational expertise of educators and children. I grapple with the responsibilities of this proximity and argue that staying alongside caregivers requires more than physical closeness and admiration. It requires allowing caregivers' knowledge, working conditions, generosity, and limits to shape our scholarly questions, practices, and institutional commitments. During periods of political backlash and public disinvestment, this accountability is one way we might resist the exploitation of care labor in early childhood.

For two years of my PhD, I lived in a preschool. Literally. I slept in a storage room with a toddler-sized bed, stashed groceries between lunchboxes and experimental fruit-and-vegetable paint, and brushed my teeth at a sink built for someone approximately three feet tall, elbowing the diaper-changing table immediately to my right. Each morning, families gathered outside my 'bedroom' window for drop-off, and children began the day singing, shuffling, eager to share the day's first "guess what."



When I returned in the evenings, long after pickup, educators often remained - cutting materials, rearranging furniture, answering WhatsApp messages, and negotiating care for their own children while they still had access to the building's Wi-Fi. We'd chat. Then, I'd grade papers, revise manuscripts, and annotate articles beside drying tempera paintings. On those occasions I worked from home, my Zoom calls unfolded alongside the small dramas and triumphs of preschool life. More than once, I found myself stifling a laugh as I overheard my "roommates" celebrating a successful trip to the potty on the other side of the wall.

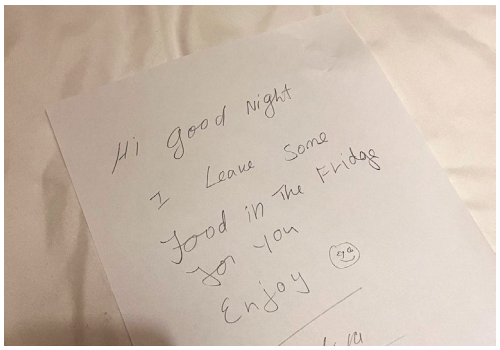
It was a peculiar arrangement, but also one reason I was able to finish graduate school in New York City. I had two master's degrees and years of teaching experience, but no ordinary way to afford staying in my chosen field. School was a place of stability for me as a child; yet, as an adult, I saw how little stability it offered the people who taught and cared for children. Living in the preschool made that contradiction literal. It was not a research method. It was housing.

This strange and precarious arrangement required credentials and background checks, but also trust, flexibility, and a fair amount of generosity from the people whose

workplace had become my home. These educators also took a chance on me, accepting that an adult would emerge each morning from a room surrounded by tiny furniture and eat from child-sized dishes. And we came to know and care for one another. Sometimes that meant making extra coffee for the teachers before heading to campus; other times, it meant finding leftovers from their home-cooked lunches waiting for me when I got home. Graduate-student friends visited on weekends to doodle with crayons and try to make our work feel possible. What sustained me was not only cheap housing, but also a small ecology of care that layered mutual dependence over material instability. I am still trying to process receiving such care from people already asked to give too much and what that requires of me now, as a newly minted PhD.

## How I Ended Up (Back) in Preschool

I spent most of my twenties as a public elementary school teacher, familiar with early mornings and the strange social expectation that work with young children should be both highly consequential and adorable. I received those usual comments ("How cuUuUute") and saw how easily care labor could be minimized, even while families and economies depended on it. The conditions that brought me back to preschool were not separate from those contradictions. Like a borrowed charger for a phone whose battery doesn't hold a charge, preschool was generous, necessary, and still, not a solution to the underlying problem.




Early childhood education in the United States relies on skilled, demanding, and poorly compensated work (McLean et al., 2025). Participation is often sustained through second jobs, family support, debt, unpaid labor, or small acts of improvisation that look personal, but are structurally produced (McLean et al., 2019). As Gould et al. (2019) rightly argue, there is "no justifiable defense of the status quo from a developmental, economic, or equity perspective" (p. 2). Graduate education has its own versions of this arrangement. In my case, the two forms of precarity happened to meet in the room where I slept. There were complicated boundaries, and days when I would have preferred not to encounter early-morning drop-off tears while scrambling to prepare a lecture.

Unlike the educators, though, I had the privilege to lecture later that day, and not just about hand washing and 'vampire' coughs. I floated between preschool and the university with enormous protections: whiteness, citizenship, English fluency, institutional affiliation, no children of my own yet, and the prospect of only temporary financial instability. Living close to care labor did not make me equivalent to those doing it, but it did make certain forms of distance harder to maintain. That proximity continues to shape how I approach scholarship, especially during politically difficult times.

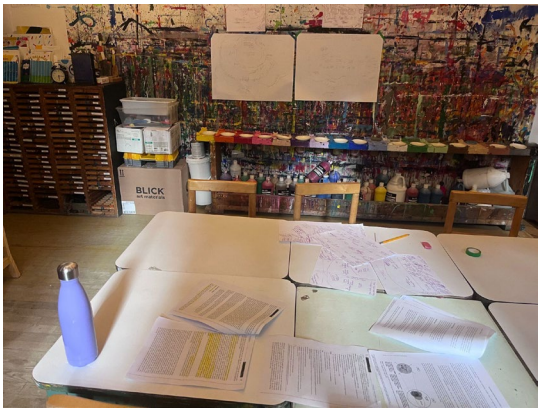
## What Living in the Preschool Made Impossible to Ignore

Academic life often encourages distinctions between theory and practice, policy and intimacy, intellectual work and relational responsibility. Living in the preschool blurred those lines. Attendance, for example, was never a neutral administrative category: Who is missing? Why? Which families belonged, and which were perpetually provisional? In preschool, care was never as tidy as it was operationalized in research. It was reassuring anxious parents, double-knotting shoelaces, and noticing when a child's silence communicated something different. That none of these acts seemed particularly

spectacular is the point. Care was the repeated, anticipatory work, easy to overlook because everything depended on it. The preschool made visible teachers' continual noticing, weighing, and adjusting. I remembered that calculus. Graduate study did not introduce me to these phenomena so much as give me new language for describing what I had already known in a deeper, more embodied way than what 'counts' in academia.

Kind professors taught me accepted measures. Quantitative methods, psychometrics – all of it was understandable, but left me perplexed about everything uncounted (e.g., time making extra sandwiches the night before a field trip so no child goes hungry). Their absence in conventional measures of 'quality' had me wondering not only what was regularly missed (Burchinal, 2018; Markowitz et al., 2020), but also who decides what 'counts' in the first place.

Who is 'authorized' to do the defining, counting, interpreting? Whose accounts are more likely to be solicited, circulated, and accepted: those of an Associate Professor of Education, or 'just' an early childhood educator with an Associate's degree? There were days I wished Hyacinth[1] was the Principal Investigator, and the tenured professor the one covered in craft glue, knees aching from kneeling to meet children's eyes. Research that positions academics alongside crawlers and their caregivers might do more than simply describe their realities – perhaps it'd even produce material changes.




The distinction is obviously not that academics possess theory and teachers experience. Educators theorize and live with the consequences. The preschool had no grants, yet knowledge production was everywhere: ideas made, tested, revised, abandoned, borrowed, and shared all day long. What differs is whose knowledge is recognized as such, and who gets to translate it into institutionally accepted language. I could move between the preschool and the university, carrying circle time brilliance into seminars, presentations, and manuscripts. That those ideas would more readily be recognized as scholarship because I carried them there is not incidental. How do I use the language and access I gained without implying that the university is where knowledge begins?

## Construction-Paper Courage

Knowledge, creativity, looked different in preschool. Children rarely seemed paralyzed by fear of failure. They rebuilt towers and layered paint into new shades. The walls were filled with construction-paper courage: pencil marks that pierced through the page, edges torn from overcorrection, and projects that changed direction several times. I often found myself lying on the floor, admiring the walls while avoiding the very blank document open on my laptop. They reminded me that untouched is not the same as excellent; I needed to be a little braver and my page a little messier. Sometimes I overcame inhibitions by imagining conversations with the preschoolers about whatever I was trying to write. For them, discoveries were never private matters; a child announced an insight, someone added, another objected, and the original idea evolved into something no one could quite claim as theirs.

[1] Pseudonym

This felt especially striking in academic spaces that rewarded polish over pondering, certainty over creative experimentation. Of course, no PhD student produced knowledge alone. We passed PDFs around paywalls, split conference transportation and lodging, whispered unwritten rules, and 'pre'-peer reviewed papers. Yet, by the time an article was published, that interdependence disappeared from view. As Richter et al. (2020) note, the PhD functions as a credential, signaling one is now an 'authorized' thinker; unfortunately, it can also privilege individual authority while obscuring the collective efforts that make scholarship possible (Richter et al., 2020).



Now, the preschool was not a place entirely outside hierarchy, standardization, and potential institutional harm, either. Within the macaroni art-adorned walls, there sat binders of evaluation language, regulations, checklists. Funding, expectations, and judgements sorted children and families: successful, deficient, or worthy of investment. Still, the preschool's walls coached me: revision isn't failure, rigor doesn't require distance, and work must be responsive to actual humans. How effective will a prestigious scholar's intervention be if it mistakenly assumes transition time after recess is a five-minute break for teachers, instead of a sophisticated production often involving costume changes, a chorus, and inevitable plot twists. The preschool's rhythms refused the logic of timers or calendar reminders.

## The Pace of Attention

Time worked differently here. Children repeated stories, returned to disagreements, and asked already-answered questions. Time bent to moments to attach, notice, repair, and sometimes, simply, to rest. Meals were not 'interruptions' to learning. Once, I learned at lunch that three children had dogs, Hannah rhymes with banana, and most of the table preferred green grapes to red. Numeracy and literacy abounded, but not because teachers monitored 'productivity.' Inefficiency felt deeply human. I wondered what institutions miss when obsessed with streamlining.

The first things on chopping blocks are often forms of attention that do not prove immediate value: waiting, listening, noticing. These matter, especially when families and educators are living through immigration terrorism, public disinvestment, and surveillance outside the classroom. They show up in educators' bodies, staffing gaps, and how institutions describe children (Sloan, 2024). 'Neutrality' can be performed while inequity continues uninterrupted. In the R1 Space Race, silence is often the preferred strategy to minimize drag. My scholarship is not outside of these conditions. Proximity does not balance power, and access granted once is not fixed; closeness without boundaries can quickly become yet another sacrifice educators endure. Even within trusting relationships, they retain the right to refuse access, interpretation, and participation (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Retrieving a runaway button from craft time, I ask myself how I might stay near enough to notice, accountable enough to act, and humble enough to know another's life is not mine to interpret for academe.

## Staying Alongside

I no longer live in the preschool. When I revisit artwork and notes kept from those days, I remember specific children, educators, and moments. I also remember exhaustion,

constraint, and the limits of what any classroom or home can repair alone. I am reminded to protect the people and their stories but let the lessons learned travel (something we practice in my classes). I still teach university-based emerging educators. Their brilliance and determination give me hope, even as we frankly discuss futures in a field marked by underpayment, surveillance, shrinking autonomy, and impossible expectations (Sloan, 2024). I'm not always sure how to mentor them without preparing them for martyrdom. I feel similar tension in research.

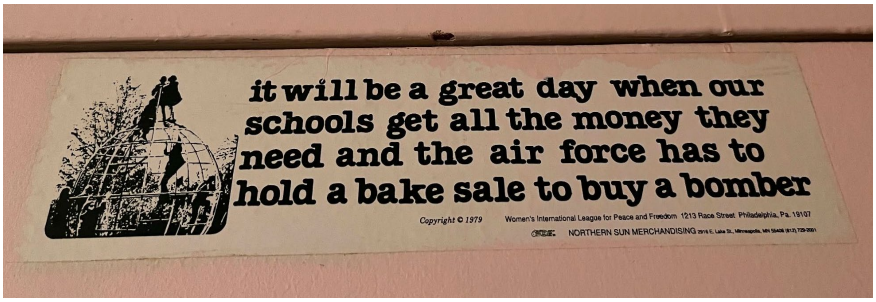
I want educators to sculpt scholarship, not just accessorize a scholar's paper with a dazzling quote. Perhaps 'staying alongside' is less a settled method than a discipline of being interruptible: allowing relationships to change what I notice, ask, and publish. Of being alert to moments when an educator's exhaustion becomes an interesting finding rather than evidence of an unacceptable condition to be addressed. Remembering that a workforce statistic is not the same as being in relationship with the people doing the work. I am fortunate to still hear updates about this place that did far more than provide an affordable place to sleep. Its people helped make my scholarly life possible and continue to challenge how I understand myself within academia.

I think often about the room where I finished so much of my doctorate. I remember both the comfort and absurdity of it. I remember being grateful and embarrassed, protected and precarious, close to the work, yet positioned very differently within it. I do not know if there is a clean way to repay that kind of care that does not risk turning the relationship transactional. What I can do is resist forgetting the labor beneath the theories: the Hyacinths who persist and make space for learners (even one in her thirties). Their generosity is not evidence that care will somehow sustain itself. It will not. I hold two truths at once: I was cared for, and the conditions under which that care was offered were woefully inadequate. I learned so much through this Preschool PhD, and I am still learning what that means. Perhaps that is part of staying alongside, too: resisting the urge to package and publish the experience and instead allowing it to trouble the distance between the work I study and the humans whose labor makes it possible.

## Epilogue

Though my story ended with a PhD, it does not make the conditions that helped produce it charming or acceptable. I have educational, professional, and social advantages that, by virtue of birth lottery, outnumber those of more driven, talented, and intellectually serious educators and scholars. That is absurd. In this wealthy nation, 97% of occupations pay more than early childhood education. In every state, the median early educator wage falls below a living wage for a single adult with no children; nearly half of early educator families need public assistance to survive (McLean et al., 2024). In Higher Education, nearly 70% of faculty appointments are contingent (Colby, 2025). This means more than just low pay; it means only being able to plan housing, healthcare, children, or ordinary adult life one semester at a time. A system cannot credibly claim to value children, education, or knowledge production while making the people who sustain them struggle to even participate.

I close this essay with a bumper sticker hanging in the guest room of someone who graciously hosted me while I attended an academic conference. Once again, my own educational work was enabled in part through private generosity. From another borrowed bed, I found myself learning from the walls again. Like the construction-paper courage in the preschool, this sticker coached me: to speak in expectation, refusing to see a better future as hypothetical. I still admire how it does not stoop to capital letters, punctuation, citation; it needs neither academic validation nor political permission. Many years later, I, too, know that it will be a great day when our country organizes its resources around sustaining human life, learning, and care instead of telling the people who provide them to make do. I'll see you there.

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Shana DeVlieger (she/her) is a graduate of the Urban & Early Childhood Teaching and Learning PhD program at NYU Steinhardt. She continues to teach emerging educators at NYU, Columbia, and Bank Street, while working as a data scientist for the University of Delaware's Center for Research in Education and Social Policy/Delaware Department of Education.