

# Free Play and “Loving Care”: A Qualitative Inquiry of Chinese Kindergarten Teachers’ Professional Ethics

ECNU Review of Education  
2022, Vol. 5(4) 664–682  
© The Author(s) 2022  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/20965311221121677  
journals.sagepub.com/home/roe



**Jie Zhang** (张婕)

East China Normal University

**Mollie R. Clark** 

The University of Memphis

**Yeh Hsueh**

The University of Memphis

## Abstract

**Purpose:** Chinese kindergarten teachers commonly held “loving and caring for young children” as a core professional ethic, but many reported fatigue and burnout because of this ethical practice. This study presents a unique account of how children’s free play has helped transform teachers’ professional ethics and increased their professional satisfaction.

**Design/Approach/Methods:** Following a purposive sampling, we interviewed eight Chinese teachers who actively promoted children’s free play. The analysis of the interview transcripts led to an in-depth interpretation of the teachers’ experiences through a dialogue with various concepts and theories.

**Findings:** A major finding was that children’s free play facilitated the change in teachers’ understandings of their professional ethics. Their observation and support of children’s free play brought them the unprecedented joy of teaching, which helped them redefine loving and caring for children and gave rise to a new code of professional ethics.

## Corresponding author:

Jie Zhang, Faculty of Education, East China Normal University, 3663 North Zhongshan Road, Shanghai 200062, China.

Email: [jzhang@pie.ecnu.edu.cn](mailto:jzhang@pie.ecnu.edu.cn)



Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access page (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

**Originality/Value:** This study was the first to assess the Chinese kindergarten teachers' ethics in the free play movement in China. It reveals, in the teachers' own words, how their growing commitment to supporting children's free play has transformed their beliefs and understandings of what a loving and caring teacher means.

### Keywords

Free play, kindergarten teachers' professional development, professional ethics, the ethic of loving care

Date received: 9 August 2021; revised: 18 December 2021, 17 March 2022, 18 May 2022; accepted: 10 June 2022

## Introduction

Most early childhood educators will recognize that pedagogy is conditioned by love and care for children (van Manen, 2016/1991). Scholars have demonstrated that caring is one major moral character within the teaching context (Noddings, 1984, 1992; Sockett, 1993), including early childhood education (e.g., Clark, 1995; Goldstein, 1997). The ethics of care is a useful conceptual framework through which we understand how early childhood teachers respond to difficult situations (Cherrington & Dalli, 2019; Öztürk, 2010; Tirri & Husu, 2002).

A core professional ethic of caring for children in China's kindergartens<sup>1</sup> has been stipulated in several national policy documents, for example, "The Professional Standards for Kindergarten Teachers (Trial Version)" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE of PRC], 2012) and "Kindergarten Work Regulations and Procedures" (MOE of PRC, 2016). These documents require that kindergarten staff respect, love, and care for children. Later, "Ten Guidelines for Kindergarten Teachers' Professional Behavior in New Era" (MOE of PRC, 2018) includes a specific article on "caring for and loving children," requiring teachers to care for children's health and well-being.

Our pilot study showed that Chinese kindergarten teachers commonly held loving and caring for children as the most important professional ethic, although, paradoxically, they explicitly associated their frustration, fatigue, and burnout with trying to provide love and care in the daily routine. A kindergarten teacher told us, "My love for children keeps me working hard. I write lesson plans, set up the classroom, and write reflective reports on teaching. But I am overwhelmed and tired." They described feeling a responsibility to do as much as possible for their children. Although this may have earned them the positive reputation of "dedicated teachers," they often associated such responsibilities with a lack of passion for children and their profession.

In recent years, however, teachers in many Chinese kindergartens have begun to change their beliefs about their professional ethics following a widespread movement that embraces the

government policy of encouraging children's free play. Even so, there has not yet been a government policy linking children's free play to teachers' ethic of loving care. This lack of connection on the policy level between teacher's loving care and children's free play is also noticeable in the social policy of the United States, England, and Australia. Their explicit ethical code for early childhood teachers dwells on children's right to play (Feng, 2020) by highlighting the need to protect children's rights as a way to fulfill teachers' responsibility. However, no studies have highlighted the relations between free play and improving teachers' practice of the professional ethics, especially the ethic of loving care. For this reason, the qualitative study we report below is to understand how Chinese kindergarten teachers make sense of the changing relations between children's free play and teachers' professional ethic of loving care. We intend to delve into Chinese teachers' own perspectives on this unique experience.

### *Free play*

Kindergarten education in China has been undergoing a two-decade-long reform, which emphasizes that "play is the basic activity" in kindergarten (MOE of PRC, 2001, 2016). However, this reform was met with extensive misunderstanding from teachers whose traditional paradigm of play focused on organized play and teacher-guided play. In this tradition, although an adequate amount of time was allotted for play, kindergarteners were encouraged to "play" according to preset themes, steps, and roles while teachers worked diligently to create elaborate play materials (usually highly structured), set up learning centers, suggest tips for children's play, and interrupt children's play that deviated from teacher guidance. Xueqin Cheng, the founder of Anji Play<sup>2</sup> in Anji County of Zhejiang province, reflected on this tradition: "This teacher-designed play still focused on achieving certain learning outcomes... The teachers were exhausted and teacher-child relationships focused on classroom management and getting children through the day. Neither the teachers nor the children were happy" (Coffino & Bailey, 2019, p. 5). As the reform continued, many teachers became aware that children's own needs and imagination could take children's play very far. These teachers adopted an experimental approach to encourage children's "true play," or play that is self-determined by the child (Cheng, 2019; Coffino & Bailey, 2019).

Throughout this paper, free play and true play are used interchangeably. They refer to children's self-initiated and self-determined play, not the teacher-designed play aimed at obtaining certain learning outcomes. In support of children's own play, a free and safe play environment is provided with minimally structured and open-ended materials, allowing children to explore for their needs and interests with a variety of potential options. When children are playing in this environment, teachers are mainly observers, listeners, recorders, and researchers of children's play (Cheng, 2019; Coffino & Bailey, 2019; Dong et al., 2021; Zhao, 2016). Teachers usually choose not to intervene except when there is a clear danger, a fierce conflict, or a request for help from children. In free

play, children are responsible for playing and exploring while teachers are responsible for recording and appreciating. In other words, teachers should “[l]et go as much as possible, intervene as little as possible” (Cheng, 2019, p. 116). After each free play episode, teachers will hold a group sharing session to understand children’s ideas and invoke children’s thinking, joining children in discussing their play experience. They will also spend time listening to each child’s individual account and reflection on their own play. Teachers’ efforts during and after each play period will help them further analyze children’s play, share documentations with colleagues, and engage one another’s thoughts and feelings about children, play, development, learning, and teaching (Bailey, 2021; Coffino & Bailey, 2019; Dong et al., 2021; Recchia et al., 2018; Zhao, 2016).

### *The notion of ethical loving care in Chinese early childhood education*

The key notion that needs to be explained here is “loving care” as a cultural notion. Chinese teachers ought to embody their loving care for the young, a top-down love as if from parents to children, and extend this loving care to all children. This cultural notion is of great value and use in educational practice of China (Tan, 2019; Wang, 2018). It permeates the national policy statements and the professional discourse of teachers. Some education writers believe that this cultural notion of “loving care” (关爱) or “loving and caring for” (关心爱护) is equivalent to the ethic of caring in the Western early educational discourse (Liu, 2019).

Interestingly, although the word “love” appears infrequently in the English literature of early childhood education and social policies, many Western preschool teachers enounce “love” more straightforwardly and unquestionably in their everyday work (Goldstein, 1997). There has been a recent movement toward acknowledging love as an essential part of early childhood education, calling for re-integrating love in preschool professional discourses (Cousins, 2017; Dalli, 2002, 2006; Page, 2014; Recchia et al., 2018; Shin, 2021). The growing advocacy for loving care highlights the need to pay attention to the affective dimension of teachers—their feelings that exist in the soul (Noddings, 1992).

Considering these cultural, practical, and theoretical dimensions of loving care, we preferred to use the word “love,” which appears in Chinese folk pedagogy to represent ethical care. We would like to note this usage of love as the ethic of “love and care” or “loving care.” In Chinese early education, there is not yet a widely accepted theoretical framework for guiding research on the ethic of love among kindergarten professionals. This study set out to examine the native theory of teachers who thought and reflected on their experiences in the “free play” movement. In following their thoughts and feelings, we strove to reconceptualize with the participating teachers their understandings of loving care, their basic professional ethic.

## Research method

The early observation and pilot study suggest that free play improves teachers' awareness and practice of loving care. Because the ethics of loving care is closely connected with teachers' thoughts and feelings, it cannot be well captured through outsiders' observations. Therefore, it was necessary that our method tap into practitioners' own perspectives and give them a forum for their voices to be heard. We used in-depth interviews as the data collection method of this study, as in-depth interviews privilege the participants' perspectives and can lead to a deeper and somewhat empathic understanding of their professional life (Johnson, 2002).

### Participants

We used a purposive sampling method to recruit eight teachers from six kindergartens and asked them to offer insights into the changing relationships between teachers' ethic of loving care and children's free play. We initially invited four experienced teachers from four avant-garde kindergartens, two from Shanghai Municipality, and two from Zhejiang Province, who then introduced us to four other teachers with extensive experience in free play from the same two regions. Of the six kindergartens, two were in urban areas and four in the rapidly developing suburbs. Three of these kindergartens were model kindergartens in their areas approved by the local government. The remaining three included one "high quality" and two "good quality," as ranked by the local government.

Six of the eight teachers hold a bachelor's degree and two a master's degree. Six majored in pre-school education and two came from other disciplines, but they all have a kindergarten teacher certificate. Two are curriculum directors of their kindergarten, and the others are classroom teachers without any leadership positions. All of them are experienced female teachers with an average of 11.5 years of teaching in kindergartens. All the participants' names will appear in pseudonyms to protect their identities. After we explained the purpose of this study to the participants, they read and signed the informed consent form.

Although the play materials, environments, daily schedules, and overall curriculum structures varied across these kindergartens, all their children were given at least one hour for free play each day while their teachers continually received guidance on how to carefully observe and understand children's free play.

At the start of each interview, we assured the teachers of their privacy and confidentiality in this study. They were free to withdraw from this study at any time. Then, we invited the teachers to discuss with us their professional ethics to pave the way for our next step: seeking their views about the relationships between their professional ethics and children's free play.

### *Data collection*

In all, four individual and two paired interviews were conducted. The paired interviews were organized for the convenience of two teachers working in the same kindergarten who agreed to be interviewed together. In the semi-structured interviews, teachers were asked the following initial open-ended questions: From your perspective, what are the core ethics of being a kindergarten teacher? Has your understanding of the ethic of loving care and other ethical values changed since your kindergarten started allowing children to engage in free play?

Following these questions, we became engaged in conversations with the teachers and sought opportunities to ask probing questions and to request clarification from them. Some teachers chose to share materials including documentation of children's play, which we used as additional data. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

### *Data analysis*

We analyzed the interview transcripts to identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). A close reading of the interview transcripts, sorting, coding, writing notes, and dialoguing with theories led to the identification of frequently recurring themes, as well as themes on which the participants gave emphases. As Tobin (2018) suggests, "The core of good research is not the brilliance of the theory, but the adequacy of the description" (p. 53). We aimed to describe a teacher's belief in the way she explained it. Because we believe our role as researchers is to verify honest perceptions of respondents' thinking (Mishler, 1990), we sent our original analyses back to the participants for their confirmation, while seeking suggestions via dialogue with other experts. To demonstrate the perspectives of these Chinese kindergarten teachers more vividly and convincingly, we intentionally use many of their own concepts and words to present the research results.

## **Findings on teachers' perspectives**

At the outset of the interviews, all the participants identified the main ethic of their profession as *guan'ai haizi* (love and care for children) and talked at length about its importance to being a kindergarten teacher. In China, anyone who teaches is called "*laoshi*," a respectful title we will use in this report. We generated four main themes from our conversations with the teachers.

### **Theme 1: Transformation from love by expectation to love by appreciation**

The teachers all gave a personal account of how they previously perceived the ethic of love and care as a duty and responsibility because children were vulnerable and needed protection. The teachers

had assumed that children needed to be taught by teachers to reach the educational goals set by the kindergartens. They had also believed that without teachers' intervention, children would have a variety of behavioral problems. With these shared assumptions and beliefs, teachers' understandings of the ethic of loving care could be summarized as their professional responsibility to take care of children because children were weak and prone to problematic behavior, such as being naughty or noisy. For example, Director Cui who oversaw her kindergarten curriculum also saw her love for children driven by professional responsibility:

For so many years, I felt my love for children did not flow toward children because I was often frustrated by them. I always thought that I could set up an environment for teaching children. However, I always felt exhausted without accomplishing my teaching goals. I was often tired after spending so much time making teaching and learning materials. To my disappointment, children swiftly trashed those materials before I could make good use of them.

In this quote, Director Cui highlights the exhaustion she experienced as she selflessly devoted herself to her classroom setup, including its materials and orderliness. Later, Director Cui elaborates on this point, identifying her professional responsibilities as "external expectations":

My presence among them relied on the external moral authority, which in turn trapped me in a deep hole of fatigue. Even children's tiny misbehaviors could get amplified infinitely. Couldn't the child stop giving me trouble? I could ask such questions every day. Both children and I relied on external expectations. Those days, I could tell that my love and passion stopped flowing from my heart.

### *The introduction of free play*

When the play curriculum reform began, teachers were first required to observe and understand children in their own self-structured play activities. These teachers felt surprised by children's creativity, concentration, persistence, and adventurous spirit. In interviews, they also mentioned children's amazing self-protection ability, mutual support among peers, and sense of responsibility. Once they realized that children in free play are capable and active learners, they also realized that their views on children were changing. Lu *Laoshi* from a new suburban kindergarten in Zhejiang noted:

I was shocked when I first let a child play on his own. We used to keep this child by our side to prevent him from bothering others, but that day we were surprised to find that the child had been focusing on his construction play and had come up with many innovative ideas. He is an imaginative and brilliant boy.

In interviews, teachers shared photos, videos, and documents while excitedly talking about their children. They began using words like "崇拜" (worship) and "敬畏" (revere) to describe how they

felt about children and explained their new sense of the “real professional ethic” of teaching. Director Cui wrote in a reflective note:

The free play activities have amazed me about what the little kids can learn and do without my intervention. I must admit that I have no matching ability to plan an equally interesting activity like theirs to offer so many integrated learning opportunities... I began shifting from my love and care for children from what I have or what I have done to what children do and accomplish.

The teachers’ words reflect a change in their role in the classroom after the introduction of free play and, consequently, a new perspective on the children they teach. The teachers’ words before the introduction of free play indicated a classroom in which teachers were active and students were passive. Consider Director Ji’s comment as an example: “In the past, I needed to do everything I could to tolerate them, teach them, and change them.” Interestingly, although the teachers claimed a more active role in structuring activities before free play, they also identified their love and care for children as being deformed by incessant needs to create the learning materials and environment instead of focusing on children themselves. After free play was introduced, the teachers’ main role became actively observing and recording to capture the creative and generative nature of the child’s free play. It was through shifting their own role, however, that teachers developed appreciation for their students. Because the free play is unstructured, the teachers do not have to observe the children through the lens of compliance; rather, the teachers observe each child to better understand the child’s individual actions and ideas.

## **Theme 2: Toward a profound professional understanding of “loving care” inspired by free play**

These teachers shared a heightened awareness that selfless devotion to children does not equal professional loving care. As Lu *Laoshi* said, “Our responsibility is not merely to offer childcare and education, but to understand children on their own terms.” As mentioned, an in-depth understanding of children helped the teachers realize they “崇拜” (worship) and “敬畏” (revere) children. These feelings increased their willingness to try to understand children further with an open mind. Therefore, in turn, teachers strove to sharpen their professional sensibilities in responding to and supporting children’s own play activities. This snowballing process leads to a deeper and richer understanding of what “loving care” means, which consists of three new meanings from the teachers’ words: (1) genuine mutual respect, (2) teachers’ sympathy in loving care, and (3) equality implied by individuality.

### *Genuine respect in the teacher-child relationship*

Free play helped the teachers understand that to love and care for children is to understand and respect them genuinely. This kind of respect is first manifested as recognition and appreciation of the inner regularities of children's learning and development, rather than trying to change them. Wang *Laoshi* from the urban center of Shanghai explained:

When accompanying children in free play, the basic principle is to understand children and respect the regularities of their development. In so doing, you will find that many so-called "problems" would largely disappear because they turned out to be children's characteristics. Following the inner laws of children to educate them is the true nature of loving and caring for children.

This type of understanding and respect pivots on the teacher's willingness to observe children's activities, listen to their ideas, and value them for what they do. The teachers who do so can create a virtuous teacher-child relationship. Qian *Laoshi* told us how she developed this relationship through free play activities:

If teachers disregard what children have to say, children may think, "My teachers do not love me." This disregard was a feature of responsibility-oriented education. Now in our love-oriented education, we respectfully listen and respond to children attentively, so they keep wanting to talk and share with us as close friends.

These teachers realize that loving and caring is not top-down giving, but respecting and valuing the child's perspective.

### *Sympathy as a core of loving care*

Many teachers mentioned that free play helped them recognize that a key element of loving and caring for children is sympathy. The moment when teachers encounter an ethical dilemma is usually the moment when children appear to have problems in their behaviors. However, free play lends teachers an opportunity to observe children's behaviors with sympathy. Dong *Laoshi* from a relatively new kindergarten in Shanghai explained, "The first response is not to complain or criticize, but to listen with a sympathetic ear." A sympathetic ear can hear the child's viewpoint and find a reason in the child's apparently problematic behavior, leading to a teacher's action to meet the child's needs. Director Cui from a new development area of Shanghai told us this story:

I once observed that a little boy spent nearly one hour building a ramp with blocks, plastic pipe, and small balls and constantly adjusting the angle and the height of the ramp. When he almost reached his goal, another child accidentally knocked down his ramp structure. He jumped up with great anger. Then, he ended up kicking the blocks in all directions which we would typically consider a

problematic behavior. However, my sympathy went to him, and I shared his angry feeling. At that moment, I was lost in myriad thoughts and feelings including how to acknowledge his feelings and how to stop his angry acts. But in my heart swelled a strong love and sympathy for him. Consequently, I accepted his angry act.

### *Individual treatment for genuine equality in teaching and care*

As almost all the teachers noted, free play helped teachers discover children's individualities that were not easy to identify in the past curriculum structure. The teachers recalled that, in the past, they knew that children were very different from one another, but professionally, this knowledge of individual differences was minimally meaningful to them because the design of group activities prioritized achieving the same goal within the same time frame. This design easily blinded teachers to children's individual differences. However, free play highlights the individuality of each child. Director Cui from Shanghai reflected on how children's individual differences in free play prompted her to think about teaching:

It is amazing that free play today underscores the 2000-year-old Confucian principle of teaching students according to their aptitudes. In free play, teachers particularly paid attention to each individual child to build an understanding of the child. This understanding guides teachers' teaching and loving care.

Like Director Cui, some other teachers also found that free play opened their eyes to children's individualities. Further, like some others, Wang *Laoshi* even went so far as to argue that "the equality in education must be based on the teachers' effort to care about children's individual differences." Director Ji from Shanghai shared her thoughts about how this understanding of individual differences stood out to her: "We want to give our love for children intelligently, meaning that we support a child at the right moment for a right reason. The true professional ethic requires us to treat all children equally and regard them each as a special person with his or her own characteristics." This notion of treating all children equally added a third dimension to the other two: mutual respect and sympathy in thoughts and acts. These three new meanings reveal a complex understanding of what the changing professional ethic in these teachers may entail.

### **Theme 3: Professional happiness and sustainable loving care through free play**

Most of the teachers mentioned that before free play, they often felt upset or depressed by what children failed to do in the activities teachers had designed. Consequently, teachers were often unhappy and burned out. However, with free play becoming a routine, teachers' new understanding of what

it means to care for children became a source of their professional happiness. As Lu *Laoshi* from Zhejiang Province explained, “I am eager to observe and support my children, proud of the insights and inner growth I had, and proud of children’s accomplishment and development. I feel my professional happiness in all these.”

Teachers also mentioned that this kind of happiness could not be reinforced by a sense of responsibility built on their loving care for children because the emphasis on responsibility made teachers anxious about teaching and unable to recognize their passion for children. Now, a sense of professional happiness comes from their caring relationship with children, where they find their own value, their professionalism, and a sense that they are needed. As Qian *Laoshi*, who works in an urban kindergarten in Zhejiang, explains:

It is actually very important for teachers to realize their own value. In fact, they can realize their value through children’s growth which in turn promotes teachers’ self-motivation, professional happiness, as well as their strong sense of achievement. In this virtuous circle, teachers can embrace their own passion for their career and children.

Director Ji, who almost left the profession before she was introduced to free play, explained how her growing understanding of children’s development improves her professional confidence:

When I can understand children, my communication with parents improves correspondingly. Parents treat me as a professional, and in turn, I gradually rediscover my value as a teacher. This feeling amplifies my professional happiness. If you also feel this way, don’t you find yourself loving your career and children more?

The teachers’ comments indicate that professional happiness is the integral part of professional ethics, including the ethic of loving care. If we insist on requiring teachers to work selflessly, teachers may experience disappointment when love for children feels more like a responsibility, which easily leads to frustration, guilt, and burnout. The free play movement helps teachers align their professional ethic with their own professional happiness.

#### **Theme 4: Teachers’ changing understandings of loving care**

Free play not only helps teachers understand the ethic of loving care, but also promotes them to go further in the practice of loving care. One question invites further discussion in our interviews with the teachers: Why has free play continuously helped teachers become able to “love and care” in kindergartens? The eight teachers in their own ways arrived at three shared insights in response to this question. They believed that free play afforded them opportunities to (1) discover “true

children,” (2) feel empowered in their daily life, and (3) gain competence in their realization of loving care.

### *Opportunities for discovering “true children”*

Dong *Laoshi*, a teacher from a new public kindergarten in a developing area of Shanghai, explained, “I used to teach in a private kindergarten where teachers focused merely on direct teaching and children’s own thinking was unimportant. Now in my current kindergarten, children play under no constraints to express themselves and to do their own thinking.”

Sheng *Laoshi* from a newly developed area in Zhejiang extended this concept of “thinking children” to “true children.” She said,

In the past, we did not know these children as persons. Now children in true play emerge in their genuine selves. They are now true children in front of us and we keep discovering and rediscovering them. Their true selves in free play make so many emotional connections with us that we couldn’t love them more.

In comparison with most teacher-led activities, free play provides an open window through which teachers begin seeing the whole potential of children. This allows teachers to discover children’s strengths and power in thinking and doing; it also allows teachers to discover their own glaring limitations. It is the incessant discovery of true children as they are in free play that constantly enlightens and inspires teachers to turn their own feelings for true children into a transformed ethical loving care.

### *Empowerment of observing and listening*

In their interviews, the teachers repeatedly mentioned that observing and listening to children is vital to inducing changes in their own understandings of the professional ethics. They believed that they could hardly advance their professional ethics through other kinds of activities, including the long-time practices of group instruction, learning standards, and educational objectives.

The teachers told us that free play helped keep teachers feeling calm and empowered. Han *Laoshi* from the central urban area of Shanghai remarked: “Children are completely immersed in their activities. Their joyful play can greatly relieve teachers of their tense feeling for control and management.” “Misbehaviors” rarely happen during free play time as children do not have to obey the same rules and are autonomous. Likewise, teachers are free, too, to observe, listen to, and enjoy playing with children. They anticipated with whetted curiosity children’s next move in play. This feeling gives teachers a sense of becoming a capable teacher. Sheng *Laoshi* described her experience as follows:

After we launched free play with children, teachers quickly became excited about children's play every day. We talked with one another nonstop on play... I think it is wonderful since these conversations also deepen our love for children—we were in love with children. Don't forget that we were full of complaints before about children.

Teachers mentioned that their conversations with colleagues about play greatly promoted their caring practice and gave them renewed energy. The conversations were activities of a professional community that are instrumental to developing teachers' professional ethics (Sockett, 1993). Teachers' extensive conversation about free play also stemmed from observing and listening to children in play. Teachers claimed they "fell in love with observing and listening" and appreciated the roomy leeway to "focus on the true needs of each child."

### *Professional ethics nourished by professional competence*

During an interview, Han *Laoshi* asserted, "Children are themselves textbooks for teachers." Namely, closely observed children can teach teachers much more than any theories and training courses can. The more teachers observe children in free play, the more they understand children's learning processes, characteristics, and rules as well as needs, the more competent they are because they can understand, respect, and support children. Director Cui put this succinctly: "True professional ethics gradually grow with professional competence."

As teachers become more competent in teaching, their understandings of the professional ethic of loving care will also grow. They will become more compassionate about children, as Dong *Laoshi* explained:

It is like putting the cart in front of the horse if we insist that professional ethics can precede professional competence. What really happened was that I observed children extensively and tried to understand them first, with reverence and due respect. Then I found my passion and love for children, and as a result, I want to examine my professional ethic to learn how it works. Now, I know how to love children in a proper way.

These veteran teachers' views about providing loving care for children presented an epistemological argument about how they became a loving and caring teacher, or how they came to know their professional ethics. This new understanding does not lie in responsibility-oriented words and self-control, but in a respect and understanding through teachers' engagement with children's own agency in true play. In summary, this epistemological stance links all the above three key points together as a whole. The free play activity engaged teachers in listening to and observing children in close quarters; this engagement afforded teachers with ceaseless possibilities for discovering children, and the growing discovery helped teachers shape and develop their professional loving

care ethic. To answer the question in the opening of this theme section, teachers' professional loving care ethic is rooted in their respect for children. Their understandings of the professional ethic change with their growing ability to understand children.

## Conclusion and discussion

Through their involvement in children's free play, the teachers in this study deviated from the traditional expectation for teachers to provide the most important knowledge to students, sparing no efforts for the consideration of their interests (Noddings, 1984, 1992). This common expectation is fortified by most administrative regulations, teacher education literature, and textbooks regarding professional ethical codes of kindergarten teachers. This widely shared view depicts loving and caring as obligations, endurance, and selfless sacrifice. Such self-sacrifice often comes with consequences, as Higgins (2011) describes: "It does often turn out that it is precisely the teachers we respect the most, those whose selfless dedication to making something happen for other people is an inspiration, who burn out the fastest" (p. 159). Almost at this point of burnout, the teachers in this study changed their practices and embraced studying children's play "like an anthropologist" (Bailey, 2021, p. 25). Their investigation into children's free play through observation of play allowed them to love children by appreciation, to develop respect for children in the teacher-child relationship, to sympathize with children, and to treat children as individualized persons. These experiences reformed the curriculum as well as the teachers' practice of ethical loving care. Only after the teachers plunged into free play with children did they find their own professional happiness. The teachers, independent of educational scholars like Tan et al. (2016), came to the similar understanding that their caring ethic as teachers can coexist with their professional happiness.

It is worth noting that although the teachers' newly established loving care ethic was not directly drawn from a theory or a set of theories, it was in sync with the ideal ethic of care advocated by some modern theorists (e.g., Noddings, 1984, 1992; Page, 2014; Tan, 2019; Wang, 2018). Both in the teachers' remarks and Noddings' caring theory (1984), the essential elements of caring are located in the reciprocal relationship between the care giver and the care recipient. By listening to children, the teachers in this study were able to establish the equal and close teacher-child relationship required for genuine caring. This resonates with Noddings (1984, 1992) view that sympathetic listening and positively responding to the students is a basic sign of care. Such sympathy for children and acceptance of their ideas also coincides with Noddings' idea of engrossment (1984), in which a carer must think deeply about, and become engrossed in, the cared-for to gain an in-depth understanding of the latter. This engrossment is a necessary precondition for any caring and loving act in education. Noddings' related

idea of motivational displacement (1984) explains that the caring act must take place in response to the need of the cared-for. So, engrossment and motivational displacement complement each other in thinking and action to embody a true loving care. It was only through free play that the teachers in this study became engrossed in observation of their students, making it possible for them to embody the true loving care that children deserve.

Thought-provoking is the fact that all these teachers had received workshop training to learn the theoretical perspectives on the loving care ethic before implementing free play, but they did not actualize these perspectives until they became engaged in and committed to the free play movement. They repeatedly mentioned that their understanding of loving care was not possible without their whole mind-and-body involvement. This significant transformation in the teachers' understanding of the professional ethic of loving care may enlighten thinkers and practitioners in shaping future curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and especially teacher professional development. The loving care ethic runs through all these important educational domains. Practically, the free play movement offers an authentic and effective approach for teachers to develop this ethic over time.

Contemporary researchers attach great importance to developing different professional ethics for teachers at different school levels (Tan, 2020). A meaningful question is what is so special about the professional ethic of kindergarten teachers in comparison to that in the other school levels? One answer is that protecting young children's rights to play demarcates kindergarten teachers' professional ethic from elementary school teachers'. Play is a birthright and "the most frequent, necessary and suitable activity" for young children (Hua, 2003, p. 128). Therefore, our interest in protecting children's right to play is a basic condition for early education. For the same reason, it is an essential part of the ethical codes of kindergarten teachers. Because free play has not been a universally adopted kindergarten practice in China, the teachers we interviewed in this study helped us make a clear case for advocating that protecting children's right to play is also uplifting kindergarten teachers' ethical practice in their daily work. They also inspired us to suggest a vision for teacher professional development that empowers teachers' intellectual and emotional autonomy. We suggest that we should wrestle with two assumptions.

The first assumption is that ethical teachers are trained. It is not uncommon for many early education stakeholders to believe that government regulations, invited experts' talks, required self-reflection, and routine peer support can ultimately improve teachers' practice of the professional ethics. This belief prioritizes an environmental determinism and imposed regulations but minimizes teachers' own inner pursuit and feelings. Educational regulatory agencies can exert policy tools like ranking or accreditation to assess teachers' compliance with the established ethical codes. But even if teachers are likely to respond to an external demand for responsibility-oriented "loving care," they will not develop professional happiness and may experience burnout quickly. Admittedly, teachers need to know the external regulations that govern their professional ethics, but when such ethics are

removed from practice, the danger is that caring can gradually be transformed into abstract problem-solving (Noddings, 1984, 1992). The teachers in our interviews offered us an epistemological pathway to better understand the connection between practice and ethics: Knowing children's free play personally is conducive to connecting teachers' inner motivation to love and care for children, which will be the manifestation of their loving care ethic. Once the teachers saw their loving care being continually empowered by experiencing children's free play, they became more confident and intelligent teachers than those external approaches were meant to make them.

A second common assumption is that teachers' ethics can be cultivated and assessed separately from other roles they play in kindergartens. This assumption flouts the basic professional unity of a teacher. A different view is that the promotion of a teacher's ethic is coherent with their role change from a member of society to a person engaged in an occupation, and eventually to a professional person. These categories should tend toward internal unity in the background of the professional development of teachers. But in the training of teachers, stakeholders usually emphasize the former two roles, neglecting the connection between profession and ethics (Wang et al., 2019). An example of fragmenting teachers' professional existence can be seen in measuring teachers' qualifications, such as professional knowledge, skills, and ethics, all of which are often examined separately in the educational arena (Chen, 2014). It is undeniable, however, that the teaching activity in any sense is an ethical practice as a whole (Campbell, 2000).

It stands to reason that teachers' professional ethics should be understood as part of their professional existence or becoming that consists of expertise, experience, reflective thoughts, practical wisdom, personality, and, most relevant here, professional ethics and professional happiness. All these are complementary with one another as a virtuous circle. The teachers in this study reported that children's free play provided many enlightening events or scenarios that elevated the teachers' understandings of the loving care ethic to a deeper level. One might say that free play presented a context that is vital to virtues (MacIntyre, 1981/2007), and we may add that free play is both the content and the context that shaped teachers' professional loving care ethic. The teachers' words and voices we reported in this study have supported this view.

## **Acknowledgments**

The authors want to thank the teachers who inspired this study and generously shared their thoughts and feelings.

## **Contributorship**

Jie Zhang conceptualized this study, summarized the literature, conducted interviews, and wrote up the initial manuscript. She was responsible for interpreting the participating teachers' ethical perspectives in the context of the free play movement in China. Mollie Clark examined the interview data for reinterpretation, revised the

whole manuscript to clarify various theoretical and conceptual analyses, and edited the text to maintain a consistent writing format. She also drafted the responses to reviewers' comments. Yeh Hsueh weighed in on the translation of key words and ideas and also finalized both the manuscript and the responses to reviewers' comments. In the revision process, the three authors collaboratively contributed to the strategy for revision, reinterpretation of the interview data, and articulation of various ideas.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by "Chenguang Program", granted by Shanghai Education Development Foundation and Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, China (grant number 11CG27).

### Ethical statement

This research was carried out in full compliance with the ethical guidelines as approved by the University Committee on Human Research Protection, East China Normal University, in accordance with commonly agreed standards of good practice.

### ORCID iD

Mollie R. Clark  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5067-6098>

### Notes

1. In China, kindergartens educate and care for children of two to six years of age.
2. As an innovative model of play-based education, Anji Play has been scaling up in China with the aid of the Ministry of Education and UNICEF. It has found a home in the United States, Hungary and some African countries in its global outreach. More information can be found at the website: <https://www.anjiplay.org>

### References

- Bailey, C. (2021). "Anji play" in my eyes (Anji Childhood Education Research Center, Trans.) [in Chinese]. *Early Childhood Education (Pedagogy in Teaching)*, (1), 24–26.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>

- Campbell, E. (2000). Professional ethics in teaching: Towards the development of a code of practice. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 30(2), 203–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640050075198>
- Chen, X. (2014). Features of expert teachers' thinking and action in teaching [in Chinese]. *Educational Research*, 35(5), 128–138.
- Cheng, X. (2019). *Discovering young children by letting them play on their own* [in Chinese]. East China Normal University Press.
- Cherrington, S., & Dalli, C. (2019). What troubles early childhood educators in New Zealand: A 20-year cross-sectional study of ethical difficulties in early childhood practice. *Early Years*, 39(2), 205–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2017.1382447>
- Clark, C. (1995). *Thoughtful teaching*. Teachers College Press.
- Coffino, J., & Bailey, C. (2019). The Anji play ecology of early learning. *Childhood Education*, 95(1), 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2019.1565743>
- Cousins, S. B. (2017). Practitioner' constructions of love in early childhood education and care. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 25(1), 16–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2016.1263939>
- Dalli, C. (2002). Being an early childhood teacher: Images of professional practice and professional identity during the experience of starting childcare. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 37(1), 73–86.
- Dalli, C. (2006). Re-visioning love and care in early childhood: Constructing the future of our profession. *The First Years: Nga Tau Tuatahi. New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education*, 8(1), 5–11.
- Dong, X., Hang, B., Yan, L., & Zhang, H. (2021). *Self-determined play: Achieving a happy and meaningful childhood for children* [in Chinese]. China Light Industry Press.
- Feng, W. (2020). The complete realization of children's rights and the particularity of the professional ethics of pre-school teachers [in Chinese]. *Educational Research*, 41(12), 17–20.
- Goldstein, L. S. (1997). *Teaching with love: A feminist approach to early childhood education*. Peter Lang.
- Higgins, C. (2011). *The good life of teaching: An ethics of professional practices*. Willey-Blackwell.
- Hua, A. (2003). *Theories of young children's play* [in Chinese]. Shanghai Education Press.
- Johnson, J. M. (2002). In-depth interviewing. In J. Gubrium & J. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method* (pp. 103–109). Sage Publications.
- Liu, J. (2019). *Reflection on the development status and cultivation path of kindergarten teachers' caring quality* [in Chinese] [Master's thesis, East China Normal University]. [https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CMFD&dbname=CMFD201902&filename=1019835956.nh&uniplatform=NZKPT&v=xSno81KP3TS1mSEniK\\_uduK7RMqz8yak\\_kSTL4ky\\_cSrIALGWaLPviqFFIYtA180](https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CMFD&dbname=CMFD201902&filename=1019835956.nh&uniplatform=NZKPT&v=xSno81KP3TS1mSEniK_uduK7RMqz8yak_kSTL4ky_cSrIALGWaLPviqFFIYtA180)
- MacIntyre, A. (1981/2007). *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. University of Notre Dame Press. (Original work published 1981).
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2001, July 2). *The guidelines for kindergarten education (trial version)* [in Chinese]. [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_sjzl/moe\\_364/moe\\_302/moe\\_309/tnull\\_1506.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_364/moe_302/moe_309/tnull_1506.html)
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2012, February 10). *The professional standards for kindergarten teachers (trial version)* [in Chinese]. [http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A10/s6991/201209/t20120913\\_145603.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A10/s6991/201209/t20120913_145603.html)
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2016, March 1). *Kindergarten work regulations and procedures* [in Chinese]. [http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A02/s5911/moe\\_621/201602/t20160229\\_231184.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A02/s5911/moe_621/201602/t20160229_231184.html)

- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2018, November 16). *Ten guidelines for kindergarten teachers' professional behavior in new era* [in Chinese]. [http://www.moe.gov.cn/srscsite/A10/s6991/201209/t20120913\\_145603.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/srscsite/A10/s6991/201209/t20120913_145603.html)
- Mishler, E. G. (1990). Validation in inquiry-guided research: The role of exemplars in narrative studies. *Harvard Educational Review*, 60(4), 415–422. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.60.4.n4405243p6635752>
- Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics & moral education*. University of California Press.
- Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. Teachers College Press.
- Öztürk, S. (2010). The opinions of preschool teachers about ethical principles. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice*, 10(1), 393–418.
- Page, J. (2014). Developing professional love in early childhood settings. In L. Harrison & J. Sumsion (Eds.), *Lived spaces of infant-toddler education and care: Exploring diverse perspectives on theory, research and practice* (pp. 119–130). Springer.
- Recchia, S. L., Shin, M., & Snaider, C. (2018). Where is the love? Developing loving relationships as an essential component of professional infant care. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 26(2), 142–158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2018.1461614>
- Shin, M. (2021). To love or not to love, that is the question: Examining the intersection of love, care, and education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 22(3), 282–285. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1463949120902864>
- Sockett, H. (1993). *The moral base for teacher professionalism*. Teachers College Press.
- Tan, C. (2019). The explanation of love and its educational realization: A comparison of Confucius' "benevolence" and Noddings' concept of "care" [in Chinese]. *Educational Research*, 40(2), 149–152.
- Tan, C. (2020). The school levels and the time dimension of teachers' ethics [in Chinese]. *Educational Research*, 41(12), 14–17.
- Tan, C., Zhang, N., & Lv, W. (2016). *The foundation and practice of teachers' professional ethics* [in Chinese]. East China Normal University Press.
- Tirri, K., & Husu, J. (2002). Care and responsibility in 'The best interest of the child': Relational voices of ethical dilemmas in teaching. *Teachers and Teaching*, 8(1), 65–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540600120110574>
- Tobin, J. (2018). Anxiety, theory, and the challenges of doing early childhood education. In M. N. Bloch, B. B. Swadener, & G. S. Cannella (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing early childhood education and care—A reader: Critical questions, new imaginaries & social activism* (2nd ed., pp. 47–55). Peter Lang.
- van Manen, M. (2016). *The tact of teaching: The meaning of pedagogical thoughtfulness*. Routledge. (Original work published 1991).
- Wang, S., Luo, S., & Zhao, Z. (2019). Teachers' morality: A multilevel of development and the structural model [in Chinese]. *Educational Research*, 40(10), 143–152.
- Wang, Z. (2018). Educational kind-heartedness: A basic principle of educational ethics [in Chinese]. *Journal of Shanghai Normal University (Philosophy & Social Sciences Edition)*, 47(5), 87–97. <https://doi.org/10.13852/J.CNKI.JSHNU.2018.05.010>
- Zhao, Q. (2016). *Kindergarten teachers' professional development on the basis of children's self-organized play: The case of XZ Kindergarten in Shanghai* [in Chinese] [Master's thesis, East China Normal University]. <https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CMFD&dbname=CMFD201602&filename=1016141717.nh&uniplatform=NZKPT&v=zMRLgXBxm9ouc-cqJk-gzYOxF-M9Tb4WVFhrB7I1faCKu1s5JDcS4kRpXT3llqiW>