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Emotions, Interactions, and Institutions in Preschool Teaching

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Emotions, Interactions, and Institutions in Preschool Teaching
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Between Caring and Teaching in the Preschool: Talk, Interaction, and the Preschool Teacher Identity

By John C. Pruitt (Lexington Books, 2019).

Due to school closures and shelter-in-place orders -- both necessary measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic -- parents around the world have been forced in recent months to provide full time care as well as educational instruction to their own children while also trying to work from home or cope with the loss of their employment. These parents are coming to grips with the fact that both teaching and caring for children simultaneously is stressful and complicated, to say the least. To do it well requires a savvy ability to manage emotions (both one's own and those of children), a range of interrelated organizational, interpersonal, and communicative skills, and a knowledge base of appropriate subject matter and pedagogy. Needless to say, many parents are finding themselves lacking in one or more of these essential skill sets as they muddle through this crisis as best they can.

In John Pruitt's recent book, *Between Teaching and Caring in the Preschool*, he puts in stark relief just how complex and important this type of work can be by shining a bright ethnographic light on the day-to-day life of teachers in a Montessori preschool. Pruitt clearly developed strong rapport with the preschool teachers and students involved in the study, and a deep familiarity with the routines of the site ("Ellis Montessori"). This methodological rigor and closeness to participants enables him to outline in vivid detail exactly how the Montessori environment operates and why. The Montessori emphasis on children's autonomy is found in how preschool teachers manage student behavior by offering students acceptable choices rather

than issuing directives; the Montessori emphasis on community and belonging is found in how teachers refer to children as “friends” rather than students.

In addition to Montessori philosophy and practice, wider institutional norms that structure early childhood education are also brought to bear on preschool teachers’ meaning making and identity formation. These norms are made relevant to preschool teachers in everyday routines; as Pruitt puts it, “structural problems are misinterpreted as personal challenges” (p. 35). In this way, teachers sense that women possess innate abilities at nurturing and caring for children that men lack due to traditional gender performances that naturalize gender difference. In addition, men are cautious with physical displays of affection with children for fear of suspicion that they are predatory, again driven by institutionalized assumptions about gendered behavior. Moreover, widespread lack of resources in early childhood education are made manifest to teachers by having to dig into their own pockets for instructional resources, as well as through constant debt management by the school’s director to keep their doors open. All of these constraints inform teachers’ identity construction through the ways they actively define them in the context of daily challenges. Compelled by what Pruitt calls a “discourse of teaching” to educate kids academically, and a “discourse of caring” to cultivate their social and emotional development, preschool teachers define these challenges as just the way it is, so to speak, in early childhood education. Since preschool teachers are drawn to the job by their concern and affection for children, coping with these challenges in the name of “doing it for the kids” is part of who they are professionally.

Emotion management is the key mechanism for coping with these challenges, as well as the interpersonal complexities of interacting with young children. Preschool teachers engage in self-talk to keep control of their own emotions in tense situations, and at times they “tag out,”

removing themselves briefly to compose themselves. A key concern shared among these teachers is avoiding negative emotional displays in front of their students. Limiting these negative emotional displays is also part of their broader efforts at the emotional socialization of their students. They model to students how to handle difficult emotions, and through talk, help students identify what they are feeling and the reasons for it. Close observation of the children's individual qualities, careful attention to the setup of the classroom environment, and an abundance of hugs are routine practices. Affection, empathy, and emotion work all become part of their professional identities through these collective routines.

While Pruitt focuses on how these processes and discourses shape preschool teachers' identities, there is less in the book directly examining the professional culture among these teachers, or how the organizational conditions at Ellis Montessori and the structure of early childhood education enable and constrain that culture. No book can or should examine all social dynamics at play in a study's data, and Pruitt's analysis of identity construction is very well-grounded in the literature on sociological social psychology. But his findings also point to promising avenues of future research on preschool teachers' professional culture, a culture that likely possesses both similarities and key differences with that of K-12 teachers. Much of the scholarship on teachers in the sociology of education focuses on K-12 teachers, and Pruitt's book signals that greater attention to preschool teachers could be very fruitful, especially with regard to emotional socialization. Given the growing emphasis on social and emotional learning across K-12 education, such potential research would also offer important implications for curriculum and policy.

Overall, *Between Caring and Teaching* is an important addition to our understanding of identity construction in the symbolic interactionist tradition. It would serve as valuable reading

for courses in the sociology of education, sociology of childhood, or self and society. Finally, the book is a wonderful analysis of preschool teaching that showcases exactly how and why face-to-face interaction matters so profoundly in education. Interaction is essential to how we as adults and children socialize each other collectively, how we express and receive affection, how we cope with raw emotions, how we empathize with others and feel valued ourselves, how we understand our very identities as both teachers and students alike. When we gradually ease pandemic-related distancing practices, and educational routines resume in some way, John Pruit shows us that we will be very well-served by a renewed appreciation for the relationships that teachers and students sustain together through their interactions and shared presence.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR(S)

Judson G. Everitt is assistant professor of Sociology at Loyola University Chicago. His research focuses on how social institutions and culture are produced and reproduced through the social psychology of people's everyday interactions and meaning making. Professional training programs for both teachers and doctors comprise the substantive focus of his research to date. Recent publications examine how prospective teachers reconcile the competing institutional pressures that structure university-based teacher education (*Lesson Plans*, Rutgers University Press, 2018), how professional socialization spans people's careers (with Taylor Tefft, *Symbolic Interaction*, 2019), and how medical students make sense of both permanence and change in healthcare institutions (with James M. Johnson, William H. Burr, and Stephanie H. Shanower, *Ethnography*, 2020).