The Already-Whole Child: Reconceptualizing Care and Sanctuary through Childism

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Abstract

Early childhood education (ECE) is often organized through adultist, developmentalist, and neoliberal paradigms that position young children as beings-in-progress whose value and rights are contingent on becoming "ready" for normative adulthood. This conceptual paper draws on critical childism and care ethics to name adultism as a structural form of power and to examine how power is enacted, negotiated, or redistributed through everyday caring relationships in early childhood settings. Using practice-based vignettes as analytic sites, I trace how dehumanization operates across temporal, material, and relational dimensions of classroom life—through clock-driven pacing, care-as-control, and the elevation of independence as a marker of humanity. In response, I theorize sanctuary as a humanizing alternative to compliance-driven systems: a relational and material reconfiguration of early childhood life that recognizes children as already-whole, centers responsiveness over regulation, and treats interdependence and love as legitimate conditions of human flourishing. The paper contributes to critical childhood policy studies by reframing sanctuary through relational practices and by articulating children's humanity as an essential criterion for care.

Keywords: childism, adultism, early childhood education, care ethics

Introduction

What would early childhood education look like if young children were recognized as already-whole and fully human beings? Throughout history, adults have often viewed children through reductive tropes rather than as human beings (Wall, 2008). The child has been pedestaled as an innocent in need of protection, caged as a savage in need of colonizing, and molded as clay in need of forming. Wall (2008) traces these constructions to their philosophical roots in John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant, respectively, and emphasizes that each continues to shape contemporary understandings of childhood and human rights. Despite their differences, all three conceptions function to dehumanize and constrict children, producing direct consequences for children's humanity and early childhood education (ECE).

Dominant paradigms in ECE position children as beings-in-progress whose humanity is contingent on their movement toward normative adulthood. This conditional framing dehumanizes young children by prioritizing adult-centered notions of development, care, and education over children's lived experiences and inherent wisdom. As the ECE field navigates increasing pressures from neoliberal marketization and standardization, young children are subjected to restrictive, deficit-oriented policies and practices (Albin-Clark & Archer, 2023; Press et al., 2018). Centering children's humanity is therefore essential to creating ECE spaces in which both children and adults can mutually thrive. This requires an unapologetic confronting of the adultism embedded within ECE. Childism is an emerging theory that provides "a critical lens for deconstructing systemic adultism and reconstructing norms and structures that empower the lived experiences of children as children" (Wall, 2024a, p. 5). Using childism as the primary analytic framework, this paper reconceptualizes ECE as a sanctuary for humanity—one that centers young children as fully human, interdependent beings whose wisdom and joy are

integral to transforming the field through relational practices of care. Here, sanctuary is conceptualized as a transformative, liberatory space that honors the authenticity of being human together—not a cage or a pedestal, but a release from adultist norms.

In this paper, I propose a paradigm shift to understand young children as already-whole. Drawing on childism (Wall, 2013) and care ethics (Noddings, 1995) I examine care as the relational space through which power is enacted and negotiated. Through a series of practice vignettes, I analyze how developmentalism, neoliberalism, and intersecting forms of oppression constrain young children as less-than-human. I expand upon the possibilities that sanctuary can offer instead: recognizing children's full humanity, redistributing power within care, and embracing interdependence as a human strength. Reconceptualizing early childhood through childism therefore requires rejecting constricted notions of humanity and intentionally expanding understandings of human value through interdependence. These conditions are examined across temporal, physical, and relational dimensions of practice to illustrate how sanctuary can be enacted in everyday moments. Taken together, these conditions position sanctuary as a conceptual framework for rethinking early childhood education beyond compliance. Recognizing children as already-whole therefore requires not only a shift in belief, but a transformation of the relational, temporal, and material conditions through which humanity is enacted in relation.

Childism, Care, and Power: Theoretical Entanglements

Critical childism recognizes the marginalization and oppression of children while centering children's humanity as a foundation for social justice and transformation. Although childism has a relatively brief history, it has evolved rapidly across disciplines. In psychological fields, childism is typically used in its negative sense to describe prejudice against children (Young-Bruehl, 2012). In the social sciences and humanities, however, childism is used in a positive sense to articulate the need to transform systems of oppression by placing children at the core (Biswas & Wall, 2023). In education, childism draws primarily from definitions developed within childhood studies by John Wall (2006, 2008, 2010).

Wall (2013) described childism as the third wave of childhood studies and argued that "childism would seek not only to understand children's agency and to empower children's participation but also to ask how children's different and diverse lived experiences call for structurally transformed scholarly and social norms" (p. 70). Childism advances both political and scientific aims: politically, it advocates for children to be recognized as fully human and worthy of rights, while scientifically, it asserts that understanding children's experiences is essential to understanding what it means to be human (Warming, 2020). This expansive and inclusive definition of humanity is central to childism's motivation; as Biswas et al. (2024) explain, "Childism, in my understanding, is fundamentally for recognition, social justice, and inclusion of all humans" (p. 746). Childism is not only about including children in existing frameworks—it requires transforming epistemology by centering knowledge systems that have resisted adultist norms and practices.

When applying childism to ECE, care theory (Noddings, 2005, 2012) provides the relational context through which liberation—or oppression—takes shape. Relationships are central to early childhood work; as Noddings (2012) states, "Every human life starts in relation, and it is through relations that a human individual emerges" (p. 771). Noddings (2012) describes the relationship between carer and cared-for as dynamic, reciprocal, and inherently power-laden across the full spectrum of humanity. Recognizing the interdependent nature of all relationships—not only those between children and adults—provides a necessary shift for challenging hierarchical understandings of power in ECE spaces.

Caring-about and caring-for are distinct practices that are frequently conflated within educational institutions, often resulting in unequal distributions of power (Noddings, 2015). Caring-about functions at a projective level, whereby those in positions of institutional authority make decisions based on assumed needs rather than expressed ones—particularly for those, such as young children, who possess limited formal power to alter their circumstances. Societies, institutions, and policies may care about young children, but they cannot care for them. Caring-for, by contrast, operates at a receptive level, requiring responsiveness within a person-to-person relationship; as Noddings (2015) explains, "Caring-for requires a person-to-person relationship in which both carer and cared-for play essential roles" (p. 83). Care theory humanizes both the cared-for and the carer by redirecting power toward responsiveness to children's expressed needs rather than compliance with institutionally imposed assumptions.

Conversations about who is recognized as fully human cannot be separated from the colonial and racialized histories through which humanity has been differentially granted and denied. Black feminist, Indigenous, and Global South scholars, including Wynter (2003), have demonstrated how Western constructions of the human have historically functioned through exclusion and dehumanization. This paper is shaped by these critiques, particularly in recognizing that children's marginalization does not occur in isolation from broader systems of racial and colonial power. Childism and care ethics are therefore used here as focused analytic lenses for examining how humanity is negotiated relationally within everyday educational practice. Synthesizing childism and care ethics enables a critique of independence as the primary marker of humanity while foregrounding interdependence as a fundamental human condition. This pairing makes visible how sanctuary in ECE depends not only on recognizing young children as already-whole but on transforming the relational conditions in which that wholeness is honored.

Sanctuary in Practice: A Vignette-Based Analysis

Expanding the definition of the human to fully include young children requires a paradigm shift in both thought and practice, enacted through changes in relational and material conditions. This section examines three interconnected conditions through which early childhood education can be reimagined as sanctuary: recognizing children as unapologetically and unconditionally human, redistributing power within care relationships, and embracing interdependence as a human strength. To ground this analysis in lived experience, I draw on three brief vignettes from my own ECE practice. Each vignette functions as an analytic site where adultist understandings of care, time, and control become visible—and where childist alternatives can be enacted. In each scene, institutional rhythms press toward compliance until a small pause reorients the relationship toward responsiveness and opens the possibility of sanctuary.

Vignette I

In a classroom, the clock ticks in the background, high on the wall, for adult eyes- for adult meaning-making. The clock exists as a function of control on the bodies in the room; the teacher replicates its patterns on sheets of paper dictating and detailing bodily needs and functions. She stops and starts tasks according to the needs of the outside world. The adult world. The clock sees the child as a prop, sees her as a chess piece, both bits of hardened plastic. The teacher bites her lip, jaw taut with tension. "Again," comes the child's voice as she closes the final page of a beloved story. She breathes, releases her jaw, centering her own hands instead of those of the clock. She relinquishes adult-time to the child's voice in the lap of beloved carer, soft hands squeezing the cardboard pages. She begins the book again.

Clock as Control

The first vignette examines time as a site of adultist power in early childhood education, where developmental and institutional policies regulate children's bodies, rhythms, and relationships. Read through a childist and care-ethical lens, it illustrates how refusing clock-driven practices can function as a redistribution of power that reorients time toward relational responsiveness rather than compliance.

The classroom clock operates as a technology of coercive control and developmental surveillance. Under its regime, the pace of the day—and the march toward normative adulthood—determines what time matters, and what time is deemed wasted. The clock ticks according to adultist expectations of young children's becoming rather than their being. Developmentalism functions as a powerful form of adultist dehumanization in ECE by enforcing views of children as less-than and positioning adulthood as the measure of success. It heightens the perceived importance of individualism and limits our ability to care for and with one another in early childhood settings (Eizadirad & Abawi, 2021), thereby constraining our capacity to humanize one another. Fontanella-Nothom (2024) argues that dominant cognitive development theories, such as Piaget's, are underpinned by settler colonial understandings that position children as less than human and restrict them through normative ideas of "developmentally appropriate" practice. By framing childhood primarily as preparation for adulthood, developmentalism constructs children as incomplete humans—perpetually lacking and dependent on adult intervention to achieve full humanity—thereby denying their present worth and dignity.

Reimagining Time

Refusing the clock supports a vision of the child as fully human and disrupts developmentalism's demand for "more, faster, better." The clock is not the final measure of what one has accomplished or whether expectations have been met "on time." The already-whole child has no need for these adult measures of worth, and the teacher of the already-whole child experiences time as fluid rather than segmented into thirty-minute units of productivity. Refusing to bend the softness of humanity to its rigid practice is not indulgence; it is a deliberate redistribution of power.

Recognizing children as already-whole therefore requires disrupting adult-centric assumptions about time, productivity, and developmental progress. In ECE as sanctuary, time ebbs and flows in tandem with the needs of the cared-for and the carer, both of whom are fully human. What would it mean to frame time as responsiveness to human needs? Research indicates that clock-driven practices constrain classroom life, whereas child-responsive pacing supports relational freedom and reduces pedagogical tension (Cho et al., 2022; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012; Peltoperä et al., 2023). These shifts disrupt adultist assumptions that learning and life must be segmented, measured, and managed separately from children's lived experience. Although teachers may be required to segment time for adult-planned tasks, bookending required activities around blocks of free-flowing time can allow children and adults to lose themselves in connection rather than being constricted by transitions. Responsive pacing—allowing slowness, lingering, and attention to what catches the light—reorients the day away from compliance and toward relationships. Snack and mealtimes, for instance, can be guided by biological and relational rhythms rather than by the clock. When children in ECE are already-whole, time can become sanctuary: space to explore, play, and be without the demand to become.

Vignette II

The toddler's hands wrestlea bottle of paint, it is heavy. The teacher watches, waits. She considers the mess. She considers the space, full of beings, full of possibilities yet restricted by expectations. Restricted by those who are not here, who are not now. The bottle topples. The toddler looks to the teacher; they exchange a glance of understanding. The teacher moves in, holds the paint bottle while the toddler squeezes. "Yes, more," the toddler sighs contentedly, relaxing into the flow. The teacher wears the paint. Wears the grin of a co-conspirator. The paint flows across the paper, the table, the lap, the floor. Others notice; they join the flow. The toddler is the paint, is the teacher, is the wall. Later the paint becomes soap and water, flowing and foaming, a slippery joy.

Care As Control

The second vignette makes visible how power and care are negotiated through children's embodied engagement with materials, bodies, and classroom space. The scene turns on a small decision: the teacher does not seize control of the paint, the child, or the room. She does not prioritize control and compliance to external standards. Instead, she moves alongside the child—holding the bottle steady without taking over—so the child's intention ("more") can be realized. Read through childism and care ethics, this is not a minor pedagogical preference, but a moment of power redistribution: care is enacted as responsiveness rather than regulation, and the child's desire is treated as meaningful rather than inconvenient. In this sense, sanctuary emerges not through order but through shared authority in relation.

In many early childhood classrooms, what appears to be most protected is not the child's exploration but the classroom's smooth and efficient functioning. Dominant adultism often equates care with control and order with safety. In many classrooms, children's bodies—particularly the bodies of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and neurodivergent children—are subjected to heightened surveillance, regulation, and correction under the guise of "school readiness" or "appropriate behavior." Paint becomes a problem not because it harms children or walls, but because it disrupts adult authority and institutional routines of compliance. Care-as-control functions as a racialized extension of institutional and policy power to justify heightened surveillance, regulation, and punishment of marginalized children. Creating sanctuary requires confronting these realities directly. Inequities shape who has paint in their classroom and who has permission to pour it.

Redistributing Power

The vignette refuses care-as-control. The teacher's body becomes part of the activity—she "wears the paint"—and the room shifts from a managed environment to a shared space of meaning making and creation. In refusing to coerce compliance or reassert control over children's bodies, the teacher's stance is not permissiveness; it is an intentional redistribution of power in favor of shared humanity. The teacher refuses moralizing labels and centers herself in the relational present. The teacher does not need power-over to define the space; the space belongs to both and is made through both. In this moment, the teacher uses power to support the child's expressed need—trusting that the child's bodily expression is meaningful, human, and worthy of response.

This vignette illuminates the importance of attending to power and children's unique epistemologies. From a childist perspective, children and adults are both social actors and world creators (Saal, 2023). In the paint vignette, the classroom space is not a backdrop but a participant: materials spill, bodies move, and others join. Honoring children's agency therefore includes honoring their capacity to co-create space (Cortés Loyola et al., 2020; Pescott, 2022). Salamon (2011) notes the irony of adults labeling

young children egocentric while constructing worlds made by and for adults. Children's decisions in ECE are decisions about how to live their lives in shared spaces. Children can share their worlds when adults redistribute power rather than obstruct it. Spatial and relational power are interconnected; physical environments shape expressions of power between teachers and children and can support more equitable power-sharing (Jobb, 2019). Ruscoe (2025) urges educators to treat children's truths as valid and vital in pedagogical decision-making—truths that emerge from children's needs, interests, and ways of understanding that often challenge adult priorities. Rethinking space as sanctuary requires reconsidering what power and agency look like with children's humanity at the core.

Vignette III

The door is steel. Cold and hard. It keeps outside out and inside in. The boundary purposely firm, not permeable. And yet something intangible moves beyond walls, moves within us. We pass the child between us, a shared heartbeat, a shared breath. Shared love. The entanglement of parent, teacher, child is one palm on your cheek, one around the nape of my neck, literal tangles in her fingertips. She needs this, both of us, enmeshed. This moment is sacred and fleeting. Then she releases: you, to the world, and us, to the classroom. We cuddle into a wingback armchair in the corner, quiet. Our breath in tandem, until she clambers down from the sanctuary of us and into the day ahead.

Independence As Control

This vignette reveals how independence is treated as a prerequisite for humanity in early childhood education, and how relational care disrupts that assumption by redistributing power through interdependence. Through a childist and care-ethical lens, it demonstrates how love functions not as sentiment but as a relational practice that sustains children's full humanity. The expectation that children traverse institutional spaces alone, without comfort and with sterile efficiency, reflects neoliberal needs for independence and compliance. Neoliberal institutional systems prioritize independence to create compliance and maximize returns. Yet young children are not the only humans for whom absolute independence is impossible; reliance on tangible and intangible support is *fundamentally* human. Love unsettles institutional systems precisely because it centers shared humanity over procedural efficiency. The field struggles to describe love because it runs counter to dominant scientific and results-oriented neoliberal discourse (Shin, 2021, p. 284). Yet this difficulty signals precisely why love matters in early childhood relationships.

The hyperfocus on independence reproduces and sustains inequities. Davies et al. (2022) affirm that developmentalism is deeply interconnected with other oppressive systems of power that harm children and must be rejected. As Watson (2022) explains, "Diversity and difference will remain Othered while embedded developmental knowledges continue to circulate and are enacted in developmentally appropriate practices in classrooms" (p. 459). The persistence of developmental frameworks ensures that children who diverge from predetermined norms—particularly children from marginalized communities—are assessed as "needs improvement" rather than recognized for their unique embodiments of humanity. A child seeking closeness with a beloved caregiver should not be pathologized but understood as expressing a deeply human need.

Reframing Love as Relational Sanctuary

The vignette refuses adultist and neoliberal regulation of love and interdependence as liabilities to be managed in the service of productivity. It rejects the premise that closeness is weakness, or that attachment is merely a stage to be outgrown. The need

for love and affection is a human right and a pedagogical necessity in early childhood education. Expansion into love as relational sanctuary therefore positions human emotional vulnerability as honorable rather than shameful. The relationship belongs to the parent, the teacher, and the child, sustaining all three. Relational sanctuary creates space to honor love explicitly within ECE.

Love does not require independence to validate a child's humanity. Often framed as "professional love" (Page, 2018) to manage adultist discomfort, love in ECE remains rooted in lived experience rather than rigid definition. Sanctuary is created and sustained through loving interdependent relationships. In the vignette, this redistribution of power is enacted through shared bodily presence, where the child's need for closeness reorganizes adult authority rather than being subordinated to it. Reconceptualizing ECE around shared humanity will not occur without empowered participation; as Josefsson and Wall (2020) note, "power does not arise from independent agency alone, but rather from within interdependent networks of relationship" (p. 1049). This shift toward interdependence creates space for educational approaches that honor children's orientation toward relationship, connection, and mutual care—strengths the present moment urgently requires.

Discussion

Taken together, these three vignettes illustrate how sanctuary in early childhood education is enacted through the redistribution of power across temporal, material, and relational dimensions of everyday practice. In the first vignette, the refusal of clock-driven time disrupts developmentalist control and reorients the classroom toward relational responsiveness. In the second, care is disentangled from control as power is shared through children's embodied engagement with space and materials. In the third, independence is revealed as an adultist and neoliberal precondition for humanity, while interdependence and love emerge as legitimate and necessary forms of human relationality. Across each scene, sanctuary is not produced through policy mandates or abstract ideals, but through small, intentional pauses that refuse compliance and affirm children as already-whole. These moments reveal how adultism is sustained—and how it can be interrupted—within the ordinary rhythms of early childhood life.

Making Adultist Power Visible

Childism and care theory provide analytically distinct but complementary lenses for examining how power functions within everyday practice to expand or restrict young children's very human lives. Childism establishes the critical foundation by asserting young children's full humanity and naming adultism as a structural form of power that constrains it. Care theory then specifies how this power is enacted, negotiated, or redistributed through relational practice. Together, these frameworks enable a critique of independence as the primary marker of humanity while foregrounding interdependence as a fundamental human condition. Childism addresses who is recognized as fully human, while care theory illuminates how that recognition is either realized or denied through relational engagement.

This theoretical pairing clarifies that sanctuary in ECE depends not only on recognizing young children as already-whole, but on transforming the relational conditions through which that wholeness is honored. Childism argues that freedom from oppression emerges through mutual empowerment, where "neither children nor adults are self-empowered without also being empowered by others" (Wall, 2024a, p. 211). Similarly, Noddings (1995) conceptualizes care as a "continuous search for competence" (p. 676), enacted by both carer and cared-for. Authentic caring relationships therefore require recognition of humanity in the other and a willingness to redistribute authority in response to that recognition.

Care Ethics as a Mechanism for Redistributing Power

Power in ECE is a "negotiated act" (Jobb, 2019), yet it has historically settled into hierarchical arrangements that position children at the bottom. Power and care remain deeply intertwined, "entangled within relational dynamics, each sustaining the other" (Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2013, p. 264). When educators position themselves as all-knowing providers of care, they silence children's knowledge of their own experiences and reinforce existing hierarchies. Noddings (2012) emphasizes that educators must remain attentive to the inherent power asymmetries embedded within caring relationships, even when children's needs cannot be fully met. Responsiveness can transform power from a vertical hierarchy into a relational and circular dynamic, where authority is exercised in service of connection rather than control. Redistributing power is foundational to equitable early childhood education (Adair & Sachdeva, 2021).

However, institutions that claim commitments to equity frequently reproduce harm by normalizing White, middle-class standards while restricting children's agency. This tension demonstrates that care and power cannot be separated. Care that fails to confront power risks becoming complicit in sustaining oppressive systems. A childist approach therefore requires explicit attention to how racism and other forms of oppression intersect with adultism to intensify constraints on children's humanity. Black, Brown, and Indigenous children remain disproportionately enrolled in lower-quality ECE settings (Frankenberg, 2016; Iruka, 2022), while inequitable access to early learning opportunities continues to burden families within these communities (Joshi et al., 2025). Structural racism and systemic inequities intersect with children's marginalization as children, producing compounded harm. Creating sanctuary requires confronting these intersecting realities directly.

Sanctuary is Structural and Relational Refusal

The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates how adultist processes regulate, restrict, and render young children's humanity conditional within early childhood education. This dehumanization shapes children's everyday experiences, relationships, and human rights. It operates through dominant developmental, neoliberal, and institutional frameworks that position children as objects to be managed rather than as fully human participants in relational life. Adultism functions simultaneously across structural and relational dimensions, emerging through policy mandates as well as through everyday interactions that shape how care is enacted, how participation is understood, and how humanity is recognized. For children of the global majority and other marginalized communities, these processes are intensified as adultist expectations intersect with racialized assumptions that further constrain children's rights and lived experiences.

Adultism is further reinforced through neoliberal policies that frame children's rights as conditional and subordinate to adult authority rather than as relational expressions of children's inherent humanity. The neoliberal commodification of ECE (Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022) operates alongside developmentalism to position both children and educators as perpetually deficient and in need of correction, rather than as already-whole and worthy. Richardson and Langford (2022) demonstrate how developmental discourse restricts conceptions of children's humanity by positioning them as commodities within marketized systems, while Sims (2017) argues that resistance constitutes an ethical responsibility.

Viewing children as whole humans unsettles hierarchical knowledge systems that privilege adult ways of knowing and opens possibilities for multiple epistemologies. Children's wisdom can enrich learning environments with perspectives less constrained

by adult assumptions. Beneke and Love (2022) argue that such recognition creates space for equity by drawing on multiply marginalized children's gifts, including lived experiences, cultural practices, and historical knowledge (p. 207). Honoring children's epistemic authority therefore resists intersecting forms of oppression and supports more just educational life. Adultist power—enacted through developmentalism, neoliberal governance, and care-as-control—narrows children's humanity. The work of sanctuary begins precisely at this point: in refusing to render children as less-than-human and in expanding collective imagination around the relational conditions under which young children's humanity can flourish.

Collectively, this discussion demonstrates that sanctuary in early childhood education is neither a metaphor nor an aspirational ideal, but a relational and material reconfiguration of power. The vignettes reveal that adultism persists not primarily through overt policy mandates, but through normalized assumptions about time, care, independence, and knowledge that shape everyday pedagogical life. By pairing childism with care ethics, this paper offers a framework for recognizing and interrupting these assumptions while illuminating interdependence as a foundational condition of human flourishing. Sanctuary therefore emerges as a critical reorientation of early childhood education—one that requires educators, institutions, and policy systems to move beyond compliance-driven definitions of quality and toward relational practices that affirm young children as already-whole participants in shared humanity.

Implications

This paper contributes to critical childhood policy studies by offering a childist and care-ethical reframing of how early childhood education policy conceptualizes children, care, and participation. Rather than treating children's rights as conditional entitlements granted through institutional compliance, this framework positions rights as relational practices enacted within everyday educational life. This shift has implications for how policies are designed, implemented, and evaluated across early childhood systems.

First, this analysis challenges policy approaches that rely primarily on standardization, developmental benchmarking, and efficiency-based accountability measures as indicators of quality. When children are positioned as already-whole human beings, policy frameworks must account for relational responsiveness, interdependence, and children's lived experiences as central components of educational quality rather than as peripheral or immeasurable dimensions. Policies grounded in sanctuary-oriented practice would therefore prioritize conditions that support sustained relationships, flexible temporal structures, and environments that allow children's participation to shape pedagogical decision-making.

Second, this framework calls for re-examining how power operates within policy mandates that are often framed as neutral mechanisms of improvement. Developmentalist and neoliberal policies frequently regulate children's bodies, relationships, and participation through compliance-oriented standards that disproportionately affect children from historically marginalized communities. A childist policy orientation requires explicit attention to how adultism intersects with racialized, colonial, and ableist structures that shape access to high-quality early childhood education. Policies that seek to humanize early childhood systems must therefore move beyond universalized developmental expectations and instead support multiple ways of being, knowing, and participating in educational environments.

Third, reconceptualizing care as a relational and power-mediated practice has implications for professional standards, workforce development, and institutional accountability. Policies that emphasize procedural care or risk management without recognizing relational reciprocity risk reinforcing hierarchical power structures between

educators and children. A childist policy approach would instead support professional learning structures that prepare educators to engage in shared power, interpret children's expressed needs as meaningful knowledge, and navigate care as an ethical and relational practice rather than as a set of technical competencies.

Importantly, this framework suggests that policy reform alone is insufficient to transform early childhood education without simultaneous attention to the relational and material conditions of practice. Sanctuary cannot be mandated through policy language alone; it requires structural conditions that allow educators and children to enact responsive relationships, including reasonable ratios, protected time for relational engagement, and institutional cultures that value children's participation as epistemically and ethically significant. Policies that recognize these conditions shift early childhood education from compliance-driven systems toward humanizing environments that sustain the dignity and agency of both children and educators.

Conclusion

All humans exist within webs of interdependent relationships; young children are no exception. Recognizing children's full humanity enables educators to question power dynamics in caring relationships. When power is shared rather than imposed, interdependence flourishes. Within interdependent communities, children's wisdom and joy can emerge as valued epistemologies rather than being dismissed as distraction. Together, these conditions create the foundation for sanctuary in early childhood education—spaces where both children and adults can breathe freely in shared humanity and collective growth. This vision of early childhood education as a sanctuary offers liberation for both children and adults. Recognizing shared humanity and interdependence creates space for early childhood life beyond hierarchies of knowledge and power—toward communities of care and mutual respect. The work of creating sanctuary begins and ends with a simple but profound recognition: children are *already-whole*.

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