

# Between the Sweeping and the Wiping: The Invisible Labor and Relational Care of Early Childhood Educators

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## Abstract

This essay examines the invisible emotional labor embedded in early childhood education through the author's experience as an Iraqi American preschool teacher traveling between Iraq and the United States. Drawing on ethnographic observation and personal narrative, the analysis argues that early childhood systems operate through a hidden curriculum in two directions: teaching children whose ways of being "belong," according to narrow dominant norms, while simultaneously depending on the invisible and unacknowledged labor of teachers who absorb what the institution refuses to see. Encounters with two preschool teachers, Maryam in Iraq and Chongi in the United States, reveal a shared pattern across contexts. Standardized systems cannot encompass what children carry, leaving teachers to bridge the gap through their own histories, grief, and humanity. Grounded in the work of Noddings (1984), Anzaldúa (1987), and Mills (1997), this essay calls for policies that name, protect, and compensate this labor as central to teaching.

## Introduction

With a few exceptions, early childhood classrooms around the world are modeled on a fiction: children arrive as empty vessels to be filled with the standardized version of childhood that the educational system has deemed appropriate. Curricula are advanced, criteria are met, and the school day chugs along as though the reality of what a child brings with them, their family history, grief, language, the particular rhythm of who they are, and where they come from, does not enter the school building with them.

Scholars who discuss classroom socialization talk about the "hidden curriculum," those unwritten/unspoken rules, routines, and institutional expectations students must learn to navigate within educational systems (Apple, 1980; Jackson, 1968). Within every lesson, a quiet institutional sorting is imposed based on how well children leave themselves at the door. The child who cannot sit still, whose language does not align with institutional expectations, whose grief spills into the school day, each child receives an early lesson in whether the system was built for them.

But there is another hidden curriculum that rarely gets named: the educational system operates on the assumption that teachers will fill the holes in the structure. The caring, the flexibility, the capacity to see a child's history, none of this is built into the architecture. Teachers are silently expected to create this foundation. Nel Noddings (1984) argued that genuine care and presence to the particular person in front of you is the ethical foundation of good teaching. What the system does not say is that it counts on this ethic while refusing to create conditions for it. Caring comes from the teacher's personal, private emotional resources. The system spends it freely.

I have lived within this system from multiple standpoints. First as an overlooked Iraqi American student, then as a constrained early childhood teacher in the U.S., and now as an emerging scholar. Across Iraq and the United States, I found the same pattern: standardized institutions cannot hold what children carry, leaving teachers to absorb what

spills over. I learned this most profoundly from two teachers, Maryam and Chongi. Their stories reveal how widely this hidden burden is shared, and how rarely its cost is measured.

### **What the Lesson Plan Did Not Ask: Baghdad**

Baghdad, the city of my ancestral roots, always welcomes me with familiar rhythms: the call to prayer echoing over rooftops, traffic filling dusty streets, and the heat haze rising from the sidewalks. When my visits to Iraq became an annual ritual, I was also in my early years of preschool teaching in the United States, and during each visit, I found myself drawn to explore Iraqi preschool classrooms. Something moved through those rooms that I could not quite name yet. I only knew it felt like more than teaching. Maryam was the first to show me what this feeling was.

The classroom where I met Maryam, an Iraqi preschool teacher, was modest: fluorescent lighting, clustered chipped desks, and a chalkboard layered with repeated lessons. In most of the Iraqi preschools I visited, their day followed a traditional instructional model. Children practiced letters and numbers aloud, moving steadily through lessons designed to prepare them for primary school. The structure was clear. The expectations were uniform.

Consequently, as in any classroom, education is shaped by social, economic, political, and cultural forces. It is the teacher who gives the classroom its soul, through the relational work of seeing beyond the lesson. Maryam stood at the front, guiding children through the Arabic alphabet like a conductor shaping a familiar melody. Children sat upright, hands raised, but her attention was never fixed on the chalkboard. She attended to what the lesson plan did not ask of her: the whole child.

At the end of every school day, the room grew loud before quiet: chairs scraping, broom sweeping, and the clatter of a day being undone. I learned early on that this was never just teachers picking up from the day. It was where we debriefed, trading the kind of knowledge no training manual holds, the unfiltered, hard-won truth of caring for young children. It was here, between the sweeping and the wiping, that Maryam began to talk.

“Did you notice how Abdullah struggles to sit?” Maryam asked as she wiped down the table beside me. “The way he hovers at the edge of the play circle? Poor child. He lost his parents to Daesh a few years ago. He lives with his grandmother now, and she is exhausted. He carries that weight with him.”

To hear the word Daesh—the Arabic term for the militant group ISIS—spoken so plainly in a preschool classroom underscored how violence had shaped children’s lives like Abdullah’s. Ordinarily, his hovering might be read as noncompliance, a failure to follow directions, corrected and documented by school expectations. But Maryam understood it differently. Her life reflected a story many Iraqis share. Maryam spent her childhood living with internationally imposed sanctions, survived the civil wars that followed the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, and navigated losses that many Iraqis unfortunately bear due to the ever-present conflicts. That history had given her insight that the official curriculum could never teach, including the ability to read a child’s body language as an indicator of what that child had experienced.

“These kids have seen a lot,” she told me with a sad smile. “But that is what it means to be Iraqi. We are born with grit. If I only focused on the things we lack, we would have a room full of crying sheep instead of children.”

At the time, I accepted Maryam's words as wisdom, without asking what they cost her. Reflecting now, I know there is also a weight. What Maryam described was not a singular act of resilience, but a condition of being asked to absorb what the system would not provide. I see now that Maryam's choice to bear the weight was a form of communal resistance shaped by shared histories and hardships in Iraqi society. Maryam was working inside what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) calls *Nepantla*, the in-between space where conflicting worlds meet, and someone is faced with the crossroads: a choice of which world to privilege or walk a new path that straddles both. Each day, Maryam translated between what the system expected of children and what their lives allowed. Abdullah's file would record his hovering, but never why. Maryam knew the why. The system is quietly sustained by teachers' emotional relational labor. It never names it, never builds for it, never accounts for its cost. What goes unnamed is taken for granted.

I thought what I witnessed in Baghdad was unique to only there, a teacher doing the invisible work of caring for children the system had no language for. It would take another teacher, thousands of miles away, to show me that the system's silence was not special to Baghdad.

### **The Authority of the Clipboard: The United States**

U.S. early childhood programs frequently describe themselves as play-based and child-centered, inspired by philosophies in which children's curiosity leads to learning. The language is warm. The vision is expansive... And then there is the clipboard.

An ordinary day in my Reggio-Emilia-inspired U.S. preschool is structured by licensing requirements, ratios, assessments, and documentation to verify learning. Observations are recorded, transitions timed, and activities logged to align with developmental benchmarks. Early childhood systems often emphasize accountability through measuring play, but the consequence is often stripping the spontaneity and diversity of play that the system claims to value. As a teacher, I felt swallowed by the mechanics, losing sight of the children beneath the pile of paperwork. I was burning out. Not dramatically, not all at once, but steadily. After returning to teach in the United States following my visits to Baghdad, I carried a growing understanding that good teaching requires holding the full complexity of children's lives, even when the system does not make space for it. And I learned that best from Chongi, my co-teacher.

Chongi worked under the same protocols but navigated them differently. I would look up from my clipboard and find her cross-legged on the floor, deep inside a block structure, a child was explaining to her, her face arranged with the kind of attention that makes a four-year-old feel like the most interesting person in the world. She was not ignoring the schedule. She was just refusing to let it determine her interactions with children every moment. The room felt, for once, like the philosophy we were supposed to be inspired by.

After the children left, Chongi and I synchronized our end-of-day cleaning, much like Maryam's. As the remnants of the day spilled into our conversations, I came to truly see Chongi. Similar to Maryam, both were taught as children to leave their full selves at the door—now expected as teachers.

Chongi lived nearly three hours away. She woke at three in the morning to beat the traffic, and on mornings she arrived too early, she would park outside the center in the dark and sleep in her car until it was time to clock in.

One afternoon, as we scraped dry glue from the floor, Chongi told me about the years she had spent trying to have a child of her own, including IVF cycles, miscarriages, and

the quiet grief that followed. She said it simply, almost matter-of-factly, as she tidied up the scattered crayons. Then she paused and looked across the empty classroom.

“At least here,” she said softly, “I still get to love someone’s child.”

I remember pausing, unsure how to respond, struck by the way she held both loss and care in the same sentence. What Chongi described was not only love but the transformation of grief into care. That care became part of the classroom’s functioning without ever being named. The system depends on it because it lacks the structures to support children’s emotional lives. This is the hidden curriculum: teachers’ emotional lives become labor the system relies on without accounting for their cost. In my moments with Chongi, I found Maryam again. Two women, two countries, two systems; both fluent in a relational language that the system cannot measure, and both taken for granted because of it.

### **The Unmeasured Cost of Care**

Early childhood schooling is organized around assumptions about development, learning, and the teacher’s role. At the core is the belief that children’s development progresses through predictable, measurable stages, and that the teacher’s task is to move children efficiently from one stage to the next; we follow developmental theories that have long been critiqued as universalizing yet continue to drive policy and practice. Within this logic, teaching becomes technical. The teacher delivers. The child receives. Any child who does not receive as expected becomes, quietly, a problem to be managed. As Charles Mills (1997) argues, the social contract has always determined whose humanity is acknowledged and whose is not. Classrooms become where children first learn their place within that divide. The child who cannot sit still, who carries trauma, or whose language does not match the dominant language of the institution, is flagged and labeled as a deficit. Those labels follow them into placement, tracking, and systems that reproduce inequality long before children can name what has been decided about them.

The current political moment not only creates this pattern, but it also accelerates it. As early childhood programs face defunding, DEI frameworks are dismantled, and teachers face consequences for centering the full lives of their students, the pressure intensifies: narrow the curriculum, return to measurable baselines, and remove anything that cannot be documented. For children who have always needed more than the system offers, that narrowing is not neutral but a policy choice about whose humanity counts.

I have watched that choice play out in two classrooms, on two sides of the world, in what gets removed from the curriculum, and in who is left to carry what remains. Maryam reading Abdullah’s body across a noisy classroom. Chongi, cross-legged on the floor, finishing a conversation after the schedule had ended. The gap between what institutions demand and what children need is filled by whoever is in the room, drawing on whatever they have left. The system does not build that capacity. It banks on the next Maryam, the next Chongi, to hold the children who fall through.

### **Refusing the Mold: Possibilities for Policy Change**

If we want early childhood programs that truly support children’s well-being and development, we must stop designing systems that treat children as broken vessels waiting to be fixed and filled. We have to build time and space into policy for the relational work in teaching that allows children to be known beyond what institutions choose to measure. Assessment must expand beyond scores and benchmarks to include what a child carries: their history, language, grief, and rich, inherent funds of knowledge. As long as we measure only compliance, the hidden curriculum will continue to run

undisturbed, paving over the lived realities of children. And it will continue to run on the backs of teachers.

We cannot transform early childhood education without taking seriously the teachers who live inside it. Their resilience has been mistaken for proof that the system works, but resilience is not the same as support. The wisdom exchanged between the sweeping and the wiping is not supplementary to research; It is the research of situated community-held knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This wisdom should not have to live in the margins of an exhausted day. Policy must create what Oldenburg (1999) calls a third space: protected, structured time in which teachers can deliberately bring that wisdom into the room, where care is taken seriously as pedagogical knowledge, not squeezed into end-of-the-day conversations between a broom and a time clock. That means bringing teachers into policy design from the beginning and compensating them for the full scope of what they carry. Because a teacher is never only teaching. That truth has a face: it looks like Maryam, who held a grieving child across a noisy classroom and never called it a burden, and Chongi, who loved others' children through her own quiet losses and never called it a sacrifice. What they gave was real. What the system gave in return was silence.

I have spent years trying to understand what I felt moving through those classrooms: in Baghdad and then again in the United States, something that lingered in the air long after the children had gone home. I know now what it was. It was never on any clipboard, never accounted for in any budget or lesson plan. It was humanity— selfless, generous, abundant in those rooms, and yet somehow the most invisible thing there. The kind that sees what no assessment can measure and gives what no policy can mandate. The kind the system has always depended on and never once deserved. Teaching, at its truest, is irreducibly human. The system was never built to hold that. It was only ever built to spend it.

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