Putting politics and ethics first: exploring the linkage with early childhood education (ECE) and the values of participatory democracy and care

Xiao Zhang, B.Ed., M.Ed.

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Department of Educational Research

Lancaster University

UK

Abstract

This study is conducted in the context of questioning neoliberal governance calls for putting politics and ethics first in ECE. The overarching aim is to provide evidence on how participatory democracy and ethic of care are understood in Chinese ECE. Framed by theories of radical education and the ethic of care, this research aims to address four research questions: 1. How are collective decisions between EC practitioners and colleagues/children/parents made in the classroom? 2. What commitments to caring do EC practitioners have? What are the factors affecting their commitments to caring? 3. How do EC practitioners align the ethic of care with education? 4. How do children care for their peers, adults, and non-human beings?

This qualitative study is conducted within the paradigm of interpretivism. Research methods employed include interviews with EC practitioners, visual methods (imaged-based dialogue and drawing) with children. The research method of examining photographs collected from one EC practitioner makes a complementary job of data collection. 16 EC practitioners and 51 children aged 4-6 years old participated in the research. This study argues that forming a habit of mind of the ethic of care and practicing care ethics are significant to not only comfort the anxiety of the 'crisis of care' but also to build a democratic community in early years settings. This study also argues that we should take the role of children aged 4-6 years old as actively social connectors and constructors seriously, and the construction of early childhood pedagogy needs to be adapted by considering learning culture such as participation, listening, dialogue, and reflection.

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Author's declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the Lancaster University or any other institution. Word count is 67,603.

Signature ....Xiao Zhang......................................

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research background

This study is conducted in the context of calling for democracy in ECE based upon debating influences brought by neoliberalism (Moss, 2018; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Sims, 2017). Prior studies have demonstrated that neoliberalism constrains children to well prepare to participate in democratic process (e.g., Keddie, 2016; Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury; 2016; Sims & Tausere Tiko, 2016). For example, Sims and Tausere Tiko (2016) argued that neoliberalism positions education as a means of training children to be economically competitive in the future employment. Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2016) claim that neoliberal values focus on data-driven accountability which hierarchically labelled children in accordance with prescribed standards and targets in national early childhood curriculum. Similarly, Keddie (2016) argued that under the context of data surveillance, children formed a habit of mind that success was closely associated with gaining higher ranking in academic tests and sports games. Besides, neoliberalism also negatively affects teacher's professional identity. For example, Osgood (2006a) stated that push-down controls by neoliberal government restricted teacher's professional autonomy and created tensions between teacher's own perspectives and professional requirements set by the state. She (2006b) was further concerned with the relationship between neoliberalism and teacher's inner states and pointed out neoliberal control struck teacher's professional confidence engaging with children, colleagues, and parents. Last but not least, neoliberalism deteriorated social bonds. Roberts-Holmes and Moss argued that neoliberal governance potentially brought a 'crisis of care' (2021) in ECE. In this case, children who were brought up with no room for the care of others. Even though there are few studies to indicate that children are engaging in 'crisis of care', hints of such 'crisis' can be glimpsed in the group of EC practitioners. As argued by Simpson et al. (2015), most of early childhood (EC) practitioners in their research positioned child poverty as a problem of the poor themselves so that they did less to provide any help for them to break the cycle of poverty.

As the devastating influences brought by neoliberalism in ECE are discerned,

there emerges many resisting movements. First and foremost, combating neoliberal hegemony depends upon integrating culture into schooling. For example, McMaster (2013) critically discussed neoliberal focus in New Zealand curriculum and advocated to practise democratic culture that is entrenched in New Zealand society in ECE system. In contrast to neoliberal educational models, Finnish ECE administration sticks with conducting its cultural traditions, such as equality, democracy, freedom, participation, collaboration, solidarity, and emancipation, with EC practitioners and children (Melasalmi et al., 2022). Secondly, resisting movements conducted are associated with professionalisation of early childhood. For example, European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) conference Professionalisation Special Interest Group (P-SIG) organised a discussion with regards to managing constraints imposed by neoliberal governance. Moloney et al. (2019) stated that all members of the EECERA P-SIG shared their determination to resist neoliberalism in ECE. Drawing upon the members' reflections, this research goes further to point out decreasing neoliberal influences in ECE needs sectors (education, health, and welfare) break the boundaries and jointly work with children. According to studies by Lynch et al. (2019), they discerned Canadian Ontario's lauded literacy education has to do with neoliberal governance that requires teachers to give priority to conducting push-down curriculum to children. In order to draw teacher's eyes back to children's needs and interests, Lynch and other members in the research team organised professional learning programs for teachers by providing modules of multimodal literacy pedagogies and creating a community-based learning environment. Besides, resisting neoliberalism in ECE also is entangled with pedagogies. For example, Moss (2017) suggested that EC practitioners who are neoliberal resisters necessarily made efforts to integrate post-structural ideas with their teaching practice in the classroom. Drawing upon reflections on neoliberal discourses in Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) operated in ECE, Brewer and Harman (2021) argued that to balance the influence of standardised teaching, there was need to call for more practices of play-based pedagogies conducted in ECE. Similarly, to avoid formulating teaching as an instrument of producing predefined and normative outcomes in early childhood services, Reggio Emilian pedagogies are under spotlights (Hall et al., 2014; Moss, 2018;

Mphahlele, 2019). It is fair to say that many countries and places have initiated resisting movements towards neoliberalism in ECE. Nonetheless, as argued by Moss (2017), they are very local, existing under a backdrop of global regime of neoliberalism. To seek the counterpart against neoliberal power, Moss and Roberts-Holmes (2022) suggested that there needs to be an alternative form of language system in policies to reshape what ECE looks like. They further provided clues, grasping two terms to politically outline the images in relation to ECE: democracy and care.

The value of democracy foregrounds a widespread participation. For example, Fielding and Moss stated that early years settings necessarily politically regard as a 'public forum' (2011) in which EC practitioners, children, parents, and other stakeholders in relation to ECE should be entitled equal opportunities to participate in the processes of decision-making on the matters that affect educational transformation. Further to that, early childhood professionalism in democratic discourse signifies building participatory relationships with children, colleagues, and parents (Sachs, 2001; Oberhuemer, 2005). Under the backdrop of Chinese policy making in ECE system, there are many articles that are associated with democracy. For example, the documentation of *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial Basis)* articulates that 'children are required to participate in evaluation of early childhood curriculum with policymakers, EC practitioners, and parents' (Ministry of Education, MoE, People Republic of China, PRC, 2001); the documentation of *kindergarten teacher's professional standards (Trial Basis)* clarifies that professional requirement on EC practitioner's collaboration with their colleagues. Such requirements are to '[…] collaborate and communicate with colleagues, exchange knowledge and resources, and grow as a team' (MoE, PRC, 2012a); according to the documentation of *Kindergarten Work Regulations* (MoE, PRC, 2016), early years settings are required to not only proactively build relationships with parents and provide parenting education programs, but also to guarantee parent's participation by establishing communication system, such as family committee and regular parental meetings.

The value of care is given to its ethical nature. The ethic of care is 'a creative

practice, requiring the making of contextualised ethical decisions [...] and responsibility for the other' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 73). It is envisaged as both an aim and means of ECE (Warin, 2014) and positions as the 'central plank of professionalism' (Taggart, 2011) for early childhood workforce. Osgood (2010) suggested that caring practitioners are able to conduct pedagogical practices by concerning themselves with children's needs. In Chinese ECE system, care is one of the goals of national early childhood curriculum. According to the documentation of *the guidelines of learning and development for children aged 3-6* (MoE, PRC, 2012b), children are expected to interact with parents, peers, EC practitioners, and people surrounding them with attitudes of respect, inclusion, and empathy and to provide help for others as much as they can. Besides, the ethic of care also regulates EC practitioner-child interaction. As articulated in the documentation of *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial Basis)*, EC practitioners are required to 'engage with young children in a respectful, accepting, and caring manner.' (MoE, PRC, 2001).

I have briefly discussed the devastating influences brought by neoliberalism in ECE, resisting movements, the image of early childhood profession within the value of democracy and care, and further justified such two values that have places in Chinese political regulations. Now, this study is inspired to provide evidence on participatory democracy and care in Chinese ECE.

1.2 Who I am: motivation of this study

Beyond demonstrating the necessity and possibility of participatory democracy and care in Chinese ECE, this study was also motivated by childhood memories, learning experiences as a university student (undergraduate and postgraduate) who studied ECE majors in China, and working as an intern in four Chinese public-run early years settings.

1.2.1 Childhood memories, my personal beliefs on happiness, career decisions

My favourite childhood memories are of the times I spent with my pals. Almost every day, we spent time together chatting, playing games, listening to each other's distress, and consoling each other. It is fair to say that my sense of happiness comes from my pals. However, because of my parent's jobs transfer,

I moved with them to a new home, but I was apart from my pals. When I was an adolescent, I received a different understanding of happiness. I remember that my secondary teachers underlined the relationship between happiness and higher academic achievement. They held that one's sense of happiness increased with higher grades achieved in examination, especially in *Gaokao*[1]. Consequently, they ignored my actual learning needs and instead used the excuse of 'for your own benefit' to carry out teaching schedules with the aim of meeting higher academic achievement. But I found it difficult to find resonance. At that time, I decided to be committed to working in the educational field. I aimed to make efforts to bring changes and prompt my future students to feel that happiness stems from caring and interdependence, in addition to higher personal academic achievement.

1.2.2 Documentary, ECE, and my educational beliefs

Through *Gaokao*, I enrolled in a Chinese university to study education majors. During my first year of university, I obtained a chance to select from either general education program or early childhood education program. When I was making the decision, a lecturer showed me a documentary, called *The Secret of Growth*[2]. Two episodes in the documentary caught my eye.

Episode one: football game

The children in the documentary desired to have a football game. When their kindergarten teacher heard this, she promptly halted her teaching plan and supported them to set up a football game. She provided footballs, jerseys, and a pitch for the children. In addition, she also applied to be a referee, as she acknowledged the children were not familiar with the rules of football games.

Episode two: wait

Every day, Lily looked forward to her close friend Bob arriving at kindergarten. But Bob's arrival time is not fixed. Once, Lily stood at the door all morning without eating. Their teacher suggested that Lily took care of herself. But Lily

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[1] *Gaokao* is the national exam for admission to colleges and universities in Mainland China.
[2] *The Secret of Growth* is an 18-episode documentary. It was filmed at a Chinese kindergarten between 2006-2008, documenting the real lives of a group of children aged 2-6.

rejected the idea and kept waiting at the door. Lastly, although not intervening too much with Lily's waiting, the teacher was always aware of her and reserved food for her in the classroom.

According to the two episodes in the documentary of *the secret of growth* I introduced above, I was deeply moved by the role of kindergarten teachers. For example, they respected the children's decisions, provided support to meet their needs, and created opportunities for the children to build connections with classmates. I intended to become an early childhood worker like them at that time. Consequently, I decided to study in early childhood education program. I not merely expanded the scope of knowledge in relation to ECE in this program, more importantly, theoretical modules I learned in this program affected me to rethink the relationship between my personal beliefs on happiness and ECE. Finaly, I formed my educational belief. Children's happiness is the overarching aim of ECE. To reach that aim, EC practitioners more necessarily regarded children as active participants in social construction, in addition to recognising the significance of caring in education.

1.2.3 Working experiences in ECE

Beyond studying theoretical modules, I also worked as an intern in four Chinese public-run early years settings. In general, I am pleased that I met many EC practitioners who had the same educational beliefs as me. They were attentive to children's thoughts and made efforts to meet their needs. Besides, they also were willing to support me to conduct my educational beliefs in their classroom. According to working experiences, my educational beliefs can be exemplified by four vignettes recorded in my teaching notes.

Vignette one: child's participation

I observed that children were running in classroom lavatory, even though I made lavatory rules that included an article of 'no running, because of slipping'. I reflected that lavatory rules were made by myself and my colleagues but excluding children's voices. I guessed whether the lack of children's participation in rule-making resulted in violating rules. As such, when I gained permission from the lead teacher in class, I organised a group meeting with

children to re-make lavatory rules. In the meeting, we re-made rules, such as 'walking, because of slipping' and 'waiting patiently'. After that, I observed only a few children ran in lavatory. Surprisingly, I also heard that some of the children kindly reminded of following rules for those children who ran in lavatory.

Vignette two: child's needs

While I was supervising in play areas, I saw that Jason faced troubles in playing electronic block kit. He tried many times to make the lamp light but finally he failed. He turned to me to seek help. When I checked the circuit he created, I found he had missed adding battery in the circuit. In this case, I did not aim to replace him to finish his work. Instead, I explained the importance of battery by showing him pictures shown in the instruction of electronic block kit. Finally, he made the lamp light, when he added battery in his circuit. After that, I invited Jason to introduce his circuit in front of the whole class. He accepted my invitation. When he was introducing, he used his words to describe that the battery is the one of key elements of making lamp light in his circuit.

Vignette three: children as active thinkers

I intended to explain crime and punishment for children in the classroom via a collective teaching activity. When I was discussing my ideas with the lead teacher at class, she recommended utilising resources of picture books in relation to crime and punishment. I adopted her ideas and selected a children's picture book named *This is not my hat*[3]. During my teaching activity, I firstly introduced plots in the picture book for children, and then shared an ending that I designed in line with the theme of crime and punishment (the small fish who stole the big fish's hat was swallowed by the big fish). Once I asked children's comments about the waved ending, Emma expressed that small fish should wear small hat, and the big fish should wear bigger one because the small hat is not suitable to the bigger fish's head. It was a surprising answer, because it was out of my teaching plan. But I was very glad to know Emma was thinking of the plots I introduced and created her own ideas.

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[3] *This is not my hat* is a popular children's picture book that was created by Jon Klassen who is a Canadian author/ illustrator.

Vignette four: Listening to children

Izzy puked after dinner in class. From dialogue with one colleague, I was aware that the colleague thought Izzy was uncomfortable about dinner so that she puked. However, I still worried about Izzy. As such, I decided to know what Izzy thought about her puke. As we were talking, I realised that she took parent's car back home after class regularly, but she got carsick. She was afraid of puking up in the car so that she decided to puke at lavatory in class. Finally, I and colleagues in class decided to communicate with Izzy's parents about her situation of puke and carsick and to kindly remind Izzy to eat less at dinner.

According to my childhood, adolescence, university studying, and working experiences, it is hard to deny that my beliefs are key motives of conducting this study. Besides, voices from lecturers, classmates in ECE program at university, and EC practitioners also affect me. Generally, they aim to express the fact that EC practitioners mainly serve to inspector's 'needs' on children's learning; national curriculum guidelines are the key sources of teaching objectives; the overarching function of ECE is to help children well prepare their primary school life. It is fair to say that these voices have a huge difference from what I believe and are closely associated with neoliberalism in ECE. However, I am not assimilated by it. Instead, I decided to question it and provide evidence on my beliefs by conducting research in relation to participatory democracy, care, and ECE.

1.3 Aim and research questions

The overarching aim of my PhD project is to provide evidence of the popular discourse of calling for participatory democracy and the ethic of care in ECE. Framed by theoretical frameworks constructed by theories of radical education (Feilding & Moss, 2011) and the ethic of care (Noddings, 2005, 2006, 2010, 2013), this study set four research questions:

1) How are collective decisions between EC practitioners and colleagues/children/parents made in the classroom?
   - What needs do EC practitioners consider, as they make collective decisions in the classroom with colleagues/children/parents?
2) What commitments to caring do EC practitioners have? What are the

factors affecting their commitments to caring?

3) How do EC practitioners align the ethic of care with education?

- In what ways do EC practitioners educate care?
- How do EC practitioners address learning needs from children in class?

4) How do children care for their peers, adults, and non-human beings?

1.4 Contributions to research gaps and significance of this study

This study will fill research gaps in academic literature. Firstly, many recent academic studies have examined the necessity of participatory democracy in shaping the professional image of EC practitioners (e.g., Moss, 2018; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021), but there are few studies, investigating how participatory democracy is conducted by EC practitioners. Likewise, locally, according to Chinese literature, many studies gave emphasis on the importance of democratic practices conducted by EC practitioners, such as respecting children's rights of participation (e.g., Bai et al., 2022; Wang, et al., 2022) as well as forming collaborative relationships with colleagues and parents (e.g., Li and Liu, 2018; Lu, 2023; Yang, 2020; Zhang, 2023). However, few of studies detail how Chinese EC practitioners manage the diverse practices of participation in collective decision-making in class. To fill this gap, this study will provide empirical evidence on collective decision mechanism based upon Chinese EC practitioners' reflections on the cases, including ways of participating in collective decision-making processes and elements that affect the extent of participation in ECE. Secondly, the significance of ECE as a caring profession has been well discussed in current studies (e.g., Moss, 2017; Osgood & Henward, 2020; Page, 2018). However, few of studies provided discussions in line with EC practitioner's and children's interpretations on care ethics and caring experiences (e.g., Eidsvåg, 2022; Vaughn, 2024; McCormick, 2018). As a result, this study will aim to prolong such discussion by exploring EC practitioners' reflections on their commitments to caring and children's caring performance. Last but not least, the relationship of the ethic of care and education needs to further research. This study will fill the gap by seeking EC practitioners' reflections on the case of caring both as aim and means of education. Besides, as this study is associated with political and academic

concerns with the matters of children's rights of participation, collaborative relationships with colleagues and parents formed by EC practitioners, and the ethic of care in ECE, this study aims to provide further discussions on those concerns and to facilitate changes in understanding of ECE as a democratic and caring profession as well as children's as active social constructors and connecters who are forming caring relationships with others.

1.5 Clarifications on key terms

I will clarify several important terminologies before outlining the structure of this thesis.

1.5.1 Early childhood education (ECE)

Early childhood education is used in this thesis to describe major early years provision for children under 6. The term was confirmed based on Moss's (2017) critiques on 'early childhood education and care'(ECEC). He pointed out the term of ECEC literally regarded 'care' as childcare services for working parents and underestimated the significance of 'the ethic of care' in early childhood services. He further argued that care as an ethic should not exclusively include in the term that named early childhood services by exemplifying why not 'higher education and care'. Further to that, this study gives emphasis of the conception of the ethic of care, and relevant theories (e.g., Noddings, 2010, 2013) are key sources of constructing theoretical framework of caring. Accordingly, the term of ECE adopted in this study refers to pre-school education and kindergarten education in Mainland, China.

1.5.2 Public-run early years settings

Public-run early years settings used in this thesis refers to kindergartens and preschools in which all assets are publicly owned and are all financed by the government in Mainland, China.

1.5.3 Early childhood (EC) Practitioner(s)

In the current Chinese construction of the early childhood profession, roles are typically categorised as 'teacher leaders', 'lead teachers', and 'assistant teachers'. This separation reflects hierarchal relationships in decision-making.

However, this study seeks to claim the value of participatory democracy within Chinese ECE. Drawing on prior scholarship (e.g., Moss, 2017; Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022), participatory democracy highlights mutual and collaborative relationships in decision-making. This informs a shared responsibility for children's well-being within early childhood workforce. Accordingly, this study adopts the term of early childhood practitioner(s) to challenge and disrupt the existing professional distinctions in Chinese context. In this study, early childhood practitioner(s) refers to individuals who work with children in Chinese public early years settings, including teacher leaders, lead teachers, and assistant teachers. It is also worth noting that I employ the terms 'lead practitioner' and 'assistant practitioner' to present findings of collective decision mechanism in Chapter 5.

1.5.4 'The one caring' and 'the being cared for'

'The one caring' used in this thesis refers to the one who gives caring for others, and 'the being cared for' used refers to the one who receives caring from 'the one caring'.

1.5.5 China/Chinese

China/Chinese used in this thesis refers to Mainland China. China/Chinese will be largely used to discuss policies and practices in relation to democracy and ECE system in Mainland China in Chapter of literature review. China/Chinese will also be used to inform research site, sampling and recruitment in Mainland China in Chapter of research method.

1.6 Structure of this research

This thesis is divided into 10 chapters. Chapter 2 introduces literature reviews on relevant theories and studies. Chapter 3 details theoretical frameworks in this study. Chapter 4 elucidates methodological framework based on research topics of collective decision mechanism and caring and my reflexivity of conducting my PhD research project. Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 are findings parts in this study, and I also compare these findings with relevant literature in these chapters. Chapter 9 concentrates on a general comparison between findings in this study and literature I reviewed earlier in Chapter 2, as well as implications

on connecting the conceptions of participatory democracy purposed by Fielding and Moss (2011) and the ethic of care purposed by Noddings (2005, 2006, 2010, 2013) in areas of ECE. In Chapter 10, answers to research questions in this study are explicitly provided, in addition to research limitations, future research recommendation, and theoretical and practical implications.

Chapter 2 will borrow the processes of academic literature review to target two research topics of collective decision mechanism and caring in this study. At the beginning of academic literature review, I will introduce a story of quality and high returns in ECE. I will then discuss a value system behind the story in relation to neoliberalism. The value system of neoliberalism in ECE will be elucidated in many aspects, such as the history of the nature of, and the geographical distribution of neoliberalism. I will also discuss the relationships between neoliberalism and ECE system, neoliberal images of the child and the EC practitioner, and the 'crises' brought by neoliberal governance in ECE. In line with the neoliberal 'crises' in ECE, I will then move on to discuss the counterparts towards the discourse of neoliberalism. I will mainly employ the studies of Dahlberg and Moss (2005) to discuss the significance of putting politics and ethics first in ECE. Following so the conceptions of democracy and care will be targeted to discuss. As for the former, I will firstly explore democracy and its three forms. I will then elucidate the relationships between democracy and ECE via discussing democratic influences on child's participation and early childhood professionalism as well as introducing an 'attractive' example of democratic practice in ECE: Reggio Emilia. When it comes to the conception of care, I will explore care and its three forms in ECE. This chapter will also explore how the conceptions of democracy and care are employed in Chinese context and ECE system in Mainland, China. Finally, I will provide research gaps and target two research topics of collective decision mechanism and caring in this study through reviewing academic literature.

Chapter 3 will introduce theoretical frameworks in this study. To outline the conceptions of collective decision mechanism and caring, I mainly borrow the theories of radical education purposed by Fielding and Moss (2011) and the ethic of care purposed by Noddings (2005, 2006, 2010, 2013). Informed by

such theories, I will conceptualise collective decision mechanism by the terms of participatory democracy and needs; I will conceptualise caring by discussing caring as a form of EC practitioner's commitment, as both an aim and means of education, and as a decision mechanism of needs; to complement outlining the conceptions of collective decision mechanism and caring, I will also provide research assumptions of the early years setting as a democratic community, the 'rich' child, the EC practitioner as the 'rich educator', and the parent as the key participant in ECE. Finally, I will map out my own theoretical frameworks of collective decision mechanism and caring.

Chapter 4 will introduce the methodological approaches employed in this study. I will begin with defending the uses of qualitative methods within the paradigm of interpretivism. I will then introduce the strategies of data collection, including interviews, visual methods, and photograph examination. Descriptions will also be provided about the aspects of sampling and recruitment of participants, the data collection and analysis processes, and ethical considerations. Finally, this chapter will provide my own reflections on my multiple roles in relation to this study and constraints of conducting this study brought about by COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 5 will present findings on EC practitioners' understanding of collective decision mechanism in class. Collective decisions are made in three relations: EC practitioners and colleagues/children/parents. As for collective decisions made by EC practitioners and colleagues, findings will be presented under the themes of the less the EC practitioner knows the child, the less 'voice' the EC practitioner has, leadership, and the 'voice' from outside the classroom. Besides, findings show that job occupancy certainly affects EC practitioners' extent of participation in collective decisions. Regarding collective decisions made by EC practitioners and children, findings will be presented under the themes of EC practitioner-led decision-making, child-led decision-making, and cooperative decision-making. When it comes to collective decisions made by EC practitioners and parents, findings will be presented under the themes of resource-based decision-making, task-oriented decision-making, and profession-led decision-making. Finally, discussions on shared concerns of

decisions, ways of decision-making, and the extent of participation, will be conducted in line with previous studies on participatory democracy, care ethics, the recognition of the 'rich child', child-inclusion, critical thinking, professional agency, and tokenistic participation.

Chapter 6 will present findings on EC practitioners' understanding of their commitments to caring. Findings will be provided based on EC practitioners' narratives on natural impulse of caring for and their best memories of caring for or being cared from colleagues and children in class. Besides, this chapter will also seek elements that affect EC practitioner's commitments to caring enhanced or diminished. Finally, a discussion will be conducted in line with Noddings's (2005, 2013) theories of the ethic of care.

Chapter 7 will present findings on EC practitioners' understanding of the linkage between the ethic of care and education. Findings will be provided in two parts: caring as an aim and a means of education. As for the former, this chapter will present what subjects EC practitioners employ to conduct caring education with children in class as well as what pedagogical approaches to such subjects are utilised by EC practitioners. When it comes to caring as a means of education, this chapter will present how EC practitioners identify children's learning needs as well as how they balance their inferred needs and learning needs expressed by children in class. Finally, discussion will be conducted in line with previous studies on empathy, cure, friendship, democratic community, teachable moments, posthumanism, role modelling, caring teacher, and democratic experimentation.

Chapter 8 will present findings on children's caring for their peers, adults, and non-human beings. Findings show that children aged 4-6 were able to enact caring by taking the perspective of 'the being cared for', and their empathy was recognised when comforting or alienating the distress of 'the being cared for'. Many of them enacted natural caring for those who were in need or in times of distress. Occasionally, one child enacted 'care-about' those who were suffering from hunger in disadvantaged areas.

Chapter 9 will draw together the main findings and discussion in Chapter 5, 6, 7, and 8 to provide a general discussion on the otherness as the overlap between participatory democracy and care, professionalism, relationality, and gender in ECE, 'educare', professional love, and de-centredness in EC curriculum, as well as Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue.

Chapter 10 will conclude this thesis with answers to the four research questions. Theoretical and practical implications will be discussed, and research limitations and recommendations on future research directions will be suggested.

Following this structure, I will go to introduce literature review in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This section will review academic literature and policies in relation to ECE to target gaps that this study is able to contribute to. Reviewing work starts with introducing a story of 'quality and high returns' in ECE. According to the ethos delivered from that story, academic literature in relation to neoliberalism and geographical distribution will be reviewed. I will then move on to make discussions in terms of relationships between neoliberalism and ECE. Specifically, the discussions will be unfolded from aspects of neoliberal governance in ECE system, neoliberal imaginaries of the child and the EC practitioner, and 'crises' in ECE brought by neoliberalism. I will mainly follow the research works conducted by Gunilla Dahlherg and Peter Moss to justify the necessity of resisting neoliberal hegemony and putting politics and ethics first in ECE. Following this the conceptions of democracy and care will be discussed. As for the conception of democracy, reviewing work will be unfolded from introducing democracy and its forms. I will then discuss the relationships between democracy and ECE, integrating with child's participation, early childhood professionalism. An 'attractive' example of democratic practice in ECE: Reggio Emilia will be further provided. When it comes to the conception of care, reviewing work will be conducted, revolving around care and its three forms in ECE: care as commodity, care as a form of control, and care as an ethic. I will then discuss the values of democracy and care, comparing to Chinese ECE. Finally, targeted research gaps will be provided.

2.2 What is the dominant discourse in today's ECE? Digging the gains from the story of quality and high returns

Dominant discourses refer to the key influential stories in which a group of people are restricted to express particular thinking, talking, and behaviour by power exercises (Moss, 2018). In today's ECE, the dominant discourse can be depicted as a story, called 'the story of quality and high returns' (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021; Moss, 2014; 2017; 2018). The story of quality and high returns delivers a strong belief. That is, wisely costing in early years services at present can gain considerable benefits for the society in the future,

and such benefits broadly include 'improved education, employment and earnings and reduced social problems' (Moss, 2014, p. 3). As such, early years' service here is functionalised as an 'investment' to produce many profits for the society. This story has been taken into account in many projects worldwide. For example, Head Start, a national early intervention project, proposed by United States in early 1960s consider early years services as an effective resource to counter poverty (Rose, 2010). Similarly, in the Perry Preschool project, conducted by researchers at the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation between 1962 and 1967, also justified the economic effectiveness produced by early years settings. The Perry project is popularly known as the program of 'Head Start-like' (Zigler & Styfco, 1994). It provides appealing statistical outcomes, and the striking one is that the general rate of economic return falls in the area between 7% and 10% per annum by early intervention (Heckman, 2012). Besides, the Perry Preschool project also supplies evidence on crime reduction as conducting early intervention (Heckman et al., 2010). Informed by the successful example of Perry Preschool project for economic benefits for disadvantaged children, a project of effective preschool and primary education (EPPE) was conducted in the UK. EPPE aims at 'breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (Sylva et al., 2010), identifying commonly effective early interventions on children's cognitive and social development. It is worth noting that there hides a cause-and-effect relationship. That means if we impose on young children the 'correct' early intervention (CEI) in early years settings (the place of the investment), we can gain a huge amount of social and economic profits later (the high returns).

The CEI has a close relation with 'quality'. Before introducing the relationship between CEI and 'quality'. I aim to give a glimpse of the understanding of 'quality'. The concept of 'quality' has contested understanding. 'Quality' can be explained subjectively, and it has to do with what it is meant to be 'good'. For example, Sylva et al. (2010) argued that the feeling of 'good' is varied. Children might recognise their early years settings are good because they are able to have fun all day, while inspectors might identify a 'good' early years setting replying on children's learning outcomes. However, 'quality' can be also understood in an objective way. It works as a set of a set of measurable

characteristics which exist in a variety of observational rating scales in ECE. Two well-known quality rating scales includes *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Revised Edition* (ECERS-R) and *Assessing quality in the early years: Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Extension* (ECERS-E; Mathers et al., 2007; Sylva et al., 2006; Sylva et al., 2011; Sylva et al., 2020). Specifically, the quality rating scale of ECERS-R gained popularity in China. *The Chinese Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (trial version)* (CECERS) has been developed in accordance with the model of ECERS-R (Li et. al., 2014). To well balance Western cultures and Chinese cultural values, CECERS also adds the part of 'whole-group instruction' (Hu et al., 2015). Many studies employ CECERS to investigate Chinese ECE quality with regards to children's outcomes (Li et al., 2016), teaching and children's play quality (Luo, 2014; Yang et al., 2013), quality disparities between urban and rural kindergartens (Hu et al., 2014), and early childhood environment (Hu et al., 2015). Besides, relationships in ECE can also be measured. For example, *the Classroom Assessment Scoring System* (CLASS; Pianta et al., 2007) works as an observational measure of the quality of EC practitioner-child interaction. It is usually used to assess the relationship between children's learning outcomes and EC practitioner quality (Christine Wang et al., 2019).

To understand the concept of 'quality' we need to put it into a certain value system. Moss (2018) argued that 'quality' is a concept with specific assumptions and values so that it cannot be understood neutrally. He, further, gave a strong link between 'quality' and neoliberalism. That is, the term of 'quality' serves as a key component in neoliberal world. Under such a background, Moss found 'quality' is frequently employed to make performance and outcomes expert-driven, measurable and standardised. He (2016) borrowed the term of 'human technologies' created by Nikolas Rose, a British sociologist, to well explain 'quality' as one of 'technologies', governing someone to reach certain desired results as well as preventing someone from undesired ends. As followed, it creates a phenomenon of 'datafication' in ECE. The term of 'datafication' refers to the process in which the inspector employs data 'to ensure compliance to prescribed standards and targets' (Moss, 2018, p. 13). Data has become a form of governance, monitoring both children's and teachers' performance, which

brings some negative results. For example, Roberts-Holmes (2016) claimed that data-driven accountability fosters a performative culture which limits teacher's self-awareness on professional identity and their autonomy. Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2016) argued that using data to measure outcomes accelerates the classification of the child in class, and those children who ranked in high-achieving and low-achieving groups were easily neglected by teachers. Beyond this, to focus on performance data, to some extent, overlooks children's needs on personal learning and development. Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) argued that children who live under the pressure of data surveillance are automatically labeled, and their 'voices' are disappointedly overwhelmed.

Let's go back to discuss the relationship between CEI and 'quality'. When the term of 'quality' works as a subjective judgment, CEI is the tool conducted by the inspector to ensure the child or the EC practitioner to perform the outcomes that the state desires. The desire aligns with high economic returns from social investment. Secondly, as the term of 'quality' is understood as a set of measurable characteristics, CEI can be known as 'quality'. CEI, in this case, is as a variety of items. They are used to measure children's outcomes, EC practitioner's performance, early childhood environment, and relationships and interaction between the child and the EC practitioner. Similarly, as 'quality' gains a neoliberal explanation, CEI becomes a component of 'human technologies', controlling the performance of both the child and the EC practitioner.

So, what do I gain from the story of quality and high return? The overarching finding is that the story delivers us a message, ECE is an economic product. The storyteller takes advantage of a series of financial 'episodes' so as to show reality that the early years' service has been dominantly given an economic attribute, and appropriately investing in ECE can gain high returns for the whole of society, such as economic growth and crime reduction. Within this reality, a high cost-effectiveness in ECE is the final goal for the governance of a certain society. To ensure the profits gained from ECE, the governance hierarchically imposes CEI on children who are required to perform protested or predetermined learning outcomes or desired developmental targets. As such,

the child has become a form of societal asset accumulated for future prosperity.

It is true that the story of quality and high returns shows lots of benefits brought by investment in ECE. However, to focus with the financial profits easily overlooks children's own voices with regards to learning needs and developmental desires. And even EC practitioners start to question their professional identity under the background of the cult of economics by the governance in today's ECE. Behind the story of quality and high returns, there emerges a realm of particular thinking, talking, and acting to make meaning of the world via economic ethos. What value system or ideologies support the story which has become dominant in today's ECE? The answer is neoliberalism.

2.3 What is neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism emerged in the 1970s, and it flourished and became the most powerful and influential value or belief across the globe in the 1980s to 1990s (Moss, 2017). It spread out from the UK and USA at the areas of political transformation (Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022). In today's world, neoliberalism has become entrenched in people's way of thinking and has been inserted in every aspect of human life (Sims, 2017). In other words, neoliberalism insidiously shapes 'how we might make sense of ourselves, and what is important, how we make decisions about what to do, and how to behave' (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. xvi).

The term of neoliberalism is loosely recognised as a market-based ideology, and its core ideas include commodification, capital-accumulation, and profit-making (Ball, 2012). Neoliberalism is metaphorised as a 'prevailing dystopian zeitgeist' (Venugopal, 2015) that makes an epochal advancement of finance capitalism, and the practice of neoliberalisation is pervasive in human life as followed. For example, neoliberalism features as 'a system of thought' or an 'applied political strategy' (Cahill et al., 2018) that gives emphasis on the importance of economics with regards to political decisions. Free market and free trade are seen as the fundamental institutional regulations that improve human welfare, and private enterprise is as the key to economic development (Harvey, 2005). At the process of chasing economic prosperity, however,

neoliberalism negatively affects social justice and then produces inequality. Louvill (2023) who reviewed the book, *Neoliberalism – the Ideology at the Root of All Our Problems*, written by George Monbiot, and stated that neoliberal reforms position people with disabilities at a disadvantaged place in the area of healthcare. Similarly, neoliberal reforms shape education as an instrument of profit making, and the learner is constrained to be cultivated as the essential workforce who sustains capitalist economy. Furthermore, neoliberalism becomes a cultural phenomenon, which is shaping the understanding of the self. Marttila (2012) stated that the neoliberal government foregrounds the values of entrepreneurship, and entrepreneur is envisaged as the overarching social role model to describe what the individual, or say the neoliberal subjectivity, looks like. In this case, the individual is popularly known as 'homo economicus' (Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Moss, 2018), who characterises self-interest, self-reliance, and self-management. Specifically, the 'homo economicus' maximises his or her own best interests. He or she prefers to independently address life challenges or problems, which results in leaving limited room to pay attention to another's benefits, to support or care for others, or to understand others' suffering. Entrepreneurship also affects social relations. Birch (2017) pointed out that all forms of social relations are simply conceptualised as a series of contracts, and competition is the core way of connection between individuals. The term of competition here is contextualised in free market, and it aligns with the process in which someone makes rational calculation and decisions to seek the best cost/benefit analysis. As such process, however, a hierarchical relation of the winner and the loser is produced (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Human creativity is not a goal, but a means to help someone create great profits from relations (Christiaens, 2020). As a result, the pervasiveness of neoliberalism influences both political and social life. All of the domains in human life reduce to economic transactions, which echoes a calling of 'economisation of everything' (Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022).

2.4 Neoliberalism and early childhood education

Over the last 30 years, neoliberalism successfully intrudes in and raises a tidal wave in ECE. On the one hand, geographically, neoliberalism has gained a

worldwide impact. We can easily trace its footsteps anywhere across the globe. One the other hand, neoliberalism has entrenched in ECE, and its powerful force not only impacts on the style of governance and control, but it also revises the imaginaries of the child and the EC practitioner.

2.4.1 Geographical distribution of neoliberalism: A repaid and worldwide spread out

The influences of neoliberalism have been examined at many nations and regions. For example, as for the ECE system in the UK, the Labour government of 1997 to 2010 introduced neoliberal economic policies in the early childhood sector, which accelerated the speed of the construction of private-for-profit childcare businesses. Because of this political decision-making, the UK has become the most marketised ECE system in EU (Cameron & Moss, 2020). Osgood (2009) claimed that, in England, state regulation inserts neoliberal values in early childhood curricula. The government emphasises the importance of the term of quality and shapes curriculum reforms revolving around preparing children to be future citizens and workers. Neoliberal reforms in Australia, New Zealand and Nordic countries impact on children's learning outcomes. A set of standardised knowledge in related long-term employability gains popularity, and academic subjects are increasingly dominant in early childhood curricula (Sims, 2017). Similarly, neoliberal ECE policies also have been developed in China and Singapore, and young children's school readiness and their learning dispositions that enable them to become competitive learner in their future work there are main goals of curriculum in ECE (Yang et al., 2022).

There emerges a phenomenon known as 'neoliberal globalisation' (Gupta, 2018), which brings neoliberal ideologies from the dominant voice of 'the west' to 'the non-west'. As such, neoliberal reforms have not been the specialty of western countries. Asian countries and regions are impacted by such globalised movement, and neoliberal governance can be also detected in their current policies at the field of ECE. What is the 'vehicle' sending neoliberalism to the Asian areas? Or say, what brings the story of quality and high returns to Asian countries? Adriany (2018) suggested that many world-famous institutions and organisations help neoliberal ideas propagate to many countries in Asia. The

first which comes to mind is the institution of the World Bank. This is because nearly all countries in Asia make the loan from the World Bank. As such, these countries unavoidably consider the economic requirements proposed by the World Bank, as the governments initiate reforms. Predictably, early childhood education here becomes an investment, and the World Bank keeps eye on the remarkable returns for the investment. Moreover, Adriany also mentioned the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) plays a role in delivering neoliberalism to Asia. OECD develops human technologies as an international discourse to regulate children's performance (Moss, 2018). PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), IELS (International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study), and other international assessment toolkits proposed by OECD work as the references to build the testing system of children's outcomes in Asia.

It is the case that neoliberalism has rapidly spread out worldwide. Its core ideas nationally or internationally shape political agenda related to the field of ECE in many nations and regions. Under the value of neoliberalism, there arises a language of new public management, governing the direction of educational reforms in early childhood sector.

2.4.2 Neoliberal governance: Importing marketisation in ECE system

Neoliberal governance produces an interwoven relationship between the market and the push-down educational reforms. Ball (2012) claimed that neoliberal ideas force the state to be concerned with the economic merits of each educational reform. As such, the state automatically introduces a logic of market to conduct regulations. Ball further pointed out the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, which has nurtured a big and complex global network of free-market organisations in many countries, making a huge impact on public policy-making in diverse governing institutions. This is because policymakers can easily understand and present the idea that the 'intellectual entrepreneur' is the key to the future civil society, globally propagated by the Atlas, in public policies. As neoliberal ideas add in the process of public policy making, there emerges a language of New Public Management (NPM), which brings a big transformation with technologies of output control and standards of performance in ECE

system.

The term of NPM was born in the 1970s, and it makes a huge impact on systematic reforms of the regime. NPM is used to change the low efficiency of government administration within the regime of bureaucratism (Yu, et al., 2015). And now, it develops as a dominant discourse with regards to state regulation in education. NPM can be described as a way of neoliberal governance. Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) concluded principles of applying NPM in state regulation. Firstly, NPM emphasises quantitative measurements. Governments take advantage of digital data in educational reforms so as to monitor the performance of the services they fund and to calculate how much merit they can get. Secondly, the government, conducting the paradigm of NPM, foregrounds output control. A series of specific standards are set so as to measure or manage performance. Last but not least, NPM emphasises efficiency in performance. Governments follow this NPM ethos to release hierarchical pressure on control of the individual for achieving the greatest efficiency. As a result, importing NPM in the state regulation equates to introducing the public services, such as education in the market. To gain the best results, the state turns to seek the most effective techniques to control the individual. As such, there arises a hierarchical governance, and public service providers inevitably prioritise compliance with the policymaker's desires on their performance.

Early childhood sectors are experiencing the political transformation lead by NPM. The overarching 'pipe', shifting neoliberal ideas from the top to the ground, is throughout the push-down early childhood curricula (Sims, 2017). Taking England as an example, the Department of Education published two political documentations, the statutory framework for *the early years foundation stage* (EYFS) and the handbook of *Early years foundation stage profile* (EYFSP). These two documents impact all early years' service providers. EYFS sets the standards for learning and development for children from birth to five. In this statutory framework (Department for Education, 2017), the goals of children's learning and development are separated in three prime areas – communication and language, physical development, and personal, social and emotional development and four specific areas – literacy, mathematics,

understanding the world, and expressive arts and design. In order to help children reach the goals in each area in EYFS, EYFSP is created, and it is used by EC practitioners to accurately make assessments on children's outcomes set by EYFS (Standards & Testing Agency, 2016). It is clear to find that early childhood sector in England foregrounds a language of 'quality' by applying technologies – such as the goals of children's learning and development and relevant operational assessment measurements for EC practitioners – to effectively control children's performance. As Moss (2017) said, 'the emphasis in [quality] is on strong governing to achieve conformity, standardisation and predefined outcomes' (p. 25-26).

With the burgeoning development of neoliberal governance, there creates a phenomenon of performativity in education. The term of performativity has been fully discussed by Ball. He described performativity as 'a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change. based on rewards and sanctions' (2003, p. 216). Conducting performativity by the governance creates a big impact on early years' workforce. The workforce struggles with the compliance of 'the demands for accountability, attainment targets, a compulsory early years' curriculum and standardised approaches to their practice' (Osgood, 2006a, p. 188). As followed, they are encountering a 'regulatory gaze' (Osgood, 2006b), which triggers us to reflect what it means to be an early childhood professional under such a backdrop. I will provide more discussions with regards to neoliberalism and early childhood professionalism later. But now, I intend to conclude the point is that performativity has become a powerful regulatory mechanism used by the state to monitor or inspect the performance of early years' service providers.

Finally, neoliberal governance is deeply entrenched in ECE system. It leads to a process of 'governmentality' (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021), which means those who are managed externally end up owning what the imposed management desires to see. In this case, all participants involved in ECE system fall into the process of governing the self, embodying the norms or goals the state looks forward to and taking them for granted ultimately.

2.4.3 Neoliberal imaginaries of the child and the EC practitioner

The influence of neoliberalism in ECE is inconceivably powerful. Its core technologies of data surveillance, standardised measurement, performativity, and accountability used broadly by the state regulation revise the imaginaries of the child and the EC practitioner. These imaginaries are systematically introduced in a book, *Neoliberalism and Early Childhood Education: Markets, Imaginaries and Governance*, produced by Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) which I have already referred to several times. In the following section, I will unfold relevant discussions based upon that book.

2.4.3.1 The neoliberal children: Not ready to independently choose their life trajectory

Neoliberalism shapes the images of the child by many discourses and theoretical disciplines. Primarily, the discourse of 'human technologies' shapes the images of the child as an 'unmatured adult' or a source of 'future hope' (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). In this case, children are technically cultivated so as to make a bright future for society. They are waiting to be shaped as the one who can create financial profits for society or better participate in the process of societal construction in the future. Secondly, the discourse of 'datafication' shapes the image of children as 'a collection of numbers' (ibid.) and 'sausages in a factory' (Bradbury et al. 2017). It is worth noting that children are experiencing the processes of datafication and becoming a part of the data. According to Keddie's (2016) studies, neoliberal performativity compels children to measure themselves all the time, and children simply see success as gaining higher ranking in academic tests and sports games. Last but not least, theoretical disciplines also affect the way of understanding children's identity. Behind the story of quality and high returns, the disciplines that aligned with developmental psychology gains much attention. As argued by Moss (2018), developmental psychology viewed the child as innately experiencing certain developmental stages, and in each stage, the child should present universal capabilities. As such, there emerges a collection of images of the child, such as 'scientific child' or 'developmental child'. Because Piaget's theory of stages of development is most influential, the child is also called 'Piaget's child'.

2.4.3.2 The image of EC practitioners: Neoliberalism and early childhood professionalism

Early childhood professionalism (ECP) can be seen as a context-based terminology, which sets specific values driven in a certain backdrop to shape EC practitioner's professional identities. Prior researchers (e.g., Evans, 2008; Ho, 2006; Karila, 2008; Miller, et al., 2012; Warren, 2014) found that ECP can be interpreted in many ways and discourses, and understanding the meaning of it needs to consider the influences by outside climate, such as historical, cultural, societal, and political elements. To this point, the value of neoliberalism has to do with shaping ECP and the image of EC practitioners, consequently.

Before introducing ECP under the backdrop of neoliberal governance, I aim to briefly introduce the reason why EC practitioner's identity changes from the 'non-professional' to the 'professional'. Traditionally, early years' service is described as a childcare work (Moss, 2006), and its overarching function is to provide shelter for children from working-class families and liberates children's mothers to work rather than to provide educational services for children. Childcare skills are associated frequently with women's 'natural ability' with the study of attachment theory by Bowlby (1982), which suggests that children's source of security aligns with their relationship with mother. To this point, EC practitioner is envisaged as childcare worker or babysitter, but not the professional worker. However, with the increasing socio-cultural and socio-economic expectations on young children, care and education spontaneously become the specialised tasks for the EC practitioner (Urban, 2008). At that time, the identity of EC practitioner viewed by the state successfully changes from the babysitter to the professional worker.

ECP has been employed by the neoliberal government to manage early years workforce. The workforce is forced to undertake push-down controls via technologies of 'targets, performance indicators, external inspection' (Moss, 2006, p. 37). Under this backdrop, the images of the EC practitioner consider as 'technician' and 'investment broker' (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). They are monitored by the state, conducting push-down curriculum as well as inspecting children's performance. To successfully complete the tasks hierarchically

distributed by the state, there certainly produces government-initiated specialised trainings for EC practitioners. These specialised trainings are refurbished as 'professionalisation' or 'teacher professional development' by the neoliberal government (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996). Lo et al (2013) pointed out that such professional activities are shaping EC practitioner's expertise that the state desires. As such, ECP, a tool of state regulation, is narrowed as something about 'performing to achieve prescribed criteria' (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p.111). Originally, the term of professionalism foregrounds autonomous judgments (Moss, 2006). However, EC practitioner's professional autonomy and their professional subjectivities are challenged by neoliberal professionalism. (Osgood, 2006a). Neoliberal audit culture makes EC practitioners struggle to 'engage with children, colleagues and parents in ways that demonstrate professional confidence, expertise and authenticity' (Osgood, 2010, p.130). Jiang (2015) argued that neoliberal professionalism overwhelmingly emphasizes technical rationality in pedagogical logic, which restrains class dynamic and accelerates the speed of job burnout. Sims and Tausere Tiko (2016) proposed that neoliberal ECP provides only one legitimate way to understand teaching work, and therefore constrains the flexibility in curriculum and easily overlooks children's certain needs expressed in practice.

2.4.4 The 'crises' generated by neoliberal governance in ECE

In previous sections, I introduced that neoliberal governance has negative influences on the subjectivities of the child and the EC practitioner. This section will explore the 'crises' generated by neoliberal practice in ECE. There are three 'crises' available observed in previous studies. Firstly, neoliberalism brings a reductionism into ECE, which narrows the understanding of ECP to the point that the state prefers. This situation created very limited room for EC practitioner's reflexivity in their professional work, and their professional agencies are undermined by the outside control mechanism (Osgood, 2006a). Secondly, neoliberal governance foregrounds a discourse of 'human technologies', which prioritises the key words of 'rationality' and 'efficiency' in ECE. However, this practice overlooks emotionality that works as an essential part of professional practice in ECE. (ibid.). Thirdly, neoliberal ideas are deeply entrenched in ECE, which affects social relationships. Neoliberal human being

is characterised as the one who is self-interested, independent, calculative, and competitive. Such neoliberal moralities easily create a tendency of 'crisis of care' (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021), meaning that people's capabilities to care for others are undermined, and social bonds increasingly become weak and fragile.

The 'crises' provoke a series of resistant movements towards neoliberal governance. I have introduced some cases of such resistant movements in section 1.1 research background in Chapter 1. Further to that, many studies have presented 'the alternatives' towards the dominant neoliberal ideas in the field of ECE (e.g., Moss, 2017; 2018; Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022; Osgood, 2010; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Generally, 'the alternatives' put politics and ethics first in ECE and advocate the ethos of democracy and care to shape what are the fundamental values or beliefs in ECE.

2.4.5 Beyond Neoliberalism: political and sociocultural specificities in Chinese ECE

Previously, I discussed how China has been involved in the movement of neoliberal globalisation. Against this backdrop, Chinese ECE is undergoing a process of cultural hybridisation (Yang et al., 2022). Two dominant discourses—Western individualism and the capitalist economic market—have been primarily imported into Chinese ECE (Gupta, 2018; Adriany, 2018). These ideologies have increasingly shaped educational policies, institutional structures, and curriculum content, often leading to tensions between globalised models and indigenous Chinese values. However, localised forms of wisdom continue to resist the influence of neoliberal globalisation. In this section, I will clarify the political and sociocultural specificities of Chinese ECE by introducing the roles of communism, Confucianism, and collectivism.

2.4.5.1 Communism

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has taken a leading role in national governance, guided by socialist theories such as Marxism-Leninism, Maoism, Deng Xiaoping

Theory, and the Theory of the Three Represents (Boer, 2021). Under the leadership of the CCP, the Socialist System with Chinese Characteristics (SSCC) has been developed to guide China's reform and opening-up policies. This socialist system is characterised by unique institutional advantages. Bao (2020) argued that the SSCC emphasises a people-centred approach in political development, continuous optimisation of institutional structures, and common prosperity as the fundamental goal of reform. Chinese early childhood education (ECE) is rooted in the influence of SSCC principles (Wang & Ho, 2020). Given the complexity of these influences and the pressures of neoliberal globalisation, this section focuses on the developmental trajectory of privatisation in Chinese early years settings to illustrate how the SSCC has shaped ECE practices. The privatisation of Chinese early years settings has occurred in three key phases:

1. From the 1980s to the early 1990s;
2. From the 1990s to 2010;
3. From 2010 onwards.

During the first phase, China was operating under a planned economy in which enterprises and institutions were publicly owned. The central and local governments provided ECE as a form of social welfare for employees (Liu & Pan, 2013). However, with the 1993 fiscal reform, China's economy transitioned from a planned model to a socialist market model. Market mechanisms were subtly introduced, and private early years settings were legalised. By 2010, the number of private settings had increased significantly, accounting for 68% of the sector (MoE, PRC, 2012c). This trend reflected a shift toward a more market-based approach to ECE provision (Bullough & Palaiologou, 2019). However, the dominance of privately funded services gave rise to several challenges. First, public satisfaction with enrolment was low. Due to the high tuition fees charged by private institutions, many families struggled to afford ECE, with some turning to unregistered, lower-cost providers that were not regulated by the government (Zeng et al., 2011). Second, the quality of privately funded services was inconsistent. Aligned with market-driven priorities, many private providers prioritised profit over children's developmental needs (Yu et al., 2015). Third, marketisation exacerbated the urban–rural divide. Rapid development was concentrated in urban areas, while rural ECE programmes suffered. Between

1996 and 2004, the number of rural early years settings declined from 110,400 to 50,430 (Zhu, 2015). Additionally, Hu et al. (2016) found that the quality of rural ECE remained low, and without government intervention, the educational outcomes and life prospects of rural children were at risk. In light of these issues, many scholars have argued that the Chinese government initially focused on maximising the economic returns of ECE, with limited attention to its role in promoting social equity (e.g., Liu & Pan, 2013; Qi & Melhuish, 2017; Zhu, 2015). In response to the negative consequences of marketisation, the Chinese central government initiated political reforms aimed at meeting public demands for affordable and quality ECE.

In 2010, the State Council published the document Opinions on the Current Development of Early Childhood Education. Qi and Melhuish identified this document as a key marker that 'ECE development entered a new era in China' (2017, p. 271). In the document, ECE services were reasserted as a form of public welfare. Ten policy proposals were introduced, including a clarification of the government's leadership role in ECE development. The proposals also focused on addressing urban–rural disparities and ensuring access to quality ECE for all eligible children. In this new era of ECE development, the Chinese government has prioritised the provision of public-interest early years settings for eligible children. These settings are non-profit, publicly funded, and government-monitored (Liu, 2019). In addition to expanding the number of public-run institutions, the central government has encouraged private providers to offer public-interest services through political and financial incentives such as service procurement, tax reductions, public–private partnerships, and subsidies (State Council, 2010). By 2020, the coverage rate of public-interest early years settings had reached 84.7% (MoE, PRC, 2021). In summary, under the leadership of the CCP, the current Chinese government has increasingly taken a leading role in shaping ECE programmes to promote public well-being and social equity

2.4.5.1 Confucianism

Confucianism plays a foundational role in shaping traditional Chinese culture (Wang, 2023). It refers to "a philosophy which is the basic starting point for

every individual to arrive at the state of perfect morality" (Yim et al., 2011, p. 288). Confucianism emphasises the development of social harmony through five virtues: Ren (benevolence), Yi (righteousness), Li (propriety), Xiao (filial piety), and Zhi (wisdom) (Tang, 2008). Confucius discussed social harmony within five pairs of basic human relationships, known as Wu Lun. These are ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, and friends. These relationships are structured hierarchically and maintained through prescribed roles and social expectations (Tang, 2023). Confucian values are embedded in contemporary Chinese ECE. Regarding Confucian virtues, benevolence and filial piety serve as important learning resources for children in Chinese early years settings (Paramore, 2022; Yim et al., 2011). In terms of Confucian ethics, teacher-dominated pedagogy plays a significant role in the Chinese early childhood curriculum (Yang et al., 2022). Similarly, Chinese children are encouraged to conform to early childhood teachers' authority in practice (Yang & Li, 2018).

2.4.5.2 Collectivism

Collectivism plays a significant role in shaping ECE in China. In Mainland China, children's ability to integrate into collective life is recognised as a key indicator of high-quality ECE (MoE, PRC, 2022). Similarly, in Taiwan and Macau, fostering gregariousness is considered an important goal of early childhood curricula (Liu & Wang, 2024). Within the Chinese value system, collectivism typically refers to an ideology that prioritises group goals over individual interests, emphasising interdependence. In contrast, Western value systems tend to favour self-reliance and individual autonomy (Heine, 2001). Chinese collectivism is deeply rooted in Confucian ethics. Within ECE settings, this form of collectivism is enacted through authority figures—especially preschool principals—who play a central role in articulating collective goals (Wang & Ho, 2020). In addition to Confucian influence, collectivism in Chinese ECE is also shaped by the ideologies of the Chinese Communist Party. Here, collectivism is not only cultural but also political. It is embedded in the national vision of achieving common prosperity through cooperation and shared responsibility. This reinterpretation of collectivism emphasises people's mutual obligations and responsiveness to collective needs (Zhu, 2015; Zhu & Zhang,

2008). As such, collectivism becomes both a moral and institutional imperative. For example, the *Law of Early Childhood Education* (MoE, PRC, 2024) reinforces the notion that all members of society share responsibility for the care and education of young children. In short, collectivism in Chinese ECE is understood on multiple levels—cultural, moral, and political. It serves both as an organising principle and a normative goal, influencing how children are socialised, how institutions function, and how society at large engages with ECE.

2.5 Politics and ethics as the first practice in ECE

Before systematically introducing the overarching alternative discourses of democracy and care, the necessity of selecting these alternative concepts needs to be illustrated. It is the case that neoliberalism has become a dominant discourse in ECE. The hegemonic situation reduces decisions made by the state, shaping the image of early childhood education as a 'technical practice' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Moss (2018) pointed out that even though neoliberalism is so entrenched in state regulation, it is just 'one decision' or 'a way of choosing' made by the state, and the crucial issue is what the state desires with regards to early years provision. He further proposed they should primarily view ECE as a 'political practice'. Politics aligns with resource allocation and ways of decision in terms of public issues, and democratic politics are preferred to conduct in ECE (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). The case is about breaking the dominance, about leaving room for choosing and plurality, and about answering the question of how we make decisions between diverse discourses, especially the conflicting discourses, for EC practice.

Ethics relates to the equal stance of politics. Ethics are assemblages of beliefs, assumptions, principles, and values, which makes reasonable demands with regards to a human being's moral life, such as making relationships with others (Frick, 2011). Traditionally, under the influence of liberalism, there emerges a discourse of 'universalistic ethics' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005), which was created in the early 18th century and aligns closely with theories from Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher. Universalistic ethics prefer rationality over affection, and its core ideas of calculation force one to evaluate everyone's moral

behaviour by universal codes or norms. Such ethics promotes the image of ECE as a 'technical practice', and the relationship between the EC practitioner and the child, shaped by universally ethical principles, narrow to be called as 'the sender and the receiver' (ibid.). However, universalistic ethics still follow the footsteps made by neoliberalism, discounting the subjectivities of human being. Why do we need to amplify the importance of ethics in early childhood practice? The answer links with practices of 'choosing' and 'decision-making' (politics). Politics and ethics intertwine. Ethics are the subsidiaries of politics (Moss, 2018). Ethics advises politics, and in turn, politics conduct ethics (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). As I reviewed above, democratic politics are suggested to counter the neoliberal dominance in ECE. Many studies found that democratic politics foreground relational ethics, an alternative to universalistic ethics, characterised as responsibility, relationships, situatedness, and otherness, and care is the key ethic in such politics (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Fielding & Moss, 2011; Moss, 2018). In short, democratic politics bind with the ethic of care. They gain the equal first stance in ECE, comparing to economics brought by neoliberalism.

I have reviewed the necessity of politics and ethics that are used to resist the neoliberal hegemonic in ECE. However, what if we go beyond neoliberalism, do we still need to process politics and ethics in reality? The answer is yes. Fielding and Moss (2011) provided two examples to argue the necessity of political and ethical practice. On the one hand, even though we have gained a high technical achievement, we feel depression and upset from fragile and vulnerable relationships with others and our vanishing community life, because of lacking understanding of the other and interdependence. On the other hand, the overarching issue is with regards to Earth protection. Because of continuous territorial expansion or world war breaking, and other irresponsible treatments to the natural world, we have exploited the Earth too much now, which leads to a series of environmental problems, such as global warming. Environmental problems threaten all human beings, including children. It is time to think about collaboration with others and co-exist with other species, instead of conquering other nations or ruining habitats of other species. As for ECE, it is necessary to support children to make relations with others as well as the environment.

As I have introduced the importance of politics and ethics in early childhood practice, I will draw my camera lens closer and focus on the terms of democracy and care. The two terms are very popular to be used as counterparts against neoliberalism in the field of ECE. They are reshaping the attributes of early years provision, early childhood professionalism, and subjectivities and relationships in ECE.

2.6 Democracy and its three forms

The term democracy can be loosely explained in three ways. Firstly, democracy aligns with representation. In this case, democracy is as an electoral mechanism, serving to target representatives who govern the bodies of the whole nation. Such representative democracy creates advantages, such as bringing closer political institutions and society, providing a place for people to present their will, and creating possibilities for people engaging in political decisions (Alonso et al., 2011). However, representative democracy accepts many critiques from theorists of citizenship and social justice. Urbinati (2016) pointed out such critiques revolving around a phenomenon of indirectness to politic and summarised some negative outcomes, such as negatively restraining civil rights on participation in all decision-making with regards to public issues, manually making a division towards a vertical relationship between the citizen and the state (the passive citizenry and the elected aristocracy), instrumentalising labour to fit governmental functions, and gaining democratic qualification by election. As a result, representative democracy, to some extents, fails to consider the case that full citizens innately are entitled to participate in all decision-making with regards to public issues. Consequently, there calls for a term of participatory democracy. Participatory democracy works as an importance condition for social justice (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Menser (2018) defined participatory democracy as 'maximal democracy', which brings a cooperative power into politics so as to reduce inequalities. Menser further pointed out the core idea, supporting the term of participatory democracy, is 'the creative, collaborative, and constrictive power of collective determination' (p. 5). Participatory democracy is also a key element to understanding citizenship. Biesta and Lawy (2006) suggested all citizens innately have democratic credentials to participate in all forms of social and political life. Fielding and

Moss (2011) echoed this point, claiming that participatory democracy necessarily permeates in our 'everyday life'.

Going beyond discussion from the perspectives of politics, there emerges the third explanation on democracy that is as a key component of ethics. John Dewey has written many works on connecting democracy and ethics. He (2004) described democracy as 'a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience' (p. 94). Pappas (2008) evaluated that Dewey's works see democracy as a moral ideal which provides possibilities to answer issues related to ethical practices, such as 'how one should live, […] how to make collective decisions, how to treat… others, [and] how to communicate' (p. 239). Fielding and Moss (2011) saw democracy as a 'relational ethic' (p. 42) to think around how citizens relate to others, according to Dewey's works. Kubow et al. (2022) described democratic relationship as a form of co-existence. Groups or individuals actively cooperate to participate in social construction and exercise social freedom. Biesta and Lawy (2006) stated that the term of democracy cannot be narrowly explained as a mode of political decision-making, but a social and political ideal within a value of inclusion.

To conclude, democracy can be seen an electoral 'tunnel' of the government, a political choice that emphasises participation for all citizens, a key component of relational ethics that links all citizens to catch human common good, and even a way of being in the world.

2.7 Democracy and ECE

Democracy gains increasing attention in early years. Many studies have propagated the importance of democracy and the necessity of democratic management, building upon the critiques of devastating effects produced by neoliberalism (e.g., Arthur & Sawyer, 2009; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Moss, 2006; 2007; Moss, 2107; 2018; Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). This section will further introduce the influences on child's participation and early childhood professionalism by democratic values and provide an 'attractive' example of democratic practice in ECE, which is recognised as Reggio Emilia. This example not only justifies a phenomenon of

'everyday democracy' (Fielding & Moss, 2011) but also provides a unique assemblage of language describing what democracy looks like in ECE.

2.7.1 Democracy, citizenship, and child's participation

'A healthy democracy is one in which all its citizens can participate' (Freeman, 2022, p. 46). Freeman's words provide a clue to seek linkages among citizenship, democracy and child's participation. Democracy guarantees a child's participation by reconceptualising citizenship. Lister (2007) stated that the conception of citizenship is struggling with the tensions between exclusion and inclusion. As for the exclusionary side, citizenship is used to articulate 'an exclusive territory of adults' (Casley et al., 2024) in which a conceptualised separation between adulthood and childhood emerges. The child falls in a passive circumstance within the social structure through this separation (Freeman, 1998). The conceptualised childhood deepens the understanding of children as 'objects of concerns' (Freeman, 2007) or 'not-yet-adults' (Larkins, 2014), who lack competences, such as rationality and independence, to cooperatively construct public life with adults. Democracy draws citizenship to its inclusionary side. Democratic proponents express that recognition of the necessity of children as citizens is the first step to discuss child's participation (e.g., Fielding & Moss, 2011; Rinaldi, 2006). Participation is the central place of citizenship. 1989 United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC) is seen as the foundation of building theories or conducting research with regards to child's participation (Montà et al., 2020). The right of the child to participate in the processes of decision-making related to themselves is seen as the 'acme' (Gal & Duramy, 2015) of UNCRC. However, Invernizzi and Williams (2007) stated that UNCRC-based participatory rights reflect a limited range of rights held by the child. For example, the child has rights to participate in the process, such as informal political choice making, but is unable to fulfill adultlike rights of participation, such as election and vote for political office (Freeman, 2022). Even though UNCRC contributes to the right of the child to participate and enables our society to develop more child inclusivity, the voice of questioning that whether children are capable of or take responsibilities to fulfill citizenship remains.

Democracy is the main purpose of citizenship education for children, while learning democracy is necessarily via experiences of participation. Howe and Covell (2005) stated that children are finally developed as a 'good citizen' at school, and democracy is defaulted as the central value to understand what means 'good'. Furthermore, the Crick Report on *Education for Citizenship and Teaching of Democracy in schools* (1998) views democratic values as the main aspects to understand citizenship for children at teaching institutions. Invernizzi and Williams (2007) commented the Crick Report not only confirms the child's status of citizen in the UK, but also gives emphasis on social and moral responsibilities to children as being democratic citizens. Likewise, in Brazil, democratisation is internally affecting early year settings. Brazilian children learn citizenship by interacting with democratised environment (Kubow et al., 2023). As for the approach to citizenship education, traditionally, citizenship education is conducted by a content-based approach. The knowledge relevant to citizenship is generalised and separated into a series of different subjects. Certainly, the content-based approach easily makes children's achievement on citizenship education assessable (Scott & Lawson, 2002). However, such fragmented education, to some degree, prevents children from learning about citizenship. Once citizenship curriculum takes advantage of assessment standards, children may focus on the way to meet normative indicators instead of conceptual learning (Jerome & Lalor, 2020). More importantly, fragmented citizenship learning overlooks the linkage with the reality so that children are unlikely to act as a democratic citizen within a specific context (Howe & Covell, 2005). To this point, the arena of citizenship education is shifting from formal curriculum to children's actual life. Children's learning is different. They actively construct knowledge by experiences refined from interactions with outside. As Dewey (2004) said 'recognition of the natural course of development… always sets out with situations which involve learning by doing' (p.200). Kubow et al. (2023) followed Dewey's ideas and claimed that children understand democracy via experiential learning rather than via listening alone. The real and meaningful participation is an optimum resource to gain experiences that young democratic citizens need to learn democracy (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Biesta et al., 2009). Once early years settings become a 'public forum' (Moss. 2018), children are

able to gain many opportunities to participate in social and political action with others, and then collect experiences of democracy.

2.7.2 Democracy and early childhood professionalism

Democratic values reshape what it means to be a professional in ECE. Previously, I stated that neoliberal ECP is as a way of state control to manage early years workforce, and it brings EC practitioners many negative effects, such as a lack of professional autonomy and teaching flexibility, and influences EC practitioners' emotions. Under the neoliberal climate, EC practitioners work as 'technicians' (Moss, 2006), who are technically professionalised by accepting a series of specialised knowledge and terms so as to fulfil educational duties of the state. Carr (2000) pointed out there is a risk of participation behind such activities of professionalisation. The process of technicisation easily makes teaching impenetrable so that children and other stakeholders fail to gain access to participate in ECE. To concern with these negative effects brought by neoliberalism, there calls for an alternative discourse to reshape ECP. The first discourse which comes to mind is democratic ECP. The value of democracy is used to resist the powerful governance by neoliberalism in ECE (Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022). Democratic professionalism is generally ascribed to 'demystifying professional work' and 'building alliances' (Sach, 2001, p.153). Participation is the core idea to explain the conception of democratic professionalism in ECE. Oberhuemer (2005) suggested that collaborative and cooperative relationships or alliances exist throughout EC practitioner's professional work, such as interacting with children, democratically deliberating with colleagues, inviting parents in early years services, and networking with local community. Moss (2017; 2018) stated that democratic professionals necessarily interact with children and other stakeholders related to ECE in an inclusive way. Being inclusive calls for professional interactions associated with values of 'experimentation' (Moss, 2018), which refers to openness to new ideas brought by others and to try out different ways to do things. Besides, care is also a key value to affect participation in ECE. Primarily, caring provides ethical conditions. Caring means a moral responsibility of respect for otherness. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) stated that caring entails the practice of listening to others, the willingness to create interdependent atmosphere, and openness to

difference. Caring ensures the recognition of others' voices. Caring at its emotional position involves elements, such as empathy and sympathy. Tomkins (2020) suggested that such elements are incentives to transform personal moral feelings to moral obligations and behaviour to others, and then responsiveness emerges as followed. Once others voices are recognised and responded, the other has been involved in the processes of participation.

2.7.3 The Example of democratic practice in ECE: Reggio Emilia and 'We have choices!'

This section will introduce some examples of democratic practice in ECE. The very appealing and well-developed example is Reggio Emilia (Moss, 2006). Moss has elucidated the full landscape of Reggio Emilia in his book, *Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood: An Introduction for Students and Practitioners* (2018). I will mainly follow this book to introduce Reggio Emilia.

Reggio Emilia is a city located in Northern Italy. In this city, a network of 'municipal schools' are built for young children. At these places, not only the internationally well-known early childhood education is hatched, but also the world-renowned travelling exhibition, *The Hundred Languages of Children*, was born (https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/rc/exhibitions/the-hundred-languages-of-children/). Generally, Reggio Emilia is recognised as a 'cultural project' influenced by the timing of liberation from Nazi occupation in 1945 and democratically political choices, but not as a 'panacea' that provides a transferable educational procedure for early childhood practice everywhere in the world (Moss, 2018, p. 66). Within the universe of Reggio Emilia, there is a unique language to describe the images of early years settings, the child, the EC practitioner, pedagogy and learning, and way of evaluation. At Reggio Emilia, early years setting is a 'school for young children' (ibid. p. 79). The definition is used to justify the setting and is not the extension of home nor primarily provides childcare services to the parents. It is characterised as a public place in which local community resources are induced in ECE and all citizens can have access to engage in the schools, as a collection of 'workshops' or a 'laboratory' (Fielding & Moss, 2011) in which doing things can be in different ways. The goals of early years settings at Reggio Emilia includes

fulfilling education-in-its-broadest-sense, 'fostering and supporting the general well-being and development of children and young people, and their ability to interact effectively with their environment and to live a good life' (ibid, 2011, p. 46), as well as delivering the value of cooperation in the setting or between settings.

In the Reggio Emilian language system, the image of the child is shaped as the 'rich' child. The 'rich' child is explained as an active learner who has great potential in many aspects. Likewise, he or she has 'one hundred languages' to express himself or herself (Cameron & Moss, 2020). 'Hundred languages of children' refers 'to the different ways children… represent, communicate and express their thinking in different media and symbolic systems; languages therefore are the many fonts or geneses of knowledge' (Vecchi, 2010, p. 9). As such, the term of 'hundred' does not mean a precise count. Instead, it is intended to claim all 'languages' have the same right to be expressed by children. In this case, two of 'languages' in traditional education, speech and writing, are not the only ways that children choose to express themselves, and children's other 'languages', such as visual 'language', mathematical and scientific 'language', and poetic 'languages', have equal access to be listened (Vecchi, 2010; Fielding & Moss, 2011). The 'rich' child is also understood as a co-creator. He or she is able to participate in co-constructing knowledge with others (Moss, 2018). As a result, the image of the 'rich' child focuses on the child's subjectivities, and the child is considered to be one who innately has potential to affect social transformation with others.

The image of the EC practitioner also is understood as the 'rich' one, and the practitioner has 'one hundred languages' the same as the 'rich' child has. According to Moss's (ibid.) observation, the 'rich' practitioner can be characterised as a listener, a creator of rich learning environments, a giver of time, a respecter of otherness, a democratic professional (I have discussed above), a researcher or experimenter. The 'rich' practitioner also needs to prepare to interact with children, listening to them, questioning their ideas, providing alterative possibilities, and provoking their thinking. The main task of the 'rich practitioner' is to create rich opportunities and environment for children

and their learning. As followed, Reggio Emilia foregrounds a pedagogy of relationships and listening. Learning happens in interaction and dialogue between children and adults, and listening to the thoughts of both children and adults is throughout the whole process of learning. Such pedagogy is mainly enacted by project work. This is because Reggio Emilia pays attention to the depth of learning and interdisciplinary connection, and democratic participation emerges as the process of conducting projects with others (Fielding & Moss, 2011). Beyond learning from interactions between children and adults via project works, it is worth noting that children's learning also occurs through interactions with the environment. For example, Osgood and Odegard (2022) found a post-humanist story of 'Encounters with cork' at Reggio Emilian kindergarten in Norway. In that story, the child connected with recycled materials to broad experiences. To this point, it is the case that Reggio Emilian pedagogy implies a philosophy of posthumanism. Posthumanism challenges a discourse of child-centredness and foregrounds decentering the child. Fostering the posthuman child follows a civilising logic, seeking to make connects with more-than-human relations and to resist developmentalist practice in ECE (Osgood & Mohandas, 2022). As a result, the space of children's learning in Reggio Emilia is full of subjectivity and uncertainty.

Pedagogical documentation provides a participatory process of evaluation (Fielding & Moss, 2011). It discards objective indicators predetermined or standardised by outside experts or the state and turns to welcome plural points and multiple interpretations on outcomes or performance and involves everyone who is related to the ECE discussing everything happening in their surroundings. Pedagogical documentation embraces the documents collected in various ways, such as 'notes, photographs, videos, recordings, children's artistic or other creations, etc.' (ibid., p. 7). And these documents are delivered to all citizens so as to make discussions, interpretations, and evaluation. Moss (2018) concluded that pedagogical documentation makes learning processes and educational practice visible.

The quite recent development of the mosaic approach is a radical new way of accessing children's voices and participation. Mosaic approach is a proliferation

of pedagogical documentation (Moss, 2007). The main goal of Mosaic approach is to seek children's 'voices' and to recognise their competencies (Clark & Moss, 2011). The 'voices' here cannot literally translate as children's speaking, it involves both 'verbal' and 'visual' resources from the child. The participatory techniques (see them as pieces of the Mosaic) conducted by Mosaic approach includes observation, child conferencing, camera, tour, mapping, role play, the perspectives of the EC practitioner, the researcher, and the parent, and bringing these pieces of Mosaic together is throughout dialogue, reflection, and interpretation (ibid.). Following in the footsteps of pedagogical documentation conducted at Reggio Emilia, Mosaic approach foregrounds the values of participation, cooperation, creation, and diversity. Children's outcomes can be interpreted in different ways rather than by technically predetermined indicators, and all citizens, the child, the practitioner, the parents, and other stakeholders, allow to engage in this process, to do research cooperatively, and to seek a multidimensional explanation with regards to children's competencies in ECE.

Reggio Emilia implies that participatory democracy permeates everyday life. Both children and adults in ECE are seen as citizens who have the fundamental right of participation. As such, all citizens are able to go abroad and engage in ECE transformation, reflecting, interpreting, and sharing ideas with each other. Furthermore, Reggio Emilia pays attention to relationships and listening. It is the case that children's learning happens as interactions with each other as well as to the environment, and the professional work of the EC practitioners is to listen to children's thoughts, to interact with them and other stakeholders, and cooperatively make meanings on children's outcomes. In short, municipal schools at Reggio Emilia make early years settings as a public forum in which interaction and connection are centralised to shape the image of everyday practice, and the example of Reggio Emilia proves that there are different perspectives and ways of interpretations on ECE, which echoes a calling, 'we have choices!'

As learned from the example of Reggio Emilia, Reggio Emilia is a production of culture and history. It has created a collection of unique languages. This provokes me to reflect which element constantly intertwines with ECE. Finally, I

target the term of 'care'.

2.8 Care and ECE

The term of 'care' is entrenched in ECE system, and it is understood in many ways. Firstly, economically, the term 'care' is described as a kind of work supplied in early years provisions. It is known as a commodity (Moss, 2018). It closely aligns with 'childcare work' in practice. The goal of childcare work is to liberate women's labour, creating opportunities for them to participate in economic development in societies. Childcare work is to provide a warm and comfortable 'shelter' for children, meeting their physical needs and ensuring their safety. Because of attachment pedagogy, childcare is known as a gendered work and female-dominated. The worker is required to innately equip maternal instincts and have capabilities to do domestic practice. Instead, knowledge or competencies in terms of ECE are less required. As such, the image of the childcare worker is shaped as a substitute mother, and early childhood provisions here are seen as an extension of parenting (Moss, 2006). The government in many countries admits this type of service, separating care from educational work in ECE system (Miller et al., 2012). However, such a split approach is highly problematic. It inevitably creates a state of the superiority of 'education' part and the inferiority of 'childcare' part and childcare workers are known as those who gets low levels of education and poor pay (Moss, 2018), Furthermore, the childcare worker's job becomes demanding and challenging. Urban (2008) took England as an example to claim that the English government induces the discourse of 'quality' and 'professionalism' to manage the whole early years workforce, which requires each EC practitioner, including childcare workers, not only to provide care, but to perform more 'outcomes' that the state prefers to see. Osgood (2004) claimed that such management makes the market of early childhood service more competitive and produces a crisis of recruitment and retention in childcare sector. The image of 'care' iteratively links with un/low-paid work done by low level of academically qualified working-class women. As a result, the understanding of care as a commodity accelerates the institutional division between care and education. As such, the pedagogical values of care are overlooked, and the status of 'care', here linking with low economic reward and low level of educational degree, is underestimated.

Secondly, the notion of 'care' can be explained as a form of control. On the one hand, this explanation comes from a child-centred pedagogy in ECE. A child-centred pedagogy is based upon the psychology of child development and the theories of stages (Moss, 2018). It regulates the child development trajectory and foresees the ideal performance of the child at each stage. As such, the work of EC practitioners is to recognise with the child who is on track and the child who is not, borrowing the developmentally psychological expert's 'eyes'. At the process of selection, Adriany and Warin (2014) claimed that care as a form of control has to do with 'pathology'. EC practitioners take advantage of caring to pick up the child who does not display the 'correct' outcomes. As a result, care becomes a 'toolkit' of surveillance of normalization or an 'instrument' of regulating children's development. On the other hand, the caring-control creates tension for children to fulfil their citizenship rights of participation. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) clarifies children's two key rights of protection as well as participation. The rights of protection imply children are vulnerable and need to be well-protected by adults; the rights of participation justify children are independent and capable to participate in the processes of social construction. Even though the two rights of children have counterparts, society ideally takes responsibility to provide well-balanced resources for children exercising the two rights in their life. However, Invernizzi and Williams (2007) observed contemporary English society puts more emphasis on the part of the rights to protection. The discourse of caring-control are employed to maintain or even strengthen children's dependency, and children's rights of participation are restrained in consequence.

Thirdly, the term 'care' is understood as a relational ethic, and it is well-known to use the language of the 'ethic of care'. The concept of the ethic of care emerges in feminist ethical debates and becomes increasingly prevalent in early years services (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, Fielding & Moss, 2011; Osgood, 2004; 2006b; Warin, 2014). Taking advantage of the ethic of care is to seek a counter-discourse against dominant masculinised demands, such as 'technical rationality' 'quality', and 'performativity' produced by neoliberal governance (Osgood, 2004). The ethic of care provides theoretical support to emphasize the

emotional nature of early years work, and it is the key criterion with regards to what it is meant to be an EC professional (Osgood, 2006b). The ethic of care brings several keywords in early years services, such as 'interdependence', 'relationality', 'contextuality', and 'responsibility to the other', and caring practitioners are assumed as those who can listen to others, have respect for difference, organise radical dialogue and deliberation (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Furthermore, the ethic of care builds a bridge, connecting care with education. Moss (2018) suggested that education is the central purpose of all early years' services, while the ethic of care shapes all relationships in education. There is an interwoven relationship between education and care. As followed, the term of 'educare' gains much attention in practice. 'Educare' expresses a combination between education and care (Haglund & Boström, 2022). It is a Nordic term that 'attributes an educational value to care', serves to 'describe a holistic and integrated set of educational and social purposes', and shapes 'the ethic of care as both the ends and the means of schooling' (Warin, 2014, p.102-103). Even though educare is non-existent in English, it is used to justify caring with its ethical stance a key component in ECE. Fielding and Moss (2011) put the ethic of care as one of the core ideas to foster children as democratic citizens. As Goldstein (1998) described, caring is 'more than gentle smiles and warm hugs' (p.244).

2.9 Democracy, care, and ECE in the Chinese context

In previous sections, I mapped out the link between the neoliberal zeitgeist and ECE, several side-effects of neoliberal governance towards EC practitioners and children as followed, and the necessity of calling for democracy and care in ECE. Considering select Chinese ECE as the case to study, it is necessary to provide a general understanding of the values of democracy and care in the Chinese context.

2.9.1 The image of democracy beyond the ECE system

In People's Republic of China, the State Council Information Office (SCIO) in 2021 released a political documentation of *'white paper'*, *China: Democracy That Works* (CDTW). As introduced in CDTW, China has a unique explanation on the term of democracy, which calls as 'whole-process people's democracy'

(WPPD). WPPD expresses a core idea that is to pursue a wide, extensive, sustained, and regular participation, covering a population of more than 1.4 billion from 56 ethnic groups of a vast country. According to WPPD, Chinese people is envisaged as 'the master' of the country, and their voices in related to every aspect of China's political and social life are ensured to be heard. In other words, Chinese people can exercise their right of participation, engage in the process of self-governance, and cooperatively manage their own affairs. As shown in CDTW, a mind of democracy has rooted in people's everyday life. Chinese people show a great interest in democratic participation, and their requests can be expressed freely through many channels, such as the internet and the organisation, and answered effectively. A collection of evidence about expanding participation, owning to WPPD, is showed below.

> 'In early 2021, the NPC [National People's Congress] Standing Committee solicited public feedback on the draft law on food waste. The 15 community-level legislation liaison stations in Yiwu City, Zhejiang Province held face-to-face meetings in catering business at the grassroots to collect comments and advice from owners of local restaurants, convenience stores, and small hotels. Their proposals were adopted and turned into stipulations in the final version of the law.'
>
> (SCIO, PRC, 2021, p. 14)

Democratic participation also happens in communities and among young children. For example, a children's council has been built in a community in Dongcheng District, Beijing, China. The council aims to create a platform for young children to participate in citizen life. Young children express their requests on their community life, and their voices are responded to by community workers. More details see https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_16829845.

WPPD foregrounds extensive and sustained participation. All citizens are entitled to cooperatively manage their own affairs. As for the part of political life, Chinese government has built diverse channels to collect citizens' ideas about policy making. Beyond so Chinese government also expects the value of WPPD is able to embrace citizens' life, seeking solutions with regards to shared social

issues by participatory approaches. As such, WPPD has to do with the term of democracy in radical education (Fielding & Moss, 2011). This is because both of them see democracy as a way of life. Finally, WPPD promotes the construction of child friendly communities in China. An increasing number of children gain access to participate in the processes of decision-making that affect themselves, and their needs can receive responses from community workers and policy makers.

2.9.2 Democratic landscape of Chinese ECE system

WPPD has to do with 'everyday democracy' (Fielding & Moss, 2011), which broadens aspects of participation from political life to all aspects of daily life of individuals and foregrounds interdependence among members of the society. The ideas of WPPD also affects Chinese ECE system. Specifically, early years settings provide resources for children to exercise the rights of participation, while building collaborative relationships with colleagues and parents has become EC practitioner's daily practice.

In Chinese ECE system, the overarching sign of democratisation is to motivate children's participation. The necessity of respecting the rights of the child to participate has been elucidated in 1989 United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC). UNCRC that deeply affects Chinese political decisions on ECE took effect in China in 1992. *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial Basis)* (GKE), published by Ministry of Education (MoE), People Republic of China (PRC) in 2001, is the key political documentation in Chinese ECE. GKE stated that respecting children's rights of participation and non-participation is one of principles in early years settings. For example, GKE presented that 'children are required to participate in evaluation of early childhood curriculum with policymakers, EC practitioners, and parents' (MoE, PRC, 2001). Furthermore, to better comply with UNCRC, the Chinese government aims to create child-inclusive environment. For example, the documentation of *outlines of Chinese Early Childhood development (2021-2030)* articulated the aim of 'building child-friendly cities and communities' (National Bureau of Statistics, PRC, 2021). Lu and Cheng (2022) argued that child-friendly ideas necessarily permeate in Chinese early years settings, and

early childhood curriculum has a role to play in supporting children's participation. Many studies advocate children's participation in Chinese early years settings by taking account of Riggio Emilian curriculum values (e.g., Duan & Deng, 2023; Jia & Liao, 2015; Xie & Chen, 2019; Yu, 2023; Zhang & Ren, 2021). Likewise, to motivate children's participation, Mosaic approach gains popularity in Chinese ECE. Many studies justify Mosaic approach on the basis that it foregrounds children's subjectivities, and then promotes their participation in making decisions that affect themselves (e.g., Bao, 2015; Chen & Li, 2015; Qin et al., 2023). In practice, EC practitioners employ Mosaic approach to involve children's voices in early childhood curriculum and classroom environmental design (Bai et al., 2022; Wang, et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2024). However, Chinese ECE still exerts restraints on children's participation. Tang and Jiang (2022) pointed out children's daily routines in early years settings are fully scheduled so that they have limited time to participate in the process of curriculum evaluation. Besides, Liu and Lin (2024) argued that EC practitioners' biases on the child as the one who is incompetent and dependent, also constrain children's participation. Such biases promote the phenomenon of performativity in Chinese early years settings. Xie and Chen (2019) claimed that children are able to participate when EC practitioners take up-to-down inspection. As such, children's participation is tokenized as an indicator of externally standardised assessment, their voices are rather easily undermined.

Another sign of democratisation in Chinese early years settings is to build collaborative relationships and alliances with colleagues and parents by EC practitioners. Interaction and communication are a part of professional practice for EC practitioners. MoE of PRC published the documentation of 2012 *kindergarten teacher's professional standards (Trial Basis)* (KTPS), which politically articulates EC practitioner's professional identities. The article 13 of KTPS clarifies professional requirements on EC practitioner's collaboration with their colleagues. Such requirements are to '[…] collaborate and communicate with colleagues, exchange knowledge and resources, and grow as a team' (MoE, PRC, 2012). In Chinese literature, EC practitioners collaborate with their colleagues in many ways. For example, collaboration is used to promote professional learning of EC practitioners (Liu, 2019; Miu, 2022; Zhao & Tian,

2024; Zhang, 2016). Li and Wang (2016) stated that collaboration between the EC practitioner and primary teacher also positively affects children's transition from early years settings to primary school. Furthermore, the number of EC practitioners provides precondition on collaboration in class. According to *Kindergarten Work Regulations* (KWR; MoE, PRC, 2016), early years provisions are required to allocate at least two EC practitioners in a classroom. In practice, there are normally three EC practitioners and 45 children in a classroom (Li & Liu, 2018; Qin, 2016; Zhang, 2018). However, previous studies also present constraints of promoting collaborative relationship between EC practitioners. For example, Li and Liu (2018) argued low EC practitioner-child ratio in Chinese classroom, to some degree, manually separate EC practitioners to ensure each child under supervision, which lessens their communication and further constrains their collaboration. Yang (2020) stated that the main goal of collaboration between EC practitioners in class is to carry out the jobs of children's learning and class management but less to share educational resources with each other.

Besides, EC practitioners are also required to form collaborative relationships with parents. For example, KWR (MoE, PRC, 2016) foregrounds the importance of connecting with parents. According to this documentation, early years settings are required to not only proactively build relationships with parents and provide parenting education programme, but also to guarantee parent's participation by establishing communication system, such as family committee and regular parental meetings. The idea of parental involvement has permeated in Chinese early years settings. EC practitioners seek to collaborate with parents in many aspects, such as curriculum design (Lu, 2023; Zhang, 2023), child's play (Hu, 2024), and environmental creation (Song, 2024). Furthermore, Chinese early years settings also provide spaces and resources for parent-child interactions and organises free seminars of parental education regularly (Xu, 2024). Strengthening the linkage with parents is not merely via face-to-face interactions, but also to take advantage of social media. For example, EC practitioners use 'Wechat' apps to collect parent's ideas (Chen, 2023) and creates blogs to disseminate parenting knowledge (Chen, 2022; Huang, 2024). Chinese early years settings become a public platform in which parents have

room to participate in educational work with EC practitioners, accept parenting knowledge, and interact with their children associated by EC practitioners.

2.9.3 'Care' and its three forms in Chinese ECE

The term of 'care' can be known from its three forms in Chinese early years settings. Firstly, 'care' is explained as childcare work. *Kindergarten Work Regulations* (KWR) articulates the overarching regulation of early years provision is to 'follow the principle of combination between childcare work and education' (MoE, PRC, 2016). This principle has twofold meanings. One is that early years settings provide both childcare service and education for children, and childcare work requires to ensure they are able to grow up in a healthy and safety environment. *The guideline of evaluation on quality of childcare work and education in early years provision* further lists three articles to deconstruct childcare work in Chinese early years settings, involving 'health care', 'living care', and 'safety protection' (MoE, PRC, 2022). Another one is that childcare work involves educational part. KWR clarifies childcare workers are required to 'cooperatively work with teachers in a class to plan instructional activities' (MoE, PRC, 2016). Huang and Tao (2023) made a case study with one childcare worker in a Chinese private-run early years setting with regards to a childcare worker's teaching roles. They found that the childcare worker had a role to play in teaching children how to care and love others.

Secondly, the word 'care' can be known as a practice of caress. Tomkins (2020) stated that 'care' is rooted in the human's natural impulse to caress someone who emits signals of distress. In Chinese context, the practice of caress is associated with children's emotions. For example, according to KWR articulates that Chinese EC practitioners are required to 'support children sustain in healthy and positive emotions' (MoE, PRC, 2016). Similarly, the documentation of *kindergarten teacher's professional standards (Trial Basis)* also articulates EC practitioners need to 'actively create conditions for young children to have a happy kindergarten life' (MoE, PRC, 2012a).

Thirdly, 'care' is seen as a relation ethic. In Chinese early childhood curriculum, care regards as one of goals for children to learn how to socially interact with

others. According to the documentation of *the guidelines of Learning and development for children aged 3-6* (MoE, PRC, 2012b), children are expected to interact with parents, peers, EC practitioners, and people surrounding them with attitudes of respect, inclusion, and empathy and to provide help for others as much as they can. The ethic of care is also considered as a key principle of EC practitioner-child interaction. For example, *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial Basis)* articulates that

> '[EC practitioners] engage with young children in a respectful, accepting, and caring manner… [,] listen to them patiently and make an effort to comprehend their thoughts and feelings… [,] sensitively perceive their needs, and respond appropriately and swiftly.'
>
> (MoE, PRC, 2001)

According to Chinese academic literature, Chinese EC practitioners also make efforts to provide opportunities to promote children's learning care. For example, Zheng (2020) found that EC practitioners create opportunities for mixed-aged children's interactions. Specifically, the older ones are expected to know their caring responsibilities to the younger ones, while the younger ones learn caring from their experiences about being cared for by the older ones. Li and Yan (2023) suggested that caring atmosphere created by early years settings is a necessary resource for children to learn the ethic of care. Besides, the conception of the ethic of care has to do with Confucian *Ren (仁)*. Confucian *Ren* works as the key cultural concern in Chinese early childhood curriculum (Ho, 2006). Before I discuss the overlaps, I will firstly and briefly explain what Confucian *Ren* is. *Ren* can be understood as a collection of values of sociological philosophy (Han, 2016). Historically, Confucian *Ren* was hatched by Confucius in a chaotic era of China. To rebuild social orders in that era, Confucian *Ren* provides a series of moral principles on power exercise and social interaction (Zhu, 2020). Confucian *Ren* is both self-oriented and other-oriented. Confucian *Ren* requires the one to better seek the self in morality, and love and care are the main moral subjects (Liu, 2020). The notions of love and care in Confucian *Ren* focus on inclusion of others. For example, one key value

of Confucian *Ren* is '*Ji Suo Bu Yu, Wu Shi Yu Ren*' (己所不欲，勿施于人; Qian, 2016, p 106-107). It means never force something on someone you would not accept in yourself. Such value expresses a relational ethic, giving emphasis to empathetic emotions rather than self-centredness (Shi, 2018). Confucian *Ren* is not merely explained as a moral ideal, more importantly, it is known as a form of moral practice (Jiang, 2019). The one with Confucian *Ren* is expected to positively provide caring and loving for 'others'. It is worth noting that the word of 'others' does not mean human beings in abstract but in tangible and touchable; even though Confucian *Ren* derives from family ties, the word of 'others' extends to strangers (Shi, 2018). As a result, Confucian *Ren* focuses on self-development on moral affections, while the one with Confucian *Ren* takes moral responsibilities to practise love and care for others.

There are several overlaps between the ethic of care and Confucian *Ren.* For example, comparing to Nel Noddings's theories of the ethic of care (2010), Tan (2019) concluded that, firstly, both Confucian *Ren* and the ethic of care aim to mitigate others distress and satisfy others needs. Secondly, the two philosophies refuse to conduct abstract moral principles. Instead, Confucian *Ren* and the ethic of care foregrounds the contextuality and relationality of moral practice, meaning that different situations hatch different ways of caring. Thirdly, Confucian *Ren* and the ethic of care focus on emotionality. As such, empathy has a key role to play in understanding others distress. It works as a trigger of putting yourself into others shoes. Last but not least, Confucian *Ren* and the ethic of care are moral practice, and carrying out *Ren* or caring for others will bring about joy. However, the Confucian *Ren* is different from Noddings's ethic of care in some aspects. Su (2007) stated that Confucian *Ren* grows following one's self-development on recognition of love and care, but the ethic of care is rooted in relationships. The ethic of care focuses issues on interdependence which calls for moral responsibilities of both sides. Another difference is about gender issue. Su claimed that Confucian *Ren* and the ethic of care are products of its time. Confucian *Ren* served to sustain hierarchical control in the traditionally patriarchal society of ancient China, in which, females had very low social status so that they were excluded to receive education of

Confucian *Ren*. Noddings's ethic of care grows in a history of personal rights and freedom in America. Such ethic focuses on gender equality, and both female and male are capable of caring for others.

2.10 Summary

This chapter reviewed two contested discourses that shape the image of ECE. The one is neoliberalism. Neoliberalism creates a story of quality and high returns. In this story, two core values of economisation and marketisation depict early childhood practice as a 'technical practice'. There emerges a series of economic terms, such as 'human technologies', 'homo economicus', and 'datafication' in ECE. The images of the child and the EC practitioners are under attack. Specifically, the child is seen as the 'future hope', 'developmental child', 'empty vessel' or 'data child'. He or she is forced to accept predetermined knowledge and take calculation and rigorous evaluation about learning outcomes. The image of the EC practitioner is shaped as 'technician'. Neoliberal governance induces a mechanism of accountability, which restrains his or her critical thinking about pedagogies and turns to supervise him or her to perform top-to-down curriculum that the state regulates. The term of professionalism is used as a way of control to build a well-qualified early year workforce that the state is looking forward to. Neoliberalism also affects what it is meant to be human being and relationships. Some studies (e.g., Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Moss 2018) borrow Michael Foucault's theory of 'governmentality' to justify the human being shaped by neoliberalism becomes independent, self-interested, and calculative, and there emerges a fear of 'crisis of care' to say human being lacks interconnection and interdependence. Neoliberalism is just 'one choice' for political transformation, although it has become a dominant place in ECE. Recently, a variety of resistance movements towards neoliberalism has emerged across the globe. Following the critiques of devastating effects brought by neoliberalism, there are a bunch of spotlights on the discourse of politics and ethics, and the values of participatory democracy and the ethic of care gain more attention in ECE in recent academic areas. The value of participatory democracy shapes both the child and the EC practitioners as citizens who innately have the fundamental right of participation. Besides, participatory democracy also shapes early childhood settings as a public forum

in which other stakeholders, such as parents and policy makers, are able to engage in the process of ECE transformation. The ethic of care sheds light on a caring relationship between the child and the EC practitioner, and it works as both a means and aim of ECE. In Chinese ECE system, the values of participatory democracy and the ethic of care, more or less, can be found in many aspects, such as policies, traditional culture, early childhood curriculum and practices.

What next? Targeting research gaps

This study will fill research gaps in academic literature. Firstly, many recent academic studies have examined the necessity of participatory democracy in shaping the professional image of EC practitioners (e.g., Moss, 2018; Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021), but there are few studies, investigating how participatory democracy is conducted by EC practitioners. Likewise, locally, according to Chinese literature, many studies have emphasis on the importance of democratic practices conducted by EC practitioners, such as respecting children's rights of participation (e.g., Bai et al., 2022; Wang, et al., 2022) as well as forming collaborative relationships with colleagues and parents (e.g., Li & Liu, 2018; Lu, 2023; Yang, 2020; Zhang, 2023). However, few studies detail how Chinese EC practitioners manage the diverse practices of participation in collective decision-making in class. To fill this gap, this study will provide empirical evidence on collective decision mechanism based upon Chinese EC practitioners' reflections on the cases, including ways of participating in collective decision-making processes and elements that affect the extent of participation in ECE. Secondly, the significance of ECE as a caring profession has been well discussed in current studies (e.g., Moss, 2017; Osgood and Sterling, 2020; Page, 2018). However, few of the studies provided discussions in line with EC practitioner's and children's interpretations on care ethics and caring experiences (e.g., Eidsvåg, 2022; Vaughn, 2024; McCormick, 2018). As a result, this study will aim to prolong such discussion by exploring EC practitioners' reflections on their commitments to caring and children's caring performance. Finally, the relationship of the ethic of care and education needs to further research. This study will fill the gap by seeking EC practitioners' reflections on the case of caring both as aim and means of education.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

3.1 Introduction

Previously, I have discovered that the topics of collective decision mechanism and caring in ECE are necessarily further researched. In this chapter, I will introduce relevant theoretical frameworks. Specifically, I employ theories of radical education (TRE) proposed by Fielding and Moss (2011) and the ethic of care (Noddings, 2005; 2006; 2010; 2013) to conceptualise collective decision mechanism and caring in ECE. For example, following TRE I take advantage of participatory democracy to outline collective decision mechanism. Besides, Noddings's theories of the ethic of care are used to justify caring. Care in my study is seen as a relational practice. To build caring relations with others follows one's commitments rather than universal moralities. Engrossment and motivational displacement are key internal activities, when someone makes efforts to care for others. I also recognise that the ethic of care to justify caring is at the central place in teaching. To further make sense of collective decision mechanism and caring in my study, I go back to Fielding and Moss's TRE, provide several images in ECE, and make effort to form research assumptions. Finally, I map out and then clarify the connections between conceptions I take so as to visualise my study's theoretical frameworks.

3.2 Connecting democracy and care

Democracy and care emerge from different intellectual traditions and are often discussed separately—within the realms of political theory and ethical philosophy, respectively. Democracy, associated with formal structures and public life, emphasises individual rights, equality, and participation in collective decision-making. In contrast, care, grounded in personal commitments and behaviour, highlights relationality, emotionality, and moral responsibility within interpersonal contexts (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). These differences may position democracy and care as distinct or even incompatible concepts. However, they can, in fact, co-exist and mutually reinforce one another. Drawing on Tronto's (2013, 2015) scholarship, this study argues that caring practices should be recognised as democratic ends. Care supports democratic life by fostering inclusion and reciprocity, and by making people's actual needs visible

within public deliberation. At the same time, democratic frameworks help ensure that caring responsibilities are more fairly distributed across society, rather than being unequally assigned based on gender, class, or other hierarchies. From this perspective, democracy and care are not separate but interconnected, each enhancing the other's capacity to respond to human interdependence.

3.3 Considering Chinese political and sociocultural ideologies

As introduced previously, Chinese ECE is greatly influenced by the ideologies of Chinese Communism and Confucianism. These ideologies play a significant role in shaping the theorisation of democracy and care in this study. Democracy is conceptualised through the ideological framework of Chinese Communism, which emphasises the role of deliberation in democratic practices (State Council, PRC, 2021). While such deliberation is often promoted at the national level, its interpretation in daily life is closely tied to cultural practices. Informed by Confucian legacies, deliberation can be understood as a form of 'everyday talk' (He, 2023), referring to a culturally embedded mode of persuasion through dialogue and interpersonal exchange. This cultural perspective suggests that decision-making is not solely a formal or institutional process but rather a relational practice grounded in ongoing communication, mutual understanding, and consensus-building among participants. In ECE contexts, these dual perspectives—political and cultural—imply that decision-making emerges through continuous interaction and collaboration among EC practitioners, children, and families, and is guided by the collective aim of serving the common good.

Furthermore, Chinese Communist ideology also emphasises the importance of addressing people's needs as central to democratic processes. As Xi (2020) notes, continuously responding to the needs of the people constitutes the fundamental orientation of Chinese democracy. This political principle suggests that decisions are made to address the needs of members within collective groups. In ECE settings, this implies that decision-making is based on the needs and voices of EC practitioners, children, and families, and reflects a shared commitment to collective well-being.

As discussed in Chapter 2, care is socially and culturally constructed, with different interpretations across ideological frameworks. Here, I aim to (re)claim that this study recognises and focuses on care as a form of feminist ethics. While the term care originates from Western culture and may be difficult to translate directly into the Chinese context, care is nonetheless closely related to Chinese philosophy, particularly Confucianism. Although linguistically distinct, Chinese philosophy offers its own concepts that express a moral orientation similar to that found in Care Ethics. Li (2022) argues that the concept of Care Ethics shares important features with Confucian Ren. Drawing on Tan's (2019) study, the similarities between Ren and Care Ethics include contextual moral obligation, a relational view of the self, and emotional responsiveness. Together, these elements shape the image of "the one caring" — a person who is emotionally attuned to others' distress and committed to addressing their needs through interaction in real-life contexts.

There are key differences between Care Ethics and Confucian Ren. First, these two traditions reflect different gendered origins. Confucian Ren, as Li (2015) notes, emerges from a historically patriarchal context, in which moral cultivation is often gendered and hierarchical. In contrast, Care Ethics develops from Western feminist thought, positioning care as rooted in women's moral experience. This suggests that while Confucian Ren has traditionally excluded female perspectives, Care Ethics centers them. This distinction is particularly relevant in the Chinese ECE context, where early years settings are predominantly female-dominated, and the everyday practice of caring is often carried out by women.

Second, the two traditions differ in how they view caring responsibilities. Li (2022) argues that Confucian Ren promotes a graded view of care—that is, care is distributed based on the closeness and hierarchy of social roles. For example, parents are expected to care for children, but this duty may not extend reciprocally to children toward parents or to strangers. In contrast, Care Ethics embraces a more inclusive and reciprocal approach, where care is enacted through mutual responsiveness, not just prescribed roles. This distinction allows

us to move beyond hierarchical structures and recognise that both adults and children can be caring agents.

Given these differences, this study adopts Western care ethics to conceptualise caring, as it offers a more flexible, egalitarian, and relational lens. It better captures the mutual, context-sensitive, and dynamic nature of caring interactions.

3.4 Conceptualising collective decision mechanism

I employ TRE (Fielding & Moss, 2011) to conceptualise collective decision mechanism in my study. Fielding and Moss stressed that radical education gives emphasis to participatory democracy in ECE. Participatory democracy here is seen as a practice of widespread participation. The meaning of widespread participation is twofold. One the one hand, participation embraces daily practice in early years settings. Decisions are made not merely relating to political matters, but also to social and even all aspects that affect decision makers. On the other hand, all members related to ECE are empowered to make decisions. In this case, decision-making is not as the privilege that the governors in ECE enjoy, but as the processes that all stakeholders are capable to participate in. As Fielding and Moss said, 'schools should be democratically managed in a system of governance marked by decentralisation and widespread participation, by children and adults, teachers and parents[.]' (ibid., p.123). As such, collective decision mechanism in my study is understood as the process in which both children and adults are empowered to collectively participate in decisions affecting themselves in early years settings.

3.5 Conceptualising caring

Noddings's the ethic of care provides me with a theoretical lens to understand caring in many aspects. Primarily, caring is an ethical project. Noddings (2010) stated that human beings are naturally seen as moral subjects, born and raised in relations, and inherently connect with each other by caring. Secondly, caring has to do with needs. Noddings (2006) stated that the ethic of care is needs-based, and caring is the process in which 'the one caring' identifies and meets needs from 'the being cared for' (Noddings, 2006). As carers may not meet needs from 'the being cared for' well, they still give positive responses and try to support

(Noddings, 2010). To deepen the understanding of care, Noddings (2006) clarified the relationship between want and care. A want may become a need when it persists over time, relates to a meaningful or non-harmful goal, can be met by others.

Thirdly, caring exists in various groups. Noddings (2013) stated that caring happens in interactions with others that can be touched or at distance as well as non-human beings, such as plants and animals. Finally, caring is both an aim and means in education. Noddings (2005) argued that education necessarily is organised by themes of care rather than traditional disciplines. Fielding and Moss (2011) followed Noddings's ideas and further claim that the main aim of education 'should be to produce people who are not only competent, but caring, loving and lovable' (p.63). Caring is also a means of education. Noddings (2006) foregrounds caring as an enactment of meeting needs by listening and response, and then claimed that negotiating inferred needs of teachers and expressed needs from student is at the centre of addressing educational problems. To this point, caring is instrumentalised as a decision mechanism on needs with regards to teaching and learning. Consequently, in my study, I conceptualise caring an ethical process in which children and adults related to ECE make connections with others by meeting needs; caring should widely exist in many forms of connections; caring is a teaching theme or subject of ECE; caring is a decision mechanism of negotiating and balancing needs in ECE.

Beyond conceptual descriptions on caring, Noddings's the ethic of care also implies on my study by its three characteristics. For example, I know EC practitioner's understanding of caring from their commitments to caring. Depending upon the critiques of normative construction of caring in Kantian virtue ethics, Noddings (2010; 2013) claimed that commitment guides caring enactment to others. She (2013) further mentioned two sources of the commitment to caring. One is from the natural impulse to care 'the one caring', in other words, the situation of 'I must care'. Another one is from the best memories of caring for or being cared for by others. Such two sources provide me with instrumental outlines to know EC practitioner's interpretation on caring

in my study. Moreover, the commitment to caring is vulnerable. Noddings (ibid.) stressed that the dynamic that motivates 'the one caring' to comply with his or her commitments to caring is easily enhanced or diminished by responses from 'the being cared for'. My study also considers such a dynamic as another key source to know EC practitioner's understanding of caring, consequently. Besides, 'the one caring' form relations by engrossment and motivational displacement. Noddings (2010) stated that engrossment is a form of receptive attention that ensures 'the one caring' to identify needs from 'the being cared for'. She (2013) further stressed that 'the one caring' engrosses without mindsets on 'the being cared for'. As the carer engrosses, motivational displacement follows. Motivational displacement is a process of energy shifting. '[T]he motive energy of the carer flows toward the needs of the cared-for' (Noddings, 2010, p.31). In my study, I use engrossment and motivational displacement to shape EC practitioner's internal activities when they identify others' needs.

3.6 Research assumptions: images of early year setting, the child, the EC practitioner, and the parent

To better know about my two research objectives of collective decision mechanism and caring, I go back to Fielding and Moss's (2011) TRE to provide images of early years setting as democratic community, the child as the 'rich' child, the EC practitioner as the 'rich' educator, and the parent as the participant of ECE. These images make efforts to form research assumptions.

Primarily, TRE shapes the image of early years setting as democratic community. Feilding and Moss characterised democratic community as person-centred. It means that functional arrangements in an institution serve persons' purposes. The manual boundaries set regulated system or specific tasks are broken. As the authors said, all members 'act together in mutuality as persons, not as role occupants' (ibid., p.51). As such, hierarchical forms of engagement are lessened, while widespread participation revives. Furthermore, secondly, TRE shape the image of the child as the 'rich' child. Radical education recognises the child both talented and actively engaged, both independent and interdependent, and both rational and emotional. Explicitly, the 'rich' child is '[…]

an individual, whose individuality and autonomy depend on interdependence, and who needs and wants connections with other children and adults' (Children in Europe, cited in Fielding & Moss, 2011, p.52-53).

Thirdly, TRE provides the image of EC practitioners as 'rich' educators. The 'rich' educator is 'enormous potential, an active co-constructing learner, a reflective practitioner… a critical thinker, a researcher and experimenter, and… a democratic professional' (ibid., p.53). As for the role of democratic professional, Fielding and Moss follow Oberhuemer's claims on 'democratic professionalism' (2005) to point out that 'rich' educators are required to form participatory relationships and alliances with colleagues and other stakeholders. Last but not least, parents are one of the key participants in ECE. TRE clarified parents are members of participation with children and EC practitioners, they 'participate in the co-construction of person-centred learning… and the projects of the school as collaborative workshop' (ibid., 132). Consequently, referring to the implications of TRE, I assume children, EC practitioners, and parents have equal opportunities, are capable of, and are willing to participate in collective decisions which affect their communal life; children and EC practitioners are live in relations, and they enable to positively make relations with others in early years settings.

3.7 Mapping out theoretical frameworks

My study involves two theoretical frameworks conducted to investigate collective decision mechanism and caring in ECE. As for the theoretical framework of collective decision mechanism (see Figure 3.1), I aim to investigate EC practitioner's understanding of collective decision mechanism in early years settings. According to TRE (Fielding & Moss, 2011), I focus on the matters, collectively decided, that affect participants themselves in communal life. Furthermore, TRE also recognises widespread participation happens in early years settings and regards children, EC practitioners, and parents as key participants in collective decisions. This enables me to employ three types of participatory relationships in collective decisions. They are relationships of EC practitioners/children, EC practitioners/colleagues, and EC practitioners/parents. In these relationships, I assume EC practitioners as 'rich'

educators who positively form relationships with children and parents and welcome them to participate in the processes of decision-making on class matters. Besides, according to Noddings's the ethic of care, I assume, during the processes of forming relationships, EC practitioner conducts internal activities, such as engrossment and motivational displacement, to receive others, feel others, and identify others' needs in collective decisions. When it comes to the theoretical framework of caring (see Figure 3.2), on the one hand, I aim to investigate EC practitioner's understanding of caring and the linkage between the ethic of care and education. According to Noddings's (2005; 2006; 2010; 2013) ethic of care, I employ the term of commitment to investigate EC practitioner's understanding of caring. In this case, I use the terms of natural impulse to care, best memories of caring for or being cared for by others, and dynamic of caring to instrumentally outline the commitment of caring. To seek EC practitioner's understanding of the linkage between the ethic of care and education, I view caring as both an aim and means of education. To the former, care is considered as a teaching subject in early years settings. To the latter, caring regrades as a practice of identifying needs by engrossment and motivational displacement and as a decision mechanism on balancing needs. The decision mechanism is about balancing inferred needs of EC practitioners and learning needs from children in class. One the other hand, I also aim to research children's caring. I assume children are 'rich' children who live in relations and proactively form networks with others. I also employ non-human life to know their caring because caring exists not only in human relations but also non-human connections.
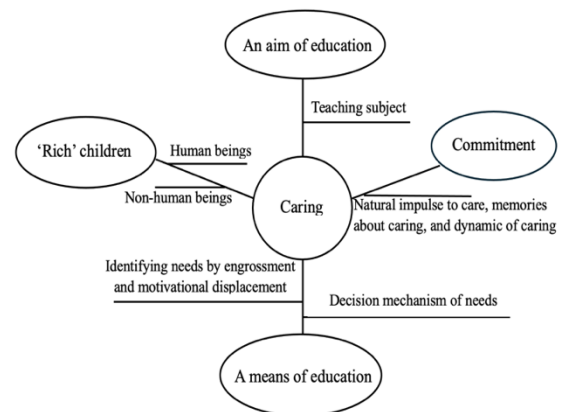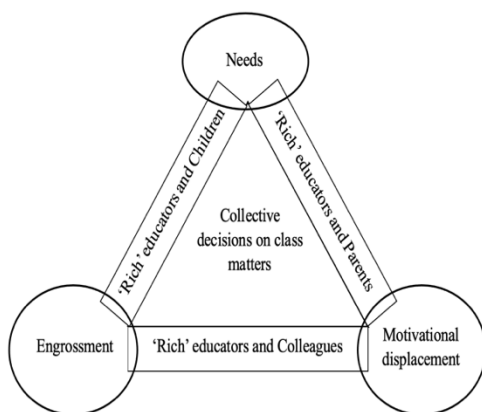
Figure 3-2 Theoretical framework of collective decision mechanism

Figure 3-1 Theoretical framework of caring

Chapter 4: Research method

4.1 Introduction

Previously, two research topics of collective decision mechanism and caring have been identified, and followed theoretical frameworks have been also constructed in accordance with theories of radical education (Feilding & Moss, 2011) and the ethic of care (Noddings, 2005; 2006; 2010; 2013). Considering conceptual works that I have made and my personal research interests on people's experiences, I set four main research questions, see below.

1) How are collective decisions between EC practitioners and colleagues/children/parents made in the classroom?
    - What needs do EC practitioners consider, as they make collective decisions in the classroom with colleagues/children/parents?
2) What commitments to caring do EC practitioners have? What are the factors affecting their commitments to caring?
3) How do EC practitioners align the ethic of care with education?
    - In what ways do EC practitioners educate care?
    - How do EC practitioners address learning needs from children in class?
4) How do children care for their peers, adults, and non-human beings?

In the next sections, I will introduce my research design. My research design is formed by the principles of qualitative research. I will firstly clarify my philosophical stances and research approaches. I will then introduce the strategies of collecting data, sampling, and recruitment, the procedure of data collection and data analysis, and ethical considerations. I will finally present my reflections on the whole research design I set.

4.2 Methodological stance: qualitative research

Qualitative research is regarded as one major branch of research strategies in social sciences. A naturalistic and contextual concern serves as the foundation for qualitative studies (Daher et al., 2017). Informed by Silverman (2021), qualitative research aims at finding out about people's experiences and helps us in illuminating human values. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) also claimed that

qualitative researchers focus on understanding 'how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences' (p.6). Philosophical assumptions, particularly regarding ontology and epistemology, play a significant role in shaping the conduct of qualitative research. This is because they are 'deeply ingrained views about the types of problems that we need to study, what research questions to ask, or how we go about gathering data' (Creswell & Poth, 2024, p.18).

This study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell and Poth, 2024; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Ontologically, reality is understood as subjectively experienced and co-constructed through social processes, shaped by cultural, historical, and relational contexts (Weber, 2004). Epistemologically, knowledge is seen as relational and constructed through interaction. It does not emerge from objective observation but is developed through dialogue and interpretation between the researcher and participants (Leavy, 2014). As Bryman (2012) outlines, knowledge production involves three layers of interpretation: first, participants make sense of their own experience; second, the researcher interprets those accounts; and third, these interpretations are situated within broader conceptual and theoretical framework. Thus, both researcher and participants contribute to the construction of knowledge, and the interpretive process is inherently collaborative and dialogic.

As informed by Creswell and Poth (2024), the positionality of the researcher significantly affects the way of presenting qualitative research. In this study, I, as the researcher, lead the whole research design, and my personal beliefs, research interests, and research background inevitably affect the decisions on measurements of approaching my research objectives and the extent of involvement of the participant in my research design. For example, I aim at approaching my research objectives in a comprehensive way, which makes my sampling include the groups of EC practitioners and children. I also regard the EC practitioner participants as partners who are capable of contributing to my research design. Practically, according to my working experience in public early years settings, EC practitioners and children are capable of participating in social science research, and EC practitioners bring valuable experience to

social science research, particularly in studying the learning and development of children aged 3-6. In this study, many EC practitioner participants gave me useful and helpful feedback associated with their participation, which made my data collection more effective. They also provided suggestions based on reflections on their daily interactions with children in early years settings, which made me treat children participants more inclusively.

4.3 Narrative inquiry

This study utilised narrative inquiry to approach research objectives that I had set before. A narrative is 'a recounting of events, when this recounting is organised into a sequence… it makes up a story' (Rau & Coetzee, 2022, p. 701). Elliot (2005) outlined narrative by three key features including chronologicity, meaning making, and contextuality, and these features are interrelated. Narrative is different from narrative inquiry. Clandinin (2006) argued that narrative is as a way of knowing, whereas narrative inquiry is as a research methodology. The raise of narrative inquiry challenged the exclusive state of positivist paradigm in social sciences (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). Narrative inquiry aims at exploring individual's life. It is utilized not only to generate comprehensive understanding of individual's experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2024), but also to seek complex meaning that comes from individual's experiences in a certain context (Rau & Coetzee, 2022). Story is regarded as the key to exploring individual's life. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) defined story as 'a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful' (p.479). Similarly, Rau and Coetzee (2022) suggested that stories are one of the significant ways to make sense of and share individuals' experiences. To construct a story needs collaboration. Creswell and Poth (2024) pointed out that stories are co-constructed between the researcher and the participants during the processes of interaction or dialogue. Furthermore, stories are collected by multiple forms of data. They are produced through interviews (Bochner & Riggs, 2014) and observations (Creswell & Poth, 2024). For example, many narrative researchers utilized interviews to create stories in relation to EC practitioner's professional lives (e.g., Harwood et al., 2013; Kess & Einarsdóttir, 2024; Sisson et al., 2020; Taylor, 2018). Some narrative inquirers

employed observations to create stories about children's daily lives in early years settings (e.g., Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016; Niland, 2015; Puroila et al., 2012).

Visual materials, recently, have gained wide popularity in narrative inquiry. They include many different categories. Informed by prior scholars in the field of research methodologies (e.g., Creswell & Poth, 2024; Rose, 2022; Silverman, 2017), they can be photographs, digital images, artwork, video, textbook or advertisements. Visual materials can effectively facilitate narrative inquirers to obtain information. They provide possibilities to explore the domains to which textual-dominated methods are unable to get access (Mannay, 2016). Visual materials are frequently utilized to obtain children's insights. This is partly because visual materials are appealing and enjoyable for children. Thomson (2008) stated that children are interested in and like to work with visual materials. This is partly because visual materials facilitate children's better participation in research. Children may not easily engage in language-based enquiry because of their linguistic proficiency (Literat, 2013). They are unlikely to clearly express their ideas by direct speech (Freeman, 2007). However, visual materials regard effective tools that support children telling stories to narrative inquirers (Ortju et al., 2024). Tisdall et al. (2009) argued that the use of visual materials show inclusion for those children who do not respond well to textual or spoken methods. Furthermore, according to prior literature, narrative researchers employed multiple visual materials to investigate children's perceptions. For example, Xu (2020) employed self-made images to investigate children's ideas on gender. O'Leary and Moloney (2020) involved children on the autism spectrum in the processes of visual elicitation (photographs and artifacts) to approach the children's understanding of their educational journeys. Narrative inquirers also utilised drawing techniques to reach children's perspectives (e.g., Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Literat, 2013; Ortju et al., 2024; Riquelme-Arredondo et al., 2024; Vanner & Kimani, 2017; Water et al., 2020).

4.4 Interviews

Following the principles of narrative inquiry, I used interviews to collect data. Interviews refer to a family of enquiry approaches or techniques, and

researchers use it to understand individuals' beliefs, perspectives, opinions, lived experiences, and meaning making (Roulston & Halpin, 2022). Interview provides possibilities as researchers are unlikely to observe one's behaviour, feelings, or meaning making of the world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Compared to observing, interviewing is regarded as a 'short cut' (Robson, 1993, p. 229) in finding answers to research questions. Qualitative interviewing is different from interviewing in quantitative research. Bryman (2012) summarised several differences. First, qualitative interviewing is less structured but more general than that in quantitative research. Second, qualitative interviewers tend to pay more attention to interviewees' point of view and detailed answers than quantitative interviewers do. Finally, qualitative interviewing is more flexible. Interviewers are able to reschedule interviews such as asking new questions that come from interviewees' replies. Informed by Creswell (2017), interviews that are conducted to collect qualitative data have two forms. One is unstructured interviews. Unstructured interviews give a high flexibility and freedom to make conversation. Robson (1993) argued that, in unstructured interviews, interviewers begin with a general research area, and then make conversation with interviewees to develop it. Even though interviewees receive a free space to express their perspectives, it does not mean that unstructured interviews are casual, and the governing role of interviewers is underestimated (Cohen et al, 2017). The second form is semi-structured interviews. Compared to unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews need interviewers to make more detailed preparations in advance. Bryman (2012) claimed that interviewers need an interview guide (usually including a list of questions or fairly specific topics) to open conversations, but they still need to leave enough space for interviewees to reply. In conversations, asking questions relies on interviewees' responses. Bryman further argued that interviewers are able to not only freely modify the order and expression of questions in enquiry plan, but also can ask additional questions that follow up interviewees' replies. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are easily managed. Robson (1993) suggested that interviewers are able to pause and give explanations to those questions that interviewees find difficult to answer at once and to leave out the questions that are inappropriate with particular interviewees.

In this study, because specific research objectives have been formed, I selected semi-structured interviews to collect data. To conduct semi-structured interviews, I employed conversational activities (including one-to-one interviews, focus groups, and telephone interviews), image-based dialogue, and drawing techniques. Specifically, conversational activities were utilised to reach EC practitioner participants' perspectives of collective decision mechanism and caring. Image-based dialogue and drawing techniques were utilized to investigate child participants' perspectives of caring.

Conversational activities in this qualitative study included one-to-one interviews, focus groups, and telephone interviews. **One-to-one interview** defines as a two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for obtaining information in relation to research objectives (Cohen et al., 2017). It facilitates female participants engaging in conversation. Kruger et al. (2019) studied female participation in interviews associated with sensitive topics such as power relations. They compared females' replies that generated from one-to-one interviews and focus groups and found that one-to-one interview can better support female participants to express their personal thoughts on sensitive topics. In this study, EC practitioner participants are female (details about sample and demographic information will be introduced below). Some of them were reluctant to be set in focus groups because they recognised parts of interviewing questions that I set about collective decision mechanism were sensitive to them. They were unwilling to disclose or share relevant information with other participants so that I set them in one-to-one interview.

Focus group is my main technique to collect data from EC practitioner participants. Focus group is a type of interviewing that involves more than one interviewee (Bryman, 2012). It engages with a social constructivist procedure of data collection. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) argued that participants in focus group allow to interact or discuss with each other, which leads the data gathered from the interactive discussion socially constructed. Focus groups emphasise mitigating the role of the interviewer. For example, Cohen et al. (2017) suggested that the interviewer should make minimal guidance because the participants in focus group have similar knowledge backgrounds associated

with research topic(s). Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2014) argued that once the interviewer's authorities are decentred, the female interviewees in focus group will obtain a safe space to talk about their lives. In this study, my focus group normally consisted of three EC practitioner participants. Even though I prepared the same interview schedule that I used in one-to-one interview, I made efforts to mitigate my guidance as much as possible, to carefully follow the participants' interactive discussions, to flexibly arrange questions, and to decisively leave out the questions to which I had answers from their interactive discussions.

Telephone interview makes a complementary job to one-to-one interview and focus group. Telephone interview is a type of interview in which interviewers use telephone to make conversations with interviewees (Roulston & Halpin, 2022). Compared to face-to-face interviewing, telephone interviews are cheaper and more convenient to organise and gain a higher response rate (Cohen et al., 2017; Robson, 1993). In this study, I initially conducted one-to-one interviews or focus groups, and then took advantage of telephone interviews to make call-backs. The call-backs happened when I found EC practitioner participants' replies were unclear and when I needed EC practitioner participants to further their narratives to clarify their ideas. To conduct telephone interviews, I texted messages to make conversations with EC practitioner participants.

Following the principles of semi-structured interviews, I made interview protocols (see Appendix I) before conducting one-to-one interviews and focus groups with EC practitioner participants. The protocols have the same questions but different interviewing guidance. When I completed each interview, I was engaging in the process of transcriptions and data analysis. According to my ongoing data analysis, new questions were generated. Sequentially, I formed a new question sheet (see Appendix II), and then made an extra round of interviewing with EC practitioner participants. Furthermore, taking into consideration constraints brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, I used a mixed way to conduct one-to-one interviews and focus groups. I conducted face-to-face interviews with those participants who were not quarantined. I also employed online techniques such as Tencent meetings (a meeting software equivalent to Teams or Zoom) to conduct interviews with those participants who

were quarantined but available to participate in my interviews. Finally, one-to-one interviews and focus groups were taped after obtaining permission from EC practitioner participants. Informed by Creswell (2017), I also took notes in the interviews to prevent the case that my recording equipment failed.

4.5 Visual methods: image-based dialogue and drawing

According to advantages of visual materials in investigating children's insights, I employed image-based dialogue and drawing techniques to facilitate children to participate in my study. I aimed at using these methods to reach children's perspectives on their caring for peers, parents, and non-human beings. **Image-based dialogue** used in this study was adapted from Xu's (2020) method applied to investigate children's insights on gender issues. I created four caring scenes that normally happened in children's daily lives, and then selected relevant clip-art images (see Appendix III). These images appeared as visual materials to support children talking about their caring stories. The first image aims to create the scene that mother gets tired and exhausted (caring for the adult). The second image presents a child who is crying (caring for the peer). The third and fourth images created the scene that animals and plants need to be looked after (caring for non-human beings). I also made a protocol (see Appendix IV) that helped conduct imaged-based dialogue with children, and dialogues were audio-recorded if I had obtained permission.

Drawing is another method to obtain children's insights on caring. Drawing regards as a method for listening to young children's perspectives on their lives in early years settings (Clark, 2005; Clark et al., 2011). Conducting drawing technique follows up a participatory relationship formed between the researcher and the child participants. For example, Water et al. (2020) argued that the use of drawings is child-friendly, helping minimise potential power imbalances between researchers and young children. Einarsdottir et al. (2009) and Clark (2011) claimed that children easily convey their ideas based on their drawings, which makes it possible to co-construct knowledge or co-contribute to a new understanding of phenomenon in a given space to the researcher. The use of drawings can accelerate the process of data collection from children. Tisdall et al. (2009) pointed out that drawing is a task-based method which makes

children in the classroom complete drawing tasks simultaneously. As a result, using it to obtain data from children is quicker than using one-to-one interviews or observations. In this study, I utilised drawing to investigate child participants' perspectives on their caring for peers and parent, and followed drawing techniques which were adapted from the method of 'draw-and-tell' applied by Water's (2020) research team. The method of 'draw-and-tell' is that children are asked to draw about topics that are well outlined by the researcher. At completion of drawing, a semi-structured interview will be conducted that begins with the request for the child participants to talk about their drawings. Finally, the interviews will be audio-taped. When it comes to my drawing techniques, I borrowed the phrase of 'something is wrong' (Noddings, 2013, p.29) to outline the caring situations in drawing tasks. Noddings well discussed the phrase of 'something is wrong' by providing an example of a mother who was encountered with her crying infant. While the mother listened to her infant crying, she instantly felt 'something is wrong' about her infant, and then enacted caring to relieve the distress that her infant was suffering. In this case, the phrase of 'something is wrong' closely has to do with situations in which the caretaker was in distress. Implied by these theoretical works and considering my personal practical experiences in early years settings, I created three situations. One is about caring for the peer who is crying. The second one is caring for the peer who is unhappy. The third one is caring for the parent who is uncomfortable.

I followed the most procedures of the method of 'draw-to-tell' (Water et al., 2020). However, the protocol (see Appendix V) that I prepared not only included an outline of drawing tasks but also a semi-structured interviewing sheet, and I did not use portable recording equipment to record children's narratives but asked EC practitioners to take down notes of them. Furthermore, I conducted drawing techniques in this study following principles such as establishing a non-confrontational drawing environment and leaving enough time for children to draw and talk. These principles which help children better engage in drawing have been well exemplified by Einarsdottir et al. (2009).

4.6 Examining photographs: a complementary method of data collection

Photographs are one of the key sources of qualitative data (Silverman, 2017). It provides the researcher with a multi-layer resource of information to create stories. Rowe and Margolis (2016) argued that a photograph involves diverse social constructed texts that have different forms such as aesthetic and embedded physical and technical, and the researcher creates data by stories based on these texts. This informs that the researcher is the key to interpreting photographs. As a result, I, the researcher, took the role of 'key instrument' (Creswell & Poth, 2024, p.181) in gathering data by analysing details in photographs in this study. Practically, examining photographs made a complementary job to interviews and visual methods. I collected many photographs that came from one EC practitioner participant, and these photographs were about children's caring in one early years setting. To create data, I made stories by examining the context, the subject's body language and mood, the positioning of subjects, and objects in the photographs.

4.7 Research site and sampling

Considering my working site and previous social networks, my research site is located in Beijing, China. As a result, I made sampling in Beijing early years settings in this study. I conducted purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013) to recruit EC practitioner participants as well as child participants. First, I directly invited the partitioners who possibly fitted the selecting criteria (see below). Second, I contacted one EC practitioner who was the 'gatekeeper' (Silverman, 2017, p. 435) working in an early years setting in Beijing, China. She offered me names of qualified EC practitioners in her workplace and helped me contact them. Furthermore, to make sampling of children, four EC practitioner participants offered me help to contact children in their classroom who showed willingness to join in my research.

4.7.1 Selecting criteria

As for the EC practitioner participant, the first selecting condition is certification. They are qualified EC practitioners who have completed regeneration in local educational authorities. The second selecting condition is the type of early years setting. Moss (2007) argued that the value of participatory democracy can be

better conducted in public institutions. Following this I focused on the group of EC practitioners who were working in public early years settings in Beijing. The final condition is associated with EC practitioner's job title. In my pilot study with one EC practitioner who worked in a public early-years setting in Beijing, China, I recognised lead EC practitioner in the classroom had a significant role to play in collective decisions. To reach a comprehensive understanding of my research objectives, I purposely recruited lead EC practitioners in this study. Finally, there is no extra restriction on EC practitioner's age, teaching age, qualification or other demographic backgrounds. As for the child group, taking into consideration of language proficiency and research sites, I selected children aged 4-6 who had completed regeneration and were studying in public early years settings in Beijing, China.

4.7.2 The participants

I recruited 16 EC practitioners and 51 children in my study. Information on the location distribution and number of participants can be found in Table 4.1. Specifically, the participants were distributed in six districts in Beijing, China. For easier reference, district abbreviations were used to represent the names of the participant's location. The practitioners Mo, Hao, Huang, and Fan come from Haidian district, and Mo and Huang are colleagues; the practitioner Zhang comes from Chaoyang district; the practitioners Han, Guo, Song, Li, Xu, and Wei come from Dongcheng district, and Han and Guo are colleagues, while Li, Song, Wei, and Xu are colleagues; the practitioners Zheng, Sun, He come from Xicheng district; the practitioner Chen comes from Tongzhou district; the practitioner Jing comes from Fengtai district. They come from 11 public early years settings in Beijing, China. 51 children were recruited to participate in image-based dialogue and drawing activity. The location of the EC practitioner participant decided children's geographical information, and children were from three public-run early years settings. Specifically, 16 children aged 5-6 come from Haidian district. 10 children aged 4-5 come from Chaoyang district. 25 children aged 4-5 come from Xicheng district. Details about the geographical information on EC practitioner participants can be found in Table 4.2. Generally, they are all females, and their ethicalities are Chinese. All of them are qualified EC practitioners who received official certificate authenticated by China's

Ministry of Education. Some blanks are in Table 4.2 because such details were not consented to me by the EC practitioner participants.

It is important to acknowledge that the participants - both EC practitioners and children - were primally from urban, public early years settings in Beijing, which are typically associated with higher levels of public funding allocation, institutional support, and well-established facilities (Zhu, 2015). This context likely reflects a relatively high socio-economic status (SES), particularly when compared with rural or less advantaged areas in China. The focus on higher-SES participants may limit generalisability of the findings, as the perspectives and experiences presented might not fully represent those from more marginalised backgrounds. This limitation will be further discussed in the final chapter.

Table 4-1 Location distribution of the participants

District name		HD[4]	CY[5]	DC[6]	XC[7]	TZ[8]	FT[9]
EC practitioner's number		3	1	6	3	1	1
							Total: 15
Children	No.	16	10	-	25	-	-
	Age	5-6 yr	4-5 yr		4-5 yr		
							Total: 51

Table 4-2 Demographic Information for 16 EC practitioners

Pseudonym	Position	Work Experience	Qualification
He	AP[10]	1 yr	Med[11]
Chen	AP	2.5 yr	Med
Hao	AP	1 yr	Med
Jing	LP	8 yr	Bed
Han	AP	6 yr	Bed
Sun	AP	3 yr	Med
Song	AP	5 yr	Bed
Li	AP	5 yr	Bed
Guo	AP	4 yr	Bed
Zheng	AP	2 yr	Med
Wei	LP	13 yr	-
Mo	LP	9 yr	Bed

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[4] HD stands for Haidian district in Beijing, China
[5] CY stands for Chaoyang district in Beijing, China
[6] DC stands for Dongcheng district in Beijing, China
[7] XC stands for Xicheng district in Beijing, China
[8] TZ stands for Tongzhou district in Beijing, China
[9] FT stands for Fengtai district in Beijing, China
[10] 'AP/LP' stands for 'Assistant practitioner/Lead practitioner'
[11] 'BEd/MEd' stands for 'Bachelor/Master in Early Childhood Education'

Zhang	AP	1 yr	Med
Fan	AP	1.5 yr	Med
Huang	LP	-	Bed
Xu	Teacher leader	-	-
Quality: All are qualified EC practitioners			
Ethnicity: All are Chinese			
Sex: All are female			

4.8 Data collection

I conducted data collection by the strategies of interviews, visual methods and photographs examination. These strategies were well quarantined by Lancaster University ethics committee, and I had obtained the ethical approval of conducting this study. Firstly, interviews were audio-taped after receiving the participants' permission. A one-to-one interview was averagely lasting 60 minutes, and focus group was no more than 90 minutes. Secondly, visual methods were organised by four EC practitioner participants in their classroom, and I made an online session to train them using my research protocols and shared ethical considerations in advance. Thirdly, photographs were examined by me, when receiving them from one EC practitioner participant. Furthermore, I employed data saturation (Charmaz, 2006) to control my process of data collection. When I completed interviews or visual methods, I made transcriptions to the data and then analysed them by using thematic analysis at once. When I recognised that fresh data no longer generated new insights, comparing to the categories (or themes) I had built, I stopped gathering data.

Data collection process includes four stages. At Stage 1 (February to March 2022), this study began with examining my research protocols with EC practitioners. Initially, I made a pilot study with one EC practitioner who fitted my recruitment criteria to examine my interviewing protocols. According to the practitioner's feedback, she felt struggling, as I did not provide situations about collective decision mechanism. To figure it out, I outlined several situations such as group meetings with colleagues, group dialogue with children, and family meetings in my interviewing sheet. These situations were not presented directly but used to facilitate EC practitioner participants' better engaging in conversations, when they had limited ideas about collective decision-making. I also discussed my drawing techniques with another EC practitioner. I aimed at examining whether my design of drawing was child-friendly enough. However,

the practitioner pointed out that children are varied, and not every child is interested in drawing. Even though they participate in drawing, they might copy other children in the classroom to draw. She suggested that children might like to talk about their lives based on images. As such, I designed image-based dialogue in which children supported by EC practitioners talked about their caring based on images that I provided. To maximize the value of child-friendliness in my research, I should have immersed in the classroom and known children's inclination either drawing or image-based dialogue. However, I failed to gain access to early years settings because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this case, I turned to ask for help from EC practitioner participants, and four participants accepted my requests investigating children's likes and supporting me to conduct my visual activities in their classroom.

At Stage 2 (March to July 2022), I collected data from 15 EC practitioner participants through conversational activities. Initially, I conducted four one-to-one interviews and four focus groups to obtain data about EC practitioners' perspectives on collective decision mechanism and caring. There are eight conversational activities conducted online via Tencent meeting which is the equivalent tool of Zoom or Teams, and one one-to-one interview and one focus group were conducted offline. When I made conversations with EC practitioner participants, I was keeping sensitive with their ideas. Once they gave me arguments about my research topics, I encouraged them to provide one or two relevant examples or stories. When EC practitioner participants directly gave me their stories, I made summaries and refined the main points or arguments from their narratives, and then asked them to confirm my words. I was also sensitive to EC practitioner participants' feelings of engagement in conversations. For example, one EC practitioner participant was struggling with the question about her participation in collective decisions with her leader, I stopped asking for more detailed information about that. After each one-to-one interview or focus group, I immediately made transcriptions and set up data analysis. It is worth noting that I initially planned to conduct focus groups to collect data from EC practitioners. However, due to ethical considerations, some participants were unwilling to take part. For instance, one participant recognised my study involves elements of power relations and felt uncomfortable sharing

relevant thoughts in a group setting. In response, I promptly adjusted my data collection strategy by introducing one-to-one interviews, which were offered to those who preferred not to participate in focus groups.

Telephone interview was conducted as I needed more detailed information from EC practitioner participants. For example, I recognised the practitioner Hao provided a perspective on maintaining caring relationships when she made decisions about curriculum transformation in the classroom with parents. As such, I texted her messages to know details such as how to maintain caring relationships with parents and what responses parents had when she enacted caring for them. Furthermore, I also conducted extra rounds of conversations with EC practitioner participants. According to the first-round conversations with 15 EC practitioner participants and through my ongoing data analysis, I formed new research questions such as the influences of EC practitioner participants' commitments to caring and the ways of addressing children's learning needs. Sequentially, my interviewing sheet was adapted to add new questions for interviewing. I began with new questions to make the second-round conversational activities, and seven EC practitioner participants were involved in this round. The way of interviewing was mixed including face-to-face interviewing and online interviewing.

At the Stage 3 (September to November 2022), visual methods were conducted to gather children's perspectives on their caring for peers, parents, and non-human beings. Visual methods were organised by four EC practitioner participants in their classrooms. Before conducting these methods, I made an online training session to inform how to use my research protocols and to share relevant ethical considerations as conducting these methods with children. I suggested them selecting either image-based dialogue or drawing by considering children's inclinations in their classroom and left enough freedom for the EC practitioner participants to select specific research topics presented in my research protocols. As a result, considering children's factors, curriculum arrangement, the EC practitioner participants' personal time and energies. One EC practitioner participant selected to organise image-based dialogues with children in her classroom, and the dialogues were audio-taped. The other three

EC practitioner participants selected drawing. Specifically, two of EC practitioner participants selected the research topic of children's caring for their parents, while one EC practitioner participant selected the research topic of children's caring for their peers who were crying or unhappy. The three EC practitioner participants took several specific responsibilities in drawing activities. Firstly, they organised and provided drawing tools, such as pens and paper, for children who were willing to join in drawing. Secondly, they clearly told children drawing tasks and flexibly controlled the time length of drawing. Thirdly, when children completed their drawings, they used my semi-structured interviewing sheet (which is contained in research protocol for drawing) to make one-to-one conversations with children and then take notes of children's narratives on the blank places of their drawings. Fourthly, they collected children's drawings, packaged them, and then sent it to me. Two of EC practitioners passed me children's original drawings. I scanned these drawings and saved as e-version on my laptop. After that I returned these drawings to them. Another EC practitioner participant made snapshots of children's drawings and then sent it to me by email.

At the Stage 4 (November to December 2022), I collected data through examining photographs. I collected 21 photographs that came from one EC practitioner participant. The participants sent these photographs to me by email, and these photographs involved multi-layer resource in response to children's caring for peers and non-human beings.

4.9 Language of data collection

The language of data collection is only involved with Mandarin. This is because my participants and I are native speakers in Mandarin. In this case, using Mandarin to communicate can help me easily understand my participants' ideas. When I finished data collection, I transcribed their data in English to analyze. Besides, language use affected exploration on my research topic of caring. In my study, the concept of caring was theoretically explained as a form of ethic in accordance with Noddings's (2013) theories of ethic of care. Based upon Noddings's the ethic of care, Chinese academics translated caring in Chinese in two ways. On the one hand, Tan (2019) translated the ethic of care

as Chinese words, '关怀'. According to Chinese dictionary, '关怀' is explained as treating others with love and attentiveness and frequently used in the situations that the older cares for the younger. On the other hand, the term of the ethic of care is also translated as '关爱' (Li and Yan, 2023). '关爱' means loving, protecting, and concerning. It is also widely applied in any situation. My study involved the aspect of peer caring. For example, I investigated children's caring as their peers are in distress. Consequently, I selected the language of '关爱' to conduct data collection. Furthermore, I considered children were unlikely to understand what caring means. In this case, I substituted 'caring' by the words of 'console', 'concern', and 'look after' in image-based dialogue. I also considered children were unlikely to know the term of 'peers' so that I replaced it by the word of 'friends' to know the child participants' understanding of caring for peers in drawing activity.

4.10 Data analysis

I followed a six-phase thematic analysis process from Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyse the data in my study. The six-phase thematic process involves procedures of familiarising with the data, generating codes, constructing themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report (Terry et al., 2017). To begin the analysis, I engaged in repeated readings of transcripts and visual materials to gain a deep understanding of the data. The transcripts reflected participants' personal viewpoints and experiences. although I initially aimed to encourage group discussion on research topics through focus groups with EC practitioner participants, in practice, only limited interaction occurred among the participants. Most participants expressed their ideas sequentially rather than engaging in dialogue with one another. As a result, the function of the focus groups in my study was largely similar to that of one-to-one interviews.

Initial codes were generated from all data sources-textual and visual-highlighting patterns of meaning within participant groups (the EC practitioner group and the child group). These codes were then clustered into broader categories, which formed the basis of the preliminary themes. The themes were

reviewed, refined, and named through an iterative process. To further show my analysis patterns in the findings chapters, I made a demonstration based upon one piece of conversational transcriptions (see Appendix VI). In the finding chapters, similar quotes and visual materials from different participants were carefully selected and clustered together under each theme. Rather than quantifying the number of participants who mentioned a theme, I focused on the depth and richness of participants' contributions to themes.

I started the process of data analysis as soon as I collected the first piece of data. At beginning of data analysis, the participants' name was pseudonymized, and recording materials were transcribed to manuscripts via electronic recording pen and recording software from Tencent meeting. I took advantage of N-vivo to assist me to save and analyze the data that was from conversational activities with EC practitioner participants. In N-vivo, I created files to save the participants' demographic information and conversational transcriptions, coded the data, developed themes and categories. The data, that was collected through image-based dialogue, drawing, and photograph examination, was analysed in a Word document (see analysing example at Appendix VII). I began by analysing data generated from image-based dialogue. I inserted the images that I designed into the Word document, and then created a table below the images. The table is divided into three columns. On the far left of the table, I filled in the child's name and age. In the middle column of the table I added the transcriptions of child's narrative on the images. On the far right of the table I filled in my followed interpretation and analysis. I arranged and analysed children's drawings in the same way as I made for image-based dialogue. Finally, when analysing photographs, I inserted the photographs collected on the left side in the Word document and took down notes of my interpretations and analysis on the right side.

4.11 Ethical considerations

I was officially granted ethical approval to conduct this study by the research ethics committee at university. I followed ethical principles from that committee and stayed with documents, such as Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2011), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of

the Child (1990).

4.11.1 Obtaining consent

I involved EC practitioners and children aged 4-6 in my study. As for EC practitioner participants, participant Information Sheet (PIS; see in Appendix VIII) and consent form (see in Appendix IX) outlined the procedure to gain consent. They were enabled to ask questions about this study and to assure of anonymity, of confidentiality and of the opportunity for withdrawal (within two weeks after the data collection event) beforehand and able to check the recording of interviews/focus groups via the lead staff. I gained their verbal consent before recording via audio device. When it came to the group of children, I used 'opt-out' way (FASS LUMS Research Ethics Committee, 2017) to explore children's understanding of caring. 'Opt-out' way means that

> '[t]he researcher does not seek explicit verbal or written consent from each parent/guardian. Instead, parents/guardians receive an information sheet or letter explaining what the study is about. If they are happy for their child to take part, they do not need to respond to the letter or take any other action'

(p.4)

Children and their guardians were free to quit this study. If someone shows willingness or directly wants to leave, I will omit him or her. I also asked EC practitioners who helped me conduct image-based dialogue and drawing with children to follow the principle of 'continuing consent' (Warin, 2011, p. 807). For example, data collectors required to keep being sensitive with children's willingness of participation, and children's non-verbal signal about leaving also needs to be considered.

4.11.2 Confidentiality, Anonymity, and transparency

Information for confidentiality protection was outlined in the PIS and consent form. I anonymised the participants and EC institutions and used pseudonyms to ensure that their real names were not identified in my research. Audio recordings was stored into a password-protected (Lancaster) laptop. I scanned children's pictures into the password-protected laptop as soon as I collected them. I negotiated with EC practitioner participants to ensure whether children's

original paintings were returned to preschools or destroyed directly by me. Only the researcher (Xiao Zhang) worked as a guardian to have access to interview recordings, to the field notes and to the children's pictures. Analytic work and related written notes were stored electronically on my university OneDrive account (encrypted and password protected). Conversational recordings were transferred from a portable device, audio recorder, to my password-protected (Lancaster) laptop, and I deleted them from the device. Likewise, I transferred such recordings in Tencent meeting to the password-protected (Lancaster) laptop and deleted them from Tencent meeting cloud storage. In accordance with university guidelines, the data will be kept securely for a minimum of ten years. I will be responsible to delete it. Data may be used in research reports, publications for academic journals and conference presentations.

4.11.3 Incentives and benefits

This study did not set incentives at the process of sampling and recruitment, and both EC practitioner participants and child participants voluntarily participated in it. However, to form a reciprocal relationship between the research and the participants (Creswell, 2017), I provided complementary benefits for all participants. For example, I sent postcards for all EC practitioner participants to appreciate their participation and support for my research. I also actively shared theoretical knowledge to meet EC practitioner participants' needs. For example, I shared knowledge about participatory democracy and pedagogical documentation, which supported EC practitioner participants better use Mosaic approaches in their classrooms. Similarly, I provided knowledge in relation to the ethic of care to EC practitioner participants who were engaging in children's character education in their classrooms. Furthermore, I also made efforts to benefit child participants. For example, I shared my interpretations on child participants' narratives with EC practitioner participants who could better know about children's caring agencies in their classroom. I also made educational suggestions based on my study. These suggestions could help EC practitioner participants conduct multiple activities associated with caring education and therefore make child participants better know about caring in a comprehensive way.

4.11.4 Minimising power imbalances

Power imbalance is an unavoidable issue in qualitative research. Creswell (2017) argued that the researcher cannot offer a purely equal power position with the participants so that power imbalance regards as a premise that exists at the process of data collection. Although power imbalance potentially affects the relationship between the researcher and the participants, I aimed at minimizing it in my study. For example, I made an ongoing 'ethical reflexivity' (Traianou, 2014, p. 72) when interviewing with EC practitioner participants. When I interviewed, I was sensitive to EC practitioner participants' emotions. When I recognised that the participants felt stressed to provide replies, I would terminate it and jump to another question. I also considered issues of power imbalance when conducting visual methods with child participants. For example, I did not disrupt the children's daily routine. Informed by Jadue Roa's (2017), implementing visual methods, I considered child participants' learning themes and progress as well as their time arrangement in their classrooms. I also paid attention to interactions through implementing visual methods. Following the interactive principles purposed by Einarsdottir et al. (2009), I aimed to create a non-confrontational environment for interactions and to leave children enough time to draw, to respond to questions, and to engage in discussion with data collectors.

4.12 Reflexivity

This part will introduce my reflexivity on conducting the whole research project. I will firstly introduce how my two roles of the researcher and the EC practitioner affected the research. I will then focus on participatory relationship between myself and the participants to introduce my reflections on research methods. Finally, because my research was partly conducted in the COVID-19 pandemic, I will discuss its negative influences on this research project conduct.

4.12.1 The role of the researcher and the research

My role of the researcher is at the central placing of research conduct. According to Bryman's (2012) introduction on the context of social research and its methods, I reflect the relationships between my role as the researcher and the research in three aspects. They are the researcher's interests, research

community, and the researcher's training experiences.

First and foremost, my research interests motivate me to make the research take place. My research interests are early childhood education (ECE), teacher professional development, participatory democracy, 'educare', and childhood studies. These interests lead me to target potential research objectives in this study. For example, I am interested in participatory democracy in early childhood education. I followed it to search relevant literature in university library. I then found Peter Moss and Guy Roberts-Holmes did lots of work on it. According to their studies (e.g., Moss, 2007; 2018; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022), I made deeper understanding of participatory democracy. I recognised that because of devastating effects brought by neoliberalism in ECE, they called for an alternative discourse of participatory democracy to resist neoliberal governance. I also realised that participating in collective decisions is the typical phenomenon of participatory democracy. As such, I formed collective decision mechanism that worked as one of research objectives in the research. Furthermore, my interests on 'educare' also affected me to form another research objective of caring. The term of 'educare' is a Nordic concept which appropriately takes account of the relationships between care and education (Warin, 2014). It makes me an implication. That is caring has a significant role to play in ECE. Following this I searched the literature on caring and found the term of the ethic of care and its key advocate who is Nel Noddings. In line with Noddings's theories of the ethic of care (e.g., 2010; 2013) and studies of the ethic of care and education (2005; 2012), I finally outlined caring as a form of commitment as well as a needs-based concept. This helped me make the research objective of caring more specific and feasible. My research interests also affected sampling and recruitment criteria in the research. For example, my interest in teacher professional development and childhood studies motivated me to respond to my research objectives from the perspectives of EC practitioners and children. In line with previous studies on democratic professionalism (e.g., Fielding & Moss, 2011; Moss, 2007; Oberhuemer, 2005), I realised that collective decision-making is unlikely to happen in private-run early years settings. As such, I purposely recruited EC practitioner participants in public-run early years settings.

In my opinion, research interest is also known as the state that I am interested in research. Generally, I enjoy the process of seeking the 'truth'. For example, I am clinging to refine research questions from practical areas, make efforts to associate what I have found at practice with previous theories, try to construct new theories, and make suggestions on practical problems based on my research. It is hard to deny that I encountered upset, distress, anxiety, and other negative emotions at the seeking processes. However, my interests in research gave me courage to fight against bad moods and motivated me to keep moving on till I find the 'truth'. It is true that there is a common sense. That is, doing PhD is never 'perfect', and PhD thesis is a 'bias' of the researcher. But I am willing to be 'perfect' because I persuade myself being 'perfect' is a process in which I take responsibility to make my readers straightforwardly know what I aim to express via PhD thesis.

Secondly, the research community had significant influences on ethical issues in the research. For example, research ethics committee at university guided me to systematically think of research ethics. The committee provided a research ethical form. This form employs a questions-led strategy to help me know what ethical issues needed to be concerned with. Because my research involves human subjects, many questions and notes in this form helped me think of ethical matters, such as participant's discomfort or inconvenience, participant's confidentiality and anonymity in data collection, ethical constraints relating to power imbalances, potential risks to participation, benefits to participants, etc. Besides, the committee also shared recommendations on research ethical materials. For example, it is suggested to avoid using jargon or simple terms in participant information sheets, consent form, and interview questions. However, in practice, some EC practitioner participants were confused on the term of collective decision mechanism, even though I made efforts to explain its meaning. In this case, I adjusted asking strategies and provided situations to help them better participate in my research. For example, I provided situations for the participants which they are familiar with, such as group meeting with colleagues, parents meeting, and collective talking with children.

Last but not least, training experiences also positively affected the conduct of the research. During my 'PhD journey', I participated in many course modules and workshops. These training activities provide significant knowledge and resources that relate to my research. For example, university postgraduate courses provided me with curriculum resources in terms of qualitative research, academic writing, research interview, and participatory methods. These courses help me construct and revise my research outline. The course of N-vivo software introduction also makes me better take advantage of N-vivo to categorise and analyse the data collected from the EC practitioner participants. Furthermore, I also learned research skills from a workshop. The theme of workshop is understanding the well-being of young children. In this workshop, I learned innovative approaches for child-inclusive research. The approaches, such as children's drawing and image-based dialogue, inspired me to form research methods in a child-inclusive way.

4.12.2 The role of the EC practitioner and the research

I worked as an EC practitioner in Chinese public-run early years settings for six months. During internship, I formed networks with many EC practitioner colleagues. We built trust and care relationships and even became friends when I finished work in early years settings. The networks play a significant role in sampling and participant recruitment. For example, many previous colleagues became EC practitioner participants in my research project. They also generously helped me disseminate recruitment information in their social networks, recruit child participants in their classroom, and provided me with useful recommendations on engaging children's voices. Besides, my internship experiences helped me easily understand EC practitioner participant's jargon when I conducted conversational activities with them. For example, they liked to use 'guidance' and 'guidelines' to represent political documents of *Guidance of 3-6 aged Children Learning and Development* and *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial Basis)*. They also got used to the term of 'daily convention' to describe learning objectives on children's prosocial behaviour. Finally, my similar working experiences make me easily emotionally resonate with EC practitioner participants. The participants provided more details to answer my conversational questions, once they received my response, such as 'I can feel

you were stressful at that time' and 'I have same experiences, I know it is hard to overcome'.

4.12.3 Participatory relationships between the researcher and the participants

In the process of developing PhD thesis, I purposely recruited early childhood (EC) practitioners. Most of them had built trust with me because we used to work as partners in research projects or early years settings. I aligned with EC practitioner participants, collaboratively designing and creating possible ways of collecting data with children. I employed a visual narrative approach to investigate children's interpretations on caring for others. Originally, I only designed an activity in which children were encouraged to draw paintings with regards to caring for their peers, families, and non-human beings. This is because children's drawing is theoretically envisaged as an effective way to understand their thinking (e.g., Tisdall et al., 2009; Xu, 2020). However, as I communicated with one EC practitioner participant with regards to my strategies of data collection, she made me know not each child can express well their ideas by painting but talking in accordance with her practical experience. In this case, we cooperatively created and provided images for children to talk about their understanding of caring. Consequently, there are two visual activities employed to investigate children's interpretations on caring for others, and I encouraged EC practitioner participants to flexibly select one of them to conduct. The EC practitioner participants independently conducted these activities with children in class, because I failed to gain access to early years settings. As a result, I made workshops with the practitioner participants who were willing to help me conduct these activities. In workshops, I briefly introduced the two visual strategies, provided conversational outlines, and finally expressed my need with records, notes or scripts that were about children's caring.

The partnership enabled me to reflect the relationality between the researcher, the EC practitioner, and the child. Because of the children's right of participation (*United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989) and my ethical beliefs, I aimed to build a caring atmosphere for children's participation. However, according to Noddings's theories of ethic of care (2013), I failed to

care for the child, because I theoretically considered the image of the child but less tangibly knowing the child's preference; in other words, I followed the inferred need – children express themselves via painting – including children in my study. Because of the interaction with the EC practitioner described above, I realised I overlooked children's preferred way of expression. As a result, based upon my reflection, there is a way I can conduct when I do research with the child in the future. On the one hand, I immerse in early years settings and get familiar with children who I aim to study with, collaborate with the EC practitioner in class to know about backgrounds of children, and prepare a 'material tent' for children, encouraging them to express by freely using appropriate materials.

4.12.4 COVID-19 considerations

Reflecting on challenges during the process of my doctoral research project, it is hard to bypass a bit of uncertain changes brought by COVID-19. This world-spread pandemic certainly influenced my research methods. Primarily, it made me spend time on changing research design. Originally, I intended to conduct an ethnographic study in two public-run early years settings in Beijing. I had finished relevant research design and obtained approval of research ethics. However, during COVID-19 and post COVID 19, I failed to gain access to Beijing public-run early years settings. This made me change to conduct a narrative approach. The strategies of collecting data also changed. I kept conversational methods, removed observational methods, and added visual research methods. Furthermore, the pandemic also negatively influenced organising conversational activities with EC practitioner participants. For example, the participants and I failed to enjoy online conversations because of technical issues, losing signal and dropping out of chatting room unintentionally. According to time limit, few questions failed to be asked, which made me book another time with the participant to further interview. Last but not least, I have regrets because of the pandemic. I really appreciated EC practitioner participants helping me organise and collected the data that I desired but I missed the chances to listen to children's interesting ideas about my research.

4.13 Summary

In this chapter I have introduced research questions and followed research design. I set four main research questions in line with my two research objectives that are collective decision mechanism and caring. My research design was formed by the principles of qualities research. I positioned philosophical stances by the paradigm of social constructivism (which is used interchangeably with the term of interpretivism). I approached my research objectives by narrative inquiry and then employed semi-structured interview to collect data. The strategies of interviewing included conversational activities and visual methods. Conversational activities were used to reach EC practitioner participants' perspectives on collective decision mechanism and caring. Visual methods were used to obtain children's perspectives on their caring for peers, parents, and non-human beings. To approach my research objectives in a more comprehensive way, I also obtained data about children's caring for peers and non-human beings by examining photographs collected from one EC practitioner participant. Finally, I utilised thematic analysis to analyse my data. Now, I go to set out findings in this study. I divided it into four chapters and present it by thematic headings. In the next section, I will start to introduce the findings in relation to collective decision mechanism.

Chapter 5: EC practitioner's understanding of collective decision mechanism

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will introduce the EC practitioner's understanding of collective decision mechanism. I focus on the goals and ways of participation at the processes of collective decision-making on class matters between EC practitioners and their colleagues/children/parents. The overarching finding is that matters that affect children's lives are the shared concerns in collective decisions. For example, children's information is the main consideration to make decisions on class educational activities between EC practitioners and their colleagues. Children's voices are as the key references to election at class level. Parents involve in collective decisions in class with EC practitioners to deliberate children's learning needs. Besides, findings also show EC practitioners make efforts to accept other during the process of collective decision-making. For example, EC practitioners are attentive with and try to meet parent's needs on children's development. Children's needs of class culture building are able to be heard and taken into consideration in final stage of decision-making by EC practitioners. However, the ways of power distribution affect the extent of participation in collective decisions. For example, EC practitioners are marginalised in collective decisions on educational activities because of principal's inspection. Even though job occupancy certainly influences the extent of participation in collective decisions because class leader is accountable to her principal, EC practitioner's caring leadership, to some extent, makes efforts to mitigate hierarchical power, respect all participants, listen to their ideas, and collect these ideas as key references to the final decision on curriculum design. Finally, pedagogical style also affects the extent of children's participation. Findings show that a teacher-led pedagogy results in a tokenistic participation in class rule making for children.

5.2 Collective decision mechanism between EC practitioners and their colleagues

This section shows findings on collective decision mechanism between EC practitioners and their colleagues. I create three themes that are:

- The less the EC practitioner knows the child, the less 'voice' the EC practitioner has
- Leadership
- The 'voice' from outside classroom

The first theme means that the EC practitioner's ideas are unlikely to be adopted without enough recognition on the child in class, when they collectively make decisions on curriculum and pedagogies. The second theme is leadership. Within a system of class leader accountability, the style of leadership affects the extent of assistant practitioner's participation in collective decisions. The third theme aligns with the EC practitioner's critical judgement on the principal's inspection at the process of decision-making in class.

5.2.1 The less the EC practitioner knows the child, the less 'voice' the EC practitioner has

'Because I don't know enough about the information of children in class, such as their interests, I think I just have the less voice [at discussions]. It is not responsible to follow my voice to decide and to design educational activities in class without considering children.'

(He, assistant practitioner)

Children's information is the key reference to making collective decisions in class. He's narratives demonstrate that she automatically decreases the extent of participation when she knows few children's information. Children's information collected by EC practitioners is diverse. Firstly, the EC practitioner collects information about **children's interests**. This is because the child is more willing to engage in the activity that they like. EC practitioners consider children's interests at anywhere at the stage of decision-making. For example, on the one hand, their ideas of designing educational activities come from children's interests, as described by Li, 'children in my class are interested in food. We then design activities of food making, such as stewed candied pear and pickle making' (Li, assistant practitioner). On the other hand, children's interests give a reference to create the extension of the predefined educational activity. As said by Jing, 'colleagues and I have designed parts of activities under a theme, but we still follow children's interests to make extensions' (Jing,

lead practitioner). Secondly, EC practitioners consider children's **learning experiences** as the reference when they make decisions. The key criteria to develop children's capabilities is to know what they have learned. As described by Fan, 'we develop activities to deepen what children have learned' (Fan, assistant practitioner). Thirdly, the issue of **children's safety** also affects EC practitioners to make collective decisions on curriculum design. As narrated by Zhai, 'when we made decisions, we have to concern with the matters of children safety.' (Zhai, assistant practitioner). Fourthly, EC practitioners pay attention to **children's debates** in class. They record these debates and transform to the issue that can be explored by children in class, as described in Mo's narratives:

'One of themes was knowing car… I found two children were debating. One child said car "drink" gas and "poo". The other child didn't believe. I thought whether can made an educational activity based upon their debate. The issue explored was whether car can "poo".'

(Mo, lead practitioner)

To conclude, children's information plays as the key reference to collective decisions on curriculum between EC practitioners and their colleagues. The information collected by EC practitioners includes children's interests, learning experiences, as well as their debates in class. The more children's information EC practitioners collect, the more 'voice' they have in collective decisions.

5.2.2 Leadership

'Class leader has more voices to make decisions… Her [the leader] ideas on my curriculum design are very important for me.'

(Zheng, assistant practitioner)

'I basically provide some ideas and most of time seek the lead practitioner's approval'

(Chen, assistant practitioner)

'I need to seriously take the role of class leader because I am accountable with all class matters. Like, I need to address complaints, to safeguard children, to

take charge of children's learning, and so on.'

<div align="right">(Jing, lead practitioner)</div>

'I am the lead practitioner in class, but it doesn't mean you have the power to decide everything in class... There is no right and wrong between the practitioner's ideas. The final aim is to better promote children's development. For example, someone proposes an idea, we collectively discuss about it… The ideas which can, to the maximum, benefit of children, can be adopted finally.'

<div align="right">(Mo, lead practitioner)</div>

'I have my preference but usually acquire their [assistant practitioner's] ideas. For example, I was afraid that they are shy to make a drama show in front of children, although the drama show can attract children's eyes. But they thought the drama show was a good idea. They also wanted to add a game in the drama show.'

<div align="right">(Wei, lead practitioner)</div>

Job occupancy certainly influences the extent of EC practitioner's participation in collective decisions. Chen and Zheng claimed lead practitioners have more places to take in collective decisions. This possibly aligns with a system of class leader accountability. According to Jing's narratives, class leader accountability aims the lead practitioner to be accountable for class matters. The leading role certainly makes EC practitioners have 'louder voices' in the processes of collective decision-making with assistant practitioners in class. As described by Zheng and Chen, to seek lead practitioner's confirmation becomes a way of participating in collective decision-making. However, the lead practitioner's leadership constrains the hierarchical power distribution affected by the system of class leader accountability. This is partly because the lead practitioner gives emphasis on shared concerns rather than their power brought by joy occupancy. According to Mo's narratives, she and her colleagues in class commonly are concerned with children's matters. Ideas that can benefit children's development are welcome in collective decisions. In this case, assistant practitioners have an equal stance to express themselves in collective decisions. Besides, the lead practitioner's caring attitudes make assistant

practitioners have a higher extent of participation. According to Wei's narratives, she discusses her preferences on educational activity design with assistant practitioners, seeks suggestions from them, shows attentiveness to their ideas on drama show, and meets the needs of adding games expressed by assistant practitioners. It is hard to deny that job occupancy possibly affects the result of collective decision-making according to class leader's preferences or desires. However, the power brought from job roles at the processes of collective decisions is mitigated when class leaders focus on a shared concern with children's benefits. Furthermore, class leaders with caring attitudes create a cooperative, equal, and respect environment for collective decisions in class. In such situation, assistant practitioners are more willing to express themselves, and their extent of participation is increased.

5.2.3 The 'voice' from outside classroom from He's story

'We wanted parents to participate in and to co-create the posters with children… The principal knew our plan and banned us to do further, because she thought the task of poster making looked like homework burden, and it violated the 'double reduction' policy… She [the principal] wanted to avoid troubles… But we viewed the task [poster making] as a way of parental involvement and a chance of parent-child interaction.'

(He, assistant practitioner)

The principal's inspection affects EC practitioner's collective decisions in class. In He's story, she and her colleagues commonly decided to promote parent-child interaction by poster making. They encouraged parents and children to cooperatively make posters based upon picture books that children liked at home. However, the principal questioned this decision when she made inspection of He's class. The principal expressed her anxiety of 'double reduction' policy. 'Double reduction' policy aims to reduce burdens of students and families. One of the measures advocated is to reduce students' homework burden (Xue & Li, 2022). The principal considered poster making activity as homework that possibly added burdens for children and their parents. As a result, the principal's 'voice' constrained He and her colleagues to conduct the decision in practice. Even though He accepted the principal's explanation, she

preferred the decision made by her and her colleagues and insisted on poster making activity that positively brought close distance between parents and their children.

5.3 Collective decision mechanism between EC practitioners and children

This section introduces collective decision mechanism between EC practitioners and children in class. I created three themes that are:

- EC practitioner-led decision-making
- Child-led decision-making
- Cooperative decision-making

EC practitioner-led decision-making means that the EC practitioner induces children to participate in the process of collective decision-making but the final decision is predefined. The theme of child-led decision-making means children obtain a high extent of participation. They are empowered to mutually make decisions on class matters that affect themselves, and EC practitioners make efforts to support them to well express themselves during that process. As for the third theme, it means that the EC practitioner and children cooperatively make decisions. For example, Sun and children cooperatively construct class culture.

5.3.1 EC practitioner-led decision-making from Fan's story

'The practitioner has an answer and tries to induce children to speak the answer out of their mouth! For example, the practitioner wants to make rules, like not running in class and sitting on the floor. And the practitioner and I ask children why the child was injured just now. [children said that] this is because the child ran. [the practitioner responds] that yes, we can't run in class.'

(Fan, assistant practitioner)

The theme of teacher-led decision-making comes from Fan's working reflection. She saw one of her colleagues induced children to make collective decisions on class rules that had been predefined. According to Fan's story, her colleague worked as the representative of the whole class to make collective decisions on class rules. She personally decided to make rules of 'no running in class' and 'no sitting on the floor' and aimed to listen such rules expressed by children. As

such, she created group dialogues and induced children to express revolving around her ideas. Even though children are invited to participate in the processes of collective decision-making about class rules, they are, to most degree, led by Fan's colleague and received limited opportunities to express their ideas that differ from the rules that her colleague prefers.

5.3.2 Child-led decision-making

'We needed a child speaker who represented the whole class to make a speech in front of the whole early years setting. I supported them to elect the speaker. We decided to use voting and make an electoral competition… Children who wanted to participate in the election needed to make a show, such as poetry reading or storytelling. After that, children started to vote, and one child had one vote… To ensure of equity, I encouraged children to talk some of advantages of the competitor before voting.'

(Zhang, assistant practitioner)

'I took children to explore the area in the vicinity of our classroom and a tree was at this area... We [me and children] made a group meeting to name the tree… At the first round, I recorded six names from children's ideas. At second round, I invited the six children who proposed the name for the tree to stand at front line and encouraged the rest of children to vote by lining behind the child who they supported.'

(Han, assistant practitioner)

'…to leave some spaces for children to design their own activities, especially for Children's Day celebration…[C]hildren made lots of proposals about the celebration, and I helped them find out which can conduct at the early years setting… After several rounds of discussions led by children, we decided to make a fashion show to celebrate the Children's Day.'

(Guo, assistant practitioner)

The theme of child-led decision-making comes from three EC practitioner participants' stories. Generally, children obtain a high extent of participation. They mutually make collective decisions with peers, and EC practitioners

support them to well express themselves. Specifically, according to Zhang's and Han's story, children are empowered to participate in the processes of election. To make children better participate, Zhang and Han created meetings for children to discuss about election, supported them to express themselves, recorded their ideas, and organised voting. They also organised children to make hands-up and queuing to count votes of electors. According to Guo's story, she empowered children to participate in collective decisions on project design. She showed attentiveness with children's expressed needs for Children's Day celebration, made efforts to meet these expressed needs, and negotiated with children about her needs on project feasibility. Besides, children are more likely to follow the decisions made by themselves. As Jing said, 'the longer teaching age I get, I find that children are more willing to obey class rules made by their own' (Jing, lead practitioner). As a result, to organise child-led decision-making is associated with EC practitioner's recognitions on children who are protagonists in class. Children gain higher extent of participation in collective decisions that affect themselves, they show more willingness to follow such decisions.

5.3.3 Cooperative decision-making

'We created class culture together. We picked up some values that represented our class culture… They[children] drew totem… I helped classify their drawings in line with cultural values we selected.'

<div align="right">(Sun, assistant practitioner)</div>

'Because the site of water cups changed, I found some children frequently forgot to pick and collect their cups… we made a discussion about this question. "Can we change the time to collect water cups?" Children said. "What time is appropriate?" I responded. 'We can collect before we get in play areas' children answered… We made Q&R and finally agreed that they [children]collected water cups together before they went to play areas.'

<div align="right">(Hao, assistant practitioner)</div>

Cooperative decision-making means EC practitioners and children mutually

make decisions on class matters. According to Sun's narratives, she cooperatively associated with children to commonly decide class culture. She organised a class meeting to discuss cultural values and totems with children, enabled children to make decisions on the shapes and patterns of totems, and followed cultural values to classify these totems. According to Hao's story, she employed a question-driven way to make decisions with children. She made discussions with children about the question of collecting water cups, accepted children's request of changing timeline of this, and negotiated with them on the best time of this. As a result, in the process of cooperative decision-making, EC practitioners and children mutually contribute to class matters. They not only co-construct class culture but also commonly seek solutions to the matter that affects the whole class.

5.4 Collective decision mechanism between EC practitioners and parents

This section shows findings on collective decision mechanism between EC practitioners and parents. As revealed in the data, I create three themes that are:

- Resources-based decision-making
- Tasks-oriented decision-making
- Profession-led decision-making

Generally, parental involvement in collective decisions aims at children's learning and development. Resources-based decision-making means that collective decisions are made based on parental resources. To broaden children's knowledge, EC practitioners invite parents to participate in class curriculum design. They mutually decide to share the parts of knowledge that parents are familiar with for children. Task-oriented decision-making means that parents do complementary jobs to support EC practitioner's teaching tasks as they make collective decisions on children's learning. Profession-led decision-making means that EC practitioners put their professionalism first, when they make collective decisions on educational activities with parents. Once EC practitioners disagree with parent's ideas, they patiently explain their considerations to parents based on their professional knowledge, console parent's anxieties, and show attentiveness to parent's needs.

5.4.1 Resources-based decision-making

'Parents are very willing to share knowledge with children… I invited parents to walk in my class to share knowledge in many aspects. Like, in Dragon boat festival, parents participated in my class to introduce relative traditions and to show children how to make rice dumplings… parents come from ethnic minority of China, they brought many about local traditions and custom… When I conducted a thematic activity around knowing hospital, I invited one parent whose occupation is dentist to join in my class… the parent… brought us how better protect our teeth.'

<div align="right">(Jing, lead practitioner)</div>

'Parental resources can benefit children's learning… I invited one parent whose occupation is physicist to share science knowledge that complements our curriculum.'

<div align="right">(Hao, assistant practitioner)</div>

Resources-based decision-making means that collective decisions are made based on parental resources. Parental resource is a loose assemblage that includes many aspects, such as parental education, occupation, as well as social and cultural capital (Pesando et al., 2020; Tanskanen et al., 2016). According to Jing's and Hao's narratives, Jing and Hao recognised advantages of parental resources for children. They invited parents to participate in decisions on class curriculum design. In the processes of decision-making, parents showed willingness of participation, had the same goal of benefiting children's learning with Jing and Hao, and met the needs on bringing knowledge to children expressed by Jing and Hao. They introduced job occupations, traditional festival celebrations as well as custom of ethnic minorities for children in class.

5.4.2 Task-oriented decision-making

'I need parental support to conduct educational activates… Like, I create a theme of knowing roosters. I need parents to help children prepare some basic information about roosters.'

<div align="right">(Huang, lead practitioner)</div>

'I need parent's help for my [educational] activities… I gave you an example of [knowing] city… parents take their child to investigate the layout of the community they live in.'

<div align="right">(Jing, lead practitioner)</div>

Task-oriented decision-making means that parental involvement in collective decisions is to fulfil teaching tasks set by EC practitioners. According to Huang's and Jing's narratives, they needed parental support of their teaching jobs, and parents made efforts to meet the needs of children's learning preparation expressed by Huang and Jing. For example, parents helped children seek information on roosters and know community layout. In this case, parents play a complementary role when they participate in collective decisions with EC practitioners.

5.4.3 Profession-led decision-making

'Some parents ask me to teach children aged 5 something, like Pinyin. I can understand parent's worries and upset and try to console them firstly, and then I explain that we are not the institution in which children systematically learn special knowledge, like Pinyin. Instead, we immerse it in children's daily life. For example, I create games for children to let them know how to describe an event.'

<div align="right">(Hao, assistant practitioner)</div>

'[Parents proposed that] we mimicked the daily routine in primary school… [my colleges and I] wanted to adopt this proposal, but we concerned about the issue of schoolification. As a result, we negotiated many times and finally reached an agreement.'

<div align="right">(Guo, assistant practitioner)</div>

A professional-led discourse is identified during the process of educational decision-making. According to Hao's story, she made a professional evaluation of the parent's desire in terms of teaching the child academic subjects i class. For example, the parent expected Hao to teach the child Pinyin that is a coding

system for knowing Chinese characters introduced at the first year in primary school (Zhang et al., 2020). The teaching approach preferred by the parent aligned with 'schoolification'. Schoolification refers to a kind of school readiness that prefers the practice at early years settings conducted similarly to that in primary school. It happens in order to help the child better prepare for the transition (OECD, 2017). In Hao's insight, the phenomenon of 'schoolification' is supposed to be eliminated because the child has a particular learning system. Depending upon her professional knowledge base, Hao employed a play-based pedagogy to develop the child's literacy. It is obvious that Hao follows her professional identity when she addresses the parent's needs on curriculum change. A similar example comes from the practitioner Guo's narrative to the issue of parental involvement in educational activity design. Guo welcomes the parent's ideas on how they can enable the child to better understand primary school life. However, she insists on her professional judgment on schoolification when they negotiated on the activity design.

As described above, EC practitioner's professionalism influences the process of collective decision-making with the parent. The EC practitioner shows a positive attitude in responding to parent's needs on children's learning and discusses around the parent's ideas of curriculum change as well as activity design in line with professional beliefs and knowledge. As a result, the role of the EC practitioner works as the 'gatekeeper' who takes professional responsibility and makes professional evaluation when the parent is involved in educational decision. It is also worth noting that Hao positively satisfies parent's emotional needs. She conducts an empathic practice with parents who are in distress and patiently explains the disadvantages of schoolification. Her movements seem to involve a value of care, meaning that Hao accepts parents, is willing to listen to parent's needs on children's learning, and maintains a caring relation with the parent.

5.5 Discussion

EC practitioners show attentiveness with their colleagues, children, and parents in collective decisions. They make efforts to meet needs of each other in making decisions. Generally, findings confirm that collective decision mechanism is

associated with participatory democracy (Fielding & Moss, 2011). Members in collective decisions communally concerned with matters that affected children's learning and protection. However, occasionally, hierarchical power, more or less, affected final decisions and the extent of EC practitioner's participation.

The first one is **care ethics**. My findings show that children's interests and experiences play as key references to collectively make educational decisions. This point aligns with Noddings's (2012) one statement. That is making pedagogical designs needs care learner's voice. She also foregrounded listening as a pedagogical approach which helps identify and interpret the learner's interests and learning needs (Noddings, 2010). The approach to listening to the child makes the educational aims link to the child's learning needs (Clark and Moss, 2017). Fielding and Moss (2011) further broaden the effectiveness of listening, meaning that voices are heard not merely from the child but also from the adult. This change underlines democratic participation in early years settings in which multiple stakeholders have access to cooperatively address educational matters. My findings echo this point. For example, EC practitioners are willing to listen to colleagues' and parent's ideas that play as the key references to make collective decisions in the classroom. Furthermore, my findings show that EC practitioner's caring attitude was likely to promote parental involvement. For example, the EC practitioner Hao showed empathy for parent's emotional burnout and responded to expressed needs on children's learning. This aligned with an interpretation of care by Noddings (2013). That is caring can be employed to depict a kind of relation within values of acceptance and respect. Besides, the practitioner Hao was likely to maintain a caring relation with the parent. Although Hao cannot meet parent's expressed needs, she, to most degree, accepted the parent and respects the parent's ideas related to children's learning. My findings also show that job occupancy certainly affected the extent of assistant practitioner's participation because of class leader accountability. However, many lead practitioner participants narrated they made efforts to involve assistant practitioner in collective decisions. For example, the lead practitioner Mo gave emphasis to the importance of shared concerns rather than job hierarchy in decision-making processes. Besides, the lead practitioner Wei welcomed assistant practitioners

in her class to challenge her preference in decisions. These results are associated with Noddings's (2006) studies on caring leadership. They were willing to listen to assistant practitioner's ideas and were responsible and open to experimental ideas for changes.

The second one is **the recognition of the 'rich' child**. My findings on child participation show the EC practitioner sees the child who has capability and is the subjectivity of making collective decisions related to their welfare in class. It aligns with a political advocate of seeing the child as the 'rich'. The meaning of 'rich' should not be simply understood by an angle of economics (Cameron & Moss, 2020). The idea of the 'rich' child derives from a claim on a democratic radical education in early childhood context. Fielding and Moss (2011) expressed high desires on depicting the images of the 'rich' child as 'a co-creator of knowledge, identity, culture and values… [and] an individual, whose individuality and autonomy depend on interdependence' (p. 52-53). The ideologies of the 'rich' child impact on children's participation in collective decision-making. The EC practitioner who recognises such images pays attention to the child's ideas and thoughts that mainly affect the final decisions for class matters. Beyond this, the EC practitioner is also willing to invite and empower the child group in class to interdependently make deliberations and then make collective decisions by themselves.

The third one is **being child-inclusive**. My findings show that the EC practitioner positively makes efforts to create a child friendly environment to promote children's participation. For example, to enable children to better participate in voting, the practitioners Zhang and Han made ways of making hands-up and queuing that children are very familiar with. This finding confirms Gal's (2011) descriptions of one of the characteristics of inclusive child participation. It is that the decision-making process necessarily accommodate the child's expressive abilities and make the child comfortable.

The fourth one is **critical thinking**. My findings show EC practitioner He made critical thinking to the principal's interference in class collective decision. Moss (2006) claimed that critical thinking of dominant and powerful voice essentially

provides possibilities for democratic participation. As the practitioner He's narrates, she critically responded the outside 'voice' by giving an alternative idea to explain the goals of the activity of parent-child poster making. Because of the power of hierarchy in her surroundings, the decision collectively made by He and her colleagues, was difficult to conduct in practice finally. It is fair to say that there is little evidence of challenging the hierarchical control in practice in my findings. However, it is optimistic to say that a germinative tendency of critically down-to-up reflection can be exemplified.

The fifth one is **professional agency**. My findings show a profession-led discourse when the parent engages in class educational decisions. For example, EC practitioner Hao compared parent's needs on children's learning and her professional knowledge base. This point resonates Edwards's (2010) work on professional agency. Edwards employs a relational approach, interpreting the term of agency as capability of understanding of others and jointly addressing complex problems in practice. She (2015) also highlights EC practitioners necessarily collaborate with other stakeholders to make the best resources available for children's well-being. This point can be exemplified by my findings. For example, the EC practitioner Hao, Jing, and Huang purposely involved parents to support them develop educational activities.

There emerges a tokenism when the EC practitioner involves the child in decision-making. Gai and Duramy (2015) assert that a tokenistic participation means the child is as a sort of 'decoration' in the process of collective decision-making with the EC practitioner. According to reflection from the EC practitioner Fan, her colleague certainly involved children in collective decisions on that rule-making that affected children's safety problem. Nonetheless, the colleague induced children to follow her well-prepared solutions to make decisions. The interactive process seems to suspend children' isdeas that differ from what the colleague expects.

My findings are closely associated with Chinese political and cultural ideologies. Firstly, they show that EC practitioners engage in deliberative practices as they make decisions with colleagues, children, and parents. They actively share and

justify their ideas and proposals for educational transformation within group discussions. This reflects the ideological framework of Chinese democracy, where decision-making involves persuasion and negotiation among members of a collective group (He, 2023). Secondly, the findings reveal that hierarchical dynamics are present in the decision-making process. For instance, in He's story, educational decisions in her classroom are strongly influenced by the authority of the principal. When she disagreed with the principal's position regarding a family assignment, she found herself with limited space to justify or implement her alternative ideas. This dynamic illustrates the ethos of Confucian collectivism (Wang & Ho, 2020), wherein collective decisions are shaped by deference to authority figures.

5.6 Summary

This chapter has introduced the EC practitioner's understanding of collective decision mechanism. Generally, the EC practitioner welcomes different voices to involve in the process of making educational decisions. The decisions collectively are made within a common value framework of benefiting of the child in class. There are two value systems intertwined, mutually affecting the extent of participation. One the one hand, a care-oriented discourse promotes different stakeholders to engage in decision-making process. The EC practitioner shows willingness to listen, respond, interpret, and negotiate with different expressed needs from colleagues, children, and parents. One the other hand, a profession-led discourse in deliberation ensures that the EC practitioner brings the best version of education for the child. The EC practitioner's professional commitments to the child that I found in my findings involve morality, such as respecting child's developmental trajectories. There is also an up-to-down power, affecting the extent of participation of the EC practitioner in making the final decisions on educational activities. The powerful voice leads the decision-making process by prioritising the accountability of early childhood services. Even though technically performing the up-to-down decisions deviates from a democratic practice, optimistically, an increasingly critical voice against the hierarchical voice is found among the EC practitioner group.

Chapter 6: The EC practitioner's commitment to caring

6.1 Introduction

'I work out of care for my colleagues, regardless of our work allocation.'

(Huang, lead practitioner)

'Caring for the child is an instinct, not merely a requirement to be a professional.'

(He, assistant practitioner)

In this chapter, I introduce findings on the commitment to caring from the perspective of EC practitioners. Generally, EC practitioners form their commitments to caring from social interactions with their colleagues and children in class. For example, EC practitioners are committed to care for their colleagues via self-sacrifice, disputes mediation, and psychological empowerment. EC practitioners are committed to care for children via saving their reputation, sensitivity, and courage. Besides, the commitment to caring is vulnerable. It is, positively or negatively, impacted by responses from children and parents.

6.2 The commitment to caring

According to the stories of EC practitioners recruited, six themes and key behaviours that co-construct an image of the commitment to caring in early childhood context, are:

- Self-sacrifice
- Collegiality
- Psychological empowerment
- Saving the child's reputation
- Sensitivity with children's emotional distress
- Courage to care

The theme of self-sacrifice comes from stories of Han and Zhang. Specifically, Han's story is about sacrificing private time and personal energies to shoulder others work allocation. Likewise, Zhang's story is about sacrificing work regulation that she needs to be compliant with to the benefit of her colleague.

The second theme is generated from Sun's story. Sun dedicates herself to the relation between her two colleagues who are in conflict, helping them rebuild a collegial relationship. I employ Guo's stories to create two themes, respectively psychological empowerment and saving child's reputation. To the former, Guo feels being cared for when she is psychologically empowered by the lead practitioner. To the latter, Guo naturally saves one child's reputation in front of peers in class, although Guo had been aware that the child needs a moral education because of her stealing behaviour. The theme of sensitivity to children's emotional distress is from Huang's story. Huang is sensitive to children's negative emotions. To help them get rid of distress, she not merely identifies children's emotional needs and meets them as much as possible, but also creates a space for them to express negative emotion with peers. Last but not least, the theme of courage to care is from Li's story. Li shows her courage to care for one child in class. Although she finds it difficult to calculate the effectiveness of caring, she provides the best caring in her eyes for the child in practice.

6.2.1 Self-sacrifice from Han's story

6.2.1.1 Abandoning personal privileges

'Someone did something that has nothing to do with her own interests. She [Han's colleague] is willing to support me selflessly. Like, she plans to catch up with her families, but I need her now because my pedagogical activity design is keeping updating… [S]he selects to stay with me. Also, decorating wall is part of my daily job. To make sure of that I can focus on my pedagogical activity, she substitutes me to do my job. She even doesn't tell me!'

(Han, assistant practitioner)

Self-sacrificial behaviour is depicted as a movement of abandonment or postponement (Choi and Mai-Dalton, 1999). In Han's story, Han and her colleague had individual work allocation. The daily jobs were well arranged at the EC practitioner group meeting in class. For example, Han was allocated to decorate walls. Beyond the allocated work, Han also needed to prepare her own pedagogical activity. When Han needed some help from her colleague, even though it was time off from work, the colleague presented self-sacrificial

behaviours. She selected to satisfy her need and voluntarily rescheduled the time to meet relatives. Furthermore, her colleague also proactively worked Han's job of wall decoration with the aim of leaving more time for Han to prepare the pedagogical activity. It is clear that Han's colleague not merely voluntarily gives up personal interests to satisfy Han's needs, but the colleague also engages in thinking how better to provide help for Han beyond meeting her expressed needs on pedagogical activity. Clinton (2023) claims that self-sacrificial behavours are goal-driven. One allocates their time and other resources to meet the primary goal. Following Clinton's thoughts, Han's colleague prioritises Han's welfare to the top at that time. The goal of the colleague's self-sacrifice is to support Han better complete her pedagogical activity without asking any compensation.

6.2.1.2 Violating classroom regulations

'Following work regulation, my colleague and I should have supported the child to have dinner. However, I consider my colleague needed more time on her other jobs… I independently supervised children for dinner. I know I violate rules, but I also know my children, and I can take charge of them on my own… But it is true that I do this only when the principal is not at here, because I do not want to get in trouble.'

<div align="right">(Zhang, assistant practitioner)</div>

Beyond Han's colleague's self-sacrificial behaviour with regards to voluntarily giving up personal privileges, self-sacrifice can also be explained as a way of rule violation. In Zhang's story, there is a standard operating procedure (SOP) for childcare work. For example, Zhang and her colleague are allocated to cooperatively support children have dinner. The one who does not follow the SOP will be accountable to the principal. However, the higher-ups have policies – the SOP for childcare works at early years settings – while the lower-downs have their own ways of getting around them. To better benefit colleagues as well as well complete childcare works, Zhang decided to violate the SOP when there was no supervision by the principal in class. The decision made by herself not only depends on emotional impulse but rationality. Zhang made a quick assessment of herself and children's social development. She realised that her

self-sacrificial behaviour was unlikely to make herself in trouble. She decided to violate work regulations and to meet her colleague's needs, consequently.

6.2.2 Collegiality from Sun's story

'I saw they [my colleagues] got physical conflicts and then I split them immediately… I don't want their tension to upgrade. It is not good for both mental health and career development. I mean they should basically be like colleagues! To enable them to calm down, I chatted with them individually. I listen to their whines and try to comfort them by hugs.'

(Sun, assistant practitioner)

Sun concerns with the issue of collegiality at work placement. Collegiality, as one part of organizational climate in early childhood context and the main characteristic of a collegial relationship, involves interdependence, trust, and support (Dennis & O'Connor, 2013; Hewett & La Paro, 2020; Picchio et al., 2012; Redes et al., 2023). In Sun's story, Sun realised her two colleagues were away from a collegial relationship. She positively helped them decrease hostility and reunite by patiently listening to complaints and warmly consoling distress. It is fair to say that Sun pays attention to colleague's social networks that are valued by interdependence, and her caring for colleagues closely aligns with collegiality and reciprocal relationships.

6.2.3 Pedagogical empowerment from Guo's story

'I did not have many experiences on teaching. Ms. Liang, who is my leader, helps me a lot… I didn't get confidence to meet children's interests, she provided a choice for me using a word broad and to see its effect… She also gave me feedback… and shared her experiences. Like, she said different tone for the same language has different effect to the child… I appreciate she can stay beside me and polish my teaching plan.'

(Guo, assistant practitioner)

Psychological empowerment refers to an inner state of the individual who manages work roles within an active-oriented motivational system (Dust et al.,

2018; Pieterse et al., 2010). In Guo's story, initially, she feels powerless to independently make an educational activity in class. However, the lead practitioner in her class influences her positively. The leader actively provided useful suggestions and shared personal teaching experiences with Guo. Guo feels empowered psychologically because she feels more confidence to fulfill her teaching roles; in other words, Guo feels being cared for because the leader makes Guo become self-determinate by helping better present her ideas in teaching practice.

6.2.4 Saving the child's reputation from Guo's story

'Jim dived into his friend's locker, took away all of stuff that he liked, and put these into his bag… The child, Bob, who lost stuff, came to me. Although I knew who took away Bob's stuff, I selected to make a "white lie" to save the reputation of Jim in front of the class. I lied to Bob that his stuff was left at a corner of play area in class, and I collected them in a bag at children's lunch time. So, each child didn't know Jim did it till now. For Jim, I thought I needed to investigate the reason… I found Jim's parents and delicately expressed that Jim never had stealing behaviour before, and whether you were too busy to pay enough attention to Jim at home… My words provoked their self-reflection. They realised that they didn't distribute enough love to Jim… Finally, Jim did not come up with stealing behaviour again.

(Guo, assistant practitioner)

Reputation refers to an evaluation mainly built upon one's prosocial character by others. (Engelmann & Rapp, 2018). In Guo's story, Jim who stole stuff from peer's locker was 'the being cared for'. Guo played as the role of 'the one caring' took care of Jim by saving his reputation in front of the class. At the process of addressing Jim's stealing behaviour, she did not straightforwardly punish Jim or conduct a moral lesson in front of the class. Instead, she intellectually maintained Jim's self-image by telling a white lie to Bob whose stuff was stolen. Her intelligence locates at her belief in Jim's character and legitimacy. As for the former, Guo believed that Jim innately had prosociality. To the later, Guo did not find clues to prove that Jim had the same antisocial behaviour before. In any case, Guo did not superficially make a moral

judgement, depending upon Jim's stealing behaviour. Rather, she looked at a relative bright side and claimed that Jim probably attracted others' attention by stealing. In this case, Guo collaboratively discussed with Jim's parents in terms of both Jim's stealing behaviour and her inference on emotional problem. His parents agreed with Guo's ideas and decided to give more attention to Jim. Finally, Jim never came up with stealing behaviour after he received enough care from his parents.

As described above, Guo cares for Jim's reputation in the presence of his peer. Her caring involves both her trust as well as her rationality on Jim's stealing behaviour. Guo conducts an alternative way to agilely address his moral problem and helps him maintain a prosocial self-image in front of the whole class.

6.2.5 Sensitivity with children's emotional distress from Huang's story

'I see one child is unhappy, I will spend more time staying with the child, chatting, giving hugs, and holding his or her hand to walk around. That is care… But, sometimes, children are not willing to talk with me when they are unhappy. They prefer to find their peers to chat. They need a place to release their negative emotions. I created a space for them… We call this place "emotional corner". I set a soft sofa and some pieces of puzzle foam mats in this place… The space is very popular, children are willing to listen to "complains" from each other.'

(Huang, lead practitioner)

Huang pays attention to children's emotion. In her story, she is sensitive with children who are in distress in class. For example, when she finds someone is unhappy, she spontaneously enquires the reason and swiftly responds to emotional needs. According to Huang's observation, children are more likely to ask peers to console them. Following this she creates a space for children in class in order to help them to release bad mood with peers. It is obvious that Huang considers children's emotions as one of important issues with regards to caring. She aims to help children release negative emotions in appropriate ways that the child likes.

6.2.6 Courage to care from Li's story

'There was a girl whose parents got divorced at last term… She became highly defensive. Before that event, she often chatted with me and other practitioners in class… However, after that, one time I… asked her whether she needed help. She refused me... She intentionally avoided my eye contact. She was backing away and made a distance to me on purpose. I was so worried about her… I decided to make more concerns for her… I basically avoided mentioning her parents in front of her; I chatted with her every day; I gave her more encouragement when she made something good in class… I MUST let her receive more and more happy memories in my class! I am not sure of whether I can influence on her rest of life. At least, I can help her temporarily forget about sadness!'

(Li, assistant practitioner)

The theme of courage to care comes from Li's story. Li cannot judge whether her caring performance is to effectively meet the needs of the child who is tottering in grief of parental divorce. This is because it is not easy for her to find any responses from the child who is self-isolated. However, Li does not stop caring for the child. Rather, she puts more concerns on the child and does utmost to make the child happier in class, such as chatting and encouragement. As a result, Li's commitment to caring support her trying varieties of ways to help the child out of the grief. Her courage makes her caring sustainable without responses from the child.

6.3 The vulnerability of the commitment to caring: Enhancement or diminution

The EC practitioner's commitments to caring are vulnerable. The responses from 'the being cared for' affect the EC practitioner the degree of loyalty with regards to the commitments to caring. Generally, four themes emerge from the stories of the EC practitioners. They are:

- Parental gratitude
- Efforts to progress

- Taunting
- Numeric equity

The four themes are categorised as two trends, enhancing or diminishing the commitments to caring. The first two themes – parental gratitude and child's progress – show the situations in which EC practitioner's commitments to caring in my research are enhanced. The following two themes are created to present the situations of the commitments to caring diminished.

6.3.1 Parental gratitude from Zhang's story

'…a boy who was experiencing a time for replacement of his baby teeth to adult teeth. One day his one baby tooth fell... I immediately wrapped his baby teeth in a piece of paper and then cautiously put it into his pocket… His mother texted me a massage and expressed her gratitude for helping record the child's growing moment. I felt touched because she knew my caring for her kid!… The boy's mother's response boosts my willingness to keep recording her boy's growth in class.

(Zhang, assistant practitioner)

The child's mother's gratitude promotes Zhang's commitment to caring for the child. In Zhang's story, she helped one child address teeth problem and collected well the baby tooth that falls from the child's mouth. When the child's mother found the baby tooth, she expressed her gratitude to Zhang. The response from the child's mother helps Zhang confirm that her caring performance works positively for the child's family. It is fair to say, parental involvement plays an important role in the caring relation between the EC practitioner and the child. This is because the parent who works as the spokesman of the child can help the EC practitioner know whether caring performance meets the child's needs or not.

6.3.2 Efforts to progress from Song's story

'…a boy who is not good at sports... [H]is peers keep jumping many times, whereas the boy finds it struggling… I take extra concerns for him, because I am afraid that he gets injured outdoors… Once I feel the boy gonna fall down, I

immediately take steps forwards, embrace him, and help him balance well…
When I move forward and prepare to take him, I see he is trying to control his
body with all his strength… He says he won't fall... [H]e gets a good progress!
he is better than yesterday ... I am extremely happy because he knows my
caring, although he can't express clearly.

(Song, assistant practitioner)

The main aim of Song's caring is to prevent the boy from sport injuries. In Song's story, she distributed more concerns to the boy who cannot run well. She considered the boy's staggering as the alert and instantly provides protection for him as followed. Song felt her caring was accepted, when she identified that the boy was trying to make progress in sports. Finally, the boy's efforts of making progress in sports worked as a positive response, which made Song's commitments to caring enhanced.

6.3.3 Taunting from Sun's story

'Because of some reasons from the child's growth environment outside early
childhood setting, the child did something bad for me… He put out one hand
and asked me what it was, I said it was the number of one. He kept asking
whether I knew its meaning. I responded with the same answer to him. And, he
said I should be ashamed because I gave him a wrong answer for the simple
question… Finally, I figured out his posture meant getting out… I cannot believe
this is what a child does! I certainly dislike it.'

(Sun, assistant practitioner)

The child's taunting is envisaged as a negative response to Sun whose commitment to caring is diminished. In Sun's caring story, she viewed the image of the child as who should innately be kind. However, one child performed taunting to Sun by a special finger posture. The offensive performance did certainly harm Sun, although Sun tried to persuade herself that the child was innocent, but the influence of growing environment on the child brought devastations. Eventually, Sun's caring gets shattered, and their caring relation becomes increasingly fragile.

6.3.4 Numeric equity from Zhang's story

'I voluntarily snap pictures for children in class… and then I share these with children's parents… I am very willing to help children record their wonderful moments and I can proudly say children super like it. However, one time when I communicated with parental committee, some representatives complained that they feel inequity for the number of photos they get… They questioned me why some of children have more, but some get less… These voices are torturing me… I finally snap one photo for each child in the same scene.'

<div align="right">(Zhang, assistant practitioner)</div>

Equity refers to a concern with fairness (UNESCO, 2017). In Zhang's caring story, an expectation of fairness from parental committee impacts negatively on Zhang's natural caring for the child in class. Originally, snapping picture for the child is a voluntary behaviour. This movement certainly benefits the child and their parents, because Zhang helps the child leave various beautiful moments. However, the issue of equity comes up. Parental committee expects to reach a numeric equity. Parental expectation becomes a demand, which makes Zhang awkward. She has to meet the desire expressed by parents. Her natural impulse to benefiting the child is vanishing, consequently. As introduced above, parental expectation promotes Zhang to take her caring back when she contacts with children in class. To chase a numeric equity certainly deteriorates a caring relation between the EC practitioner and the child.

6.4 Discussion

The commitments to caring are envisaged as various ideal phenomena, guiding the EC practitioner to well practise caring for colleagues and children in class. An overarching finding is that the commitments to caring are other-oriented. The EC practitioner shows a sense of altruism and naturally benefits of others' welfare by caring skills. These caring skills suggested by Noddings (2005; 2013) include listening, observing, and dialogue. Generally, the EC practitioner who is as 'the one caring' is responding to the needs from others who are as 'the being cared for'. In practice, the EC practitioner's responses are different, such as boosting others' self-determination, keeping others' prosocial shapes,

and relieving others' emotional distress, depending upon the situations of 'the being cared for'. This claim exemplifies the understanding of caring need be informed in relations and social networks (Noddings, 2013). My findings also provide examples and new ideas for Noddings's some agendas and statements with regards to the ethic of care in her book *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*.

Caring is both self-serving and other-serving. According to Noddings's statements on an ethic of caring, even though caring mainly serves others, 'the one caring' should not disregard the self's feeling in a caring relation. As a result, self-sacrifice is likely to be an unacceptable way of devoting the self to 'the being cared for'. Possibly, Noddings disagrees 'the one caring' sacrifices because she sees sacrificial behaviours as burdens of caring. That is 'the one caring' generates negative affections as the process of fulfilling ethical responsibility to 'the being cared for'. However, my findings show that self-sacrifice is one of the commitments to caring. For example, Han who as 'the being cared for' accepts cares from her one colleague who is as 'the one caring'. Han's colleague conducts caring by proactively giving up her self-privileges in the workplace, and the colleague is likely to be willing to do so for Han. It seems that Han's colleague barely loses joy as she cares for Han. In this respect, she, in fact, has paid attention to her feelings and completes an intellectual battle – she has balanced the self's needs and the others' needs – before she conducts caring for Han.

To approach the point of caring as the self-served and other-served, Noddings put an emphasis on the vulnerability of the commitments to caring. She preceded the feelings of 'the one caring' in a caring relation. 'The one caring' had the freedom of choice whether caring can be maintained, whereas the response from 'the being cared for' easily affected 'the one caring's' obedience to commitments to caring. My findings provide examples to prove this point. The response from the child and the parent can affect the EC practitioner's commitments to caring for children in class. For example, the practitioner Song's commitment to caring is enhanced, because she receives the confirmation to caring from the child who makes progress at sports. In addition,

the practitioner Zhang's commitments to caring are diminished because she feels her natural impulse of caring for the child transforms as demands or burdens of caring. As a result, Zhang takes back her caring, helping children record beautiful moments by photos.

Being consistent or automatic with rules cannot be said to care. Noddings pointed that, with regards to caring by 'the one caring', receiving 'the being cared for' preceded obeying rules. In my findings, the practitioner Zhang met the conflict between her natural impulse to caring for her colleague and rule obedience. Her choice of the former exemplifies the claim introduced above. To this point, caring is as a guideline for Zhang's working behaviours, and she therefore can get rid of the constraints of SOP. Violating rules needs to consider the specific context. To avoid the fact that Zhang's caring changes to a working burden, she analyses and finally chooses that way when there is no 'regulatory gaze' (Osgood, 2010) from the principal.

Going on caring needs the courage to accept guilt. Noddings assumed a situation that 'the being cared for' failed to positively respond to 'the one caring'. She alerted 'the one caring' might face the risk of guilt and foregrounded the importance of the courage. In my findings, the practitioner Li presented her courage to accept that guilt comes from the process of caring. Even though the child who was as 'the being cared for' cannot give proper responses, Li temporally suspected whether her caring performance met the child's needs but finally kept caring without any hesitation. This is because her courage makes her accept guilt and motivates her to form caring relations with the child.

Beyond engaging with Noddings's theory of Care Ethics, my findings also show alignment with Confucian Ren and Chinese Communist ideologies. For example, in Huang's story, her commitment to caring stems from emotional sensitivity to a child's distress. This illustrates that caring responsibility involves emotional responsiveness, a feature emphasised in both Confucian Ren and Care Ethics (Li, 2022). Furthermore, in addition to responding emotionally, Huang continuously adjusts her approach to care to meet the child's needs and support their emotional well-being. This reflects a key aspect of Chinese

Communist management ideologies (Bao, 2020), in which people's needs are addressed through adaptive institutional responses aimed at practical problem-solving.

6.5 Summary

This chapter has discussed the topic of the EC practitioner's commitment to caring. There are two general claims. On the one hand, the common description of the commitment to caring is altruism. The EC practitioner aims to naturally benefit others' welfares by caring performance without compensation. On the other hand, the commitment to caring comes from the situation in which the EC practitioner continuously practices caring rather than temporary caring behaviour for others. To this point, the EC practitioner who has the courage to overcome the risk of guilt, goes on and engrosses others' needs. The commitment to caring is also vulnerable. Outside voice easily affects the EC practitioner's commitment to caring enhanced or diminished. Normally, 'the one caring's' commitment to caring is directly affected by the responses from 'the being cared for'. However, the parent who is the third party plays a role in the caring relation between the EC practitioner and the child. The parent's voice can affect the EC practitioner's commitment to caring for the child in class.

Chapter 7: Caring as an aim and means of education

7.1 Introduction

This section will introduce findings on the linkage between the ethic of care and education. I assumed caring both as an aim and means of education. According to He's, Guo's, Zheng's, Zhang's, Wei's, Chen's, Li's, Huang's, and Sun's narratives, I create six themes in response to the research topic of caring as an aim of education. The six themes include six aspects of caring education. They are empathy, cure, friendship, gratitude, sense of community, and EC practitioner's caring performance. The six themes also implied four approaches to caring education. They are teachable moments, well-prepared teaching, environmental interaction, and role modeling. When it comes to the research topic of caring as a means of education, according to Mo's, Li's, Zhang's, Hao's, and Sun's narratives, I create six themes. Three of them are about the ways of identifying children's learning needs. They are question-based dialogue, decoding, and children's hints. The remaining three themes are about the decision mechanism on balancing inferred needs of EC practitioners and learning needs expressed by children. They are schedules-based decision-making, trial-oriented decision-making, and child-focused decision-making.

7.2 Caring as an aim of education

In this part, I will introduce findings in response to the research topic of care as an aim of education. I created six themes. They are:

- Empathy: Putting yourself in someone's shoes
- Cure
- Friendship
- Gratitude
- Sense of community
- EC practitioner's caring performance

Generally, the six themes signify that empathy, cure, friendship, gratitude, and sense of community are the main subjects of caring education. Besides, according to many EC practitioners' narratives, caring education permeates children's daily lives in class, and EC practitioner's caring performance in daily lives in class is the source of caring education for children. They learned caring

by observation of EC practitioner's caring performance. The six themes also imply how EC practitioners conduct caring education. Besides, the six themes are classified into four types of approaches to caring education. They are teachable moments, well-prepared teaching, environmental interaction, and role modeling. Specifically, the approach to teachable moments is used to teach children in terms of empathy and cure. The approach to well-prepared teaching is used to teach children in terms of friendship, gratitude, and sense of community. The approach to environmental interaction is used to teach children friendship. Finally, the approach to role modeling permeates children's daily lives, and they learn how to care from EC practitioner's caring performance.

7.2.1 Empathy

There was a boy who had a high sense of aggression in my class. He frequently showed violent behaviour to his peers, such as beating and scratching. After that, he just said sorry to these victims. His apology was so superficial and technical!… One time, he scratched one peer's face again. I invited him to stay with me and the victim to go clinic. in clinic, he was watching nurse dress the victim's wound.

The boy: 'Is it very painful?'
Guo: 'Yes, how do you find it?'
The boy: 'She [the victim] seems crying.'
Guo: 'How do you show your concerns with her, when you feel she must have been in pain?It is so painful, and the pain could be lasting for a long time.'
The boy: 'I want to blow her wound, I want to console her because she is crying, and I want to help her rub tears.'
Guo: 'Ok, you could use these ways to comfort her. I also hope you could keep doing it tomorrow, because her wound is hard to recover.'

On the day afterwards, I saw him keeping care for the victim. For example, I heard the boy's words of 'were you still in painl last night? I am sorry, I do not do it again to you.' I know he could get the sense of caring in the future. But, before that, he might not realise this. I need to guide him to care for others in a right way.

'I often encourage children to think of their feelings, what if another's misery happens to you [children]'

Empathy is metaphorised as 'putting yourself in someone's shoes' (Noddings, 2013). According to Guo's and Wei's narratives, they made efforts to teach children to understand another's distress to learn caring. For example, Wei guided children to look after another's miserable feelings, while Guo taught caring by feeling another's pains. Besides, caring education is conducted within an actual situation. For example, Guo aroused one child's empathy when the child hurt his peer. She felt that the child's apology looked like an automatic response without sincerity. To make the child feel his peer's pain, she involved the child in the process in which the victim dressed her wound in clinic. When the child directly witnessed his victim have wounds dressed, he realised his violence certainly had a bad effect on the victim. Guo realised the child felt a sense of guilt. She further took account of possible results on the victim made by his violence, and these results made the child imagine that he took the victim's pains. As a result, the child felt he provoked commiserative emotions and started to take care of the victim.

7.2.2 Cure from Sun's story

Because of regulations for the Covid-19 variants, we [the early years setting] were not allowed parents to get in and to send their children into class. In my class, loads of children found some of younger peers were crying as entering the main door of teaching building. Some of them said that they [the crying younger peers] were annoyed… We thought of why the younger children cried together. [We agreed with] the reason that they were upset and crying as leaving their parents. I claimed that all of us had the same feelings. At this moment, I had an educational plan to develop children's caring. I disseminated an initiative that we could escort the younger ones to go to their class with teachers. I did not force each one to do so, but they spontaneously brought the younger to their class!

According to Sun's story, she envisaged caring as a form of cure. She asked children in her class to cure the younger children who cried because they were temporarily separated from parents and started their lives in early years setting. Sun organised teaching activity on protection because she was affected by children's talking. Sun was good at listening. She heard that the children's talking revolved around the younger children's crying, when they separated from parents in the morning. She decided to respond to them with a teaching purpose of caring, when she heard that some children in her class expressed annoyance at younger children's crying. To conduct caring education, she discussed with them to think of the reason why younger children cried, introduced her understanding about younger children's crying, and raised children's awareness of cure for the younger children. In this case, Sun's means of understanding younger children's crying and following guidance play key roles. She explained younger children cried possibly because of separation anxiety from parents. Her explanation affected children to rethink younger children's crying. And then, she guided children to think more what they were able to do for younger children rather than how younger children's crying affected them. Finally, in order to cure younger children's separation anxiety, Sun and children decided to escort younger children to go back to the classroom.

7.2.3 Friendship

I noticed some of children frequently made conflicts with other peers in class. They normally did not have friends who they regularly staedy with. For my feeling, they spent most of the time playing on their own… There was one child I noticed. He seemed not easily to be accepted by other peers, because he was a 'troublemaker'. He basically was unlikely to play in a group. I aimed to enable children to make more connection with other peers. So, I employ a form of drama play to encourage children to play roles from a picture book, named I have a friendship to rent*. I arranged the whole class to participate in the process of making friends. I was surprised I found that the boy was impressive, played as the main character in the picture book to lead peers playing games.*

He warmly reminded them of being careful of footsteps in drama performance. He became gentle and started to care for others. Like, I observed he stepped backwards to avoid stepping on another's foot.

(Chen, assistant practitioner)

'I conducted caring education by setting situations for children. For example, I set a situation on your [the child] friend is unhappy and encourage to talk how they could comfort so… I also encouraged children to draw about their ideas when they encounter their friends were unhappy and used their drawings to decorate wall… They can also learn how to make friends for these wall decorations.'

(Huang, lead practitioner)

According to Chen's, Li's and Huang's narratives, they made use of friendship to teach caring for children. For example, Chen believed that caring is an important value for children to make friends. She realised some children were not able to get on well with their peers and expressed self-centredness. As such, she decided to organise a teaching activity for children to learn caring for others. She designed a drama play activity based on episodes from a picture book, named *I have a friendship to rent*. To design the drama play activity, she asked children to make friends as the protagonist in that picture book did. This activity certainly affected children to care for others. Surprisingly, Chen noticed one child who was identified as the self-centred who expressed caring for peers. For example, the child was able to foresee risks at drama performance. Once he felt his peers miss footsteps, he gently made a reminder of keeping distance. He also proactively adapted his footsteps so as to avoid hurting peers. Besides, Huang regarded wall decorations as the source of children's learning. She organised a drawing activity and created image-based dialogue with children to interpret how to make friends and to get on well with them. And then, she used children's drawings to decorate walls in class. This is because she aimed to make children further understand friendship by interacting with drawing materials.

7.2.4 Gratitude from Sun's story

There was a regular educational theme, called the person I loved, in my class in March. It derived from the National Women's Day celebration. My colleague and I set a goal for children, that is to express love and gratitude to their mom… It revolved around females in children's family. For example, I started the dialogue from the question of do you know National Women's Day is set up for who? Some of children answered that it is for mother and grandma... and we discussed how we could show gratitude to them… I taught children some blessing words as well as finger dance to show thanks for mom.

<div align="right">(Sun, assistant practitioner)</div>

According to Sun's story, she considered gratitude as a form of caring. She taught children to be grateful to female families under the teaching theme of 'knowing National Women's Day'. Specifically, Sun organised collective talking with children, briefly introduced National Mother's Day, led discussion, and recommended some ways of gratitude to children's mother and grandmother, such as bless words and finger dance.

7.2.5 Sense of community

The reason that I set a position of management assistant in class is to enable children to raise a feeling of community. It seems like a slogan "one for all, all for one". The most important point that I set was that children were willing to look after each other. So, this position was not merely to deliver a value of care, but also to satisfy children's eagerness of caring. In my class, all of the children took the role of management assistant in turn. Firstly, I asked them what you could do for the class. And then, I collected some answers, such as rolling up peer's sleeves, washing flower, and distributing chopsticks. Children, my colleagues, and I also discussed in terms of participation together. Finally, we made an agreement on five children as a group in a day. This means five children who were distributed with different missions play as management assistants together.

<div align="right">(Li, assistant practitioner)</div>

'*It seems to depend on teacher's guidance, to enable children not to feel a*

burden when they shoulder works as management assistants. It does not say I require you [children] to work but says that this is from a sense of responsibility of caring for others or for the place we are living.

(Huang, lead practitioner)

'I need to guide and help children realise that you are not working for me. You work as management assistant because you love our community.'

(Wei, lead practitioner)

'Frankly, when children are not management assistants but they took that role, they still provide support to others, such as helping peer zip up jacket and grease moisturizer. Actually, this time children do care unintentionally.'

(Zhang, assistant practitioner)

According to Li's, Huang's, Wei's, and Zhang's narratives, they taught caring by means of arousing children's sense of community. They envisaged the whole class as a community, and children were seen as active members who were able to contribute to making the community flourish. To make children know how to be members of community, they set a position of management assistant. The role of management assistant was to provide services for the whole class. According to Li's narratives, she organised children to collectively discuss what services they were able to provide, recorded children's expressions, and made time schedule for them to take service in class. It is worth noting that those children who were well self-served were prioritised to take the role. As Hao narrated, 'children need to help themselves before they helped others' (Hao, assistant practitioner). The jobs of management assistant were conducted in two ways. One is that management assistants looked after children's daily lives. They helped children roll sleeves and distribute chopsticks. Another one was that management assistants contributed to a better living environment. As Li's narrated, management assistants made service of washing flowers in class. Besides, EC practitioner's guidance helped children to better know the role of management assistant. According to Huang's and Wei's narratives, they made meaning of the role of management assistant as a way of benefiting of class members' lives rather than as a form of burden for children. Finally, the role of management assistant certainly taught children how to care for others.

According to Wei's narratives, she noticed children helped their peer zip up jacket and grease moisturizer, regardless of whether they were management assistants.

7.2.6 EC practitioner's caring performance

'As for caring education, I think it probably doesn't need a talk to deliver what it means to care. For example, when David felt uncomfortable, I asked him like 'are you ok?' or 'where do you feel bad?'… When the same thing happened again, I found one child asked David the same questions as I did.'

(Zheng, assistant practitioner)

'Caring education could be done in a super invisible and nuanced way. We [children and I] live together for three years!'

(Guo, assistant practitioner)

'Caring might not be taught by a well-prepared session, but is about learning by watching in their [children's] daily lives.'

(He, assistant practitioner)

According to Zheng's, Guo's and He's narratives, caring is not a learning topic in teaching sessions but a way of being in daily lives. Children learned how to care via observing EC practitioner's caring performance. For example, Zheng noticed that one child mimicked her to care for his peer who was uncomfortable. In this case, EC practitioners are seen as a role model for children to know what caring means. Their caring performance in daily lives in class are invisibly learned by children.

7.3 Caring as a means of education

This section will introduce findings on caring as a means of education. I firstly explored EC practitioner's ways of identifying children's learning needs. My findings show that EC practitioners showed attentiveness to children's expressions and their performance to identify their learning needs. I then introduce findings on EC practitioner's decision mechanism of needs. I focused

on the process of balancing inferred needs from EC practitioners and learning needs expressed by children in class. My findings show that EC practitioners kept comparison between teaching plans and learning needs expressed by children and made efforts to meet their learning needs.

7.3.1 Identifying children's learning needs

In this part, I will introduce the ways of identifying children's learning needs from the perspectives of EC practitioners. According to Hao's, Zhang's, and Sun's narratives, I create three themes. They are:

- Questions-based dialogue
- Decoding
- Children's hints

Questions-based dialogue means that EC practitioners are sensitive with children's questions, when they identify their learning needs. Decoding means that EC practitioners make efforts to decode children's statements on learning difficulties or phenomenon to questions and then to acknowledge whether the questions associate with children's learning needs. Finally, the theme of children's hints means that EC practitioners identify their learning needs by observation. They are attentive to children's performance, such as iterative trying and emotional change.

7.3.1.1 Questions-based dialogue

'Children's learning needs come from their questions. To teach the 'secret' of shadow, I asked some questions about shadows to children… They also ask me some questions about shadow. We interacted based on questions so that I can know which parts of shadows children need to learn.'

(Hao, assistant practitioner)

'When children had difficulties in the process of researching a shadow toy, they enquired me how to produce different colors of light by using the toy.'

(Zhang, assistant practitioner)

According to Hao's and Zhang's narratives, they identified children's learning

needs via questions-based dialogue. For example, Hao organised a group talking with children with regards to knowing shadow. She introduced shadows to children via questions. These questions served Hao's curriculum goals. In group talking, children followed her questions-based teaching and asked questions they were concerned about. In this case, Hao listened to their questions that implied their learning needs. Besides, Zhang gave emphasis on children's help. She considered children's questions for seeking solutions as a way of knowing children's learning needs.

7.3.1.2 Decoding

'Children are not good at language use… I heard one child say that the shape building did not like a circle. I tried to know her words meaning, and decoded to a question, how we could make the shape of the building look like a circle. This is the question I refined.'

<div align="right">(Sun, assistant practitioner)</div>

'Children's needs focus on learning materials… They say, "the paper can't stand." I decoded her words to a question and confirmed whether it is your needs.'

<div align="right">(Zhang, assistant practitioner)</div>

'Children wanted to learn more about shadows, they possibly expressed some phenomena [on shadows].'

<div align="right">(Hao, assistant practitioner)</div>

According to Sun's, Zhang's, and Hao's narratives, identifying children's learning needs was via decoding. They realised that children were unlikely to explicitly express their learning needs via questions. Instead, children were clinging to state learning difficulties or describe phenomena. To identify children's learning needs, Sun provided a procedure. Specifically, she listened to children's statements, made efforts to decode it to questions, and then sought acknowledgement from children.

7.3.1.3 Children's hints

'Children used long blocks to construct eaves of building. They almost made a success but finally they failed. They kept trying many times but failed as well. I thought they showed me they wanted to successfully construct eaves. So, I participated in and guided them to analyse the reason of loss.'

(Sun, assistant practitioner)

'There was a child who may not play a brain-building toy well. I saw he played it for 10 minutes, but he did not find any clues… He got mad. So, this moment I asked him whether he needed me and followed instructions.'

(Zhang, assistant practitioner)

According to Sun's and Zhang's narratives, they sought children's hints to identify their learning needs. For example, Sun envisaged children's trying as a hint of learning needs. She observed children kept trying to build eaves, even though they failed many times. Children's trying attracted Sun's attention, and she realised she needed to get involved and supported them to address problems of building eaves. Besides, Zhang recognised children's emotional change as a hint of learning needs. She observed one child failed to know how his brain-building toy worked. The child did not ask for help from Zhang and kept exploring the toy by himself. However, Zhang noticed the child got in a bad mood so that she decided to proactively ask him whether he needed instructional support.

7.3.2 Balancing inferred needs of EC practitioners and learning needs expressed by children

In this part, I will introduce the ways of decision-making on balancing inferred needs of EC practitioners and learning needs expressed by children. According to Hao's, Li's, Zhang's, and Mo's narratives, I created three themes. They are:

- Schedules-based decision-making
- Trial-oriented decision-making
- Child-focused decision-making

Schedules-based decision-making means that EC practitioners concern with teaching schedules in class, when they meet children's learning needs. Trial-

oriented decision-making means that EC practitioners guide children to meet their own learning needs by self-exploration. They support them in seeking answers they need by providing hints and continuing questions-based dialogue. Finally, child-focused decision-making is conducted to balance EC practitioner's teaching objectives for the whole class and children's personal learning interests.

7.3.2.1 Schedules-based decision-making

'I had a full plan for knowing shadows, and I planned to play the game of stepping each other's shadows with children later. But I saw they were playing this game and asked me lots of questions about shadows. I participated and further explored shadow with children… Another one is about the time I couldn't prepare well. I found children were interested in the materials of shadow puppets in play area, and they asked me lots of questions about that. But I was not so familiar with it. So, what I did was to encourage children to investigate them on their own. I did this because I wanted them to maintain their interest as well as wanted me to know more about it.'

<div align="right">(Hao, assistant practitioner)</div>

'I will meet children's learning needs on time when I recognise it doesn't delay teaching schedule… I will make efforts to combine children's learning needs with my thematic teaching schedule when I take the schedule at early stages.'

<div align="right">(Li, assistant practitioner)</div>

According to Hao's and Li's narratives, teaching schedule was an important element of decision on balancing their inferred needs and learning needs expressed by children. For example, Hao was concerned about whether she was well prepared on teaching. In her narratives, her inferred needs were externalised as knowledge of shadows. She was well prepared on the activity of stepping shadows. When she acknowledged that children were interested in stepping shadows, she decided to immediately meet their learning needs. However, she failed to meet children's learning needs and make them freely play materials of shadow puppets, when she identified they showed great eagerness on materials of shadow puppets. This is because she was not

prepared well to address their problems on shadow puppets. Besides, Li depends on her teaching process to meet children's learning needs. In her narratives, her inferred needs were externalised as thematic teaching plan. As such, she made efforts to address children's learning needs, when her thematic teaching plans were not affected.

7.3.2.2 Trial-oriented decision-making

'Normally, I less directly tell children answer, but we possibly give them some hints. For example, they wanted to know how can make shadows move. I gave them a hint of using torches and encouraged them to further make a try.'

<div align="right">(Zhang, assistant practitioner)</div>

'Children are interested in something they don't know… They learn from what they dig out… I'd like to do in this way… What method you need to use to know the answer you want. Or we can use which experiment to test your [children's] assumption. These ways help children maintain curiosity, know how to make trials, and meet their learning needs.'

<div align="right">(Li, assistant practitioner)</div>

According to Zhang's and Li's narratives, they were concerned with children's sense of self-exploration. To meet learning needs expressed by children, they made efforts to support them to self-explore. For example, Zhang supported children to explore their learning needs by material hints. To make children better explore on shadows, she suggested children made use of torches to make a try. Besides, Li provided probing questions to lead children to self-explore their learning needs. She believed children learned from what they found so that she asked children to think of possible measures to get the answer that children needed and then encouraged them to make trials.

7.3.2.2 Child-focused decision-making from Mo's story

'I set a teaching theme on knowing car, but some of children were not crazy about this. They were interested in dinosaurs… I followed teaching schedule to conduct the theme, but I respected their interests and refurbished a place at play area, putting some materials about knowing dinosaurs, like, picture books

and dinosaur encyclopedia.

<div align="right">(Mo, lead practitioner)</div>

In Mo's story, she made efforts to balance her teaching objectives for the whole class and children's personal learning interests. When she realised that a small group of children were not interested in her thematic teaching activity of 'knowing cars', she decided to involve them in her class at first because she inferred they needed to absorb knowledge that was associated with cars. However, she intended to concern herself with each child's learning needs. As such, she then acknowledged they were interested in knowing dinosaur. To meet the small group of children's learning interests, she made proactively extra works to refurbish play areas and to provide learning materials about dinosaur.

7.4 Discussion

This chapter introduces the linkage between the ethic of care and education from the perspectives of EC practitioners. In line with a theoretical framework of caring, I construct caring both as an aim and means of education. As for caring as an aim of education, my findings discern that EC practitioners conduct caring education via diverse subjects and approaches. The overarching subject in caring education is empathy. Many EC practitioner participants make efforts to teach children to put themselves into others' shoes and feel others' pain. This finding is associated with the theories of 'other-oriented empathy' (Schore, 2015), which refers to a way of socialization via feeling another's distress. To teach children to feel another's distress, The EC practitioner Guo involved the child in the process of dressing the victim's wound and described the possible distress taken by the victim because of the child. This is associated with Johansson's (2007) and Zeece's (2004) studies, who suggested EC practitioners provide actual situation and serious talking to arouse children's empathy. Many EC practitioner participants also envisaged friendship as a teaching subject of caring education. This is consistent with that of Beazidou and Botsoglou (2016) who stated that friendship is closely intertwined with caring in ECE.

Besides, the EC practitioner Sun encourages children at her classroom to

escort younger children who have separation anxiety to go back to classroom. Her teaching case corroborates previous work in cure that refers to a healing movement to fix problems and comfort others' negative emotions (Tomkins, 2020). Finally, many EC practitioner participants induce the term of community to teach children caring. They explain the role of management assistants in a way of benefiting of others. This finding aligns with Fielding and Moss's (2011) studies on democratic community in which members make efforts to make caring relations with each other. To conduct caring education, many EC practitioner participants gave emphasis on teachable moments. They were sensitive with children's learnable moments and spontaneously emerged purposively instructional actions (Hyun & Marshall, 2003).

Furthermore, to teach children friendship, the EC practitioner Huang provided opportunities for them to interact with non-human objects. Her teaching approach is associated with the value of posthumanism (Moss, 2018; Osgood & Mohandas, 2022). Besides, many EC practitioner participants narrated how children learned how to care in their daily lives, and their caring performance was the key source of learning. In this case, children regarded EC partitioner participants' caring performance as role models to learn how to care for others. This corroborates the ideas of Morgenroth et al. (2016) and Noddings (2013), who suggested that role modeling is a significant way to teach ethical subjects to children.

When it comes to caring as a means of education, many EC practitioners patiently listen to children's enquiries and descriptions of learning difficulties and then make response to them. This further supports the idea of Noddings (2012), who suggested that listening and responding are at central places of being a caring teacher. EC practitioner participants also make efforts to observe children's performance in their learning processes. They consider children's trying behaviour and emotional change as hints that possibly align with their learning needs. Their observation confirms a receptive process that is to feel and to see others (Noddings, 2013). As for decision mechanism of needs, many EC practitioner participants consider teaching objectives as inferred needs. They are willing to rethink and combine children's interests with their teachng

schedules, which associates with Noddings's (2005) recommendation on balancing inferred needs of teachers and learning needs expressed by children. Besides, EC practitioner participants support children's self-exploration. This associated with Reggio Emilian's the value of experimentation which suggests 'to think differently, to imagine and try out different ways of doing things' (Moss, 2018, p. 76).

My findings inform how political and cultural ideologies operate in early education, particularly in framing care as both a means and end of educational practice. My findings reveal that EC practitioners' caring behaviours are recognised as valuable learning resources for children to learn how to care for others. This reflects a Confucian conception of care as 'care as modeling' (Lambert, 2016), where the actions of 'the one caring' serve as a key reference point for 'the one being cared for'. My findings also show that EC practitioners connect caring education with serving the class community. This practice reflects the ideological framework of Chinese Communist collectivism (Zhu, 2015), in which individuals are expected to contribute to the collective good through self-regulation and a sense of social responsibility.

Furthermore, my findings also show that many EC practitioners engage in collective teaching to achieve curriculum goals. When they notice that some children are not interested in the planned activity, they first encourage those children to follow along with the group and later provide complementary activities to meet their individual learning needs. This practice reflects a synthesis of Chinese collectivism (e.g., Lin and Huang, 2014; Wang and Ho, 2018) and Western Care Ethics (e.g., Noddings, 2005; Tronto, 2013)—where both group goals and individual interests are acknowledged and addressed. It demonstrates a relational and responsive approach to teaching, in which practitioners balance the collective good with personalised care.

7.5 Summary

This chapter has introduced findings of the linkage between the ethic of care and education. As for caring as an aim of education, my findings on caring subjects associated with empathy, friendships, cure, gratitude, and sense of

community. Many EC practitioner participants also narrated children learn caring via observing their caring performance in daily lives. To conduct caring education, EC practitioner participants set well-prepared teaching schedules, were sensitive with teachable moments, provided resources for children to interact with non-human objects, and had a mindset of being caring models. When it comes to caring as a means of education, my findings show that EC practitioner participants employed movements, such as listening, responding, decoding, and acknowledgment, to identify children's learning needs. EC practitioner participants also observed children's learning performance and sought hints that children possibly needed instructional support. Last but not least, my findings show that decision mechanism on balancing EC practitioner participant's inferred needs and learning needs expressed by children was associated with teaching schedules and learning materials provision. They also made efforts to provide probing questions for children to self-explore their own learning needs. In the next chapter, I will introduce findings of children's caring, when they face their peers, adults, and non-human beings.

Chapter 8: Children's caring for peers, adults, and non-human beings

8.1 Introduction

This chapter will present findings on children's ideas and behaviour in terms of caring for peers, adults, and non-human beings. As described in chapter methodology, I employed conversational activities as well as visual research methods to collect data. As revealed in the data, children undertake caring practice, depending upon the specific situation with others. Varieties of caring expressions are generally categorised as emotional support, kindly reminder, as well as tangible consideration. The study findings align with children's empathy as well as moral explanation from a gender lens.

8.2 Children's caring, when they encounter peers

The section will present findings in terms of children's caring performance, when they encounter their peers. The sources of data are from conversational activities with EC practitioners, children's paintings, as well as photographs captured by EC practitioners in one early years setting. There are themes and typical behaviours generated from the data, see below:

- Mediating peer conflicts
- Sharing experience of zipping up jacket
- Being inclusive with the child with special needs
- Worrying the problem of peer's starvation in undeveloped areas
- Children's 'magic bag': Consoling peers who are in bad mood
- Working for 'a whole class'

8.2.1 Mediating peer conflicts from Jing's narratives

'When two children in my class made a conflict about sharing toys. I saw Kaie voluntarily involved and analysed who was right and who was wrong… He was helping manage the conflict.'

(Jing, lead practitioner)

According to the excerpt above from Jing's narratives, Jing views children's caring as a practice of conflict meditation. She found that one child proactively built a connection as a conflict meditator to help his peers manage conflict. The

source of the conflict was sharing toys. The child was involved in and justified who should not take another's toys without permission. It is clear that the child's caring performance is to voluntarily share his energies and time with peers and to engross the process of resolving peer conflict. Furthermore, he, as a conflict mediator, provides a moral thinking which presents the child with aims to deliver an ethos of respect for each other.

8.2.2 Sharing experience of zipping up jacket

Sharing experience is a way of children's caring. Hedd saw his classmate was struggling to zip up jacket in corridor. He stayed closely with the classmate and then voluntarily shared experience of zipping up jacket (see Figure 8.1). Hedd's movement aligns with an old saying, 'giving a man a fish, you feed him for a day; teaching a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.' His caring is benefiting his classmate from a lens of a long-term development.
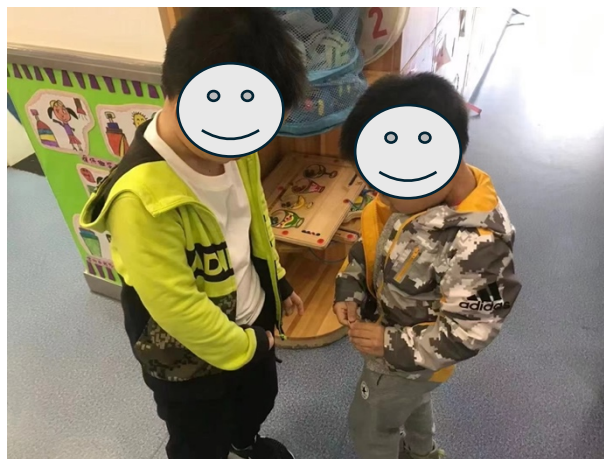
Figure 0-1 *Hedd shares experience of zipping up jacket with peer.*

8.2.3 Being inclusive with the child with special needs

'Actually, children know he is different. However, they don't isolate and marginalise him. Instead, they help him as much as possible… One child was in pair with him to learn fan dance. The child kindly reminded him putting fans into right place and patiently demonstrated for him.'

(Wei, lead practitioner)

According to Wei's narratives, children are willing to accept the special needs child as their peer, and cooperatively create a friendly atmosphere for the child. For example, children pay more attention to the child with special needs. They

are afraid of missing the opportunity to give help for the child. Once the special needs child delays the team's progress of learning fan dance, his teammate does not show annoying emotion, instead, patiently demonstrates the right posture for him.

From Wei's perspective, children's caring performance aligns with inclusion. Fielding and Moss (2011) claimed that respecting is the premise of building an inclusive community. Children in Wei's class show respect to the child with special needs. They accept the child who is different and positively help the child fit in the class. Even though the special needs child finds it difficult to learn fan dance, his mate is willing to provide help for him without complaint.

8.2.4 Worrying about the problem of peer's starvation in undeveloped areas
'Children in my class independently drop leftover food into landfill. Some of them say we should not waste food, because children in undeveloped areas are suffering from starvation.'

(Sun, assistant practitioner)

Children worry about those who are suffering from starvation. Although they cannot make a tangible connection and get a response, they choose to take care of the starvation problem by not wasting food. Children's expressed concern is aligned to the conception of 'caring about' (Noddings, 2010; 2013). 'Caring about' refers to concerning with sufferings of those who are unlikely to encounter. This form of concern cannot be thought as a moral obligation because the caring givers who do not receive a response find it difficult to justify whether their action or practice can cover caring taker's needs. Children in Sun's class worry about starving children in undeveloped areas. Although it is impossible to effectively address the starvation problem by not wasting food, it is obvious that they show empathy to the starving children and concern with the problem of social justice.

8.2.5 Children's 'magic bag': Consoling peers who are in bad mood
I create the metaphor of 'magic bag' to describe how children have various

strategies to console peers who are in bad mood.

Making a promise. Emily sees her mate has tripped over a stone and cries. She uses language to console her mate. She confidently says, 'Don't cry, next time I will cover your needs.' (see Figure 8.2). Emily's way of consoling is to make a promise to her mate. The promise is about compromise and obedience to her mate. Obviously, Emily has confidence to cover all of expressed needs of her mate. Her promise can be thought as a knot that sustains their caring relation. It not only proves Emily's encouragement to keep caring for her mate, but it also promotes Emily's moral obligation to her mate in the future.

Emily: 'When I see her be tripped over a stone, I will say don't cry, next time I will cover your needs.'
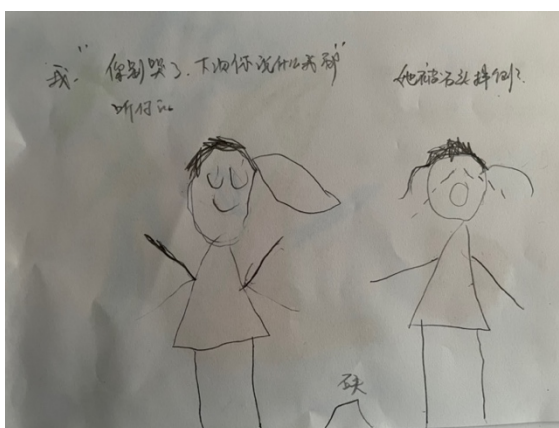
Figure 0-2 *Emily, aged 5, uses language to console her mate who is crying.*

Sending a gift. Lauryn takes care of her mate who is crying by sending a gift (see Figure 8.3). She concerns with another's emotion and knows that sending gift is a universal way to make other happy. In this respect, Lauryn brings her happy experience into the other. Consequently, she views sending gift is the best way of consoling who are crying. It is not clear whether Lauryn's caring performance could effectively cover the other's needs, because she does not enquire the reason that someone is crying. As a result, it is difficult to justify whether they have formed a caring relation. However, she shows empathy to someone who is unhappy and positively provides a solution to make the other happier. Her performance is the motivational foundation of building a caring relation with the other.

Lauryn: 'If someone cries, I will send a gift.'
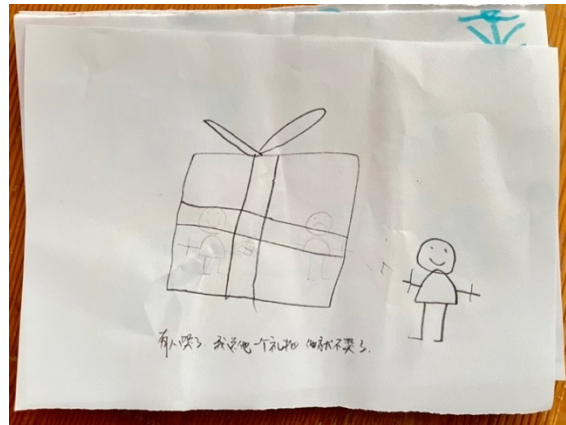
Figure 0-3 *Lauryn, aged 5, send a gift to someone cries.*

Making a funny face. Amos aims to make his mate who is unhappy laugh by making a funny face. He is also willing to wait for his mate to become happy, and then plays together on the ground. (see Figure 8.4). Amos's caring story gives evidence of the conception of reciprocity explained by a patriarchal value (Noddings, 2010). It means that one's caring giving is conditional needing a compensation. Amos makes caring efforts to make his mate happier by making a funny face. His expectation of playing with his mate drives this caring performance.

Amos: 'if I see he is unhappy, I will make a funny face to make him happy. When he is happy we can play on the ground together.'
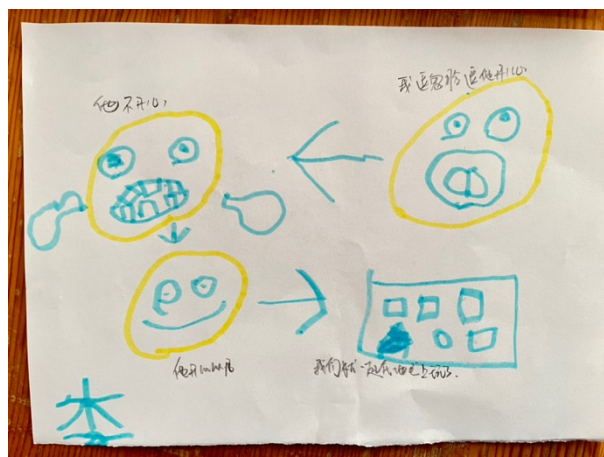
Figure 0-4 *Amos, aged 5, makes a funny face and plays with his mate who becomes happy.*

8.2.6 Working for 'a whole class'

'*A ball was broken in my class. One child spent tokens that he earned in play area buying a new one for a whole class.'*

(Mo, lead practitioner)

The child's caring is to work for benefiting of a whole class. In Mo's early years setting, a play area in which children can gain the experience of money management has been designed. For example, children not only can earn tokens by making artifacts under the guidance of EC practitioners, but they can also spend tokens to change merchandise. According to Mo's narratives, the child in her class puts the whole class of peers at priority, spending his or her own tokens in order to buy a ball for a whole class. It is fair to say that the child aims to benefit a whole class by his tangible practice. The similar example can also be found in Peter's and Ben's caring performance. Peter and Ben voluntarily deliver food packages for a whole class. (see Figure 8.5). They distribute these packages to the whole class by paying physical stamina.

Figure 0-5 *Peter (right side) and Ben (left side) deliver the whole class's food package.*

8.3 Children's caring, when they encounter adults

This section will present findings on children's caring for adults. I selected two adult groups: the children's parent and the EC practitioner. As for the former, the source of data is from children's paintings about how they look after their parents who are ill at home. When it comes to the latter, the EC practitioner is considered as 'the being cared for'. I conducted a series of conversational

activities with EC practitioners to collect data about what kind of caring they receive from children in class. Findings from two groups show that children conduct both verbal caring and tangible caring when they realise adults are uncomfortable or at risk.

Verbal caring. Verbal caring refers to a form of language that children take to express their worry to adults. For example, Ben makes a kindly reminder to He to be cautious with safety concerns. 'Ben tells me move slowly and don't fall down, when he sees that I am on a ladder, taking painting papers for him.' (He, assistant practitioner). It is well-known that drinking water aligns with an effective protection from illness. Matthew reminds Jing to drink water. 'Matthew reminds me drink water when he is drinking.' (Jing, lead practitioner).

Tangible caring. Tangible caring means the caring practice that children conduct to adults. As for the EC practitioner group, for example, children give hugs and circle around practitioner Li when they know Li is uncomfortable from stomachache. 'They together gave me a big hug… I was around by children. Even though I felt bodily uncomfortable and stomachache, I was touched and felt warm from children's caring.' (Li, assistant practitioner). Daniel passes Wei's water can, signifying that he wants Wei to drink water as soon as possible, when Wei cannot speak because of larynx inflammation. 'I pointed my larynx and shook head… Daniel proactively passed my water can. Although he did not speak anything, I can feel that he wants me to drink water for releasing the pain from the larynx inflammation.' (Wei, lead practitioner). Abby warms Han's hands when she feels Han's hands are cold. 'Abby was holding my hand, but my hands were so cold. I was thinking of she might separate at once, but she did not and helped me warm hands.' (Han, assistant practitioner).

When it comes to the parent group, Ruby spontaneously passes ice pack to her father, when she knows her father's legs get injured (see Figure 8.6).

Ruby: 'I bring ice pack to my dad, when I see his one leg injuries.'

Figure 0-6 *Ruby, aged 5, brings an ice pack to her father whose legs get injured.*

Kitty proactively substitutes her mother to do household work, when she knows her mother gets ill (see Figure 8.7).

Figure 0-7 *Kitty, aged 5, shoulders her mother's household work.*

8.4 Children's caring for non-human beings

This section will address the question of how children care for non-human beings, such as animals and plants. Findings present that children generally know how to look after non-human beings. They conduct similar ways of caring for animals and plants, according to image-based dialogue, children's paintings and photographs captured by EC practitioners. The main ways of caring for animals and plants are feeding and watering. For example, according to the image-based dialogue between the practitioner Zhang and Matt, aged 5, I found that Matt looks after dog and cat by feeding food. He put dog food and water into separate containers (see the dialogue transcript below). Likewise, Jerome feeds snail a piece of leaf in class. He cautiously delivers the leaf to the snail's

mouth and patiently waits for the snail to eat it (see Figure 8.8). Lewis waters houseplants in class by taking advantage of a water pot. He carefully waters the houseplant's leaves, stem, and soil (see Figure 8.9).

EC practitioner Zhang: 'How do you look after dogs and cats?'
Matt: 'I will feed them dog food, cat food, and water.'
EC practitioner Zhang: 'I see, you will feed and water dogs and cats.'
Matt: 'Yes, I will also put them into different boxes.'
(Zhang, assistant practitioner, transcripts from the image-based dialogue)

Figure 0-9 *Jerome is feeding snail a piece of leaf in class.*

Figure 0-8 *Lewis is watering houseplants in the classroom.*

8.5 Discussion

Findings showed that children aged 4-6 in this study enacted caring by taking the perspective of 'the being cared for'. For example, many children provided food to the snails based on their living requirements and supplied appropriate

amounts of water to nurture plants. Some of them also did something to help when recognising the distress of 'the being cared for'. For example, one child warmed the practitioner Han's hands, when recognising that Han's hands were cold; one child helped her mother do household work at home, when recognising that her mother was uncomfortable; and one child showed inclusion, when recognising 'the being cared for' had special needs. These results challenge the image of the child as 'egocentric' (Piaget, 1959), which means that considering things by taking other's viewpoints is available to children by the age of 7 years or above. In addition, children in this study showed their ability to separate their own feelings from others. For example, according to the drawings listed above, children used different facial expressions to divide themselves and others. They drew themselves smiling faces, but a crying face was given to the other person who was in a time of distress. These results are associated with children's empathic development. Dunn and Kendrick (1982) argued that children's ability to differentiate another's emotional experiences from their own was grounded in developing empathy. Hoffman (2000) claimed that one psychologically compared his or her own feeling with another's feeling, when he or she empathised.

Findings in this study show that children naturally provided caring for those who were in times of distress. For example, many EC practitioner participants felt being cared for by children, when they realised that children proactively provided considerate help and intimated contact to comfort their distress from stomach ache or larynx inflammation. When caring for peers who were crying or unhappy, children made multiple efforts such as gift giving, promising, and making a funny face. Such considerable efforts to care discern that a recognition of the other person's distress has been formed (Dunn,1988). In addition to recognition of distress, children's caring derived from their natural impulse. This result is evident as what Noddings (2010; 2013) suggested is a form of natural caring (I have discussed it in Chapter 3). Occasionally, children showed a sense of caring to those who were not physically present. For example, one child in this study showed anxiety about those children who were suffering from starvation in disadvantaged areas and called for stopping food waste in the classroom. It is captured by Nodding's concept of 'caring-about'

(2013). 'Caring-about' means someone shows their concerns with others but cannot be heard by one who needs care. It is clear that the child in this study cares about those who are struggling with starvation. Interestingly, the child also raises the other persons' awareness of food waste prevention in the classroom and makes an appeal to them to join in caring about individuals suffering from hunger. The child's caring enactment demonstrates cooperation in food waste prevention and echoes what the United Nations Environment Programme (2024) argued, that coordinated actions can effectively combat food waste.

Findings show that children made efforts to form reciprocal relationships, when they enacted caring for other persons. For example, according to the drawings listed above, children used different facial expressions to divide themselves and others. They drew themselves smiling faces, but crying faces were given to the other persons who were in distress. As a result, the drawings inform that children could generate a feeling of joy, when enacting caring for those who were unhappy or crying. A reciprocal relationship can be also found in the case that the child was likely to teach rather than directly satisfy the need of zipping up a jacket expressed by his peer. In this respect, the child took his own experiences into account when addressing his peer's needs, and his peer accepted the child's way of caring. These results are evident in that Noddings (2013) recognised personal delight and direct response to the caring giver as two signs of reciprocity in caring relations. The results are also consistent with a feminist understanding of reciprocity. Noddings (2010) argued that reciprocity in female experience calls for no expectation of compensatory action, and caring individuals do not typically engage in calculating the potential benefits that are derived from their acts of caregiving. However, occasionally, one child in this study enacted caring for the sake of personal aims. It aligns with what Noddings (ibid.) recognised as reciprocity which in male-dominated world is recognised as a means of anticipating something beneficial from the caring recipients.

Finally, findings of children's caring revealed a relationship between care and self-sacrifice. For instance, one child used his tokens to buy a new ball for the class, when recognising that his peers needed it. This result aligns with a discussion about self-sacrifice that I have completed in Chapter 6. In this case,

the child voluntarily sacrificed his own financial privilege to meet needs of his classmates. Previously, I argued that it is unlikely to avoid self-sacrifice when 'the one caring' made an effort to support or meet needs of others, even though Noddings (2013) emphasised that those who enact care ethics should also attend their own needs spontaneously. Here, I aim to reaffirm that the motive for caring drives sacrificial behaviour, rather than a deliberate act of self-sacrifice intended to demonstrate care. Interestingly, this story may also reflect ideological values associated with Chinese Communism (Bao, 2020), where individuals are expected to serve the needs of others and prioritise the collective good.

8.6 Summary

This chapter has discussed findings of children's caring in this study with previous academic work. In general, children enacted caring by taking the perspective of 'the being cared for'. It challenges Piagetan image of the child as 'egocentric' but is evident their empathy was aroused as enacting care for others. Furthermore, findings in this chapter also showed that children enacted natural caring for those who were in need or in distress. Occasionally, one child showed his 'caring-about' to those who were suffering hunger in disadvantaged areas and raised awareness of food waste prevention to the whole class. Finally, children formed reciprocal relationships, when they enacted caring for others. Most of them did something to help others without compensation, while one child enacted caring for the sake of personal aims.

Chapter 9: Discussion

9.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a general discussion of my findings. I will firstly discuss my findings with relational ethics in ECE. My findings demonstrate that responsibility for the other and respect for others are two common grounds, as early childhood (EC) practitioner participants make collective decisions with and enact caring for colleagues and children in their classrooms. I will then discuss my findings with concepts, theories, and principles from previous literature such as early childhood professionalism, 'educare', professional love, and children's agency.

9.2 Responsibility for the other and respect for otherness: two common grounds in collective decision-making and caring enactment

In this study, my findings demonstrate that EC practitioner participants have two common grounds, when they make collective decisions with and enact caring for children and colleagues in their classrooms. One is responsibility for the other. For example, many EC practitioner participants recognise that they are not only responsible for children's learning and development in collective decisions but also for protecting children's dignity and addressing children's distress. Similarly, EC practitioner participants also take responsibilities of colleagues. For example, lead practitioner participants are responsible for initiatives that come from associated practitioners in their classrooms, when seeking educational transformation in collective decisions. They also practice caring responsibilities for colleagues by self-sacrifice and collegiality. The second common ground is respect for the other. For example, the lead practitioner Wei welcomes plural arguments and respects colleagues' ideas in the process of collective decision-making. She integrates different ideas with colleagues and cooperatively makes final decisions on educational activities. The lead practitioner Mo contributes to satisfying the needs expressed by children in her classroom. She did not make efforts to persuade them following her teaching schedule in terms of 'knowing cars'. Rather, she meets their needs on 'knowing dinosaurs' by providing learning materials and encourages them to self-explore and to communicate with others who are also interested in

dinosaurs in the classroom. In Wei's and Mo's cases, they treat both colleagues and children as entities and respect their ideas in collective decisions and personal learning needs beyond teaching schedule. These results are associated with Emmanuel Levinas's theories of ethics and alterity. According to Marcus's (2008) analysis on Levinas's ethical position, alterity requires the other person in a relation not to be reduced to a category or concept but to be treated holistically, as an individual. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argued that Levinas's ethics of alterity emphasised the importance of respecting rather than assimilating the other person in a relation.

Finally, the two common grounds of responsibility for the other and respect for others are consistent with that of Moss (2018) who purposed the common themes generated from relation ethics (consisting of ethics of care and ethics of encounter) in ECE, and relevant findings suggest that practicing participatory democracy and caring requires EC practitioners to concern with ideas and needs that comes from colleagues and children as well as to take responsibilities of benefiting both children and colleagues.

9.3 Collective decision, interdependence, and a feminist democratic ethic of care

This study has examined participatory democracy in collective decision mechanism in the classroom. Findings in this study show that to reach a common ground on affecting children's learning and development in collective decisions, EC practitioner participants made efforts to form interdependent relationships with their colleagues/children/parents. This case is captured by Tronto's (2013) feminist democratic ethic of care. A feminist democratic ethic of care emphasises the centrality of care in democracies. Tronto defended this argument starting from discussing the nature of human lives. She argued that all humans are innately living in relationships. They are both independent and dependent and both recipients and givers of care. To approach a democratic practice, the ethic of care creates possibilities for reducing power differentials, which helps people interdependently form common ground with each other as much as possible and finally address shared concerns in their lives. In this study, for example, many EC practitioner participants had built 'tunnels' to

involve colleagues, children, and parents in addressing their shared concerns associated with educational issues in the classroom. They also made caring practices such as being attentive to and responsive to another's interests and needs, relied on their professional knowledge, and showed inclusion with and reliance on other participants in making collective decisions. These results are evidence of what Tronto's feminist democratic ethic of care means.

9.4 Early childhood professionalism, relationality, democracy, and emotional labour

My findings show that complex social networks have been built in collective decision-making in the classroom. According to many EC practitioner participants' narratives, they have made professional alliances with colleagues and parents, and initiatives that generate from themselves, their colleagues, and parents are equally regarded as important sources of collective decisions in relation to educational change in the classroom. This result discerns that relationality is at the heart of early childhood professionalism (Dalli, 2008; Edwards, 2015; Miller et al., 2012; Urban, 2008; Warren, 2014; Warin, 2014). Furthermore, discussions in Chapter 5 have presented that EC practitioner participants recognise children as social agents who are capable of constructing and influencing their lives in the classroom, which matches one of the significant qualities of a democratic professional in ECE (Oberhuemer, 2005). This study also found that EC practitioner participants are responsive to the needs of children and parents, make efforts to maintain caring relations with parents by emphatic consoling, and have qualities of being a caring leader (I have discussed it in Chapter 5). These results match the images of ethical professional that have been detected in Finnish National curricula of early childhood education and care (Melasalmi et al., 2022). However, my findings challenge neoliberal images of early childhood professionalism. Specifically, findings on making collective decisions based on children's interests, learning experiences, and professional judgment do not support the fact that professional identity impacted by Neoliberalism regards practitioners as 'technicians' (Moss, 2006) who are required to perform push-down early childhood curriculum in their decision-making (Yang et al., 2022).

Findings on EC practitioners' commitments to caring such as critical reflectivity towards a hegemonic form of collective decision, voluntary self-sacrifice, psychological empowerment, collegiality, and sensitivity with children's distress exemplifies that EC practitioner participants position their professional identity within a feminist and self-regulatory model (Osgood, 2006a; 2006b) and invest emotional labour in their daily professional practice (Osgood, 2010; Taggart, 2011). The result of EC practitioner participants' emotional investment in their practical lives varies. For example, when EC practitioner participants in this study naturally cared for children and parents, some of them generated joy from parent's appreciation and children's progress, while some of them felt burnout from children's taunts and parent's 'regulatory gaze' (I have discussed this in Chapter 6). The varied results in relation to EC practitioners' emotional labour discern Lynch's (2007) clarification on the fact that labouring and maintaining caring relations with young children is regarded as a 'hard work' (p.554) that is not only pleasurable but also burdensome. Maintaining caring relations with young children also needs courage. My findings show that the practitioner Li continuously provides caring for the child whose emotional state is negatively affected by the case of parental divorce with her colleagues in the classroom. Even though Li cannot recognise whether the child accepts her caring and therefore generates guilt, her courage motivates her to keep caring for the child. In this case, Li's courage in her caring performance has to do with emotional resilience that is regarded as one of the professional identities in ECE suggested by Page (2013).

9.5 The ethic of care, 'educare', attachment, professional love, and early childhood education

This study has examined the relationship between the ethic of care and education. Findings show that EC practitioner participants integrate a mind of caring and intellectual capacity to support children's learning and development. For example, the practitioners in my study listened actively to the children to be able to incorporate teachable moments to develop children's understanding of empathy. Specifically, they listened to children's informal dialogue with their peers in the classroom, identified children's concerns and issues, ignited children's desire to learn, formed a temporary teaching plan, and engaged them

in caring interactions with others. EC practitioner participants also addressed the learning needs expressed from children in the classroom. They stepped out of their teaching schedule, maintained children's learning interests (e.g., knowing dinosaur and shadow), and provided relevant learning resources and spaces to meet children's individual learning needs. These results discern an ethic of care-centred teaching (Noddings, 2012). In particular, the practitioners' engagement in transforming a feeling of care to decisive teaching action exemplifies the ideas of Goldstein (1998). Goldstein argues that the ethic of care provides a way of thinking to form early childhood curriculum that involves both emotional and intellectual elements. This challenges the perception of caring 'as little more than gentle smiles and warm hugs' (p. 259). The findings discussed above also inform on integrated roles of teaching and care, which are associated with the concept of 'educare' (Warin, 2014). They are evident from what Warin suggested that teaching with care not only provided children with a holistic set of learning goals but also opportunities of participation in the process of forming caring relations with others.

Furthermore, conducting caring pedagogy requires EC practitioner to consider children's safety. The findings of this study show that many EC practitioner participants were concerned with children's physical safety. For example, the practitioner Guo put children's physical safety as the significant consideration when she made collective decisions on children's learning with colleagues in the classroom. The practitioner Song constantly stayed ready to hold the child who started learning how to run. EC practitioner participants also paid attention to children's emotional security. For example, the practitioner Huang consoled a child with separation anxiety by company and intimacy contact before teaching. These results discern that EC practitioners contribute to establishing attachment relationships with children (Page, 2017) and involve love in their daily practice (Page, 2011). The results also are consistent with those of Page and Elfer (2013) who highlighted the importance of an attachment based pedagogy in enabling children's learning and development to thrive.

Findings in this study also show that EC practitioner participants formed a close relationship with children and parents. It is captured by Page's (2011; 2013;

2017; 2018) term of professional love. The concept of professional love is constructed starting from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1953) and framed built upon Noddings's (2010) the ethic of care. Page (2017; 2018) articulated that attachment theory grounded professional love in experimental psychology. She pointed out that a child gained the best development when he or she was securely attached and had an adult (a key person) to trust and rely on in times of distress; EC practitioner was positioned as the key person in the same relationship as child's primary caregiver. Page (2011; 2013) also shaped professional love as a relational practice, drawing on Noddings's (2010) the ethic of care. She recognised EC practitioner-child attachment as a caring approach to children's wellbeing and emphasised EC practitioners' abilities to de-centre themselves in relations with, to concern with the needs of, and to form an enduring, emotionally intimate, and reciprocal relationship with children and parents. Following these theoretical works, Page modelled her professional love as a 'triangle of love' (2018) between child, parent, and EC practitioner and proposed following developmental steps of professionally loving practice for EC practitioners. My findings in relation to parental involvement in collective decisions, addressing children's needs, and children's caring for EC practitioners (e.g., holding and warming hands) are evidence of Page's suggestions on the first and second step in the process of professionally loving practice – EC practitioners become self-aware on the attentiveness to the needs of parents and children and dedicate to addressing these needs. My findings also show that the EC practitioner participants showed emphatic ability to detect parent's anxiety about children's learning and defended their needs for children by a body of professional knowledge, when they involved parents in collective decisions on classroom curriculum. These results are consistent with the third and fourth step of professional love practice – an intimate and reciprocal relationship between EC practitioner, child, and parent has been built.

Finally, findings from the practitioner Guo who saved a child's dignity informs a relationship between familial love and professional love. She built a secure attachment with a child who took out a toy from his peer's locker, formed an educational alliance with the child's parents, and encouraged parents to share more love and care with the child. Guo's array of enactments are evidence of

Page's (2011; 2018) suggestion that professional love is complementary to and facilitative of familial love, rather than threatening to parents' relationships with their children.

9.6 Children's agency, postmodernity, theory of mind, and emotion understanding

This study has examined 4-6 year-old children's caring for peers, adults, and non-human beings. Findings show that child participants de-centred and actively made caring connections with the world. For example, when they acknowledged someone was in distress, they not only presented a habit of mind of considerateness, inclusion and worry, but also enacted multiple forms of caring to relieve someone's pain or anxiety. Specifically, child participants' caring enactments, such as addressing needs, sacrificing personal privilege, consoling, and healing disputes, were similar with what EC practitioner participants did. They also took their own forms of caring (e.g., intimate contacts, gifting, and making funny face) for persons in distress and provided right nutrients that animals and plants need. These results are evident in viewing children from a postmodern perspective and align with what Dahlberg et al. (2007) suggested that children are capable of actively engaging with the world and exercising responsibilities for others' wellbeing. The results also recognise children as social agents who contribute to making influences on others around them **(**Esser et al., 2016; Nijnatten, 2013; Vandenbroeck & Bie, 2006; Wyness, 1999).

Furthermore, the findings of children's caring in this study challenge a Piagetian image of children as 'egocentric' (Piaget, 1959), meaning that children were able to consider things by taking their own points of view only until they are 7 years old or older. However, the findings align with children's theory of mind. Theory of mind is seen as children's ability to understand a person's action such as his or her desires, thoughts, beliefs, and emotions (Cutting & Dunn, 1999). In this study, for example, child participants showed empathy (I have discussed in Chapter 8) to those who had different emotional states (e.g., unhappiness, discomfort, and distress) than themselves and then provided caring. It is evident in the case of young children's theory of mind with its aspect of understanding

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of another's emotions (Dunn, 1988; Dunn & Kendrick, 1982). Children's theory of mind has to do with their beliefs. Doherty (2009) suggested that children's ability to take the perspective of others is caused by their beliefs. This study contributes less to the basis of children's theory of mind in relation to caring for others. Nevertheless, following Doherty's point, I infer that the child participants' caring derives from their beliefs of their abilities to care and the necessity of exercising their caring responsibilities for those who were acknowledged in times of unhappiness or distress.

9.7 Summary

This chapter has discussed main findings in this study with prior academic work. Firstly, findings of collective decision mechanism and caring discern two common grounds about forming social relations in ECE. They include being responsible to the other and respecting the otherness. Secondly, findings in relation to collective decisions mechanism is evidence of Tronto's feminist democratic ethic of care. EC practitioner participants make efforts to form interdependent relationships with their colleagues/children/parents to address their shared concerns about children's learning and development. Thirdly, findings generated from EC practitioner participants' narrative discern that they are ascribed as democratic, ethical, and feminist EC professionals. They not only conduct intellectual work but also invest emotional labour in their work. The findings are also captured by Page's professional love. Many EC practitioner participants position the ethic of care and intimacy at the heart of educational activities in their classroom. Finally, findings of children's caring discerns the image of the child as social agent who actively participates in social construction and makes caring connections with others around them. The findings also inform that children aged 4-6 have theory of mind and empathetically understand another's emotions.

Reflecting through a cultural lens: Western theories, Chinese ideologies, and early childhood education

This section reflects on the use of Western theoretical frameworks to interpret democracy and ethics of care in Chinese ECE. While this study draws on

theories developed by Western scholars such as Fielding and Moss (2011) and Noddings (2013), the findings show that Chinese democratic and caring practices in ECE are deeply shaped by local political and cultural ideologies—particularly Confucian ethics and Chinese Communist collectivism.

Western theories of democracy tend to emphasise individual autonomy and equality in decision-making. However, the findings indicate that Confucian ideologies, particularly relational hierarchy (Li, 2022), shape how participants engage in collective decision-making. For example, children's participation in China is often guided by EC practitioners, and parents tend to defer to practitioners' authority in educational matters. Similarly, while Western ethics of care (Noddings, 2013) highlight mutual reciprocity and attention to individual needs, the findings show that care in Chinese ECE tends to reflect other-directedness and group orientation. For instance, EC practitioners, influenced by Chinese Communist collectivism (Zhu, 2015), often design their teaching plans around the idea of caring for the classroom community and serving its members.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal that Western traditions of democracy and care can be integrated into Chinese ECE practices. For example, many lead EC practitioners in this study intentionally decrease their hierarchical power in collective decision-making, creating more space for colleagues to contribute ideas and co-develop educational plans. This reflects democratic values, such as shared responsibility and collaboration, highlighted by Fielding and Moss (2011). Similarly, many EC practitioners encourage children to follow group teaching plans while also paying attention to their individual learning needs. This approach reflects a model of care that balances both collective goals and personal interests. The focus on group learning aligns with Chinese collectivist values (Bao, 2020), while the attention to individual needs reflects Western care ethics (Noddings, 2013).

Chapter 10: Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will firstly introduce findings in response to research questions that I set out for this study. For example, in response to research questions associated with collective decision mechanism in the classroom, the commitment to caring, the linkage between ethic of care and education, and children's caring, I made conversational activities with 15 EC practitioner participants who are working in 11 public-run early years settings in Beijing, China. In practice, conversational activities are made by one-to-one interviews and focus groups, and the time for conversations with EC practitioner participants approximately lasted no more than 60 minutes for one-to-one interviews and no more than 90 minutes for focus groups. As for collective decision mechanism, I totally created nine themes. Decisions were made about the matters that affected children's learning and classroom lives, and the processes of collective decision-making were based on needs expressed by members who participate in the processes of collective decision-making. As for the commitment to caring, I totally created ten themes. Their commitments to caring derived from interactions with their colleagues and children in class, while the responses from children and parents affect their commitment to caring enhanced or diminished.

When it comes to the linkage between the ethic of care and education, I assumed caring worked as both an aim and means of education and totally created 12 themes. At the side of caring as an aim of education, EC practitioner participants signified five learning objectives of and four approaches to caring education. When caring is as a means of education, EC practitioner participants signified three ways of identifying children's learning needs and three types of decision mechanism on balancing inferred needs of EC practitioner participants and learning needs expressed by children in class. During the balancing process, EC practitioner participants considered teaching objectives as inferred needs. Finally, I asked explorative questions to EC practitioner participants about children's caring. As I confirmed children were capable of caring for others, I recruited 51 child participants aged 4-6 recruited in three public-run

early years settings and organised image-based dialogue and drawing activity to better know their understanding of caring for their peers, adults, and non-human beings. To complement the data about children's caring, I also interpreted photographs collected from one EC practitioner participant. In line with the data, I totally created nine themes, and findings showed that children actively enacted natural caring for those who were in need or in times of distress. After responding to research questions that I set out in this study, I will discuss some research limitations and suggest relevant recommendations for future research directions. I will then discuss theoretical and practical implications.

10.2 Contribution to knowledge

This study provides valuable insights into participatory democracy and the ethic of care in ECE. Firstly, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge on participatory democracy in ECE (Fielding & Moss, 2011; Moss, 2018) by presenting diverse practices of participation. For example, the findings highlight a common concern on children's learning and development, when collective decisions are made by EC practitioners with children/colleagues/parents. Furthermore, the study reveals that EC practitioners not only show habit of minds rooted in the ethic of care, respecting the otherness, and interdependence, but also make roles of democratic professional (Oberhuemer, 2005), such as employing child-inclusive ways and building partnership with colleagues and parents, when they make collective decision-making in the classroom.

Secondly, this study contributes significantly to our understanding of the ethic of care in ECE. for example, it reinforces the argument that the ethic of care is central to early childhood professionalism (Osgood, 2006a; 2006b; 2010; Taggart, 2011; 2016) and enhances the concept of 'educare' (Warin, 2014) by providing empirical examples of caring practices in class. These examples illustrate how EC practitioners conduct caring education and identify and respond to children's learning needs in class. Moreover, the study sheds light on EC practitioners' commitment to caring—an area that has received limited

attention in prior research. The findings affirm that EC practitioners enact caring without compensation (Noddings, 2010; 2013). However, it also challenges aspects of Noddings's (2013) framework of the ethic of care, particularly the suggestion that caring should avoid self-sacrifice.

Finally, this study contributes to the decolonisation of educational theory by showing that democracy and care in Chinese ECE cannot be fully understood through Western paradigms alone. Instead, they tend to be interpreted through a cultural situated lens, particularly Chinese Collectivist values and Confucius's relational hierarchies. This informs that, within Chinese early years settings, democracy is relational rather than egalitarian, and ethics of care are understood not only through mutual dialogue but also modelling and the sense of community.

10.3 How collective decisions between EC practitioners and colleagues/children/parents are made in the classroom

In order to approach EC practitioner's understanding of collective decision mechanism in early years settings, I focus on the process of participation in collective decision-making on class matters. I also provided EC practitioner participants with three decision situations to retrospectively interpret their participation. They are decisions made by them and their colleagues/children/parents. In conversations, EC practitioner participants reflected common concerns, their considerations, other members' needs, ways of participation, and motives and constraints in collective decision-making. According to findings and discussion in this study, EC practitioner participants understand collective decision mechanism in a complex and diverse way, and their extent of participation associates with specific situations and job roles.

10.3.1 Common concern: matters that affect children

EC practitioner participants narrated that their common concerns were the matters that affected children, when they made collective decisions with their colleagues, children, and parents. They were communally concerned with the issues of children's learning and protection. To better address such issues, they involved many elements in collective decisions, such as children's personal

learning information, children's daily interactions with EC practitioner and their peers, children's safety, teaching objectives, and inferred needs on children's learning expressed by parents. Many EC practitioner participants narrated they proactively mitigated the extent of participation in curriculum design, when they know less about children's interests and previous learning experiences.

10.3.2 Care

Many EC practitioner participants participated in collective decisions with caring attitudes. They showed great attentiveness with members who participate in collective decisions, listened to their ideas, responded to their needs, and finally negotiated the final decision based on each other's needs. These movements exemplified that EC practitioners made efforts to form caring relations (Noddings, 2013) with other members in collective decisions. Occasionally, EC practitioner participants also comforted the members' anxiety and showed empathy at the processes of collective decision-making. Besides, the extent of participation associated with caring leadership. Certainly, many EC practitioner participants narrated class leader accountability brought hierarchical power to final decisions made between them and their colleagues. This is because the lead EC practitioner would be accountable, if any practitioner in the classroom received complaints. However, assistant practitioners gained a high extent of participation, when lead practitioners took their leading role in a caring way. According to lead EC practitioner participants' narratives, their leading performance met many conditions of caring leadership suggested by Noddings (2006). For example, they aimed to benefit children's learning, were willing to listen to assistant practitioner's ideas, led but not dominated discussions for collective decisions, and were responsible and open to experimental ideas for change.

10.3.3 Hierarchy

Caring leadership significantly constrains collective decisions made by 'one voice'. Nonetheless, hierarchical power still makes a role of interference with decision results negotiated between EC practitioners in class. According to one EC practitioner participant's narratives, her principal imposed hierarchical

interference on the class decision about parent-child activity design. This is because the principal regarded it as a counterpart of 'Double Minor' policies. In order to avoid unnecessary accountability by inspectors, the principal finally vetoed the class decision.

10.3.4 Child-inclusion

Many EC practitioner participants regarded children as capable persons who were able to have an impact on decision outcomes. To better help children participate, they created a child-inclusive environment for children to participate in the process of decision-making. Considering children's expressive capabilities, they employed hands-up and queuing to make children vote. They also encouraged children to express their ideas by drawing. These cases also confirm that EC practitioner participants made efforts to fulfil the children's rights of participation (UNICEF,1989).

10.3.5 Tokenism

It is true that many EC practitioner participants were concerned with the issues of child inclusion, when they involved children in collective decisions. However, my findings also associate with a case that children were invited to participate in the process of collective decision-making, whereas they failed to have any impact on decision outcomes. One EC practitioner participant reflected that her colleague involved children in collective decisions but suspended their ideas when that differed from what the colleague expected. This case is consistent with studies on child participation within a value of tokenism (Gai & Duramy, 2015), which means that children were involved in collective decisions to instrumentally assist decision-makers to better meet their expected outcomes.

10.3.6 Professionalism

Many EC practitioner participants regarded their colleagues and parents as collaborators to jointly make decisions on the matters that affected children's learning. They also offered opportunities for children to make impacts on the matters that affected children themselves. These cases were associated with the criterion of democratic professionalism in ECE (Oberhuemer, 2005; Fielding

& Moss, 2011), such as building alliances with colleagues and parents as well as respecting children's rights of participation. Besides, some EC practitioner participants involved parents in collective decisions on curriculum design in order to benefit children's learning. They focused on parental resources to make connections between parent's expertise and class curriculum. Parents also took a complementary job to assist EC practitioner participants to develop teaching activities. A possible explanation for these cases might be the term of professional agency (Edwards, 2015), which highlights EC practitioner capabilities of integration of children learning resources from multiple stakeholders in ECE.

10.4 What commitments to caring do EC practitioners have? What are the factors affecting their commitments to caring?

In addition to exploration of EC practitioners' understanding of collective decision mechanism, this study also examines EC practitioners' understanding of caring. I investigated EC practitioners' understanding of caring through their commitments. According to EC practitioner participants' narratives, their commitments to caring generated from interactions with their colleagues and children in class, and the construction of commitments to caring is discursive and contextual. Besides, their commitments to caring are vulnerable. The responses from parents and children, more or less, impact on their commitments to caring.

10.4.1 Self-sacrifice

EC practitioner participants were committed to caring for colleagues by self-sacrifice. They voluntarily sacrificed personal time, energies, and job privileges to assist their colleagues to complete jobs. Besides, according to one EC practitioner participant narrative, violating work regulation was also as a form of self-sacrifice. In her case, she independently supported children have dinner so as to meet her colleague's needs, even though this job was regulated to be done by her and her colleagues. It is worth noting that she intellectually violated work regulations. Once she recognised violating work regulations failed to put herself in trouble, she made efforts to take care of her colleagues. This case

confirms Noddings's (2013) studies on the ethic of care, who suggested that 'the one caring' necessarily cares for himself or herself before caring for others.

10.4.2 Collegiality

Collegiality was also envisaged as a commitment to caring for colleagues. According to one EC practitioner participant's narrative, she had committed to create a collegial environment in class. However, her two colleagues generated disputes and conflicts in class. In order to reform collegial relations between the two of them, she made efforts to heal disputes, fix problems, and console their bad emotions. In this case, all efforts made by the EC practitioner participant are associated with an explanation of caring as cure (Tomkins, 2020).

10.4.3 Psychological empowerment

Further to that, psychological empowerment regarded as a commitment to caring, when the EC practitioner took care of colleagues. Psychological empowerment referred to a comprehensive motivational system (Dust et al., 2018). According to one EC practitioner participant's narrative, she generated the commitment to psychological empowerment, as the lead practitioner successfully motivated her to complete teaching tasks by keeping company, providing useful suggestions based on her teaching tasks, and unselfishly sharing teaching experiences.

10.4.4 Saving the child's reputation

In addition to the commitments to caring generated from the interactions between EC practitioner participants and their colleagues, there also emerged evidence of the commitments to caring formed from the interaction between EC practitioner participants and children. Firstly, the EC practitioner was committed to caring children by saving their reputation. Reputation associated with another's evaluation of one's prosocial behaviour (Engelmann and Rapp, 2018). According to one EC practitioner participant, she made efforts to protect one child's prosocial self-image in front of the whole class, even though the child showed stealing behaviour in class. She did not directly make moral judgment on the child. Instead, she collaborated with the child's parents to seek reasons.

Finally, the child never stole again, when the child's parents shared more concerns with the child.

10.4.5 Sensitivity to children's emotional distress

Secondly, the EC practitioner was committed to caring for children via being sensitive to their emotional distress. Children unavoidably generated anxiety or upset at early years settings. They cried, yelled, and moped. According to one EC practitioner participant's narrative, she concerned herself with children's mental health. Once she felt children were in low spirits or unhappy, she immediately healed them by holding children's hands, taking them around campus, and chatting.

10.4.6 Courage to care

Last but not least, the EC practitioner was committed to caring for children with courage. According to one EC practitioner participant's narrative, she failed to know whether her caring can meet one child's needs, because the child did not respond. She had self-suspected but finally decided to keep caring without any hesitation. This case is associated with Noddings's (2013) discussion on the relationship between care and courage, who suggested that 'the one caring' might generate guilt, when 'the being cared for' failed to provide positively responses. However, if 'the one caring' had courage to accept guilt, he or she would keep making efforts to form caring relation with 'the being cared for'.

10.4.7 Factors affecting EC practitioners' commitments to caring

EC practitioner participants reflected that when they cared for children in class, responses from children and parents made their commitments to caring enhanced or diminished. As for parent's responses, parental gratitude was as a motive that enhanced EC practitioner participant's commitment to caring for their child. One EC practitioner participant reflected that she was willing to stick with her commitment to caring, as she received parent's appreciation for her concerns with their child's teeth problem. However, a parental committee negatively affected EC practitioner's commitment to caring for children. According to one EC practitioner's narrative, her natural impulse to caring for

children was impaired, when she recognised her natural caring was forced to change as a work task to meet needs from the parental committee. This case is associated with 'regulatory gaze' (Osgood, 2006a). The EC practitioner participant's commitment to caring was diminished, when she wrestled with the demands of performance of her caring practices influenced by parental committee. When it comes to responses from children, the child's efforts at progress were regarded as a positive response. As one EC practitioner participant narrated, she enhanced beliefs on her commitment to caring for one child, as she observed the child attempting to get better at sports to ease her fears around the possibility of sports-related accidents. However, children's taunting negatively affected EC practitioner participant's commitments to caring. As one EC practitioner participant reflected, she decided to reduce her caring of the child who taunted her in class.

10.5 How do EC practitioners align the ethic of care with education?

To further explore EC practitioners' understanding of caring, this study also examines the linkage between the ethic of care and education. I regarded care as both an aim and means of education. As for care as an aim of education, EC practitioner participants employed diverse subjects to teach children how to care for their peers, families, and living environment. They also flexibly used multiple pedagogical approaches to such caring subjects for children.

10.5.1 Empathy

Many EC practitioner participants envisaged empathy as a significant teaching subject of caring education. They reflected that the overarching precondition of arousing empathy was to feel another's distress. To better make children feel another's pain and discomfort, EC practitioner participants involved children in actual situations to directly see another's pained expression. Following this they created serious talking with children and help them decode another's distress.

10.5.2 Cure

Cure is also an important teaching subject of caring education. Many EC practitioner participants reflected that they made efforts to create opportunities

for children to cure their peer's distress. For example, they empowered children to escort their peer who was suffering from separation anxiety from parents to classroom.

10.5.3 Friendship

Many EC practitioner participants regarded caring as a significant characteristic of friendship. In teaching, they employed the term of friendship to support children to know how to care for their peers. For example, one EC practitioner participant narrated she provided picture books for children to support them to know about friendship, and then designed drama play to further their understanding of friendship. Besides, another EC practitioner participant reflected she intended to use environmental resources to support children to know about friendship. To do this she decorated classroom walls with children's drawings about the topic of making friends.

10.5.4 Gratitude

Gratitude was regarded as a form of caring. One EC practitioner participant reflected she aimed to teach children about caring for their parents via gratitude. She made efforts to combine the value of gratitude with teaching theme of 'knowing National Women's Day'. In teaching, she guided children to express gratitude to their female families and taught some ways of expressing gratitude, such as bless words and finger dance.

10.5.5 Sense of community

Children's sense of community was regarded as a teaching objective of caring education. Many EC practitioner participants reflected they set a position of management assistant for children to cultivate their sense of community. Children who took the role of management assistant provided helping services for their peers and contributed to a better living environment in class.

10.5.6 EC practitioner's caring performance

Finally, EC practitioner's caring performance was the source of caring education. Many EC practitioner participants reflected children mimicked their

caring performance to learn caring in class.

10.5.7 Multiple pedagogical approaches to such caring subjects that I mentioned above

EC practitioner participants used multiple pedagogical approaches to teach such subjects I mentioned above. Firstly, EC practitioner participants caught teachable moments to arouse children's empathy and guide them to cure their peers. They were sensitive with children's learnable moments and spontaneously emerged purposively instructional actions (Hyun & Marshall, 2003). Secondly, EC practitioner participants employed well-prepared teaching activities to teach children friendship, gratitude, and sense of community. This is because they regarded such subjects of caring education as regular teaching objectives involved in class curriculum. Thirdly, the approach to interaction with non-human objects (Moss, 2018; Osgood & Mohandas, 2022) was used to teach children friendship. Last but not least, children learned how to care for others via role modeling (Noddings, 2013). They regarded EC practitioner participants as role models of caring and mimicked EC practitioner participant's caring performance. Such way of caring education is unlikely to manage or control. This is because children invisibly observed EC practitioner participant's caring performance in daily classroom lives.

10.5.8 Care as a means of education: ways of identifying and meeting children's learning needs

In addition to explorations on the topic of care as an aim of education, this study also provides evidence to respond to another topic of care as a means of education. As for identifying children's learning needs, many EC practitioner participants regarded dialogue as a significant way. Generally, in dialogues, they listened to children's questions and then responded (Noddings, 2005). Occasionally, children failed to directly use questions to express their learning needs. Instead, they intended to describe learning difficulties they faced or phenomenon they observed. In this case, EC practitioner participants made efforts to decode children's descriptions to questions and then acknowledged with children whether decoded questions aligned with their learning needs.

Besides, EC practitioner participants identified children's learning needs by observation. They regarded children's iterative trying and bad moods as hints that they needed instructional interference, when children self-explored with learning materials. Furthermore, to meet children's learning needs, EC practitioner participants reflected three forms of decision mechanism on balancing between their inferred needs and learning needs expressed by children.

10.5.8.1 Schedules-based decision-making

Teaching schedule regarded as a key reference to balancing inferred needs of EC practitioner participants and learning needs expressed by children. When EC practitioner participants acknowledged children's learning needs, they started to compare with their teaching schedules because they inferred children needed to follow teaching schedules to absorb knowledge. Once teaching schedules included the part that aligned with children's learning needs, EC practitioner participants immediately responded to children's learning needs. However, once teaching schedules failed to overlap with the part of learning needs expressed by children, EC practitioner participants suspended to meet their learning needs and encouraged them to self-explore. Besides, the timeline of teaching schedule also affected EC practitioner participant to balance needs. When teaching schedules were at early stage, EC practitioner participants made efforts to combine children's learning needs with the schedules.

10.5.8.2 Trial-oriented decision-making

EC practitioner participants gave emphasis on experimentation (Moss, 2018). When they acknowledged children's learning needs, they were able to directly meet them. Nonetheless, they intended to make children find the answer they needed by self-exploration. In this case, EC practitioner participants asked probing questions, guiding them to think of measures that possibly address their learning needs, support them make trials.

10.5.8.3 Child-focused decision-making

Child-focused decision-making was conducted to balance teaching objectives for the whole class and learning needs expressed by a small group of children

in class. One EC practitioner participant reflected she inferred children needed to meet learning goals that she set to the whole class, whereas she foregrounded the importance of children's individuality. As such, she encouraged the small group of children who were not interested in her teaching activity to meet her inferred needs at first. She then made extra work, providing learning materials to develop their personal learning needs.

10.6 How do children care for their peers, adults, and non-human beings?

Beyond exploration on the research topics of collective decision mechanism, the commitments to caring, and the linkage between the ethic of care and education, this study also investigated children's caring for their peers, adults, and non-human beings. Firstly, children aged 4-6 were able to enact caring by taking the perspective of 'the being cared for', and their empathy was recognised when comforting or alienating the distress of 'the being cared for'. Secondly, children enacted natural caring for those who were in need or in distress, and many of them formed feminist reciprocal relationships with 'the being cared for' without compensation. Their natural caring examined in this study involved making a promise and funny faces, gift giving, helping mother do household work, showing inclusion, feeding food that animals need, nurturing plants by appropriate amount of water. Caring enactments such as sacrificing, healing disputes, and addressing needs are similar with EC practitioner participants' commitments to caring. Occasionally, one child enacted 'care-about' those who were suffering from hunger in disadvantaged areas.

10.7 Limitations and future research directions

As all research questions have been addressed, I move on to discuss research limitations that this study has and further provide recommendations on future research directions. This study has potential limitations. The first one is associated with methods to collect the data. As for the research objective of collective decision mechanism, findings show that the processes of collective decision-making are complex, including many events, such as addressing conflicts, meeting participants' needs, sustaining the extent of participation, and negotiating pedagogical changes. These events were addressed in participants'

interactions. As a result, to portray a holistic picture of collective decision mechanism in class necessarily calls for the angles from all participants. However, due to constraints of methods to collect the data, this study merely borrows EC practitioners' reflections to seek ideas and enactments on participation in collective decision-making processes. The constraints are associated with the devastating influences brought by COVID-19 pandemic in this study. In the COVID-19 era, nearly all sectors were negatively impacted in China. Under such backdrop, Chinese early years settings were closed. As one EC practitioner narrated, she regularly stayed in touch with children by enquiring whether children were in good physical condition and consoled parents who were suffering from anxiety via online meetings. It appeared to restrict processing decision-making on class matters. Now, we go into the post-COVID-19 era, all sectors are resuscitating, and Chinese early years settings have reopened. In this case, future research is recommended to conduct field studies, rooted in the collective decision-making processes to collect the data from all decision-making participants.

The second limitation is associated with difficulties in gaining access to principals. Findings in this study show that the role of principal significantly affected the extent of participation in collective decision-making between EC practitioners. However, I failed to successfully approach principals in Chinese early years settings to collect the data about their understanding of participation in class decision-making processes. As such, further research is recommended to explore collective decision mechanism in ECE from the principals' eyes.

The third limitation is related to generalisability of the findings in this study. The demographic diversity of the 16 EC practitioner participants and 51 children participants is limited to those from relatively privileged socio-economic backgrounds in Beijing. As revealed in my findings, many EC practitioner participants promptly support children develop their personal interests by providing learning resources. This informs that EC practitioner's caring enactment might be influenced by material conditions. In this case, EC practitioners from disadvantaged areas in China might not meet that goal. As such, future research is recommended to pay more attention to EC

practitioner's caring in disadvantaged areas in China.

The last limitation aligns with time constraints. Compared to previous studies on children's caring agencies, there is a different caring enactment of helping peer zipping up jackets in this study. Specifically, as detected by McCormick (2018) in a university-affiliated early childhood center in a Midwestern town, one child participant appeared to directly meet peer's needs on zipping up jacket. However, this study conducted in Chinese early years settings detected that one child participant appeared to indirectly respond to peer's needs of zipping up jacket by sharing experiences of zipping. The different result of children's caring provokes me to form a recognition of the fact that children's caring has to do with culture. However, because of time limitation, I failed to concern more with cultural analysis on children's caring. As such, future research is recommended to focus on cross-cultural comparative approaches to investigating children's caring experiences and enactments.

10.8 Theoretical implication

According to findings in this study, several theoretical implications can be made in understanding the concepts of participatory democracy and relationality as well as the images of the child.

10.8.1 Democratic community

Firstly, there is a need to regard early years settings as democratic communities. The idea of democratic community arises from Fielding and Moss (2011) who foregrounded the importance of shared concerns and persons-centred relations. My findings align with such significant elements. For example, the shared concern was the matters that affected children's lives, as EC practitioner participants made collective decisions with their colleagues/children/parents. Specifically, when EC practitioner participants made collective decisions with colleagues/parents, they were communally concerned with the matters that affected children's learning and development. When EC practitioner participants knew less about children's learning information, such as interests and previous learning experiences, they

proactively mitigated the extent of participation in collective decisions with colleagues. As EC practitioner participants made collective decisions with children in class, they communally concerned with the matters that affected children's class lives, such as class culture, rules, election, and class collective activities. Furthermore, my findings show that EC practitioner participants made efforts to form persons-centred relations in collective decisions. They regarded themselves as persons rather than job occupants, when they make collective decisions with their colleagues. Forming such conceptual recognition of 'the self' could be due to EC practitioner participant's caring leadership (Noddings, 2012). For example, lead EC practitioner participants avoided using hierarchical power force to personalise collective decisions that affected children's learning. They were willing to be responsible to experiment assistant practitioner's teaching ideas.

10.8.2 Listening

Secondly, this study wishes to contribute to the term of democratic professionalism in ECE. The idea of democratic professionalism arises from Oberhuemer (2005), who suggested that democratic professionals in ECE necessarily listened to children's voices. My findings exemplify this point and go further to think of how we 'listen'. Drawing on my findings, EC practitioner participants employed the approach to listening within a value of the ethic of care (Noddings, 2010). They not only listened to children's questions and their descriptions of learning difficulties with their hearing; more importantly, they 'listened' by observation. Besides, EC practitioner participants had made a clear separation between their inferred needs on children's learning and the learning needs 'listened' from children. This point is associated with Moss (2018) studies on 'the otherness', who suggested that we necessarily avoided to regard the other as a part of the self and to assimilate the other's voices, when we 'listened'. This point is consistent with Gordon's (2011) works, based on Martin Buber's theories of philosophy of dialogue, who suggested that to be a good 'listener', we necessarily immersed in the other and recognised the specialness of the other.

10.8.3 The 'rich' child

This study also contributes to the term of 'rich' child. As revealed in my findings, EC practitioner participants regarded children as a group of individuals who were capable of participating in the processes of co-construction of class culture; who were active learners, proactively seeking their learning needs with EC practitioner participants; who were able to positively form caring relations with EC practitioner participants and their peers both inside and outside classroom.

10.9 Practical implications

Drawing on findings in this research, several practical implications can be made in the understanding of pedagogical approaches to caring education and child's participation.

10.9.1 Building close relationships with Children

My findings reveal that EC practitioners often lack confidence in contributing to collective decision-making, partly due to limited knowledge about children's lives. This highlights the importance of building close relationships with children to better understand their emotions, learning interests, and lived experiences. In doing so, EC practitioners' participation in educational planning and decision-making might become more effective and responsive.

10.9.2 Balancing collective goals and children's personal interests in class

My findings affirm the integration of Chinese collectivist values and Western care ethics in children's education. While encouraging children to achieve collective learning goals, EC practitioners also create opportunities to support individual learning needs. This suggests that, in enacting caring pedagogies, EC practitioners are expected to skillfully balance collective goals with children's personal interests in class.

10.9.3 Being a role model of care

My findings demonstrate that children often learn how to care by observing the caring behaviors of EC practitioners. This reflects a Confucian understanding of

care as modeling (Lambert, 2016). It implies that EC practitioners should be aware of how their caring practices can significantly influence children's development of caring attitudes and behaviours.

10.9.4 Teachable moments

EC practitioners are able to catch teachable moments to teach children caring for others. My findings show that one EC practitioner participant made comparisons between children's performance and their teaching objectives of caring. When she observed one child who hurt someone fail to express caring attitudes, she recognised that was the child's learnable moment for knowing caring for others. She then spontaneously conducted teaching activities with the child.

10.9.5 Child-inclusion

To promote children to participate in collective decision needs EC practitioner set a child-inclusive environment. Being child-inclusive necessarily accommodates the child's expressive abilities and makes the child comfortable (Gal, 2011). Drawing on my findings, EC practitioner participants intended to involve children's ideas in collective decisions. Given that children's vocabulary and language skills were restricted, they involved children's ideas by simpler approaches to participation that they could understand, such as hands-up, queuing, and drawing.

10.10 Summary

This chapter has discussed the main findings in response to the research questions that I set in this study. As for responding to the research objective of collective decision mechanism, findings show that the common concern in decision-making processes is the matters that affect children's lives in class. The ways of making collective decisions are associated with care, child-inclusion, and professionalism. The elements of affecting the extent of participation in collective decisions include hierarchically job occupancy and leadership. When it comes to responding to the research objective of caring, findings show that EC practitioners' commitments to caring are associated with

self-sacrifice, collegiality, psychological empowerment, saving the child's reputation, sensitivity with children's emotional distress, and courage to care. The influences on EC practitioners' commitments to caring enhanced or diminished are from the responses from children and parents. Empathy, cure, friendship, gratitude, sense of community, and EC practitioners' caring performance are the main objectives of caring education. EC practitioners also employ acts of caring, including listening, dialogue, decoding, and observation, to identify children's learning needs. In addition to this EC practitioners meet children's learning needs by considering teaching schedules, experimentation, and children's own interests. Findings also show that children have a habit of mind of emphatic distress and are able to proactively provide caring enactments for their peers, parents, EC practitioners, and non-human beings. Furthermore, this chapter has also discussed research limitations, including methods to collect the data, difficulties in gaining access to principals, and time constraints. Further research directions are recommended as follows.

Appendix I PROTOCOL OF CONVERSATIONAL ACTIVITY AND QUESTIONS (INDICATIVE) SCRIPT

Opening One-to-one Interview/Focus group (2 or 3 members)
My name is Xiao Zhang. I'm a researcher from Lancaster University, Department of Educational Research. I am engaging in exploring your understanding of collective decision mechanism and caring.

The interview will last about 45-60 minutes – is that ok? If you would like to stop the interview, for whatever reason, you don't have to give a reason, just let me know. If after the interview, you decide you would like to withdraw from the study, please contact me within two weeks. I will then destroy your data. After two weeks, it will not be possible to withdraw. If you decide to withdraw you will not be penalised in any way.

Do you have any questions that you would like to ask about the project or about anything else?
Are you happy for me to record the interview?
Are you happy for me to start asking you questions?
Turn on Tencent meeting (audio) recording function

Indicative Questions
1. Can you tell me about considerations when you make decisions on class matters with colleagues?
2. How do you feel in this process?
3. Can you tell me about how you address disagreement in this process?
4. Can you tell me about what class agendas children participate in?
5. In these agendas, how much power do you give children to make decisions?
6. Can you tell me about parental involvement in the process of class agendas in your class?
7. What contributions do parents bring to class agendas?
8. Can you tell me about your best memory of caring for or being cared for?
9. Can you tell me about what care means to you when encountering colleagues?
10. Can you tell me about what care means to you when encountering children in your class?
11. Can children care for others in your class?
12. If they can, can you tell me about children's caring behaviour in your class?
13. Can you tell me about your caring education in your class?

Closing the conversational activity
Is there anything else that you would like to add before we finish?
Is there anything I didn't ask you that you feel I should have done?
Do you have any questions?
Thank you for talking to me today.
Ok I'll stop the recording now.

Appendix II COMPLEMENTARY QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Can you tell me about your predefined learning needs of the child?
2. Why do these needs matter to the child?
3. Can you think of some situations in which children expressed their learning needs to you?
4. How do you balance these with your predefined learning need of the child?
5. Can you think of some situations in which you educate children to care for others when they are identified as class protagonist?
6. Can you tell me of any scenes where you feel ethical caring is enhanced/diminished when meeting with the colleague and the child?
7. Do you have times when you feel burden to care for colleagues or the child?

Appendix III CLIPS USED IN IMAGE-BASED DIALOGUE

Appendix IV PROTOCOL OF IMAGED-BASED DIALOGUE AND QUESTIONS (INDICATIVE) SCRIPT

Opening image-based dialogue in class (the whole class)
Hello boys and girls, you are summoned to participate in a very interesting research project. The research is conducted by a 'mystical' researcher. He cannot show up in front of you because he is pretty 'mystical'. He asked me to say greetings to you and to help bring four images to you. He wants your ideas about these four images (*Showing images to children*). He REALLY wants to know how you console the little girl who is injured and cries; how you concern with the mother who is tired for work; how you look after plants, dogs, and cats. If you want to help him, please hands up and share your ideas on the image you choose. You do not have to share your ideas, if you do not want to.

Do you have any questions you would like to ask?
Are you happy for me to record?
Are you happy for me to start asking you questions?
Turn on smartphone recording function

Indicative questions
1. How do you console the little girl who is injured and cries?
2. How do you concern with the mother who is tired for work?
3. How do you look after plants?
4. How do you look after dogs and cats?

Closing the image-based dialogue
Is there anything else that you would like to add before we finish?
Is there anything I didn't ask you that you feel I should have done?
Do you have any questions?
Thank you for talking to me today.
Ok I'll stop the recording now.

Appendix V PROTOCOL OF DRAWING ACTIVITY AND QUESTIONS (INDICATIVE) SCRIPT

Opening drawing activity in class (the whole class)
Hello boys and girls, you are summoned to participate in a very interesting research project. The research is conducted by a 'mystical' researcher. He cannot show up in front of you because he is pretty 'mystical'. He asked me to say greetings to you and wants your help! He REALLY wants you to draw paintings about how you look after your families when they are uncomfortable; how you console your friends when they are crying or unhappy. If you want to help him, please select one of them to draw a painting. You do not have to draw if you do not want to.

Do you have any questions you would like to ask?
Are you happy for me to record?
Are you happy for me to start asking you questions?

Indicative questions
1. Could you introduce your painting to me?
2. Could you tell me the meaning of the symbols in your painting?

Closing the image-based dialogue
Is there anything else that you would like to add before we finish?
Is there anything I didn't ask you that you feel I should have done?
Do you have any questions?
Thank you for talking to me today.

Appendix VI THE DEMONSTRATION ON THEMATIC ANALYSIS (INTERVIEWING)

Thematic analysis for a focus group's text for the research topic of collective decision mechanism

- **Notes on Familiarising TY's**

-Her voice was low during the process of participation with colleagues because she did not master children's previous experiences and their interests.

-She followed lead practitioner's ideas of educational outline because the leader is familiar with children in class and has enough 'professional insight' on evaluating educational activity's availability and effect.

-She felt MA qualification made her <u>cautious or even not dare</u> to judge colleagues' ideas and behaviour. This is because authority was related to working experiences and the degree of knowing children in class.

-She thought professional in theoretical field did not represent professional in practice.

-She felt the number of children is quite big but physical space is very limited so that she had to take care of children's safety first and then to think of other matters, like child's learning and development.

-Child's safety problem was related to practitioner's performativity (wage and promotion). She defined practitioner's identity as child's temporary guardian so that she had to shoulder role's responsibilities when something wrong happened.

-Policy in <u>compulsory education</u> influenced EC partitioner's decision-making. *To mitigating heterogamety? (need interview)*

-Practitioner gave a general direction for educational activity. Children would participate in a predetermined curriculum design and be guided to reach predefined goals.

-Child's interests were the original of educational theme. They expressed themselves in a boundary that was created by practitioner.

-The degree of familiarity towards a certain activity> Activity's effect>child's participation and voice. *Is children's expression homogeneous by art activity?*

- **Coding from TY's texts**

Text quotation	Codes
Because I don't know the children in this class, I don't know so much about the children's ideas or interest in them, I don't think I have any say.	Understanding children impacted Voice
Basically, the leader teacher decides	Primacy of lead practitioner's voice

the direction of education, and then I can say my ideas, but the main class will consider the feasibility of my ideas, or how it will work.	
Because I think sometimes my professionalism is not the professionalism cannot match lead practitioner's view of it. So I think this profession gives working experience at priority.	Working experience is main concern
Safety factors put it in the highest position. It ties to your salary!	Children's safety is related to practitioner's performativity
As a temporary guardian, the most basic of my duties is to ensure the safety of children	Children's safety is the 'common good'
In order to promote the connection between kindergarten and family, my class launched a family painting exhibition activity. The painting activity is performed by parents drawing lines and strokes to write and children to color. Then the head of the kindergarten told us not to let the children draw at home, which is equivalent to homework and violates the policy of easing the burden of excessive homework and off-campus tutoring (It is for compulsory education)	Policy hinders parent's participation
Practitioner gives children a main direction, such as letting them go north, but children can choose to go 5 degrees east or 10 degrees west.	Children's participation has conditions.
Practitioner and children discuss the way to tell the story, and then slowly guide them to say, for example, they can tell stories with puppets, they can tell stories with shadow puppets, and they can tell stories in the form of comic strips. Finally, when it comes to the way of drama, the teacher will guide it in depth, such as drama roles and drama arrangements.	Practitioner leads discussion to their predefined activity
Practitioner asked them to draw their ideas, to draw them as much as they wanted, and then to collect them to decorate the theme wall	Paints are as form of participation
After professional evaluation, practitioner feels that this is feasible and good for the child's development,	Children development and activity availability are core concerns

so will design this.	
The voice will be enhanced, and it will be possible for others to listen to your ideas.	Higher voice, higher possibility to be listened
Job title is higher, then your voice will be listened carefully	Job position impact voice

Notes on Familiarsing XW's

-She felt she had higher voice because colleagues had the same learning experiences with her. (Graduating from same department, university)

-She voluntarily lowered voice during the process of participation because she did not know children (Same idea with TY — Voice/ authority: working experience > theoretical knowledge base)

-She thought child's safety and their order in activity are 'common goods' to make sure when deciding educational aims and organisation.

-She thought parent's voice on children's safety and physical problem should also be involved in practitioner's meeting for education and care.

-Practitioner led children to go for some of predetermined goals (same as TY's idea)

-Practitioner had more outcomes, their voice would be higher in preschool. She gave a metaphor MVP in basketball game. If you were an MVP in your preschool, your voice would be listened carefully.

-She mentioned ECE is a female-domain profession. This implied the researcher to think further of the connection between gender, professionalism and democracy/participation/voice/authority…

- **Coding from XW's text**

Text quotation	Codes
The teachers in the class have the same educational background as me. We all graduated from the First Normal University. My voice will be a little higher.	Voice would be listened carefully because of same educational background
I think part of the reason is because I am familiar with my job, so I am afraid that it is wrong for me to make some decisions. In this case, I voluntarily marginalise my voice.	No knowing, No talking
When I have any questions to ask, lead practitioner says that you will know after a few more working years. They will feel that experience is primary, rather than saying that your academic qualifications and your knowledge, or what we call	Working experiences > theoretical knowledge and qualification when deliberating educational matters

theoretical knowledge, anyway. It is not theoretical knowledge to show the concept. Knowledge of the expertise we've learned above your texts, like Piaget, they don't feel like that's preemptive	
I'm going to do a "mirror" themed event. Lead practitioner found this activity difficult to achieve in our class, because first of all, but we don't have a space to hold this. The second point is that she considers the safety and control of the child's activities. Finally suggested that I change the activity.	Child's safety, order and physical environment are core considerations
It is the parents who will put the safety needs of this child first, so practitioner put this need first.	Parent's need is practitioner's need
You will find that parents are often concerned about our children being bitten by mosquitoes today, where our children bumped.	Concerning safety problem by parents
You can only improve your voice in this kindergarten if you have outcomes.	Outcomes would impact voice

- **Constructing Themes and reviewing potential themes**

Theme1: No knowing No Voice	Theme 2: Children's safe and development, activity availability, and policy consideration as 'common goods'	Theme 3: guiding Children's participation	Theme 4: higher achievement, higher voice
Understanding children impacted voice	Children's safety is related to practitioner's performativity	Practitioner leads discussion to their predefined activity	Higher voice, higher possibility to be listened
Working experience is main concerns	Children's safety is the 'common good'	Paints are as form of participation	Higher voice, higher possibility to be listened
Primacy of lead practitioner's voice	Parent's need is practitioner's need		Outcomes would impact voice
No knowing, No talking	Concerning safety problem by parents		
Working experiences > theoretical knowledge and	Child's safety, order and physical environment are core considerations		

qualification when deliberating educational matters	
	Policy hinders parent's participation
	Children development and activity availability are core concerns

- **Defining and naming themes and producing the report**

Theme 1: No Knowing, No voice

EC practitioner participates in class discussion about curriculum design. In this process, children's previous experiences and interests works as key evidence to express ideas. If practitioners have longer working experience, they would have higher voice, and their ideas are conducted more easily.

Theme 2: Children's safety and development, activity availability, and policy consideration as 'common goods'

During the process of practitioner's meeting, children's safety and development, activity availability, and policy consideration are main considerations when conducting educational activity. In this respect, making sure of children's safety is the top priority for both preschool and family. Furthermore, principal who follows a policy conducted in compulsory education forces practitioner to revise their curriculum design. This hierarchical behaviour would enable preschool to avoid unnecessary trouble from the system of accountability.

Theme 3: Guiding children's participation

Practitioner guides children to participate in educational activity. This is because predefined activity is easy to control. Furthermore, practitioner prefers to select activity that they are familiar with because they have successful experience and know its outcome. As for children's own voice, they would be marginalized but practitioner respects them and enables children to draw out their ideas. Children's paintings are utilized to refurbish class thematic wall.

Theme 4: Higher achievement, higher voice

Practitioner's achievement has a key role to play in improving their voice/authority. Higher voice represents their ideas are listened to carefully by other colleagues. More importantly, their ideas are easy to be conducted. In this respect, practitioner would concern their performativity in educational activity. For example, they would concern elements such as sharing personal experience in conference and engaging in educational research first, instead of children's needs or interests.

Appendix VII DEMONSTRATION ON THEMATIC ANALYSIS (VISUAL MATERIALS)

Mozi. Liu	Kiss	Hug+ bandage	Food enough+ big bed+ litter box	Water+fertilizer
Shuning. Hou	hug	Hold up	-	water
Yiyi. Wang			Different Food+litter box+	Water+fertilizer
Kexin. L	Hug; kiss	Bandage	food;	Water;
Jingming. Z	Kiss;	Toy giving	Different food (Cat and Dog)	Water + fertilizer
Yizhen. J	hug	Hug;	Food	Water + fertilizer
Ximu. L	Substitute mother to tidy up	Toy giving; leaving him a space to calm down	---	Water
Xuxi. C	Accompany	Accompany		Water +
----	Aoteman- protection; click mosquito	Giving my loving gift	food	Water + fertilizer

Drawing	Name & age	Narratives
	Emily, aged 5	*When I see her be tripped over a stone, I will say don't cry, next time I will cover your needs.*
	Lauryn, aged 5	*If someone cries, I will send a gift*
	4 Amos, aged 5	*if I see he is unhappy, I will make a funny face to make him happy. When he is happy we can play on the ground together.'*

Photographs	Name	Examination
	Peter (right side) and Ben (left side),	*They deliver the whole class's food package*
	Hedd.	*shares experience of zipping up jacket with peer*
	Jerome	*is feeding snail a piece of leaf at classroom*
	Lewis	*is watering houseplants at classroom*

Appendix VIII Participant Information Sheet (PIS)

Participant information sheet for early childhood practitioners
Putting politics and ethics first: exploring the linkage with early childhood education (ECE) and the values of participatory democracy and care.

> For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage:
> www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

I am a PhD student at Lancaster University in UK and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about your experiences on participatory democracy and caring in Chinese early years settings

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This study aims to understand participatory democracy and caring in ECE. The researcher will investigate your understanding of collective decision mechanism, the commitments to caring, the linkage between the ethic of care and education. The participant will also be invited to share understanding of children's caring.

Why have I been invited?
I have approached you because I am trying to understand your considerations of participating in collective decision-making processes, ways of making collective decisions, elements of affecting your extent of participation, memories that are associated with caring or being cared in class. I am also making efforts to understand your understanding of caring education, strategies of identifying children's learning needs, the decision mechanism with regards to balancing preferred needs from you and learning needs expressed by children in class. I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?
If you decided to take part, this would involve the following: you will be asked to take part in an interview (one-to-one) or a small focus group (2/3 individuals) conducted online or in person. This will take between 45-60 minutes and will be at a time that is mutually convenient, arranged in advance. The interview or focus group will be audio recorded on Tencent meeting or by portable device, a digital recorder, with your consent. Questions will focus on your experiences of participation and care.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
Taking part in this study will allow you to share your experiences on collective decision mechanism and caring in Chinese early years settings.

Do I have to take part?
No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?
If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 6 weeks after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part.

Will my data be identifiable?
After the interview/focus group/ telephone interviews, only I, the researcher conducting this study, will have access to the ideas you share with me. I will keep all personal information about you (e.g., your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others, and it will be stored on an encrypted device. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project. Participants in the focus group will be asked not to disclose information outside of the focus group and with anyone not involved in the focus group without the relevant person's express permission.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?
I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:
I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in our publications.

If anything you tell me in the interview, focus group or observation suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with colleagues. If possible I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

How my data will be stored
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact me.

Xiao Zhang, Educational Research, County South, Lancaster University, LA1 4YD
x.zhang71@lancaster.ac.uk**; +8613811549787**
If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact:

Professor Paul Ashwin (HOD) Educational Research, County South, Lancaster University, LA1 4YD. p.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk**; +441524594443**

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix IX CONSENT FORM

Title of research: Putting politics and ethics first: exploring the linkage with early childhood education (ECE) and the values of participatory democracy and care.
Name of Researchers: Xiao Zhang
Email: x.zhang71@lancaster.ac.uk; zhangxiao_cnu@126.com

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 2 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 2 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed. If I am involved in focus groups and then withdraw my data will remain part of the study. PLEASE NOTE: I understand that as part of the focus group I will take part in, my data is part of the ongoing conversation and cannot be destroyed. I understand that the researcher will not try to disregard my views when analysing the focus group data, but I am aware that this will not always be possible.	☐
3. If I am participating in the focus group I understand that any information disclosed within the focus group remains confidential to the group, and I will not discuss the focus group with or in front of anyone who was not involved unless I have the relevant person's express permission.	☐
4. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, PhD thesis, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	☐
5. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	☐
6. I understand that any interviews or focus groups will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
7. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
8. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

_____   _____   _____

___

Name of Participant   Date   Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher/person taking the consent_____ Date _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

Glossary and Lists of Abbreviations

Gaokao	The national exam for admission to colleges and universities in Mainland *China.*
The one caring	The one who gives caring for others
The being cared for	The one who receives caring from 'the one caring'.
关怀	Treating others with love and attentiveness. It is frequently used in the situations that the older cares for the younger.
关爱	Loving, protecting, and concerning. It is also widely applied in any situations.
仁	*Ren*; Benevolence

BERA	British Education Research Association
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDTW	China: Democracy That Works
CEI	'Correct' Early Intervention
CECERS	The Chinese Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (trial version)
CLASS	The Classroom Assessment Scoring System
EC	Early Childhood
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECERS-R	Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Revised Edition
ECP	Early Childhood Professionalism
EECERA	European Early Childhood Education Research Association
EPPE	Effective Preschool and Primary Education
EYFS	The early years foundation stage
EYFSP	Early years foundation stage profile
GERM	Global Education Reform Movement
GKE	Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial Basis)
IELS	International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study
KTPS	Kindergarten Teacher's Professional Standards (Trail Basis)
KWR	Kindergarten Work Regulations
MoE	Ministry of Educaiton
NPC	National People's Congress

NPM	New Public Management
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PRC	People Republic of China
P-SIG	Professionalisation Special Interest Group
PIS	Participant Information Sheet
SCIO	State Council Information Office
SSCC	Socialist System with Chinese Characteristics
TRE	Theories of Radical Education
UK	The United Kingdom
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WPPD	Whole-Process People's Democracy

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