

# Classroom Management as a Curriculum of Care

Carla Shalaby

**Treat classroom management as an opportunity to teach young children what it really means to take care of each other.**

While visiting a 1st grade classroom once, I had the opportunity to observe a 15-minute independent reading session. I immediately noticed Luna, a 6-year-old girl, pulling out a stack of books from her backpack, hurrying to settle in so she could get right down to it. All her books—about five or six of them—were about bugs. *She must really love bugs*, I thought to myself.

I watched her open the first book to the first page. Repulsed by the detailed images of all kinds of creepy crawlers, she quietly gagged. She looked away from the book to give her eyes a break, and then slowly—cautiously—returned her gaze. Courageous, intent, determined, she started to read.

I was confused. She seemed to find bugs deeply unpleasant. So why was she so intent on reading about them? Unable to curb my curiosity, I made a beeline for her as soon as reading time was up. "You must really love bugs to have all those books about them," I said.

"No, I hate them," she replied matter-of-factly.

"Then why did you pick a million books about bugs?"

"Because they're all over my house," Luna explained. "And they're at recess and in the garden and they're just everywhere, all over. Even there was one in my bathtub! When I see a bug, I just scream until someone comes to kill it. But I need to be brave about them."

"I see," I said. "So, you want to be brave about bugs so you can kill them yourself?"

"No!" she corrected.

"No?"

"No! I want to be brave about them so I can leave them alone. After they're *killed-ed* I feel sad for them."

Consider all that 6-year-old Luna had to know, understand, and be capable of to set forth on a project of reading about bugs so she could stop being afraid of them. She had a legitimate and sophisticated theory of change: *If I learn about bugs, I won't want to hurt them.*

While seemingly extraordinary, Luna is typical for a child her age in her desire to participate in making things safer and better for living things. Young children—in their capacity for empathy, their insistence on fairness, and their boldly imaginative problem solving—are uniquely suited for "care work" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018), for healing-centered ways of being (Ginwright, 2018; Pour-Khorshid, 2020), and for practicing models of mutual aid in which skills and resources are exchanged for mutual benefit. These ways of organizing collective care and prioritizing well-being—practiced for centuries among the most marginalized and vulnerable among us as a necessary means of survival—come naturally to young children.

But this deep orientation toward care is frequently unlearned over time, replaced by ways of being that are traditionally rewarded in schools: competition over cooperation, individualism over collectivism, independence over interdependence. These school-driven values best prepare children for their lives as workers instead of as compassionate human beings and ethical stewards of the land.

Values that obfuscate the interdependence of all living things have consequences because they allow us to justify practices and policies—both inside and outside of schools—that normalize cruelty, indignities, and the sacrifice of some for the benefit of others. These normalized inhumanities include, to name just a few: expelling preschoolers; knowingly allowing children to drink water tainted with lead; placing aggressive policing programs in school buildings with Black

and brown youth; and investing unconscionable amounts of money into the maintenance of prisons while urban and rural schools lack even the most basic resources. All of these practices, which should seem unimaginable, are instead part of a widespread acceptance of cruelties that are nearly invisible to some people while literally killing others.

So, how do we go from being children who believe that the death of a bug is tragic to becoming adults who regularly accept and normalize that some lives are *throwaway*?

As both the COVID-19 pandemic and racial injustice continue to disproportionately cause the premature death of our Black, brown, Indigenous, disabled, undocumented, trans and queer loved ones, we must invite children to contemplate what it means to live and behave in ways that refuse the idea that any human being is disposable, that any resource is ours to hoard, or that any person can be safe while even one of us is in danger.

In the early grades especially, one of the central ways to teach these lessons is through the practice of classroom management.

## Three Essential Understandings

Here I offer three understandings that invite educators to explore new directions for classroom management, starting in the early grades. They are designed to emphasize care over control, inclusion over exclusion, and community over authority. These understandings draw on traditions and values of care regularly exercised by vulnerable communities as a means of survival.

### 1. Understanding Classroom Management as a Curriculum

By reframing classroom management as a curriculum, we can recognize that the current way we organize our approach to management is achieving certain objectives, and we can be as thoughtful and intentional in writing our objectives for classroom management as we are in our approach to the traditional core academic subjects. In short, if classroom management is a curriculum, what are we teaching now, and what might we want to teach instead?

Traditional approaches to classroom management, because they reward some behaviors and punish others, are a series of lessons for children on what we value, what is good, and how to be. I am disturbed by how quickly such classroom management practices have evolved to include new and creative ways to control bodies, even when not physically together in classrooms: strict demands for children to wear school uniforms and adhere to dress codes while at home; arbitrary rules forbidding them to eat or drink while on screen; using participation and attendance norms that ignore unequal access to devices and young children's inability to tolerate long hours on a computer. Even where children are together in school, they are too often punished for violating the rule to wear a mask, instead of educated into understanding that wearing our masks is part of how we take care of each other.

Through traditional practices that rely on authoritative control, policing, and exclusion, our children witness a model of power that punishes people instead of taking care of them. They learn that those in authority (and the rules they devise) mandate how we ought to behave—instead of guiding a commitment to live in right relationship with one another and with this planet we all share, which requires sacrifice, flexibility and judgment, discussion and debate, and attention to identity and power. Changing the way we understand the goals and objectives of classroom management may help us notice that when we are so worried about policing bodies, we miss opportunities to teach community care—even during a time when literally hundreds of thousands of people are dying.

Longtime elementary math teacher Marian Dingle supported her students in recognizing that their long list of generated classroom "rules" could be summarized in a single agreement: "We will take care of each other" (2018). Like Marian and her students, I fundamentally understand classroom management as the way we deal with the following kinds of questions:

How will we be in genuine community together?

How will we keep everyone safe, happy, and well?

What will we do and practice when harm or conflict happens in our community?

How will we take extra special care of the most vulnerable among us?

Because this is how I understand classroom management, I find its goals and objectives to be the same regardless of whether school is happening in person or virtually. We are still together as we socially distance, and our individual choices and behaviors powerfully impact the community. Indeed, these questions are particularly timely in light of both COVID-19 and the powerful uprisings against police violence and for Black lives. These are the questions governors and mayors asked themselves while devising COVID-19 lockdown plans. These are the questions education leaders asked themselves while making decisions about reopening schools. These are the questions police and prison abolitionists routinely challenge *us* to ask.<sup>1</sup> They are authentic questions with use far beyond classrooms.

There are, however, no easy answers to these questions. They spark disagreements, reveal a diversity of values and beliefs, and can be very difficult to navigate. For this reason, it is especially useful to start exploring them with young children in the early grades—not because it will make the questions easier to answer, but because it will better prepare them as human beings to recognize and deal with the fact that *really* taking care of each other can be very difficult to do.

## 2. Understanding Care as Political Work

Because the idea of *care*, much like the idea of *love*, is too often misunderstood as apolitical, our work with children and with each other must be first to establish the relationship between care and justice. Care is not about being kind or charitable; rather, care is about being and working in ways that are fair, inclusive, and in solidarity with the most vulnerable.

For example, care is not just cheering for or serving free meals to essential hospital workers as they head in to treat COVID-19 patients. That is kindness, and it is important. But *care* is demanding that they have the personal protective equipment required to be as safe as possible and organizing to get them what they need in the absence of coordinated government efforts. Care is also about considering the other essential workers who keep hospitals functional, including janitorial staff, food service workers, and those who provide childcare, to name a few—and asking why these workers are less visible than doctors and nurses. Care is fighting for just treatment of the most vulnerable and most marginalized among us. Care is hard work because it requires a kind of genuine sacrifice and solidarity far beyond what is demanded by charity or kindness.

Young children can—and *do*—welcome hard work. They routinely wrestle with what is fair and unfair, and they want to debate and discuss the questions and conflicts that arise in their friendships, their attempts at sharing, and their efforts to get along with others. If we reduce and oversimplify this hard work to a set of rules children follow, we miss the chance to invite them into the messy, incomplete, difficult work of justice.

Instead, by modeling democratic participation, we can anticipate and welcome the discussion and debate that arise from conflict. We can intentionally create routines and structures that make space for these tough conversations about how to advocate for our own needs and wants, while also taking care of others and our planet. In this way, classroom management in the early grades might develop the first building blocks of skills like nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2015); making a good apology and holding ourselves accountable to others (Mingus, 2019); and using restorative practices to build community and respond to harm (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015; Winn, 2018).

With these approaches, rather than simply trying to avoid punishment from breaking rules, children are instead guided to worry about how to make things right when they've caused harm and how to take care of the people or the community that is hurting. These care-based, restorative skills and approaches are more than social-emotional qualities. Done with clarity and intention, they are political actions, engaging young children in the work of justice.

## 3. Understanding Young Children as Already Powerful

Finally, classroom management as the practice of care refuses the idea that our work with young children is always about preparing them for the future and instead recognizes that children can and do exercise their power already, acting on and impacting the world in daily life. We can affect the ways they use their power by teaching them values of interdependence and collective care. As educator Olivia Mulcahy (2020) writes in a beautiful [blog post](#),

We must understand that self-care and care for family, community, and our world are each important and also inextricable from each other. Of course, this has always been true. But it is a lesson that clearly many have not yet learned well enough.

I am hopeful that teaching this lesson in the early grades—emphasizing the ways in which we are all inextricably linked—will allow us to leverage the brilliance of young children in the ongoing struggle for justice, starting *now*. Children are powerful people—we need them to help solve problems of care that continue to stump us as adults.

As young children work together in the here and now to wonder and worry about how best to balance their own needs against the needs of others, the needs of the community, and the needs of our planet, they *do* the work of justice in the here and now. When they figure out, with our support, how to make things right after harm has occurred, they slowly change our world into one in which relationships are more important than rules, where care is the political work we do together each day.

Luna, setting out to learn about bugs, is already engaging in political care work. I tend to think about her work in relation to a poem I recently read called "Mercy," by an award-winning, Belizean spoken word poet named Rudy Francisco (2017). Asked to kill a spider, he instead gently frees it. He writes of hoping for that same mercy, "If I am ever caught in the wrong place / at the wrong time, just being alive."

Luna is exercising and developing a fundamental understanding of the sanctity and preciousness of life—an understanding that animates the struggle and movement for Black lives. Let's invite all children into the work Luna is doing on mercy—the care and justice work she has already begun.

## Reflect & Discuss

- > Do your current classroom management practices allow children to practice collective care? If not, how could they be altered to do so?
- > What does a classroom management curriculum of collective care look like for those engaged in virtual or hybrid learning?
- > How might you teach children to understand the difference between care and kindness, and the political relationship between care and justice?

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> *Correction:* Due to an editing error, the original print version of this article used the word "reformers" in this sentence in place of "abolitionists," misrepresenting the author's intended meaning. The sentence is corrected in this version.

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