

# *Encounters with Care:*

*Mentoring Beginning  
Art Teachers Amid the  
Pre[CARE]ious Conditions  
of Neoliberalism*

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# Encounters with Care: Mentoring Beginning Art Teachers amid the Pre[CARE]ious Conditions of Neoliberalism

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Figure 1. Casey's handmade book, presented near the end of her first year of teaching art.

*I thought about including issues with isolation and with administration. That's in there, but overwhelmingly it's about the fact that emotionally my job is really draining because I'm constantly worrying about my kids and about their lives and about what happens to them when they go home...but the positive outweighs the negative—or you have to make it. So, there's not a lot about art-making in here.*

*Casey (personal communication, April 25, 2015)*

## Introduction

Casey expressed these sentiments during a final workshop I hosted for six first- and second-year art teachers at the end of a study I was conducting during the 2014-15 school year. She was talking about a handmade book (Figure 1) she had created as an expression of her experiences during her first year of teaching in a public charter elementary school. Casey was one of two elementary art teachers (Lauren

being the other) in the study who, over the course of the school year, repeatedly expressed a dawning realization that their jobs were not so much about teaching art as they were about *caring* for kids. While teachers' expressions of care and concern for children are perhaps not surprising in a broad sense, for me the beginning art teachers' repeated statements that indicated *how concerns for care began to eclipse the role of art* stood out to me as something both significant and unsettling within the context of my study.

Based on my experiences visiting the teachers' school contexts and the conversations we shared during both my school visits and three workshops I hosted on a university campus, I began to see how Casey and Lauren's expressed dedication to caring for their students was tied up in a larger network of social, cultural, political, and material relations they were negotiating amid K-5 school cultures. I knew it was likely no coincidence, for example, that Casey and Lauren both

taught in Title I schools with free or reduced lunch rates of 65% or higher and that their schools had the largest populations of students of color compared to the other teachers in the study. Casey and Lauren both identified as white and female, which is true of approximately 80% of the teacher labor force (Taie & Goldring, 2018), and therefore their desire to care for the students in their schools was also fraught with the possibility that they might be caught up in a “savior complex,” viewing their students through a deficit lens and assuming they needed to be rescued from their circumstances (Emdin, 2016). In addition to these already fraught circumstances, Casey and Lauren were met with the following embodied, material, institutional, social, emotional, and affectual school experiences: both teachers taught from a cart rather than in a classroom; one teacher travelled between three schools each week, usually two per day; both regularly experienced physical outbursts by students that included throwing objects such as chairs, shoes, and rocks at other students or sometimes at the teachers; both were emotionally distraught by stories they heard about students’ lives outside of school, such as parents in jail, experiences of abuse, and lack of basic needs, such as food; both teachers’ schools were heavily encumbered by behavior management and character development programs, as well as standardized approaches to teaching and learning; one had a mandated curriculum tied to charter school funding; and one was part of a large school system in which, like many school systems, new teachers were heavily observed and evaluated according to pre-determined teaching standards. My point in trying to establish a larger perspective of the complexity of these new teachers’

experiences is to suggest that when I pulled back from a micro-level view of their desires to care for their students, I was able to recognize, at a broader level, how the contexts in which these expressed realizations emerged were, in fact, extremely *precarious*—thus rendering these concerns for care more complicated than at first glance.

### **Pre[CARE]ity**

By positioning “CARE” within “precarity,” my aim is to explore what happens if, as a lens for analyzing what it means to care as an art teacher in K-5 school contexts, we think these concepts together. What would it mean to understand the network of caring relations that encompasses both students and teachers in K-5 schools as situated within conditions of precarity—conditions that extend beyond the school and that are tied up in gender-, class-, and race-based inequities of the past and present? Also, what insights might this analysis provide for those who prepare and mentor beginning art teachers?

According to Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), the need to think about care is pressing, given what might be described as the precarious state of a “present permeated by worries about the unraveling of life from all possible crisis fronts—environment, economy, values” (p. 8). She continues on by describing as well the slow, background violence (Nixon, 2011) that receives less attention, but that is pervasive, destroying “more fundamentally the very tissue of existence” (Puig de la Bellacasa, p. 8). Calling attention to slow violence highlights one aspect of the danger in viewing the condition of precarity as tied to surges in crises—as if the precarity exemplified by these crises is

a state of exception (Fragkou, 2019). Crises that arise in the context of schools, for example, are not exceptions; rather, they are produced from conditions of ongoing, slow violence in the form of systemic inequities and social, cultural, and political relations of power.

Further refuting the human propensity to view precarity as an exception, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) instead recommends that we understand “current precarity as an earthwide condition” that allows us to acknowledge the indeterminate nature of experience and to take notice of aspects of life that go otherwise unnoticed (p. 4). Tsing encourages a commitment to fieldwork and observations aimed at taking notice of unpredictable, experiential encounters that defy the continuity and stability of the status quo—disturbances that, when viewed as ephemeral assemblages, might reveal the possibility of something new. While Tsing’s research provokes ephemeral assemblages and entanglements brought together at the intersections of capitalism, commerce, landscape, and society, in this paper my interest is in the happenings that emerge at the intersections of teaching, care, and the neoliberal contexts of US public schools, especially at the elementary level.

In my work mentoring beginning art teachers in recent years, I have experienced several encounters that have defied the continuity of my own understandings about what it means to care—for students in K-5 public schools and for the beginning art teachers working in those contexts. Arguing that significant encounters with care often go unnoticed in a US educational system largely defined by a neoliberal agenda (Atkinson, 2018), in this article I explore

such encounters as disturbances that might reveal the nuances and intricacies of the entanglements at work. Through this exploration, I aim to show that these caring entanglements are, in consequential ways, run through with *precarity*—not only as an existential condition of life, but as a specific set of social, cultural, political, and material relations that produce an unequal distribution of both precarity and care, especially along the lines of gender, class, and race. In order to theorize this perspective of precarity further, I draw on the work of Judith Butler (2004, 2009, 2012) and other feminist scholars (Fisher, 2011; Fragkou, 2019; Lorey, 2015) who have built on her work.

I begin by reviewing literature relevant to the neoliberal agenda of education in the US and feminist conceptualizations of care, both past and present. Next, I move toward describing the details of my encounters with care in the cases of both Lauren and Casey by first situating those encounters in the context of precarity (Butler, 2004, 2009, 2012). Then, after analyzing each set of encounters with regards to both the conditions of precarity and the consequential effects produced, I conclude by offering provocations for how those who support beginning art teachers might, given the earth-wide and school-specific conditions of precarity, prepare them to navigate the complexities of caring relations in schools.

### **Why Take Notice of Care?**

#### **The Neoliberal Agenda of US Education**

At times, the topic of care has been at the forefront of research and theory in education, having undergone particularly productive scrutiny by feminist scholars (e.g. Collins, 1991; Fisher & Tronto, 1990;

Gilligan, 1982; Grumet, 1988; Noddings, 1984, 2002; Walkerdine, 1986). However, in contemporary K-12 school contexts, care—as both disposition and practice (Tronto, 1993), and as embodied, affective, and emotional (Zembylas et al., 2014)—seems to go largely under-recognized and under-theorized as the swiftly moving current of the accountability culture carries on with force, leaving little time to notice much else. According to Dennis Atkinson (2018), the neo-liberal agenda of education in both England and the United States conditions teachers and students in schools to govern themselves according to standards of “economic ambition and competition” (p.15). Adherence to these standards, then, results in teachers and students who follow highly prescribed ways of being that are “constructed through the signifiers of performance, assessment, progress and achievement, which anticipate known pedagogic subjects (teachers and learners)” (Atkinson, 2018, p. 15). Within this context, the focus on forward-moving progress toward known goals is strong, and thus “it may be the case that there is an inherent blindness in education to the untimeliness of events” (Atkinson, 2018, p. 3) that do not fit these neo-liberal rhythms of progress. In the case of my experiences with mentoring new teachers, events marked by care often fall into this category of *untimely events*.

Concurring with an inherent blindness toward care in schools, in the June 30th, 2019 special issue of *Gender and Education* titled “Picturing Care: Reframing Gender, Race, and Educational Justice,” one of the co-editors Wendy Lutrell (2019) describes the effects of a neo-liberal accountability culture that has “erased the humanity and personal integrity of all that happens in school settings” in favor of quantitative assessments (p. 564). Within this climate,

Lutrell explains that “Practices of care defy simple categorization and cannot be rendered as neutral ‘data points’” (p. 564). Thus, while practices, emotions, and affects associated with care are always present in schools and in the experiences of teachers, they run alongside accountability practices that continue to hold them at bay, reifying the subordinate value of care and dismissing caring relations that deserve attention.

### **Prevailing Boundaries that Define Care**

In Joan Tronto's (1993) landmark book *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for Care*, she points out that “[s]ince our society treats public accomplishment, rationality, and autonomy as worthy qualities, care is devalued insofar as it embodies their opposites”—that is, traditional conceptualizations of care have been connected with privacy, emotion, and the needy (Tronto, 1993, p. 117). In part for this reason, Tronto argues that previous attempts by feminist authors to advocate for the importance of care by grounding their arguments in women's morality have been largely ineffective. For example, authors such as Acker, (1995-1996), Noddings (1992), and others (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Lyons, 1983) were increasingly “disturbed at the privileging of men's experiences in studies of ethical decision making, identity development, and modes of learning,” and proposed that “women's ways” (Acker, 1995-1996), such as a strong ethic of care and a preference for connectedness (relationships), should take center stage. Noddings (1992) argued for care as a centerpiece of school reform efforts, suggesting that “Our aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving, and lovable people” (p. xiv). This establishes care as tied to women's morality—the notion that



caring dispositions and practices that have been traditionally associated with women, and particularly mothers, (Collins, 1998; Grumet, 1988) have something significant to offer to society as a whole. However, Tronto explains that this approach by Noddings (1992) and others has not been able to disrupt or redraw the moral boundaries that have excluded women from fully participating in public life in the first place. Likewise, any corresponding attempt to alter the value of, or recognition for, care in society has also been thwarted by prevailing moral boundaries shaped by power structures, political contexts, and widely accepted social values.

According to Tronto (1993), prevailing moral boundaries include: (1) the boundary between morality and politics that requires them to be completely separate notions, with one maintaining superiority over the other; (2) the "moral point of view" boundary that maintains morality as informed by reason and removed from intrusions of context or emotion, and thus moral actors as detached and autonomous, and; (3) the boundary between public and private life, which in Western thought has positioned women in the private sphere (pp. 6-11). These moral boundaries form a set of norms that function to privilege some ideas of morality and exclude others. In the case of an ethics of care, the conventional association of care with morality versus politics, women versus men (thus private versus public), dependence versus autonomy, and emotion versus reason has continually positioned care as something easily contained by prevailing moral boundaries, thus limiting its transformative potential.

Tronto (1993) makes the point that care, as associated with women's morality,

does not fit the goals of a capitalist society focused on rationality, individual accomplishment, and autonomy and thus continues to be dismissed as ultimately insignificant. This argument might also explain why care continues to be devalued in school contexts that have similar goals. For example, pervasive images and discourses of teaching are premised on the notion that teachers are autonomous subjects free from the complexities of context and circumstance (Britzman, 2003). And, as previously discussed, the neo-liberal accountability culture of schools requires teachers to embody the pursuit of "economic ambition and competition" (Atkinson, 2018, p. 15). And yet, while there seems to be no room for care to matter within these prevailing norms, Deborah Britzman (2003) points out that, paradoxically, dominant stereotypes also construct teachers as the ultimate, selfless care-givers. For women teachers in particular, "good teachers" are also expected to possess the qualities of the "good woman"—"self-sacrificing kind, overworked, underpaid, and holding an unlimited reservoir of patience" (p. 29). Thus, teachers are caught in a contradictory context in which they are expected to be ambitious, autonomous achievers as evidenced through quantifiable data and performance measures, and simultaneously self-sacrificing care-givers despite the fact that care is ultimately not valued as a measurable achievement. Here again, even if efforts were made to acknowledge the value of care, if those efforts were bound by the limits of care as a moral virtue tied to "women's ways," emotion, privacy, and dependence, as in the work of Noddings (1992), they would not have enough force to affect change. According to Tronto (1993), while these authors made eloquent efforts to center care as a virtue,

they have ultimately “been unable to show a convincing way of turning these virtues into a realistic approach to the kinds of problems that caring will confront in the real world” (p. 161).

### **Alternative Conceptualizations of Care**

The conceptualization of care in what is often termed relational feminism (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2002) has focused on care as an individual virtue expressed through dyadic relationships between a care-giver and a care-receiver, such as a mother and child or teacher and student. However, authors such as Tronto (1993; 2013) and Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) suggest a move away from such individual or dyadic theories of care and toward an understanding of care as “a ‘species activity’ with ethical, social, political, and cultural implications” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 3). In Fisher and Tronto’s (1990) oft-quoted definition of care, for example, they theorize it as:

*a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live it in as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (p. 40).*

Fisher and Tronto’s definition of care thus goes well beyond the dyadic relationship and even goes beyond the human to include non-human animals and the environment, emphasizing what Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) refers to as a “key theme in feminist ethics, an emphasis on interconnection and interdependency” (p. 4). By highlighting the fundamental interdependency of more-than-human entanglements, these authors suggest that

care *must* be present in the web of life in order for living to be possible. In addition, by moving care beyond the limits of the individual and positioning it as an activity that is necessary to live in our world “as well as possible,” Fisher and Tronto (1990) aimed to emphasize that care is defined culturally, and functions socially and politically. Tronto’s (1993) further efforts to position care as a universal aspect of life also aimed to highlight how care is often inadequate, as it is situated within the “inequitable distribution of power, resources, and privilege” (p. 111). Tronto suggests that only if we move away from care as associated with women’s morality and toward a recognition of care as an ethic with political import, can we harness the capacity for care to function as a strategic concept that can contribute to a more democratic, more just, and more humane society.

### **Resonances between Care and Precarity**

Three key aspects of the reconceptualization of care offered by Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), Tronto (1993), and Fisher and Tronto (1990), include: (a) the interdependency of humans and non-humans in a web of life that *requires* care, (b) the recognition that care and care work are distributed inequitably through relations of power and privilege, and (c) the suggestion that care can and should be harnessed for ethical and political efforts toward justice. Notably, these same key aspects can be found in the feminist scholarship that explores precarity for its ethical and political implications. For example, interdependency is exemplified by Butler’s (2009) description of precariousness as “a feature of all life” (p. 25) in that, as human beings, “we are, however distinct, also bound to one another and to living

processes that exceed human form" (2012, p. 141). In this way, Butler suggests we are socially vulnerable, both exposed to and responsible for others. However, Butler (2012) also acknowledges that a view of precarity as merely a shared condition of all humans risks a return to "an uncritical universal humanism" (Fragkou, 2019) that does not go far enough to recognize the way power actually works through precarity. Therefore, as with care, Butler (2012) explains precarity as encompassing the unequal distribution of vulnerability, whereby social, political, and governmental efforts deem some lives more worthy of protection and more grievable (Butler, 2009) than others. According to Butler (2009), "Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death" (p. 25). And lastly, in her foreword to Isabel Lorey's (2015) book *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, Butler describes how Lorey dismantles notions of precarity as a politics of victimization in which vulnerability is viewed as an imposed weakness and site of non-agency, and instead asks us "to consider those forms of political mobilization that rally precarity against those regimes that seek to augment their power to manage and dispose of populations—in other words, precarity as activism" (p. 14). Thus, the feminist scholars I've identified in this article have theorized both care and precarity as a call to action—a potential way forward toward more just and equitable forms of life.

### **Beginning Art Teachers and Encounters with Care**

In what follows, I take a first step towards carrying out this call to action by further

exploring the care-related encounters that emerged in my work with Casey and Lauren. My goal in describing these encounters is not merely to draw attention to moments where care is a pressing concern for teachers or mentors, nor is it to suggest that we simply need to care more for students in schools or for beginning art teachers. Rather, following the motivations of Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) I agree that it is more productive to ask:

*...not 'how can we care more?' but instead to ask what happens to our work when we pay attention to moments where the question of 'how to care?' is insistent but not easily answerable. In this way, we use care as an analytic or provocation, more than a predetermined set of affective practices. (Atkinson-Graham et al., 2015, p. 739)*

For both me and the beginning art teachers I worked with, the question of 'how to care' was certainly not easily answerable. In fact, the exploration of caring encounters that formed the basis for this article became even more complex as I began to take notice of how the gatherings of human bodies, material contexts, relations of power, circulations of affect, discourses of neoliberalism, histories of care, and racial injustices (and on and on) are entangled in conditions of precarity—thus firmly situating care *within* precarity. Therefore, in the following descriptions, I intentionally draw attention to a multiplicity of factors and forces that shape caring encounters. My aim is to show how, for example, things like the physical spaces travelled by teachers, the norms of discipline and behavior imposed on students, the neoliberal focus on performance and accountability, the norms and standards of curriculum, the lives of students in and outside of schools, and the



emotions, affects, and practices produced in these encounters are intertwined in relations of precarity—relations that both *bring care to the fore* and *demonstrate the conditions and effects of its inequitable distribution*. These are the complex encounters to which I now turn.

## Lauren

Lauren was teaching in a large county school system where she was an itinerant art teacher. Three days of the week Lauren was at Franklin Elementary School, which she described as having a low socio-economic status. The other two days of the week, Lauren taught at Briarwood and Stratford, which she described as affluent schools. Because Lauren was teaching in schools that had a stark disparity in socio-economic levels, she often commented on how the school differences impacted her teaching. In our first session, which took place in November, Lauren explained:

*My Monday through Wednesday school is [Franklin], which has a high poverty rate...they get breakfast at school, and they get lunch at school. It's like, sometimes that's what they get. They maybe don't go home and eat. So, I teach the same lessons there as I do here (Briarwood)...I'm teaching in the same exact way, the exact same stuff, like same samples, same PowerPoint, same everything. But I don't have that discipline problem here that I do there.... it's just a completely different, you know, perspective on what I'm supposed to be teaching. Because here (Briarwood) it's super academically-driven; and there (Franklin) it's [about] developing character.... So, it's just TOTALLY different. Like, I'm teaching the same lessons [at both schools], but I'm teaching through the arts totally opposite things" (Lauren,*

*personal communication, November, 13, 2013).*

This notion of "teaching through art" was something that came up in our second group workshop (January 18, 2015) as well. During that workshop, Lauren and I had the following dialogue:

Lauren:

*I find that I'm teaching kids more than I'm teaching art to kids—[that's] how I think I'm working. I always wanted to be a teacher but wasn't sure what I wanted to teach. Art is secondary to the teaching in my practice. I try to teach through art—is [sic] always how I've thought of it. I don't necessarily teach art, but I'm teaching through art.*

Researcher:

*What would you say you're teaching?*

Lauren:

*I think I teach a lot of character development kind of stuff, and personal goal-setting and problem-solving, and things like that through art. And, I of course include all of art history and all of the stuff that you're supposed to do. But, I think a lot of it is also teaching social [skills] and how to be a progressive person and honest person in today's world.*

## Teaching as an Act of Care

It seemed that Lauren saw her commitment to teaching kids *through art* as part of her overall interest in caring for her students. Lauren described having a strong bond with her classes, making sure to give the kids at Franklin a lot of hugs because they seemed to crave attention. By the time of our second workshop in January, we were having a conversation

about how the teachers' perceptions of "What makes a good art curriculum?" had changed as in-service teachers, and Lauren responded, "what undergraduate courses don't teach is "how to care for kids" (personal communication, January 18, 2015).

Lauren's creative practices as an art-on-a-cart teacher could also be interpreted as a form of care. For example, because she felt bad that students did not have an opportunity to get up and walk from their homeroom to an art room, she would often start her class sessions by having students walk out into the hallway, making a big loop before re-entering the classroom as art students. In addition, Lauren would integrate movement in her younger classes by enticing them with dance parties during the last few minutes of class. Lauren even mentioned that she was considering incorporating some yoga in her classes.

In relation to the other beginning art teachers in the study, Lauren was one of the more progressive in terms of her approaches to art curriculum, and this became more evident as the year went on. Lauren was interested in "trying to expose the students to new art materials and ways of thinking about art and their connection to it" (Lauren, written reflection, November 13, 2014). For example, Lauren had inherited a free set of plastic tubes/tunnels that could be combined together, and on free art days she encouraged the students to play with them and think about how they could be considered sculpture. Along similar lines, she had puppets that she used to talk about performance art. Despite Lauren's earlier description of teaching the same lessons across multiple schools, in the spring Lauren described doing several projects, like one focused

on graffiti art, that were developed with student input. She said she often previewed project ideas with her students to get their feedback and determine which ideas they were excited about. She also encouraged students to bring popular culture interests into their work in order to make the projects more engaging.

Given the range of experiences Lauren provided her students, it was easy to forget that she was an art-on-a-cart teacher. Lauren described often having only five minutes to transition between classes, sometimes having to use an elevator to get to her next class—but this didn't prevent her from doing clay projects, for example, with her students. On more than one occasion, Lauren said she never wanted her students to feel like they were missing out because they had an art teacher on a cart. She said, "I want my kids to be pumped. 'Yes, I have Miss M.! We got the girl on a cart! Finally!'" (Lauren, personal communication, March 15, 2015).

### **Noticing Inequities**

Lauren was, in fact, perceptive of the inequitable differences of her school contexts. Lauren noticed the differences in resources between her schools early on in the school year and even tried to force a school representative to discuss the issue at a professional development session by posing the question, "How do you equitably divide resources within the county among different schools?" Lauren had noted, for example, that the school where she needed more support for disruptive students in the classroom or students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) had markedly fewer paraprofessionals than the affluent schools. According to Lauren, Franklin had approximately eight

paraprofessionals for about 800 students and the paraprofessionals mainly covered things like lunch or recess duty rather than helping in classrooms. Alternatively, Briarwood had paraprofessionals working with high needs children in the classroom. Human resources were not the only thing that was inequitable, however. Lauren also said that Franklin was a physically run-down school, and, during the year of the study, mold had been found in the first-grade wing. According to Lauren, school administration was not supportive under the circumstances even though teachers and students were becoming ill. For that reason, by spring the entire group of first grade teachers—eight teachers total—decided they were leaving the school the following school year. This was in addition to the already high turnover rate of teachers at Franklin.

Although Lauren picked up on the differences between her schools and the inequitable distribution of resources, she didn't necessarily make a connection between these factors and the ways school policies and procedures were implemented in the schools or the ways these concrete realities shaped her practices. For example, moral behavior initiatives and programs brought an emphasis on behavior to the fore across the schools, but Franklin was the only school that implemented Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS; <https://www.pbis.org/>), a program that is based on a rhetoric of positive rewards while also generating metrics of discipline. However, Lauren attributed these practices to Franklin's overall concern for equitable practices and to students' challenging behaviors rather than any larger socio-cultural issues. In addition, Lauren struggled throughout the year with how to handle classroom management at

Franklin. She implemented some unique strategies of her own, such as making calls to parents to let them know about their child's positive behavior. But, she also developed some stricter discipline strategies with other teachers, such as deciding to implement book reports for students "who can't handle learning by making art, but can learn by reading about art" (Lauren, personal communication, March 15, 2015).

### **Casey**

The school where Casey was teaching was a K-5 charter school in a major city. Students attending the school were chosen through a lottery system, with priority given to children living in the city school district where the school was located. As Casey explained, students did not generally live in the area where the school was located but were bused in primarily from areas of the city that were identified as wage-poor communities. The funding and charter contract for Casey's school were tied to their use of a specific curriculum, which included a detailed sequence of lesson plans for the visual arts. The curriculum was designed to build content from year to year, but Casey's students had not had a consistent art teacher for several years. In fact, Casey was the first art teacher to last more than a few months; three previous art teachers had quit after as long as three months and as little as one day. According to Casey, the most recent art teacher gave the students coloring pages every class period.

### ***Curriculum as Care***

Casey noticed early in the school year that the art curriculum was not relevant to her students, so she worked hard to develop more engaging lessons despite

challenging circumstances. Casey had 45 minutes for her classes, with no transition time between them—despite the fact that she had to travel on an elevator between four levels of the building. As an art-on-a-cart teacher, she often entered classrooms where students' behaviors were already at an escalated level, which meant she ended up using her class time to try to de-escalate the situations. She described entering a second-grade classroom where, even before she had a chance to get settled, a student picked up a chair and hit another student with it, breaking the other child's nose. Outbreaks like this were not uncommon. Casey described incident after incident of students breaking out into fights, hiding from teachers, or having emotional meltdowns. As Casey expressed, "There's a rough moment in almost every class" (Casey, personal communication, November 20, 2014).

As the year progressed, Casey seemed to take more and more risks beyond the given curriculum. When I visited in March, she told me about a lesson focused on the work of Jacob Lawrence, describing, "we talked about what it means to be proud of your neighborhood even when it's a really hard place to live" (Casey, personal communication, March 12, 2015). When some of the students were making jokes about being poor, she used it as an opportunity to share about her own life growing up poor in the foster care system, and even being homeless. Casey explained:

*A lot of them have that, but they're embarrassed about it. I'm trying to make it a place where we can talk about that. We've had some really great conversations about where they live. A lot of them live in [area of the city], a really bad area. It's hard. Or they live in [another*

*area]. Even being able to tell them [that area] is a walk in the park compared to Harlem, especially Harlem in the 1940s as a black person who had no rights. Making them realize that they really do end up saying it with their artwork. Then they did a torn paper cityscape of their city and their neighborhood and we did some drawings. I was able to teach them some stuff about landscape and about foreground and background. We threw that stuff in there, but then also making it relevant. That was really great. (Casey, personal communication, March 12, 2015).*

I also noticed that by spring she was adjusting her art practices in a way that fit more closely with her own philosophy of art education and with what she saw as the needs of her students. Casey's philosophy, a visual representation of which can be seen in Figure 2, described creating a safe place for students. As an extension of her philosophy, Casey began giving her students more time to free-draw in sketchbooks. At our March meeting, she explained:

*I feel like that is a way for them to really tell me what's going on. Yeah, it's art therapy! I'm not an art therapist and I don't try to be but I know it gives them a way to talk about it and tell us what's going on. I try to make it so that our projects give them some way to express themselves, not obviously crafts. I think it's just a little bit more of me being like screw the curriculum—'Here, look. We talked about it (the curriculum). Now do this.'* (Casey, personal communication, March 12, 2015)





Figure 2. Casey's visual representation of her teaching philosophy.

In addition to giving the students more opportunities for self-expression, Casey pushed for her students to experience art beyond the planned curriculum in a variety of other ways. Casey described teaching her classes in the school's yoga studio when the opportunity arose. Because the yoga studio was set up much like a dance studio, she set up a variety of stations in the room—collaborative drawings, small-scale and large-scale drawings, drawings on the mirrors with dry-erase markers—all of which allowed the students the opportunity to move freely, lie on the floor, and spread out in the room. Casey said her students absolutely loved it and she had no behavior problems during those classes. The other experience Casey worked hard to provide her fifth-grade students, in particular, was field trips. Throughout the year, Casey researched local gallery exhibits within walking distance of the school in the hopes of

taking advantage of the school's location in a cultural hub. By the time of our last workshop together, Casey said she had finally been able to take the students on more than one field trip and she was amazed at how well they responded. She implored the students to be good representatives of the school and make her proud, and they did just that. After a tough year with the fifth grade, she finally saw a different side of them.

### **School Practices**

Because of the student behavior issues the school struggled with, there were numerous forms of behavior initiatives, school procedures, and teacher training programs in place. The school emphasized Covey's "The Seven Habits of a Happy Child" as well as five main behavior reminders such as "Raise your hand to sit or stand." In addition, Casey said each teacher had their own management system in place such as ClassDojo, which allowed multiple teachers to award points to students through an app, or a strategy where the students in the class were all assigned jobs such as police officer, secretary, or custodian. Despite all of the programs in place, discipline issues still existed. Although there was a school behavioral specialist, teachers were told he was to be contacted as a last resort. In the midst of any incident, teachers were to begin by using the training they had received on how to deescalate volatile incidents. In addition, teachers had received restraint training that instructed them to, when necessary, approach students from behind and wrap their arms around them to keep them immobilized. Once behavioral events were resolved, teachers had to go through a series of steps to report each incident. Casey dreaded having to recount incidents



to the behavior specialist, for example, stating, "in some of the situations I feel so terrible about it, because I just feel like a failure" (Casey, personal communication, November 20, 2014).

### ***Teaching from a place of vulnerability***

With Casey, more than any of the other participants, our time together always left me feeling the emotional weight of her experiences. Similar to Lauren, she proclaimed that art-making was often secondary in her teaching, stating, "Students' lives are more important to me than the art that they make" (Casey, personal communication, April 25, 2015). Casey often shared with me some of her most difficult experiences with students. Casey described one student who often had to be carried onto the bus because she would throw herself onto the ground and cry that she didn't want to go home to her mom. One night, Casey stayed late for a Parent Advisory Council meeting, where the family showed up ten minutes before the meeting was over. When Casey asked the kids what they had been doing since they left school, they said, "sitting in the car" (Casey, personal communication, March 12, 2015). That night at the school, Casey said she sat with the students until 7:45pm to help them do their homework and gave them granola bars in case they wouldn't get to eat that night. Casey said she went home in tears that day.

In the handmade book (Figure 1) Casey made at the end of our year together, she emphasized the quote, "teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability" (Palmer, 2017), which demonstrated just how tightly her experiences of teaching were tied to her commitment to her students. She ended one section of the book with the word "love," because she got so many notes

from students that ended that way. Her final touch was her response back to her students, stating, "*I love you*," because as she told the group in the workshop, "*I do love my students*" (Casey, personal communication, April 25, 2015).

### **Noticing Complex Entanglements of Care**

The encounters with care that surfaced in my work with Casey and Lauren functioned as disturbances (Tsing, 2015) that unsettled my understandings about what it means to care as an art teacher in K-5 schools. By pursuing these disturbances as provocations through the lens of feminist theories of both care and precarity, I now see more deeply and with more complexity the complicated entanglements in which these beginning are teachers were situated. And, while there may be other aspects of these entanglements that are worthy of attention, I want to focus here on what I see as a major nexus of paradoxical tension that is generated within these entanglements. Namely, that these beginning art teachers and their students are held to, and blinded by, the neoliberal expectations of education in the US, which include a racially discriminatory emphasis on "security" (Fisher, 2011; Lorey, 2015) in school spaces, while simultaneously experiencing both the precariousness and precarity of life in and outside of schools. Lauren's and Casey's encounters with care demonstrate how neoliberal agendas of education that prioritize the market values of competition, individuality, and "security" create a spectacle of illusion that refuses to acknowledge the "differential distribution of care and injurability that frame the opportunities and access kids have to live and learn within and beyond the site of school" (Fisher, 2011, p. 385). Neoliberalism attempts to construct

teachers as autonomous workers, whose primary focus is on individual performance as demonstrated through the accomplishments and regulated behaviors of their students; yet, teachers' encounters with care in K-5 schools are inherently bound up in a network of interdependency and vulnerability that cannot be separated from the conditions of precarity that define students' lives. As Butler (2012) explains, "the life of the other, the life that is *not* our own, is also our life, since whatever sense 'our' life has is derived precisely from this sociality, the being already, and from the start, dependent on a world of others, constituted in and by a social world" (pp. 140-141). This is the condition in which the bodies of teachers and the bodies of students are both vulnerable to and responsible for the other—an ethical relation that is not chosen, but that is the condition of being in a social world. Thus, the unequal distribution of precarity that produces conditions in which students do not have an adequate supply of food when they leave school, do not have enough paraprofessionals in their school, or are heavily surveilled through codes of conduct in school cannot be thought or experienced apart from what it means to care in schools. And, this reality produces affects, emotions, and behaviors—on the part of the teachers and the students—that exist despite the unwillingness of schools to recognize them.

As Tronto (1993) pointed out, the fact that care is covered over by agendas such as capitalism and neoliberalism is what allows pervasive inequities in caring practices and resources to persist—in other words, creating an even further state of precarity. In fact, a blindness toward care contributes to conditions in which teachers like Lauren and Casey might unknowingly perform versions of care—whether their

own or those encouraged through school practices—that actually sustain inequities and racial discrimination despite what they believe are good intentions. Therefore, in these next sections, I first elaborate on the ways that Casey and Lauren experienced encounters with care that went largely unrecognized, especially as they were situated within contexts of isolation that speak to a gendered history of women teachers and care work. Then, I move on to demonstrate how Casey and Lauren's unrecognized encounters with care were further situated within social discourses and institutional systems of racial discrimination that perpetuate harmful and inequitable practices in education.

### ***Caring in Isolation***

Both Lauren's and Casey's encounters with care, and the emotions and affects produced, were largely experienced in isolation. While Casey and Lauren were not isolated in a single classroom like many of their elementary school counterparts, their positions as art-on-a-cart teachers left them isolated in other ways. Once they entered a classroom, they were on their own with their students. In addition, Casey was the only art teacher in her school, having no other colleagues to rely on for day-to-day happenings; and Lauren was itinerant, traveling between three schools, therefore experiencing relative autonomy. According to Tronto (1993), the private arena of care is commonly associated with a women's morality approach, which positions women in the private realm of the home—or the classroom—for example. In Sandra Acker's (1995-1996) comprehensive review "*Gender and Teachers' Work*," she describes how the identity of elementary school teachers has often been associated with mothering due to the way "Teachers spend long

hours with 'their' children, as mothers do with theirs, often in relative isolation from other adults" (p. 121). According to James (2010), the factory model of the teacher as isolated in a classroom with students likely contributes to the ways teachers define themselves as carers (p. 531). Yet, she also points out that this model, combined with the notion of 'teacher as mother,' can result in teachers feeling they need to take on the responsibility for all of their students' lives (James, 2010)—unmanageable for teachers of 25 to 30 students, let alone art teachers who see around 300 to 900 students each week. Casey's experiences certainly demonstrated the immensity of the responsibility she felt for her students, which resulted in many tearful breakdowns. Yet, Casey's raw emotions had no place in the context of the school. In fact, she said she vowed never to let her students see her cry (personal communication, March 12, 2015).

Given the historical associations of women with care work, it is no coincidence that the workforce of teachers in the US is primarily comprised of women,<sup>1</sup> who are tasked with being compliant workers amid precarious contexts that leave them isolated and with limited support or resources. It is also no coincidence that the schools in which teachers experience the most intense emotions, affects, and propensities toward care are supposed to be serving students of color from wage-poor communities, and that those schools have the least amount of resources. These are realities that further reveal the politics of care (Tronto, 2015)—in terms of who is expected to care and who is worthy of care—and thus inequitable distribution of precarity.

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1 A 2016 report by the National Center for Education Statistics found that 77% of teachers were female. [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/Indicator\\_CLR/coe\\_clr\\_2019\\_05.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/Indicator_CLR/coe_clr_2019_05.pdf)

### ***Entanglements of Whiteness, Deficit Thinking, Systemic Inequities, and School Practices***

As I mentioned in an earlier section, in contexts where white women are teaching students of color, there is a propensity for the teachers to operate from a whiteness ideology (French, 2019) by taking up a deficit model of thinking, viewing students as "lacking" in a variety of ways that might be "fixed" by the teacher (Emdin, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994). This stems from the fact that whiteness operates as the "axis around which other races are constructed in hierarchical relations of power and material and psychological privilege" (Spillane, 2015 drawing on Haney Lopez, 2006 and Wildman, 2000). Deficit thinking through the lens of a whiteness ideology could have certainly contributed to Lauren's and Casey's feelings of responsibility. This seems especially likely in the way that Lauren described her responsibility for teaching character development and how to be "an honest person in today's world" to students at Franklin.

While Lauren did notice the inequitable distribution of resources across her schools, she did not have the critical knowledge necessary to notice how those inequities also played out in her own forms of care for her students or in other school practices, such as behavior management. For example, of the three schools where Lauren taught, only Franklin implemented a PBIS program. Was it determined, then, that Franklin students *needed* this kind of program more than the students at the other schools? Likewise, while Casey seemed less prone to deficit thinking—perhaps because of the unique perspective afforded by her own life experiences—she also never identified

her school's approaches to student discipline, a multi-faceted approach to controlling student behaviors and bodies, as problematic.

Despite both Casey's and Lauren's authentic efforts to care for their students, mistakes were made and opportunities lost—yet those mistakes were not merely a matter of individual concern. Casey and Lauren's actions were situated within entanglements of social, cultural, and political relations that actively shape status quo norms and perceptions. And, those entanglements are indicative of educational inequities that have been firmly established over decades. For example, inequitable differences in the curriculum and procedures enacted in schools along the lines of race and class are well documented in the literature (Anyon, 1980; Brownell, 2017). As early as 1980, Jean Anyon's analysis of five elementary schools across various economic contexts demonstrated that the curriculum in working-class schools was procedural, while the curriculum in affluent schools was more self-directed and focused on developing students as leaders and thinkers. In a more recent example, Cassie Brownell (2017) described the stark contrast between her experiences teaching in Post-Katrina New Orleans in an 'elite' school comprised of a predominately white, wealthy student body and one situated in communities marked by poverty and comprised of a majority Black student population. After teaching for two years in the low-income school where "students were mandated to not only move in silent, gendered lines through the halls, but they were not even trusted to have toilet paper within the restrooms," Brownell was shocked when she discovered students in grades one through seven in the elite school "were able to move freely about

the campus, unsupervised, throughout the day" (p. 212).

Today we see PBIS programs, like the one in Lauren's school, implemented nationwide, with over 25,000 schools using the program as of 2018 (<https://www.pbis.org/about/about>). PBIS programs have become accepted as a standard practice in schools. However, researchers Christopher Robbins and Serhiy Kovalchuk (2012) have suggested that behavior programs like PBIS actually "dovetail" with an educational system focused on metrics and criminalization of youth (p. 199). In addition, Robbins and Kovalchuk (2012) have found that programs like PBIS "preserve racial politics and racial order(ing) through the disproportionate use of discipline measures toward youth of color" (p. 207). And yet, like educational policies that are framed through a rhetoric that appeals to a sense of common good,<sup>2</sup> PBIS is framed as emphasizing 'positive behavior' through rewards, thus making it difficult for most teachers to see its potential down sides. In fact, Lauren expressed appreciating the PBIS program at Franklin because it was a consistent approach throughout the entire school. PBIS might even be seen by many as a caring approach to student behavior and discipline.

The popularity and rhetoric of PBIS, along with the variety of other approaches to controlling student behavior in Casey's schools, is intertwined with a broader interest in "child safety" (Giroux, 2009) and ideals of security produced through neoliberal governing (Lorey, 2015).

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2 For example, consider the names of policies such as "No Child Left Behind" or the "Every Student Succeeds Act" (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009), which appeal to a sense of public good despite the actual practices which have produced, in many cases, the opposite of good outcomes.



According to Lorey (2015), “neoliberal governing proceeds primarily through social insecurity, through regulating the minimum of assurance while simultaneously increasing instability” (pp. 16-17). Lorey (2015) refers to this as precarization (which she distinguishes from precariousness and precarity), or a neoliberal state of living that emphasizes security while “requiring and inducing precarity as a mode of life” (Butler, 2015). Neoliberalism has generated public fear tied to the loss of security and order, and therefore presents the safety of the public as the primary motivation for citizens to govern themselves and for programs, policies, and tactics that guard public safety at all costs. Through this lens, programs like PBIS—or more to the extreme, the hiring of school resource officers in many schools—function as a means of safeguarding students by creating “safe” environments where rules are followed and punishments are distributed as deterrents. Yet, as in the case of PBIS, which students’ lives are made secure and which students’ lives are punished largely falls along the lines of income and race, with students from wage-poor communities and students of color being the most often punished (Fisher, 2011). And, at the same time, “money that would go to hiring competent teachers, investing in new technologies, and maintaining school infrastructures now goes to metal detectors, surveillance equipment, fencing, and the hiring of security guards” (Fisher, 2011, p. 381). This is the work of neoliberalism—that in the name of security, the distribution of funds and resources creates realities that offer “the minimum of assurance while simultaneously increasing instability” (Lorey, 2015, pp. 16-17). And, in this same context, emotions and affects are not seen as an indicator of care deficits or a lack

of resources that make life livable across income and race. Instead, when outbursts of emotion and affect inevitably erupt from the conditions of slow violence (Nixon, 2011) taking place, those outbursts are considered a consequence of delinquent behavior or a psychological issue rather than a product of oppressive conditions (Fisher, 2011).

Given the pervasiveness of programs like PBIS and their intersection with a neoliberal emphasis on safety and security for a “common good,” it becomes possible to see how, particularly as beginning teachers, Casey and Lauren’s sense of “right” approaches to care get formed. Thus, while deficit thinking needs to be challenged at a personal level, beginning teachers would also benefit from recognizing how the underlying ideologies that contribute to notions of care grounded in deficit thinking are symptomatic of the precarity generated by a wide range of systemic inequities that impact school practices and students’ lives.

### **On Becoming Vulnerable and Taking Action: The Place of Care in Art Education**

Through the encounters with care that came to light during my year of working with Casey and Lauren, I was—and perhaps they were—unpredictably transformed (Tsing, p. 46). According to Tsing (2015), “Unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves. Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others” (p. 20). Much like Butler’s (2012) proposition that we are made vulnerable through our interdependency, Tsing (2015) describes these unpredictable encounters as predicated on vulnerability; in the



precarious present, we are unavoidably vulnerable. Vulnerability is, of course, not a desirable trait for teachers in most current educational contexts in the US where neoliberal discourses proclaim the individual teacher—in K-12 contexts as well as higher education—as a self-reliant contributor to the machine of progress and economic prosperity. Yet, encounters with care and the vulnerability-to-others they are capable of producing continue to surface despite “the simplifications of progress narratives” (p. 6)—which is precisely why these encounters and effects are worth noticing. As provocative disturbances, encounters with care create conditions to see, learn, understand, experience, and make something new from what some might describe as “the ruins” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000; Tsing, 2015) of education in the US.

A surprising finding from the experience of revisiting Casey’s and Lauren’s stories is that, despite claiming that art was secondary in their teaching practice, both of them made significant investments in forms of art curriculum and pedagogy that defied the status quo in their school contexts. Although I did not go into great detail in this article (see Hanawalt, 2018 for an in-depth discussion of accountability), the weight of the accountability culture was felt immensely in both of their contexts—whether through the teacher evaluation process in the case of Lauren, or the focus on tests and a mandated curriculum in Casey’s case. Yet despite their precarious positions, both of these beginning teachers were willing to challenge that culture through practices that give us a glimpse of what is possible if we position art as not secondary, but as *central* to an ethic of care as a political endeavor. Through Casey’s efforts, her students were not limited to a mandated

art curriculum focused mainly on art created by white, European males. Rather, they had the opportunity to learn about artists relevant to them, and to experience embodied forms of artmaking in a yoga studio where they could move freely in ways uncommon to their school context. And, despite being challenged by student behaviors and feeling the pressure of surveillance by her new teacher mentor-as-evaluator, Lauren did not limit her students to art as a practice of following directions to make a pre-determined end product. Rather, she showed them how art could be performative, playful, and relevant to contemporary life. As Tsing (2015) articulates, precarious contexts make “it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible.”

### ***Taking Action and the Role of Art/ Education***

As Fisher and Tronto (1990) argue, care *must* be present in order to live in our world “as well as possible” (p. 40). Therefore, we might re-imagine what happens in both teacher preparation programs and K-12 schools in order to acknowledge the role of care as well as the conditions of precarity in which caring encounters occur. In fact, Fisher (2011) calls for a *precarious pedagogy* that entails both a recognition of pedagogy itself as precarious—occurring in relations of unpredictability and uncertainty, and also a recognition of the politically induced conditions that create inequitable distributions of precarity for students both in and out of schools. Here, Fisher drives home the point that pedagogy cannot be thought apart from the precarious conditions that define the concrete realities of students’ lives. And, she proposes that any form of education that aims to call itself “caring” or “democratic” must recognize the ways

both emotion and affect are produced through precarity (Fisher, 2011, pp. 419-420). Following Fisher's proposition, what might become possible, for example, if pre-service teachers were taught to recognize precarity as the context in which we are interdependent and vulnerable to others, where emotions and affects are produced, and in which care is *required*? This investigation would include and require a study of the ways care and precarity are situated within neoliberalism and distributed inequitably in both schools and life, especially along the lines of gender, race, and class. The goal of such an investigation would not, however, be mere resilience (Butler et al., 2016)—preparing future art teachers to survive amid the realities of schools and their entanglements with students' lives. Nor would it be to create a hierarchy of victimhood by determining which students are harmed the most and thereby essentializing their experiences or assuming non-agency (Fisher, 2011). Rather, the goal of this work would be to: (a) challenge the ways neoliberal agendas of education do cause harm by defining, derailing, and concealing both care and precarity (Fisher, 2011), and (b) develop the capacity for resistance (Butler et al., 2016) in order to take a stand and take action in ways that disrupt the wider hierarchies of power at play. And, this work would need to be supported during the early years of teaching, when beginning art teachers experience, in a particularly embodied way, the vulnerability and precariousness upon which teaching is predicated.

Though the pedagogical and curricular risks enacted by Lauren and Casey took place as acts of care within the isolated spaces of their art rooms, small gestures have the potential to become political. In her book on ecologies of precarity

in twenty-first century theatre, Marissia Fragkou (2019) offers examples of how theatre productions in the United Kingdom have been addressing precarity, and, in the case of several examples, she argues that glitches or hiccups can “turn into small political gestures that disturb conventional frames of recognizing precarious lives” (110). Imagine, for example, how Lauren's and Casey's gestures could have carried more weight if they had understood the precarity of the entanglements in which they were situated. Further, art educators in higher education and K-12 contexts might consider how artistic practices and processes might function as both small gestures and active attempts for larger-scale disruption. In a book edited by Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay (2016) called *Vulnerability in Resistance*, the authors present a collection of chapters that offer some examples, such as artistic interventions, mobilizations, and community and school projects that take up various forms of resistance. A common understanding that underlies all of these approaches is that the aim is not to “end the threat of precarity”—which might only be imagined through civil wars or a breakdown in society, but to locate “where, within these governing mechanisms, cracks and potentials for resistance are to be found” (Lorey, 2015).

### **Concluding Provocations**

Given that my intention was never to offer suggestions for how to care more but to more deeply consider “how to care” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) amid precarious conditions—as art teachers and as art teacher mentors, I end here with a few questions for further provocation:

How might we move from a dyadic conception of care between teacher

and student, to a focus on care that is grounded in more-than-human interdependence? In other words, what would care look like if it went beyond teacher-student or mentor-mentee? How would the inequitable distribution of care and precarity in the lives of students be considered? How might we attend to the role of emotion and affect in the lives of both teachers and students? How might this lead to more just forms of art/ education, whether through curriculum, pedagogy, or social action?

What are the current neoliberal discourses that are working through teacher preparation programs and that may be blinding those of us in higher education to encounters with care that are critical for us to imagine alternatives? What do certification exams and edTPA make us blind to, for example? How will art teacher preparation programs respond to the move to trace new teacher “success” back to their undergraduate programs? How will students in K-12 schools be served or not served as a result of these accountability tactics? Where will care fit in?

What can art as a political form of care do? How might we further consider the role of artistic practices, such as social practice or artistic interventions in the public realm, that rely on interdependence and ambiguity (Hegeman et al., 2020)? How might we engage students (K-12 and pre-service) in these artistic practices as a means of foregrounding both care and precarity?

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