

Watching the Classroom: Surveillance, Trust, and Professional Autonomy in Early Childhood Education

Research Overview: This study explores how classroom surveillance reshapes early childhood educators' practices and relationships in Taiwan. Drawing on qualitative interviews, it examines impacts on classroom management, parent–teacher communication, and administrative interactions, highlighting tensions between accountability, trust, and professional autonomy within increasingly monitored educational environments.

Purpose: The growing use of surveillance technologies in early childhood classrooms has generated increasing debate regarding safety, privacy, and professional autonomy. While video monitoring systems are widely implemented in public spaces, their application in early childhood settings remains highly contested. The installation of cameras in non-public classroom environments introduces complex tensions among educators, parents, and administrators. This study examines how classroom surveillance reshapes early childhood educators' perspectives and practices, with particular attention to classroom management, parent–teacher communication, and administrative interactions.

Methods: This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, informed by theoretical perspectives on surveillance and power (e.g., Foucauldian perspectives) and emotional labor in educational contexts. Participants included two early childhood educators in Taiwan who had direct experience teaching in both non-surveillance and surveillance classroom environments. Although the sample size is small, participants were purposefully selected for their comparative experiences, enabling in-depth exploration

across contexts. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, supplemented by contextual information such as classroom layouts and camera placement. The data were analyzed using thematic coding to identify patterns in perceptions and practices.

Results and Discussion: The findings suggest that surveillance functions as both a mechanism of accountability and a source of emotional labor for teachers. In classroom management, cameras were primarily perceived as tools for reconstructing events and ensuring accountability. Teachers reported that surveillance footage enabled more objective clarification of incidents, particularly in cases of peer conflict. Additionally, the presence of cameras appeared to influence children's behavior, reducing inappropriate actions and, in some cases, alleviating separation anxiety by symbolically connecting children with their parents. While surveillance did not fundamentally alter teachers' pedagogical beliefs or overall interaction styles, it led to increased caution in specific situations, particularly regarding physical interactions with children.

In the domain of parent-teacher communication, surveillance played a dual role. On one hand, video recordings served as evidence that strengthened teachers' credibility and reduced misunderstandings. On the other hand, increased parental reliance on video access created additional workload and emotional strain. When mutual trust was insufficient, surveillance footage did not necessarily resolve conflicts; instead, it could be used to question teachers' professional judgment. While surveillance promises transparency, it simultaneously introduces new forms of control and uncertainty in communication.

Regarding administrative interactions, surveillance systems reconfigured power relations within the educational setting. Administrators often acted as intermediaries in retrieving and interpreting footage, supporting teachers in resolving disputes. However, concerns regarding privacy and informal monitoring emerged. Teachers reported

discomfort when footage was accessed without prior notice and noted that recorded events could become subjects of informal discussion. These dynamics contributed to a sense of being constantly observed, highlighting how surveillance operates as both supportive infrastructure and a mechanism of control.

Overall, participants expressed conditional support for classroom surveillance, emphasizing its role in providing objective records that protect children, teachers, and parents. However, such support was closely tied to concerns about privacy and potential misuse of data. This study provides insights from a non-Western context, where cultural expectations regarding parental involvement and teacher responsibility may shape how surveillance is perceived and enacted.

In conclusion, classroom surveillance extends beyond its technical function as a safety tool and actively reshapes relational dynamics in early childhood education. Rather than simply enhancing accountability, it reconfigures trust relationships and professional boundaries among educators, parents, and administrators. This study contributes to the international discourse on surveillance in education by offering empirical insights from early childhood settings and calls for context-sensitive and ethically grounded policy frameworks that balance accountability with the protection of educators' professional autonomy and dignity.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education; Classroom Surveillance; Educational Policy; Teacher Professional Autonomy