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Caring in Public Education

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ABSTRACT Currently the British educational system can be characterised by its instrumentalisation (of ends) and control (of means), revealing an impoverished vision of community and a lack of care. To (re)imagine public education is to reconsider what this 'public' means and signifies in practice. This article suggests that at the core of a richer and more compelling vision lies the notion of care. It re-examines what constitutes the content of our caring, and argues that to care is to direct attention to things that are intrinsically valuable, such as persons, relationships, educative experiences, all of which are comprised in our well-being. This understanding is a shift from care as a virtue and disposition, to care as valuing the cared-for and engaging the community in caring, and facilitates an exploration of a public education that is caring, in terms of its aims, values and processes, and in terms of schools as learning communities.

In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey (1927) proposed that education be intimately connected to democracy and the life of the public. He rejected conceptions of men as isolated, atomic, hostile and instrumental, and instead, he stressed the importance of perceiving humans as socially constituted. In fact, Dewey (1888) argued that we are human(e) precisely because of our non-instrumental relations with each other. For Dewey, the *public* is only called into being by common interests which are situated within the aforementioned intrinsic human associations. This alludes to the idea that the public or the community is itself a *process* of meaningful engagement in which common interests are formed, informed and transformed in dialogue and deliberation. What is implied here is that the common interests of the public are reflections of what a community truly cares about and cares for. That is also to say that when we evaluate democratic processes, where one group misses out to another group's triumph, or even suffers from it, it is not just the minorities' rights and entitlements that are being lost, but also the significance of caring. After all, it is care and caring that is at the root of mutual respect, close human relationships and meaningful activities, all of which are comprised in our public or communal life and personal and collective well-being (Gill & Thomson, 2012).

Dewey's analysis of the public and its link to the centrality of caring seems to apply most appropriately in unpacking the hopelessness of our current educational system, which is theoretically instrumental and practically tyrannical. Clearly, grounding the public in the process of forming human bonds and transforming human conditions through the significance of care is highly relevant to reimagining public education in such a critical time of our history. I shall propose that public education be rooted in such caring which must take priority over the obsessions with measurability, individual successes, and effectiveness of the institutions.

To begin, I review some theories of care relevant to education and suggest that they do not lay enough emphasis on the intrinsic values of persons, relationships, activities and experiences. I argue that it is these valuable aspects that constitute an *about*-ness of our caring, or its content. Only by appreciating what is encompassed in our caring can public education care more and contribute better to the common interests of the community. I then illustrate how the focus on the content of caring shifts the perspective from care as a personal virtue to care as a structural feature of education. Lastly, I examine how this shift might transform public education.

Ethics of Care in Education

The practices of care in education have been highly influenced by feminism. Let us review briefly three most influential authors' theories, their key ideas for education and relevant critiques.

Carol Gilligan established an important connection between women and relations-based care ethics. Recognising the interdependence between persons and social contexts, she suggests that there be more than one voice in any given moral situation. Thus, our response to these different situations must be one of care, situated within human relationships and reciprocal responsibility. The relational is highlighted as a distinct feminine quality, and to promote care as a moral character, Gilligan (1982) proposed that education should cultivate in girls their inner moral intuitions, such as empathy and compassion, rather than silence them through imposing rule-bound interpretations of moral reasoning. However, Gilligan's attributing care to the feminine has been criticised as effectively reinforcing gender stereotypes, suggesting that relational ethics of care should be fostered in both boys and girls (MacKinnon, 1987).

Nel Noddings (1984, 2002) proposes that care be intimate and personal, as found in models of caregiving within the family, and in caring relationships between doctor and patient, teacher and child, or between physically able and disabled persons. Education, therefore, should provide home-like environments where care-related virtues can be cultivated through the modelling of caring teachers. This conception has embedded in it a dyadic relationship between two individuals, where one party provides care to another. Due to this dyadic relationship, such a conception of care contains a possibility of *othering*. It is too often implied that the one who cares is perceived to be more giving, generous

and able, while the one who receives care is considered vulnerable, needy, less able. Hence this is a form of *othering*, even when it is the basis for care to take place.

Joan Tronto's proposal is connected to, but goes beyond, Noddings' proposal and is a departure from the virtue-based care ethics. She suggests that 'caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Tronto, 1993, p. 103). This view is echoed by others, such as Virginia Held (2006). It extends beyond mere human interaction, to encompass objects and environment, all of which Tronto puts under 'the world'. She contrasts the practices of care (i.e. maintaining, continuing or repairing the world) with those activities that do not generally constitute care (for example, 'the pursuit of pleasure, creative activity, production, destruction') (Tronto, 1993, p. 104). According to Tronto, seeing care as a practice or process can help break free from the hold of the dyadic relation. Such care takes place in schools as democratic environments where relationships and human interdependence are recognised and celebrated through attentiveness, responsibility, nurturance, compassion and the meeting of others' needs. While care is values-based, in Tronto's conception, it is oriented towards improving the world, and hence care is a means, and as such, a form of instrumentalisation.

All three conceptions of care presented here share a common starting point – that as humans, we are caring, and it is in our nature that we provide care to and receive care from each other. Gilligan accentuates care as a feminine quality, and the basis for all human relationships. Nodding regards caring virtue as a significant force of our moral sentiment. Tronto sees the practices of care as a key function of our political system and a central category of social analysis. A combination of all three may offer a fuller conception of relational care. Put simply, the ethics of care argues that care is situated in the relational, is derived from human caring qualities and inherent moral character, and entails practices that are aimed at improving life experiences of and for each other and the conditions of our world.

In sum, ethics of care provides a way of seeing *how* and *why* we can be caring. However, it explains little about the content of our caring. The question '*what* is it *about* a particular thing that we should care about it?' remains, and it is to this that I shall now turn.

A Different Understanding of Care

Care tends to have content which I call its *about*-ness. I am using this word to refer to those aspects towards which care is directed. When we consider what it is that commands our care, certain qualities about which we care come to the fore. They are the *content* or the *about-ness* of our caring. I argue that the about-ness of genuine caring must be the intrinsic values in things, including objects, persons, relationships, activities and experiences, all of which urge us to care.

Clearly care is always directed at the valuable aspects of things. These are goodness in things. However, there are two sides to the valuable aspects or goodness. On the one hand, things can be instrumentally valuable because they lead to something good; on the other hand, things can be non-instrumentally valuable insofar as they are valuable or good for what they are (not just because of the goodness they lead to). Let's look at a simple example. I take a walk across the park to get to the post office. In this case, the walk is instrumental, and the value of the walk is a means to an end, (i.e. to reach a destination). In fact, if I can get to the post office without the walk, even better. What makes the walk instrumental is that it is goal-directed, a mere means to achieve the goal. By contrast, I enjoy taking a walk in nature. What I appreciate is the content or about-ness of the walk, or the walk itself. The valuable aspects of walking might include, for instance, breathing in the fresh air, treading on the meandering paths, absorbing the views near and far, feeling peacefulness or a sense of awe, and much more. These are among the qualities that make a walk in nature valuable *in its own right*. For anyone who loves walking in nature, these experiences, emotions and feelings are among those things that one ought to care about, even though people may care about them in quite different ways. I use the term 'intrinsically valuable' to refer to these non-instrumentally valuable qualities.

This distinction is important. When we treat our activities as if they have only instrumental value, then as persons, we too become only instrumentally valuable. This is because meaningful activities constitute part of one's life, and in some sense, one's life constitutes oneself (Thomson & Gill, forthcoming). Thus, to regard all one's goal-directed actions as merely instrumental implies treating oneself as merely instrumentally valuable. It is like saying that what is valuable about oneself and one's life only consists of the results that one achieves. Instrumental value is entirely derivative: things that have merely instrumental value are valuable only because something else has non-instrumental value. This implies that to get to the bottom of what we should care about, it is necessary to specify the relevant intrinsic value in the things, persons, relationships or activities (Thomson & Gill, forthcoming). Therefore, what constitutes the content, or the about-ness, of our caring must be the intrinsic goodness or non-instrumental value(s) in things themselves. Otherwise, as already seen, when we merely direct our attention to the instrumental values of things, we are instrumentalising them rather than caring for them. When such instrumentalisation applies to persons, it is not just detrimental to our well-being: worse still, it is dehumanising.

The idea that care is about the intrinsically valuable aspects of things and persons in their own rights differs from the theories of care reviewed in a number of ways. First, as discussed, to care is to direct one's attention to something that is beyond one's self. In this sense, care is non-self-referential and non-self-regarding. We care because there is something valuable that is worthy of our caring, not just because, as proposed by care ethics, we are caring by nature, nor because we remember the delight and self-affirming feeling of our

selves when we are being cared for by others. There can be self-care, but it doesn't change the meaning of care in this case. This directedness shifts care from being an ethical response to the needy, to social injustice or to oppression, to care as taking an active interest in and paying keen attention to that which we care about.

Second, care is directed at the intrinsic values of things in their own right. Hence care allows us to articulate what we appreciate non-instrumentally in the things we care about, such as walking in nature, conversations with a friend or reading a book, or the relevant intrinsically valuable aspects that constitute these activities and experiences. They are valuable in themselves, not because of the goals they can help us achieve. Likewise, when we care for people, and for our relationships, our care is, in effect, directed at their intrinsic value as human beings. Such caring relationships are comprised within human well-being rather than serving as means to some ends. Our concern for people's neediness, their lack of power or access to resources, and their vulnerability is derived from our respect for their intrinsic value as human beings and their well-being. In terms of our care as directed at improving human conditions and the world, we take an active interest in them because they are valuable as such. An example of this is caring about our planet. We care about nature not because it provides resources for our economic growth; instead, we care because nature is valuable in itself, and it is already constituted in human well-being (Gill & Thomson, 2019).

Third, care involves an engagement with what we care about. To begin with, we become curious about, interested in and attentive to the valuable aspects in things, person(s) or activities; then we are attuned to them and become fully immersed in them, and further we inquire into the values in them to appreciate them even more. The more we care and attend to the valuable aspects of things, person(s) or activities, the more capable we are of appreciating their intrinsic values. This engagement with what/whom we care about further consolidates our relationship with it/them – to care is to form non-instrumental relationships and appreciative connections with that which we care about. It suggests that caring relationships apply not just between persons, but also to the relationships one can have with life itself.

Lastly, when we care, we tend to act upon our curiosity about, our interest in and our dedication to the values in that which we care about. This can mean, for instance, that we deepen our relationship with another person, participate or get involved in the activities more fully with a richer appreciation of their valuable aspects, or become more present in the life of other people, and in the world. In this way, care inspires more care, and care can prompt us to become proactive in living our lives more fully and supporting others to do so. When applied at a systemic level, care may help transform the culture of our social institutions towards becoming more caring and sensitive to well-being, improving human conditions and enabling the flourishing of all.

What would this different understanding of care mean for education? What we ought to care about in education are those intrinsically valuable

aspects. According to Dewey (1984), education does not have ends outside of itself, and the values of education lie in educating itself, including the formation and transformation of persons, meaningful relationships, educative activities, processes, and experiences which are comprised in part in the formation and transformation of persons. These valuable aspects of education constitute, in part, students' well-being in education (Gill & Thomson, 2012). Furthermore, Dewey also highlighted the embeddedness of education in life itself, and the valuable aspects of education that we care about must be reflected in the transformation of (public) life, which is connected with social progress, or the well-being of the community.

The next question is: how might this focus on intrinsically valuable aspects of education offer a new vision for our public education system?

A Caring Public Education System

Noddings (1984) warned that public education might risk a *crisis of caring*. An educational system that tends to treat students as products instrumentalises persons, and an educational system that imposes its own agenda on the participants is tyrannical. Critics have long called out this instrumentality and tyranny that has dominated our public education. When schools direct their attention to predetermined contents of **A** national curriculum, targets, high-stakes testing, and reward-and-punishment, education can easily treat all activities, and persons, as means. In such a system, there is little space to help students direct their care to things of intrinsic value, not least an appreciation of themselves as dignified beings of such value. Often when 'care' is mentioned, it only applies to students who are vulnerable, excluded or experiencing mental ill-health. Care becomes a remedy for the side effects of a tyrannical system, not only instrumentalising care, but also supporting a dehumanising system. There are initiatives to encourage compassion, mindfulness and good moral character, but they seldom transform schools' culture. Activities such as arts, music and outdoor exploration are offered merely as tokens, even though they may truly enable students to care more about the intrinsic value in education.

So how do we structure a public education system differently so that it can be more caring? There are many pointers that others have already suggested; here I shall rehearse a few by stressing their link to my conception of care.

As a start, education should not have aims outside itself; hence, public education must align its aims with the cultivation and transformation of persons towards, in Freire's (1970) words, becoming more fully human. Human becoming should point to three directions simultaneously: (1) reflexive inner transformation; (2) relational enrichment with others; and (3) greater engagement with the world (Gill & Thomson, 2012). Care suggests that education must be directed primarily at the intrinsic value of its participants, including that of students and teachers. In other words, *public education that cares must take persons really seriously.*

Educative experiences and lives in school are comprised in the students' (and teachers') current well-being, which must be recognised as the heart of education. Care indicates that curriculum activities, teaching and learning processes, and social relationships cannot be instrumentalised because they are intrinsically valuable and should be so treasured in education. That is to say, *public education that cares must take well-being really seriously.*

To care about and to articulate these intrinsically valuable aspects of education, it is necessary to foster a culture of inquiry where students, teachers and administrators can enter into dialogue, and question, challenge and reflect on the educative processes and discern their value. Here, students, and teachers, and administrators are dialogic partners and co-inquirers, suggesting a collaborative relationship that transcends traditional role boundaries and hierarchies. Hence, *public education that cares must take dialogue really seriously.*

Central to the process of inquiry is the art of listening. Listening is caring, and contains an implicit commitment to the equal value (and reality) of all persons. Student voice has played a significant part in educational innovation, but it can mean little without relevant and appropriate listening. So *public education that cares must take listening really seriously.*

Care can strengthen relationships among persons and between persons and things in the world. Care enables us to see that these relationships are meaningful in both instrumental and non-instrumental ways. So within an educative agenda, there must be spaces and processes dedicated to fostering valuable relationships. Thus, *public education that cares must take relationships really seriously.*

In this spirit, public education that cares will be humanising. This shift from care as an ethical response to the needy and unjust, to caring as paying keen attention to the intrinsic values of things, processes and persons in themselves may inspire proactive care towards living more fully as humans in communion with others. Such a radical conception of care can serve to transform public education from fixation with instrumentality to commitment to non-instrumental values; from obsession with accountability to a focus on relational responsibilities; from separation and exclusion to an enriched sense of community; from silencing students' voices to listening and engaging children and young people in co-creating a good life together.

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