

The Centrality of Caring: Embracing Our Work as Political Practice

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Introduction

Early childhood educators (ECEs) in Ontario and across Canada face a constant battle “legitimizing” our work. All too often we find ourselves in social and/or professional situations where our work is equated with low-level custodial tasks, typically conceptualized as little more than “babysitting”. We know that this is not what we do, yet this dominant societal understanding of our profession continues to leave us feeling significantly undervalued with low levels of respect and professional recognition. More practically this results in the notoriously low wages and less-than-ideal working conditions for the majority of the ECEC workforce. While the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) is tackling these issues through several current initiatives (the *Professional Pay for Professional Work* campaign, our involvement in the broader Decent Work campaign, our recently released *Decent Work Charter and Workforce Strategy Recommendations*), the sad reality is that too many ECEs in Ontario and across the country are not engaged in this work. This could be due to their limited time and energy (too many ECEs are spending their “off” hours planning or catching up on paperwork for work the next

day), a lack of confidence/knowledge about how their work is political and/or simply a lack of awareness of how their work fits within the broader sociopolitical context. Regardless, this article seeks to challenge some basic underlying ideas about who we are as ECEs, what we do and what our potential role in the political landscape could be through rethinking ideas about care. We are not asking ECEs to do more (we know that’s not helpful), but simply to think about the important work we are already doing from a different perspective.

This article stems out of a presentation Jane, Pam and I (Brooke) led at the 25th International *Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education and Care* conference held in Toronto in October 2017. Each of the authors represent different jurisdictions in Canada and have our own personal and professional experiences that have impacted our thinking and understanding of care as political. We hope our ideas spark some opinions, conversation and reflection regarding your own work on a micro and macro political level. Brooke will begin with proposing a different way of thinking about *care* in early childhood education and care. Jane will then connect everyday “care” practices to the political realm. Finally, Pam asks some fundamental and critical questions about how the care work we do can be understood on a micro and macro political level.

What is “care”? How does it fit with “education”?

First and foremost, this article wishes to bring the conversation back to something we tend to avoid in conversations about our work: care. “Care” in the early years seems to have a bad rep where it is predominantly understood as ensuring the basic health and safety of children (i.e., keeping children alive and well). We all know our work involves essential social reproductive labour such as wiping noses, changing diapers, tying shoelaces and feeding children. But we also know it is about much more than that. Too many of us struggle to clearly articulate what we *do* do and/or how we do some of these things in a meaningful (rather than custodial) way. Ensuring children’s hygiene is not what distinguishes us as a profession, but rather how we create responsive, engaging and inquisitive relationships in carrying out even the most mundane tasks.

In recent years, the political and professional discourse of the childcare sector and workforce appears to favour “education” and “learning” above “care”. Because “care” is connected to custodial tasks, “education” appears to offer opportunities to become valued in the same way as teachers in the public education system. “Education” also fits much better in our current neoliberal sociopolitical climate as it positions ECEs as offering young children the opportunity to obtain the knowledge/skills they need to be successful in later schooling and ultimately pursue higher paying jobs. But is appealing to this education discourse really what makes our work important and therefore worthy of public policy attention/funding? I mean, is ensuring children can recite their letters, numbers and colours the most important aspect of what we do?

Rethinking Care in Ontario

This is where revisiting the idea of “care” becomes important. As you know, good care is about much more than making sure children’s basic health and safety needs are met. Good care requires building and maintaining consistent, predictable and secure relationships where children and adults can come together, connect and learn from and with each other. A bi-product may be learning colours, numbers and letters, but this isn’t the primary purpose of the relationships. It may be a relief when concrete, observable learning “outcomes” are achieved as it alleviates the mounting pressure ECEs face from parents, schools, and/or doctors

to “prove” children are meeting standardized developmental benchmarks in childcare settings. However, this isn’t typically what motivates us to do our work and do it well. It is much more rewarding when children are deeply engrossed in activities, actively experimenting and taking risks within a stable, safe and responsive environment. They may be covered in mud or paint or water, but something they are doing is important to them and we can see their learning is meaningful and not simply an achievement to be crossed off a developmental checklist.

To construct an environment where such experiences can take place requires an extensive set of skills and knowledge as well as emotional awareness and reflexivity on the part of ECEs. Understanding the role of ECEs as playing an essential part in establishing an environment that encourages creative exploration without preconceived learning outcomes is in sharp contrast to the role of teachers in the standardized, rigid public-school system in Ontario. We suggest that understanding care in this different way is fundamentally political both at the micro and macro level.

Care as Political Practice – A perspective from Alberta (Jane)

When we’re outside playing do the children need to wear their coats because I think it’s too cold? Or if I respect that they are individuals capable of making decisions on their own, can they take them off when their body feels too warm?

- Early childhood educator, Alberta

The language of reflective practice, along with the opportunity to reflect critically on everyday practice, is increasingly evident in the work of early childhood educators. As Brooke noted, governments and policy makers have become focused on promoting learning in the early years, in many ways making care work less visible and less valued. The good news is that the creation and use of curriculum frameworks in early learning and child care across Canada brings with it timely resources needed for educators to come together to talk about their work. This is creating new awareness about the value and meaning of everyday care practices.

The reflection above came from one of the ECEs participating in an action research project to create and animate the use of a new curriculum framework in practice. The involvement of ECEs in co-creating *Play Participation and Possibilities: An*

Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Alberta was inspired by the co-creation of the *New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care*, which Pam describes later in this article. As a lead researcher in the Alberta project, I took this opportunity to take another look at reflections from participating educators about care and caring. I was reminded again that the many seemingly small and unimportant decisions that ECEs make everyday about the care of young children – decisions that must be made on the spot, and in the moment - are decisions for which we bear tremendous responsibility. And, these everyday decisions about care are fundamentally political decisions.

Think about the negotiation that goes on with a two-year-old who doesn't want to have their diaper changed (along with the persistent and skilled efforts of ECEs to avoid a "power struggle"). Imagine for a moment that the tantrum is not bad behaviour, but rather a political protest. In writing about the importance of caring and caring work in a democratic society, Tronto (2013) points out that caring always involves unequal power relationships and that "this makes care deeply political." The questions that the educator above is asking herself are questions that embrace the deeply political nature of *caring well*.

What is political about changing a diaper?

Many would question the notion that the work of early childhood educators has anything to do with politics. However, as we rethink care and caring work, it becomes evident that changing a diaper is about more than following health and safety guidelines, or being gentle, or singing a song to make the experience more pleasant. It's also importantly about engaging toddlers in respectful and practical ways in the decisions about changing their diaper. And that's political. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, the word politics comes from the Greek root words *polis*, meaning *city or community*, and *polit*, meaning *citizen*. Simply put, we could say that politics is about people living together in communities. Most dictionary definitions also speak to the relationship between politics and the decisions of government, and to the idea that politics is about relationships of power between people in communities.

Consider this: by the time a child is two, they will have had their diaper changed over 5,000 times, sometimes willingly and sometimes under protest. The math is imperfect, but it's likely fair to say that if you're caring for this child, you may find yourself

in this very personal caring relationship over 1,000 times. How you approach this "routine" does matter. It communicates your values about caring relationships, and about the rights of the child to be involved in the decisions that affect them, whether intentionally or by default.

Moss (2007), a leading international early childhood scholar, writes about "bringing politics into the nursery," challenging us to think about "democracy as first practice" in early childhood education and care. Everyday life is political; and participating in the democratic political process is about being involved in the decisions that affect our relationships in communities. This is something that early childhood educators do with children every day. And if you believe Moss (2007), children make meaning of these everyday interactions and begin to build their understanding of who they are as members of a democratic community. Being together in early childhood communities is political.

Having big conversations about small things

As a researcher co-constructing curriculum alongside early childhood educators, I'm truly appreciative of the depth of practical knowledge, "knowhow," and the unique perspectives that only practicing early childhood educators can offer to a conversation about the meaning of care in early education. Care is embedded in our pedagogical practice. The surprising thing for our research team in Alberta was that the curriculum framework gave us a common language to describe the place of care and caring in early learning pedagogies. And, as Carlina Rinaldi (2006), from Reggio Emilia says "pedagogy...is not neutral...pedagogy implies choices and choosing...[it] means having the courage of our doubts and our uncertainties, it means participating in something for which we take responsibility."

Here is another reflection from an educator participating in the research to animate the Alberta curriculum framework:

The educators in the infant room noticed that this group of children enjoyed exploring the physical world with all their senses, including their feet. This has heightened focus on everyday occurrences such as putting on, and keeping on, shoes and clothing. Recognizing that the children communicate through their behaviours and, within the view that they are citizens with the right to be listened to, the educators decided to allow for more time and space for the infants to express themselves. Rather than enforce a 'shoe on' policy as soon as children entered the

room, they have taken a looser approach to this ongoing process, giving children time to transition from home to the centre or from inside to outside, or outside to inside, while they also explore their physical responses to these transitions. This has meant that at various times some children are shoeless for a short period.

What would your licencing officer say about this? Do you think early childhood educators have the expertise to make these decisions alongside young children? Part of the process of rethinking care as political practice is about coming to value our own work in a confident way. Some scholars (Miller, Dalli & Urban, 2012) describe the early childhood professional as an “uncertain expert,” and our decisions about whether to go shoeless as “responsibly uncertain” decisions (Somerville & Green, 2011). This idea is echoed in the following comments from educators about the transformation in their practice resulting from reflecting critically and collaboratively on everyday care routines:

I have not yet answered all my questions...and maybe never will. I have discovered that this part of the journey is not about finding the answer. It's about having the conversations with my peers, families, and the children, feeling alright with not knowing, but being able to still ask the questions and being aware of all the important parts. Standing true to my image of the child, but most of all...challenging everything I ever thought about each situation. It has been a scary and emotional road...but one I wouldn't trade for anything!

*The process of offering suggestions, testing them out and standing back and waiting means the community needs **TIME** to move forward. We were never sure how things would turn out. It was unsettling to not be in charge but to share leadership with the children*

The work of early childhood educators is complex, and this complexity is largely invisible to those who don't know the work. The people who can speak most effectively to the complexity and value of the work are the people who do the work – the voice of the workforce is still largely missing at the policy table. As Brooke and Pam point out, there is an urgent need, as well as a timely opportunity, not just in Ontario, but right across Canada, for early childhood educators to speak clearly about the value of these caring decisions, and to become engaged in influencing the policy and regulatory environments which govern our practice.

Macro level barriers to and possibilities for care in Ontario (Brooke)

Now it goes without saying that there are some very real and practical limitations to providing these higher-level care experiences in our current sociopolitical environment. Most ECEs are in rooms operating at maximum ratios with staff who meet the minimal qualification levels. Services run on a business model where operating at capacity is necessary for programs to remain viable. Even when centres are full, staff wages remain low, encouraging those with high levels of qualifications to seek employment in other sectors. It is incredibly difficult to provide “good” care when there are 3 staff (only one of whom must have formal qualifications in the sector) and 15 toddlers in a room. Similarly, infant rooms typically operate with 3 staff and 10 infants. Simply providing custodial care in an efficient and mundane way may be all even the most educated and skilled educators can provide in this context.

So here begs the question on the macro level– who makes these rules? Who decides the parameters in which early childhood educators practice? The answer is NOT early childhood educators and/or staff working in childcare settings. To some degree it may be owners or Boards of Directors of centres, but mainly it is politicians, bureaucrats and those with the greatest political voice (increasingly, large-scale corporate childcare chains). The problem is that they too may not recognize care as political, but instead as a private market commodity and/or family responsibility. Indeed, care itself is something that is often deemed apolitical, or something in which governments and policy should not interfere (by default leaving it to mothers and poorly paid women to magically provide). Similarly, many ECEs themselves don't consider care to be political, but as something that takes place outside the seemingly harsh and cold world of politics. Nothing could be further from the truth and the fact that this is not recognized and acted upon on a widespread level with the ECE community in Ontario is only further contributing to our devaluation.

Mobilizing RECEs to situate and on the idea of care as political practice

The Ontario government has taken initial steps in recognizing that the care of young children is political and have even emphasized “care” in pedagogical documents such as *How Does Learning Happen*. More recently, the Ontario Progressive Conservative

Party also appears to be taking an interest in childcare, though seemingly in a way that once again reinforces the market model of care (rebates to parents for fees spent on childcare services). With an election on the horizon, there is an urgent need to embrace our work as political practice and not shy away from the fact that good care is central to what makes our work unique, professional and valuable. We recognize that in publishing this article in the eceLINK, we are “preaching to the choir”. But we hope these ideas about rethinking care as political practice are helpful in your own efforts to mobilize yourselves, colleagues and peers to consider the political implications of your work on the micro and macro level.

A perspective on care and politics from New Brunswick (Pam)

As Brooke notes, and Jane and Brooke both challenge, childcare has had a long history of being viewed as custodial (babysitting), keeping children safe while their parents are working. On the other hand, education for children before four and five has a history of being for privileged families where mothers did not work outside the home and could afford the time and expense of taking their children to a private preschool program. As more and more women have entered the workforce in the past three decades and families have required child care services, the divide between “childcare” and early “education” has been questioned, critiqued and partially addressed, all the while being recognized as inequitable (Moss, 2017, p. 4).

There is an enormous momentum across Canada to transform childcare. Just as is happening in Ontario and in Alberta, there is currently a great deal of political effort going into the childcare sector in New Brunswick. In a recent New Brunswick Child Care Task Force Report (*Valuing Children, Families and Child Care*, co-chaired by Corinne Haché and myself) we heard loudly and clearly from educators, directors, parents and a host of spokespeople from a range of child, family, societal organizations, and government of the need for accessible, affordable, inclusive and high-quality childcare service.

While working on this Task Force, we were asked by educators, directors, and parents to let the government know that market forces combined with provincial legislation drive up the cost of childcare, reduce parents’ ability to pay and leave many centres, and the people within them, financially and emotionally fragile. The quality of early learning and childcare, they told us, is affected

by increasing costs including inadequate public funding levels, lack of guaranteed employment for staff, and a shortage of pension plans and health-care benefits. The deep care and commitment that so many educators and directors expressed towards their work was palpable. While they felt their work was valued by most parents/families, they did not feel valued as a profession by the provincial government, the public, and schools. Just as is the case in Ontario, the workforce struggled with feeling underappreciated, describing their work as being unrecognized and/or taken-for-granted.

As Brooke and Jane illustrate political actions take place inside and outside childcare centres every day – each person matters. As noted in the Task Force Report mentioned above, the process of creating the curriculum frameworks in New Brunswick occurred at both a macro (large “P”) and micro (small “p”) level. This progressive, sociopolitical curriculum framework – which has served as a model for other provinces – was the result of decades of work. Women working with and for government, academics, community-based childcare organizations, and representatives from the childcare workforce worked tirelessly to create the conditions whereby professional learning documents were produced by the province. The result, the *New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care* was co-authored by ECEs working in childcare centres. None of this important work would have or could have happened without the recognition from all stakeholders that caring for young children is deeply political. Politics does not happen at arm’s length from childcare – it is deeply embedded and embodied within the structure of services themselves and the relationships and experiences unfolding daily.

It is important to note the process through which New Brunswick’s curriculum framework was achieved as there was a very distinct and overt effort in New Brunswick to actively engage the childcare community in the authorship of the curriculum framework. Authorship of the framework included sharing stories orally, in written form, and through images followed by careful editing and revisions by the curriculum team. These were then returned to the educator, parent and/or director for their final say. The caring and learning concepts shaping the New Brunswick professional learning documents were first deeply researched. Pilot versions were then work-shopped with centres across the province, and stories were shared to illuminate the documents. All the documents are online and accessible, permissions were sought and granted, and a graphic designer, in concert with the

curriculum team, pulled the research, and practice together. The recognition by the New Brunswick provincial government that this was important and valuable work meant we also had the resources to engage in this lengthy, valuable and valuing process.

These highly accessible documents are the result of hundreds of people working together to illustrate what quality child care looks like and how practice and theory are interwoven and enacted. Several of the stories shared in these documents illustrate the everyday caring contributions to children, classrooms, and communities that educators, like yourselves, initiate on a regular basis. Selected stories from the *Well-Being* (2008) document include: “Caring for Others: The Mitten Story” (p.14); “Listening to Others: Welcoming New Families into the Classroom” (pp. 16-17); “Community Connections: Angela’s Walks and Jane’s Walks” (pp. 20-21); “Home Connections: Jennifer’s Blocks” (pp. 22-23); and “Building Relationships: Donna’s Cubbies” (pp.26-27). The document also places an emphasis on democratic practice with a section titled *Diversity and Social Responsibility* (2011). Some examples include: *Working Together: Building Friendships* (20); *A Helping Hand and Best Friends* (21); and the *Sustainable Futures* section has numerous stories that speak to stewardship and caring for and with the environment in many ways (pp. 30-49). These documents can all be found at http://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/education/elcc/content/curriculum/curriculum_framework.html (more specific links provided in the reference list).

Sharing one of my own stories

One summer afternoon – a small group of four and five-year olds and myself were inside. It was hot out so we were cooling down at the end of the day. And then, a large bumblebee buzzed its way in. We could hear the buzzing sound and then we saw it on the inside of the window. I remember feeling concerned for the bee and the children. I didn't want the children to be stung, and I wanted the bee to find its way back outside. However, I didn't quite know what to do – the children were relatively easy to keep safe, as they were willing to step back and watch the bee from a distance. Now what? It was one of the five-year-old children, Hannah Grant who provided us with a solution. She told me we needed a jar, and a piece of cardboard – and then directed me to put the jar over the bee and slide the cardboard underneath. I remember taking incredibly great care not to harm those tiny bee legs. Once the bee was in the jar covered over with the cardboard, we all moved to the door. Outdoors, I removed the cardboard and we watched the bee buzz away. I remember as a 24-year-old being in

awe of Hannah. And since that time she has been with me in spirit with the many bee rescues I have made over several decades.

When I am releasing bees back to the outdoors, I think of that moment with those children – and that bee – in that centre and at that window. When we work with young children, we learn with and from them, come to know them, and their interests, have collective and unexpected experiences together. We come to know that each person's childhood is different from another person's. We accumulate many ways of knowing, being, learning and caring together and with each other – care-filled moments inscribed in our hearts, minds and bodies, often, for a lifetime. It is much more than custodial work – it is complex, intricate and of fundamental importance to a democratic and equitable sociopolitical order.

Conclusion

Politics and “care” may at first thought seem at odds with each other – one is seemingly harsh and cold while the other is characterized by intimacy, emotion and responsiveness. But as Jane illustrates, care and politics are deeply embedded within relations of power. Rather than defaulting to an outcome-based, “education” discourse legitimizing our profession, this article challenges you to consider the fundamental repositioning of care as valuable in its own right. We propose that care is an essential, beyond-custodial and political component of practice on the micro (in childcare centres) and macro (broader societal) level. We challenge you to think about how care unfolds in your daily practice as political and how this is related to your own conceptualizations of children as political beings, as well as how you position yourself as engaged (or not) on the macro, sociopolitical level. Finally, we emphasize the necessity of ensuring the voice of early childhood educators is central in any political processes impacting the childcare sector in Canada. Being *careful* and political are indeed two sides of the same coin.

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