

Caring about care: Reasserting care as integral to early childhood education and care practice, politics and policies in Canada ^[1]

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Abstract

Care and education have deep historical divisions in the Canadian policy landscape: care is traditionally situated as a private, gendered, and a welfare problem, whereas education is seen as a universal public good. Since the early 2000s, the entrenched divide between private care and public education has been challenged by academic, applied and political settings mainly through human capital investment arguments. This perspective allocates scarce public funds to early childhood education and care through a lens narrowly focused on child development outcomes. From the investment perspective, care remains a prerequisite to education rather than a public good in its own right. This chapter seeks to disrupt this neoliberal, human capital discourse that has justified and continues to position care as subordinate to education. Drawing upon the feminist ethics of care scholarship of philosopher Virginia Held, political scientist Joan Tronto, and sociologist Marian Barnes, this chapter reconceptualizes the care in early childhood education and care rooted through four key ideas: (1) Care is a universal and fundamental aspect of all human life. In early childhood settings, young children's dependency on care is negatively regarded as a limitation, deficit and a burden. In contrast, in educational settings, older children's growing abilities to engage in self-care and self-regulate is viewed positively. We challenge this dependence/ independence dichotomy. (2) Care is more than basic custodial activities. The premise that care is focused on activities concerned with the child's body and emotions, while education involves activities concerned with the mind, permeates early childhood education and care policy. Drawing on Held's definition of care as value and practice, we discuss why this mind-body dualism is false. (3) Care in early childhood settings can be evaluated as promoting well-being or, in contradiction to the meaning of care, as delivering poor services that result in harm to young children. We will explore the relevancy of Barnes's contention that parallel to theorizing about good care in social policy, "we need to be able to recognize care and its absence" through the cultivation of "ethics sensibilities and skills applied in different practices in different contexts." (4) Care must be central to early childhood education and care policy deliberation. Using Tronto's concept of a "caring democracy," we discuss how such deliberation can promote care and the caring responsibilities of educators in early childhood settings, thereby redressing long standing gendered injustices. We argue that these four ideas can be framed in advocacy messages, in ways that bridge the silos of care and education as separate domains and which open up the vision of an integrated early childhood education and care system. A feminist ethics of care perspective offers new possibilities for practitioners, advocates, researchers, and decision-makers to reposition and reclaim care as integral to the politics and policies of early childhood education and care.

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