

Viewing Caring Relations in Schools through a Macro Lens

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As if relying on a camera with a telephoto lens to capture a photo of a caring school, Kevin Currie-Knight has presented a picture of markets as most able to offer attentive and responsive schools. I suggest that he has the wrong lens on his camera and is taking the wrong picture. Getting a close view of caring relations within schools would require a macro lens that enables close-up picture taking. The caring relation in the frame with a macro lens is between teacher and student. Another snapshot may be of student and student, teacher and parent, or administration and teacher. But this lens doesn't allow for a picture of student and school or parent and board, for it isn't schools that care, but people within those schools. Schools, private or public, should be examined for how best they create conditions for care, not for how best they care. We are in for disappointment if we are trying to create caring systems rather than systems within which care may thrive. This is a subtle shift of focus, but one that I believe makes all the difference. First, however, allow me to give an overview of Currie-Knight's argument and my responses, and then come back to taking pictures of care in the classroom.

Currie-Knight argues that relationships formed in markets will be more attentive, responsive, direct, and reciprocal. One premise offered in support of this argument is that the direct transaction that takes place between families and private schools in the form of paying tuition fees is more conducive to building a sense of obligation and creating empathy than in tax-funded public schools. I find this premise troubling on a few fronts. First, Currie-Knight seems to equate direct transaction with direct relation, which to me isn't a fair equation, for transactions typically reside in the realm of I/It, as described by Martin Buber, while relations may reside in either the realm of I/It or I/Thou, I/Thou being the relation in which we see each other as subjects, not just objects.¹ Second, he seems to limit direct transaction to that of money for service. I would argue that the idea of transaction must be more broadly understood. For instance, a transaction may be one of trust, in that A trusts B with C. Relevant to this argument, A represents families, who trust B, schools, with C, the education of their children. I contend that this transaction of trust bears more significance than a transaction of money because there is little of more value to a family than a child. This trust transaction is a direct transaction that occurs in both public and private education. Currie-Knight states that the transaction of money creates a sense of obligation for the school to be responsive and attentive to families. I purport that the transaction of trust creates a greater obligation than money ever would, and therefore, if direct transactions are a necessary condition of caring schools, all schools are subject to direct transactions, if not of a monetary nature. Further, he equates the sense of obligation that arises from monetary transaction with a sense of empathy from which care would arise. I would argue that a sense of obligation leads to a fulfillment of duty, in which care may be present, but is not inherent.

Another premise offered in support of the conclusion that relationships formed in markets will be more attentive, responsive, direct, and reciprocal (making markets morally preferable) is that, although private schools may be no more flexible nor more likely to change or modify operations based on consumer feedback, the process of families finding schools that are a better fit results in markets being the better avenue for caring relationships to be established and maintained. Currie-Knight has hit upon two of the advantages of private schools, that of choice and exit rights. That there are many benefits to these is indisputable and one of the reasons for private schools to exist. I disagree, however, that families finding a school that is a better fit means a school is more caring. I can find a pair of jeans that are a better fit, but that does not mean the jeans care for me, rather it means that I have cared for myself enough to find a well fitting pair of jeans and have had the privilege of choice rather than an assigned pair of jeans. In this instance of “care” it is families caring for their members, not a market system caring for students, so perhaps a condition of caring schools to be explored and strengthened is how a school facilitates family care.

A side comment on the claim that markets are more attentive, responsive, direct, and reciprocal regards the listing of adjectives chosen by Currie-Knight. Two of these adjectives pertain directly to the definition of “care,” put forth by care theorists, as attentiveness and responsiveness. One adjective, “direct,” is actually a premise used by the author to argue why markets deserve the other two adjectives. The final adjective, “reciprocal,” is irrelevant as care theory is not meant to necessarily create reciprocal caring relationships. As a teacher I care for my students in that I am attentive to their needs and act to meet those needs; however, I look to my students to be receptive not reciprocal. In order to understand if and how my caring actions have been received, I look for confirmation in word or action from my students, not to be cared for by them in return. A caring relationship does not necessarily have to be give and take, though many caring relations, such as marriage relationships, do see this ebb and flow of the carer becoming cared-for and vice versa.

Another premise is that markets allow entrepreneurs to create. This, in Currie-Knight’s view, translates to more care. I agree that markets provide freedom, and even impetus, for creation, but I do not see how this correlates to more care. Rather than arguing, as he does, that markets will lead to schools being more caring, there is an argument to be made regarding the conditions that lend themselves to fostering caring relationships in schools, as I will highlight in my conclusion. The premise that markets enable entrepreneurs to create says something about a condition that may contribute to care, that is, freedom for creativity or innovation. I would hope that both public and private schools aim at this condition.

Another premise of Currie-Knight’s article involves the problem of who school policy decision makers are and how they are chosen. For instance, in public schools, families choose and influence decision makers. This is enacted in two important ways: by electing members to school boards, and by raising concerns. Voting can be problematic because the majority wins the day, leaving minority concerns unheard. Personal/family advocacy is problematic in that, as the colloquial saying goes, the

squeaky wheel gets the grease, yet we must consider the power at play in who recognizes and uses their voice. Both of these concerns with public schools are warranted, but Currie-Knight then takes a leap to the claim that markets incentivize schools to take account of and adapt to consumer demands (while in the next paragraph he negates this claim himself). Being a private organization subject to the whims of consumers does not necessarily translate into a school that is more attentive and responsive. A condition of caring schools, however, would seem to be that of stakeholders having a voice. All schools, therefore, should consider how decisions are made and how families influence decisions in order to create conditions for care to flourish.

Finally, Currie-Knight contends that concern around the impersonal nature of markets is unwarranted, as services will be as personal or impersonal as consumers demand, pointing to examples of commercial friendships that exist between hair-dresser and client, and within yoga studios and schools. I think that he is correct in identifying the personal nature of many marketed services, but this does not equate with personal care. The personal nature of services can set the conditions for care in that the consumer becomes known to the service provider. But while personal interaction, as in face-to-face services, is necessary for care to occur, it is not the same as the actual occurrence of care. Care can occur within this service, but this service being of a personal nature does not make it caring. In part this is because the care provided may be self-serving, making a business out of the other person's needs rather than the engrossment necessary for care in the sense offered by Nel Noddings.² What is to be concluded is that schooling is personal in nature, and from this face to face contact between teachers and students, parents and administration, caring relations may arise and should be fostered.

Rather than arguing which system is most caring, it may be better to consider what conditions are most needed to foster caring relations within a school, for as Currie-Knight himself points out, there is incredible variation between public schools, and between private schools. Based on this, and the goal of care theorists to see conditions created for caring relations to flourish, I question the efficacy of trying to set forth an argument for which system is most caring, given the variation within each system and the fact that the aim is to conclude which system is better and presumably, therefore, deserves more support/recognition (the "my dad's stronger than your dad" argument). Instead, I contend, the focus needs to be on what conditions best help caring relations within education to thrive and on considering how to assess and create those conditions in all schools (let's help our dads get even stronger and this is how). Some of what we may focus our lens on, then, will be along the lines of framing/capturing images of where caring relations are strongest in the classroom between teacher and student and analyzing what conditions, unseen in the picture, in the school systems themselves can support such care.

1. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (1937; repr. Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010).

2. See, for example, Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005).