

Are Teachers Care Workers?

Barbara S. Stengel

Peabody College, Vanderbilt University

Are teachers care workers? I am not suggesting teachers don't care nor am I suggesting that caring-for is not part of the relational work that is teaching. If teaching is a relation rather than an action or activity — and I accept that it is — then caring as an ethical practice is surely one important element of teaching. But are teachers care workers?

I think the answer to this question matters for the sense we are able to make of Bing Quek's argument. Can teaching be reduced to care work? Or do teachers inhabit a distinctively different role that folds care into its practice? Let me illustrate with some examples.

My younger sister, Ellen, is unfortunately afflicted with a rare form of Alzheimer's Disease, a "visual variant" that results in deterioration in the back of the brain impacting sense perception, proprioception, speech production, and especially vision. Like so many others with similar disorders, she is unable to prepare her own food or dress herself. She has lost control of her limbs, sees sporadically, and struggles to find the words to express the thoughts — sophisticated thinking about financial matters, for example — that seem still to be present to her. Until recently, her husband filled in the gaps. He cared for her. At our urging, he hired a live-in caretaker, Regina, who *is* a care worker, but wants to be thought of as a *caregiver*. She has no other calling but to ensure that Ellen — impaired but still very much alive — is clean, safe, and well fed.

Justin is a student at my university with a progressive neurological disorder who seeks to become a teacher. He is wheelchair bound and requires assistance in virtually all the quotidian tasks of living, including dressing and toileting. A shortage of care workers, persons willing and able to provide the care he needs (including hoisting him from here to there), prevented him from returning to school in person, and he is completing his degree and licensure

requirements online. He is highly intelligent, pedagogically creative, and keenly interested in the thinking of his students. He will, I am quite sure, leverage that thinking for their development. He cares for and about them. It seems to me he is not a care worker, but he cannot do what he must without a dedicated care worker at his side.

Nancy, the teacher Quek introduces us to is an only-too-familiar character at this moment in time. As Quek puts it, “pressed for time and energy, she as a one-caring is unable to receive her students one at a time, to identify and fulfil their unique needs, and in turn foster caring relationships with them which are key to providing good care.” Quek points us toward something important when she notes the moral quandary that Nancy finds herself in. And yes, caring is implicated in that quandary, but it isn’t really the problem.

The problem is not that Nancy or Justin can’t care for their students — and prompt a reciprocal cared-for response. It’s that in the absence of the conditions for connection (time, resources, etc.), they can’t educate.

Quek knows this of course. Still, she chooses to center her claims for community support for teaching and teachers in a two-part argument, that teachers are care workers and that care workers should have the structural and infrastructural supports to enable them to care effectively, that is, in ways that result in reciprocal satisfaction for both the cared-for and for the carer. I have no difficulty accepting the latter premise, that if we are going to place persons in care work, they should have the needed tools of their trade, including and especially time and adequate compensation. As I noted above, however, I don’t accept the premise that teachers are simply care workers. Moreover, I’m not convinced that this argument will be compelling to anybody with the ‘juice’ to do something about it.

This raises a different question for me. Who is the audience for this argument? (I know who is the audience for this essay, those of us reading *Philosophy of Education*). Who needs to be convinced that teachers ought to have the resources to do their job effectively? And what is the job that we ask teachers to do? We have to figure this out in order to make the right sort of argument:

one that is compelling — rationally, but also psychologically, emotionally, and politically.

I find it hard to imagine an educator who doesn't believe that time, space, autonomy, respect, and resources are not sorely needed in school settings. Still, forty years ago we began the political process of squeezing public schools to death, motivated it seems by a desire to privatize all aspects of American life — including the public school — and replace the common schools with an individualized set of alternatives (vouchers, charters, tax support for religious schools, etc.). Those like me who have lived the shift from *A Nation at Risk* through *No Child Left Behind* to *Race to the Top*, a shift that gutted teachers' autonomy and starved public schools of their financial lifeblood, are only too aware of the change in classroom conditions. We have entered a phase of cruel optimism in which folks become teachers to nurture young people into adulthood, only to find out that becoming a teacher means you can't actually do that intellectual, emotional, and psychological nurturing.

If educators and educational philosophers aren't fighting Quek, then who is? We might assume it is taxpayers, but in fact, if annual Phi Delta Kappa surveys are a reliable indicator, taxpayers, especially parents, want teachers to have the time and emotional bandwidth to nurture their children.

What is the argument that needs to be made here — and to whom? I accept with Quek, Kittay, Tronto, and especially Nel Noddings that one might approach education from the perspective of care — and use that approach as *a point of entry* revealing the multifaceted effort that is teaching. But to cast teaching as care work feels limited and dangerous, politically and educationally.

I find myself caught here in a bit of a conundrum. On one hand, I do not want to downplay the importance of care workers of the kind who ensure the well-being of Ellen or Justin. I want their work to be respected and their efforts to be well-compensated no matter the wealth of the person who requires care. If I insist that teachers are not care workers, or are somehow more than care workers, am I downplaying the work of those who *are* care workers? On the other, I am acutely aware that acknowledging and naming teachers as care

workers will, in light of current political realities, work against the argument that we as a community should provide the resources needed to do the work. We should be embarrassed to say it, but care work is associated with women and children and continues to be generally devalued. (Consider our willingness in the US to invest in bridges and broadband, but not in the care of children.)

The point of the teaching-learning relation is the growth and development of the student(s) in and for themselves, in and for community. Whether you think of education in the German tradition as *Bildung* or in Deweyan images of growth or even through neoliberal standards of achievement, caring is inseparable from, but also in some sense instrumental to, that other goal. Caregiving in and of itself does not result in the kind of growth that is properly educational. Regina, my sister's caregiver, cares for her needs, both physical and, to some limited extent, social. Care is its own end. Justin's caring for his students always points beyond itself, as does Nancy's.

So, I wonder, what kind of argument can change the minds and hearts of those who are actually in a position to ensure that teachers have adequate resources? I note that the principal is made to appear the bogeyman in Nancy's telling, but I don't accept that he's the source of the problem. Like so many other principals today, he is caught midstream in a system that doesn't value the complex work being done.

In today's political climate, I suspect that there is *no argument*, philosophical or rhetorical, that will change these conditions, no set of premises and conclusions that will result in adequate respect and funding for the work of teaching in public schools. The alternative, it seems to me, is political action.

We need candidates for school board and state legislature who take teaching seriously as more-than-care work. We need lawsuits like the one currently concluding in Pennsylvania that challenges state funding formulas. We need teachers organized to make their case plainly and publicly. And in the meantime, we need school leaders and teachers who transform the limits of their labor and the conditions of their context from the inside, forging partnerships with universities, retirees, social service agencies, etc. to expand the relational

capacity that powers educational possibility.

Obviously, I agree with Quek that we “owe” to teachers the conditions of their work, but not for the reasons she offers. Not because they are care workers but because they are educators — and we fail as a society for the want of educators who are enabled to do *that* work.
