Understanding the role of caring in teaching

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Teaching is often described as a caring profession, since it involves ‘work in which the human person is both the object and the subject, physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually’. As a result, it is often suggested that teachers should be caring. The justification for caring, however, is often not based on the idea that because teaching is seen as providing care, teachers should aim to do the thing which it sets out. Instead, it is for moral education reasons which the justification for wanting caring teachers is based on. The idea here is that because caring is a morally good thing, it should then be instilled and developed within students, and one of the best ways to encourage the development of caring in others is by modelling good care. As such, teachers should model good caring towards their students because it affects the student’s moral development. While this way of reasoning assumes that there is a correlation between the caring practices of the teacher and the moral development of the student, to make a move parallel to Osguthrope, ‘it might also be the case that the relationship is weak or even non-existent’, and that a caring teacher might not have any impact on ‘the development of similar qualities in the student’. If the latter situation, the question is then whether there are reasons outside moral education for wanting caring teachers.

The overall objective of this paper is descriptive in nature, and aims to clarify the various reasons why we might want teachers to care. While much of the literature supports the moral development theory as justification for teachers to care, this paper will also put forth reasons for wanting teachers to care that lies outside those connected to moral development. While these clarifications are modest in scope, taking caring seriously in teaching has implications on how we conceptualize the good teacher, which in turn affects how both teacher education and professional ethics might be understood.

A brief overview of care ethics

The following will not be an attempt to provide a new account of caring, but will instead consolidate what others have already put forth. A philosophical understanding of care goes beyond the stereotypical description of caring as primarily ‘gentle smiles and warm hugs’. Caring involves ‘meeting the needs of the particular other or preserving the relationships of care that exist’ which involves ‘a set of relational practices that foster mutual recognition and realization, growth, development, protection, empowerment, and human community, culture, and possibility’.

Noddings describes care as an attitude or state of being, whereas Held argues for considering care as a practice and value, a sentiment which can be seen to be echoed in Tronto who argues that care involves ‘both the activity and disposition of care’. While it is difficult to establish
any substantial determinate criterion of caring, it does have certain recognizable features. While different writers consider these features under different names\textsuperscript{15}, for our purposes, I will consider the features of caring to involve \textit{caring for} another and \textit{caring about} another, and differentiate these elements along the practice / values (or work / attitude) divide that writers like Noddings, Held and Tronto put forth. Thus, within this paper, \textit{caring for} (or \textit{taking care of}) will refer to the \textit{work and action} involved in caring, while \textit{caring about} will refer to the \textit{attitude and values} involved. One further clarification should be made: Noddings refers to the carer as “she” and the cared-for as “he”, and I will follow suit for ease of reading.

\textit{Caring about}

Caring about can be considered the ‘attitude and motive’\textsuperscript{16} involved in caring. When one cares about another, one has concern for the other; one is invested in the other’s well-being and sees the other’s well-being as a motive towards which to act, which involves being sensitive and attuned to the other’s needs. When the carer is sensitively attuned to the needs of the other, she does not put \textit{herself} in the other’s position, rather ‘we consider the other’s position as the \textit{other} expresses it’ (Tronto 136, emphasis mine). This can be difficult since it requires one to be able to go beyond one’s self and come to understand the other in \textit{his} position, \textit{his} reality. Thus, to care about another is to recognize there is a need present that requires attention, and being attentive and sensitive to his needs are seen as ‘ethical elements of care’\textsuperscript{17} and moral achievements.

\textit{Caring for}

In addition to the attitudinal aspects of caring, caring also involves the actuality of caring, or the \textit{caring for} another. Caring for another involves the labour and the ‘work of care that needs to be done’\textsuperscript{18}. When we care for someone, we go beyond recognizing that a need for care exists and go about actually addressing the needs. A nurse administering medication to a patient, a teacher addressing a question about the material from a student are all examples of caring for and addressing the needs of the other.

\textit{Good caring}

Part of good caring then involves the carer ensuring that the caring provided does indeed meet the other’s needs. For Tronto, competence is then a crucial ethical aspect of caring as it avoids ‘the bad faith of those who would “take care of” a problem without being willing to do any form of care-giving’\textsuperscript{19}. The carer is ensured through the responses of the other, and whether the cared-for is receptive to the caring. Thus, the importance on why the carer will care for the other not on \textit{her} own terms but on \textit{his} becomes clear. If the cared-for does not respond to the carer, then her needs might not be getting addressed, and caring would not be happening. The cared-for is then an active participant in shaping the caring encounter as the carer is, and not
just something to be responded to by the carer. If the cared-for is ‘receptive and responsive to the efforts of the one-caring’\textsuperscript{20}, the caring encounter is completed. Responsiveness and receptivity are then moral achievements since it indicates that good caring has indeed taken place.

One can start to see then how the boundaries between caring about and caring for overlap and can even be blurry within caring. For instance, caring is enhanced when one has an understanding of those needs from the other’s point of view, for ‘if persons were thoroughly unaware of what others are thinking and feeling, and grossly unable to read the moods and intentions of others, they would not be very capable of (…) engaging in practices of care’\textsuperscript{21}. Thus, good caring integrates these various elements together into ‘an appropriate moral whole’\textsuperscript{22}.

**Care ethics and Education**

At least two claims can be made for wanting caring teachers. First, we want caring teachers because we should instil care within students, and one way to do this is through the example teachers set out. Second, we want teachers to display and provide caring because care is crucial to conceptions of good teaching.

**The caring teacher as a moral educator**

One reason for wanting caring teachers starts from the perspective of care itself. Noddings argues that caring is the ‘basic reality of human being and [the human being’s] basic aim’\textsuperscript{23}. Since caring is considered to have moral value, it should be cultivated in people. It is then argued that instilling care in others is done best through them experiencing it. That is, the caring person is nurtured within caring relationships. As such, the role of education would be to provide these caring experiences. Thus, good caring relationships are themselves educative.

As a result, the role of the teacher would to provide students with experiences of good caring. The caring teacher does this by modelling caring relationships, and ‘showing herself as one-caring’\textsuperscript{24} by being attentive and sensitive to the student, and attending to his needs. Through these caring experiences, the student develops an understanding of caring practices, which he can then apply towards his own life and relationships. Thus, we want caring teachers because their care directly contributes to the moral development of their students.

**Care as part of good teaching**

The above argument hinges on the assumption that a connection between the teacher’s caring and the student’s moral development exists. This paper is not concerned with proving this
connection, rather the focus here is on whether there could be reasons outside of the moral development of students for teachers to care, especially if it comes to light that this connection does not exist.

The moral development argument attacks the question of why we want caring teachers starting from the position of caring, then seeing why and how caring fits into teaching. On the other hand, we can start from an understanding of what (good) teaching entails, and see that caring is already embedded in concepts of good teaching. If this is the case, then we would want caring teachers because we want effective and morally good teaching.

**Caring for students**

Teachers are, by definition, involved in the pursuit of education, and so their responsibility is to attend to the educational needs of their students. That is, based on the assumption that education is indeed a need students have and contributes to their well-being\(^25\), to teach is to attend to students’ educational needs. Teaching then can be seen as an act of caring for their students in terms of addressing their educational needs. In the very act of teaching, teachers address the developing intellectual, moral, psychological and emotional concerns of their students. Therefore, when we start to see when a teacher is trying to ascertain what the student requires to understand a concept, or when a teacher is ‘advocating on behalf of a student at a staff meeting . . . or discussing a child’s problems with a colleague . . . tying shoes, monitoring recess or talking with a student about a pet turtle’\(^26\) as instances of caring for their students, we start to see how caring plays a role within teaching. If teachers did not take care of their students, they would, in short, be ineffective - they would not be going about attending to the educational needs of their students. So we would want teachers to care for their students because we want effective teachers.

**Caring about**

We can see how caring for students relates to teaching and education – it is already embedded in our understanding of teaching and education, and effective teachers would be going about caring for and attending to the educational needs of their students. However it is less clear whether teachers should care about their students. Does it matter whether teachers have concern for their students, as long as they meet the students’ needs and that the students are learning the material? Does, for instance, the teacher’s attitudes affect student learning and achievement at all? Perhaps executing a successful lesson plan does not necessarily require any caring disposition to be accompanied with it.
Whether teaching might involve caring about is best illustrated in an example. Take Ms Yorke, who has given out an in-class task for the students to work on. The task is difficult and some of the students become frustrated. As Ms Yorke walks by Johnny, he calls out, asking her to give him the answer to one of the questions. Now, she could give in to his desire and tell him the answer, however she knows this would not help his learning: he would neither learn the subject material, nor would he learn how to handle frustration and learn to work through both obstacles as well as the particular problem. She recognizes he needs to build up resilience in the face of adversity instead of looking for the easy way out, so she does not give him the answer. However, she also senses his feelings of exasperation and recognizes his need to alleviate those negative feelings, so she gives him some encouraging words (“you can do it, just keep trying!”), perhaps dropping a hint or two as well. Thus while it might look like Ms Yorke is ignoring his frustration or even his academic needs, she is using his frustration to address his other needs. She attends to both the needs he perceives himself (he is frustrated so she eases this with hints and encouraging words), as well as tends his other needs (building resilience, working through a problem and getting the results independently, learning the subject through said independent problem solving, etc.) which he does not perceive (perhaps due to his frustration blocking his perception, or more likely, his immaturity in such matters).

Going by the understanding of caring about from above, where caring about another involves recognizing and being sensitive to the other’s needs, we can see that Ms Yorke is attentive to Johnny’s frustration and the other obstacles to his learning, and understands the kind of support he needs from her (encouraging words, hints etc.). When a teacher recognizes that the student has needs, and what those needs are specifically, she can be seen as caring about him. Additionally, in caring about Johnny, Ms Yorke is able to care for Johnny more effectively. She can go about actually meeting his educational needs because she can discern what those needs are in the first place.

One could question why this attentiveness could not be understood under the remit of “caring for”, since caring for, as stated above, includes notions of competency. There are two reasons for this. First is that that caring for another – the actual work involved, generally comes after recognizing their needs. The need must be recognized to be there before it can be attended to. However, some needs can be determined by someone outside the main carer giver – for examples doctors could tell nurses what caring work is required by them, and they (nurses) are merely required to carry it out. This too can be the case in education, where society as a whole has already determined that certain forms of knowledge are important for students and are a need of theirs.
Yet this is only part of what is happening in Ms Yorkes situation. While her learning objectives have been set out beforehand, she is doing more than attending to his pre-stated educational needs (eg. learning the subject matter) – she was also figuring out what his other educational needs are (his frustration, his need to build resilience), and those arise through her encounter with him. Such establishment of needs and the caring work happens when we care about someone, when we are being attentive and sensitive to their concrete situation, and this contributes to, but can be conceptually differentiated from taking care of someone.

The implication of teachers not caring about their students is that they might not recognize their students’ needs (either pre-stated or developing needs) and thereby ignore their needs. So while a teacher provides lessons and worksheets, and ensures they perform on assessments, etc., she could be ignoring their concrete educational demands, for instance whether the subject matter and learning going on in her classroom resonates with her students, whether they are engaging with the material in a meaningful way, or whether other non-curriculum related educational demands require attention (such as Johnny’s frustration and building of resilience). If she ignores their needs, she then has already decided that the content should matter to them; it makes no difference to her whether it does. Yet if we understand education to be more than just the dissemination of knowledge and information, and include ways of understanding and relating to the world with some meaning, then teachers need to be attentive to whether their teaching is taking hold in their students’ hearts, and figuring out what their students actually require from them. In this way, caring about one’s students not only contributes towards teacher effectiveness, it also contributes to morally good teaching, where the students’ learning contributes to their well-being in a real way. Hence, while not caring about one’s student does not mean a teacher cannot care for them (since as stated above, teaching is at the minimum taking care of one’s students), this would be a less rich version of teaching.

Furthermore, not only can caring about one’s students lend towards better (effective and morally good) teaching, it can also safeguard teachers from bad teaching. Teachers can get bogged down with the pressure to meet targets, etc., such that the actual needs of the students could be forgotten about. When teachers are focussed on students’ concrete educational concerns, this can prevent teachers from, for example, seeing their students as means to achieve performative targets (perhaps even for further financial gain), or see their students as empty receptacles and a means to further their own legacy or the legacy of the subject matter.

Of course, this example and the above argument hinges on seeing Ms Yorkes actions as caring about Johnny in the first place. On the other hand, Ms Yorker could be seen as, for example, exercising professional judgement, where she understands the various components and factors
within her educational environment, and responds to her student accordingly. Ms Yorke’s actions could be understood in terms of phronesis or professional wisdom, rather than in terms of caring. A teacher who exercises phronesis would be able to judge what is required from her to do, and how to respond. Thus, a consideration of care would not be necessary, and as a result, teachers would not necessarily need to care, but rather need to develop phronesis (and the related virtues and moral dispositions). In other words, what is needed is an understanding of character rather than an understanding of care.

However, using a character-based framework would, in my opinion, too limiting, and not robustly reflect the nature of teaching. This is mainly because there the focus is on the moral nature of the moral agent himself: whether he has good character and disposition. However, in care, the focus is primarily on the needs of the other, and whether these needs are met. Since teaching is concerned with the educational development of the student, understanding the teacher’s actions in terms of care rather than virtues better fits the situation, where the teacher would be focussed on the student and his educational needs rather than her own moral standing. Furthermore, a teacher could, in theory, respond to a situation virtuously, however still not meet the educational needs of her student. On the other hand, to not be attentive and sensitive to the needs of her students – in other words, to not care about her students – would hinder the teacher’s ability to assess and thus provide for the educational needs of her students.

In summary, it might be the case that on a trivial level teachers do care about their students, in that when they take up the role of “teacher”, they, in theory, already recognize a need (for that subject and for education in general) exists. But the more substantial claim is that caring about their students, that is, identifying with their students’ goods allows the teacher to be ‘more sensitive to [another’s] needs and wants’28, enabling the teacher to understand what is salient within an educational situation, thus making room for her to care for their students in a more meaningful way.

What if teachers cannot or do not care?

As mentioned above, sometimes teachers can only care for their students. For instance, perhaps there is some psychological block that obstructs the possibility of a caring connection. Additionally, sometimes teachers can only care about their students, but cannot care for them. Perhaps they have genuine concern for their students but are not in the position to actually meet those needs, or perhaps the student does not recognize the teacher as in a caring position, for whatever reason (for example, the student does not require advanced maths to achieve his goals, and so while the maths teacher has concern for the student, the concern does not go beyond a concern for their general well-being). It has been seen that both kinds of caring are
important within teaching: we want teachers to take care of their students and be effective, and caring about their students can enhance their teaching, which in turn can allow teachers to take care of their students even more effectively. Therefore, the ideal situation would be for teachers to both care about and care for their students.

How this ideal situation is achieved involves more than the teacher deciding she will care. Rather, since good caring necessarily involves the engagement with the other, the ideal situation is dependent on the receptiveness and responsiveness from the student to teacher’s caring attempts. Without the receptiveness and responsiveness of the other, one might be attempting to care but as caring ‘as a practice involves more than simply good intentions’
29, caring would not be taking place. This need of engagement and responsiveness from the other, means that caring is ‘exemplified in caring relations, rather than in persons as individuals’
30 31, so that teachers are providing good care, if their teaching resonates with their students, is understood through the quality of the relationship. This is another reason why a character (or character-inspired) framework that focussed on phronesis would not fully encompass the educational landscape. The needs of the student are most appropriately addressed within relationships and ‘the ethics of care concerns itself especially with caring relations’, whereas ‘virtue ethics focuses especially on the states of character of individuals’
32.

If this is the case, then the relationships teachers build with their students become an important focal point for teachers to come to understand their practice. The “ideal situation” will be reflected in the relationship. A strong, caring relationship filled with ‘sensitivity, trust, and mutual concern’
33 will indicate that good care (and thus good teaching) is being had, whereas a relationship filled with discord and tension will indicate that needs are not necessarily being met, and thus good care and good teaching is absent. What would be important for the teacher, then, is to focus not only on, for instance, her personal qualities, but rather how her qualities and skills would contribute to allowing her to engage with and maintain a caring relationship with her students, that is, allowing her to care and meet their needs.

On the other hand, not being in the position to care, or not being able to care through no fault of one’s own is not the same as being unwilling to care or to enter a caring relationship. While the moral development consequences might be more obvious to some (in that not only would the moral development of the student not be taking place since caring would not be going on, but could also be harmed, as they might be experience “anti-care” – not being accepted and having their needs being responded to), the question on whether we would want uncaring teachers could be more ambiguous. Caring was shown to be an important aspect within both teaching and concepts of good teaching, yet one might want to resist jumping from an “is” to an “ought”.

That teachers can and do care for their students, and that this caring is tied up in conceptions of good teaching does not necessarily provide one with the normative grounds to enter caring relationship.

In other words, whether we would want uncaring teachers would, in part, involve questioning whether one has a duty or obligation to care for those we might not otherwise choose to care. The next step in the understanding that teaching involves caring relationships would be to provide a fuller account of the normative grounds to care, which, due to the scope of this paper, cannot be done here. From the presentation above, understanding that caring enhances teaching could be one avenue to justify a duty to care, however other, possibly more fruitful and robust reasons include the vulnerability of others due to our actions, dependency of others upon ourselves, social reproduction and the possibility of civil life, and common decency.

The implications of caring and possible further issues
Understanding the practice as one filled with care and thus based on caring relationships however has implications on how we consider what a good teacher consists of. Conceptions of the good teacher tend to be considered in terms of the individual, whether this be in terms of competencies and skills (such as the "competent craftsperson"), or, to reiterate the model previously mentioned, in terms of the teacher’s virtues and moral disposition, and related elements such as phronesis (the model of “the virtuous teacher” as embraced by Carr, Osguthrope, Hansen, and Hare, to name a few). On the other hand, the inclusion of care shifts the focus from individual qualities towards the quality of interaction and relations. In making this move, the good teacher would then not be understood by the qualities she portrays but rather the strength of her relationship.

Shifting the idea of the good teacher as based on the strength of her relationship and the quality of her interaction rather than on individual characteristics has implications on how we think about teacher education. Care ethics within teacher education is not a new area of interest, however most conceptions of care ethics and its relation to teacher education is justified in terms of the moral education of the student. Yet if the moral development of the student is not as closely connected to the teacher’s care as we might hope, then how a shift in the focus of caring from its importance based on moral development to being based on caring as constituting good teaching would affect teacher education would be an interesting avenue to pursue. For instance, it would not be just a matter how and whether good pedagogy affects student moral development, but rather all avenues of student learning in general. That is, just as a good teacher would involve establishing caring relationships, good pedagogy would not just enhance student moral development, but involve practices that enhance all kinds of
learning encounters. This would involve more than learning skills and competencies, but it would also involve more than developing one’s judgement: it would need to involve cultivating moral sensitivity and moral perception⁴⁰. How teacher training programs can develop such tools would need to be understood.

Secondly, caring’s involvement in teaching also has implications on how we view professional ethics in education. Since caring relationships ‘necessarily involves an engagement with the concrete, the local, the particular’⁴¹ and also does not ‘presume that people are interchangeable’⁴², what would constitute as good caring within one situation might not transfer over to another. As a result, a good teacher will not necessarily be one to all students. For instance, there might be obstacles that prevent the teacher from being able to build and maintain relationships with certain students (see examples at the beginning of this section), while being able to forge strong caring relationships with others.

Yet professional ethics is, in part, concerned with how to standardize the behaviour and values of practitioners. Yet if caring relationships is a crucial aspect of the profession, and this resists universalisation and generalisation, then how a professional ethics can be developed would also be interesting to pursue. For instance, if such relationships are particularist and unique, who would have final say on whether the relationship was a good and caring one? Furthermore, questions of the obligation and duty to care return and become even more pertinent. One way such questions could be pursued would be to see whether care ethics itself could be the theoretical framework that shapes professional ethics. Questions surrounding professional ethics and caring often look at how professional ethics affects provision of care, and ethical considerations of professional ethics in caring professions are usually viewed through virtue ethics⁴³ or through ethical principles⁴⁴. However, if caring is something to be taken seriously within conceptions of good teaching and the good teacher, having a notion of professional ethics that works from within the same ethical framework as the profession itself might be more useful to both educational practitioners and researchers.

Works cited
Engster, Daniel. "Rethinking Care Theory: The Practice of Caring and the Obligation to Care." *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005).


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2 ———, New Approaches in Ethics for the Caring Professions, 1.

3 See authors mentioned in footnote 2, as well as Diana Mayer Demetrulias, "Caring: Its Centrality to Teachers and Teacher Education," Teacher Education Quarterly 21, no. 2 (1994).


6 Ibid., 288.

7 Ibid.

8 Noddings, Caring, Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1982).

9 Goldstein, Reclaiming Caring in Teaching and Teacher Education, 9.


11 Owens and Ennis, "The Ethic of Care in Teaching: An Overview of Supportive Literature," 393.

12 Noddings, Caring, 19.


14 Tronto, Moral Boundaries, 105.

15 For instance, caring consists of engrossment and motivational displacement for Noddings, while Tronto spells out four phases and their four accompanying ethical elements.

16 Held, The Ethics of Care, 68.

17 Tronto, Moral Boundaries, 127. Tronto only lists attentiveness as an element of care but I think attentiveness implies having sensitivity, thus have presented both.

18 Ibid.
Assuming that education is for the good of the student is based on the assumption that education itself is a morally good endeavour. For instance, R. S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966), argues that anything worthy of the name “education” would necessarily be morally good. So teaching a student how to pickpocket would not be educative since such an activity is not morally good.


Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 42.

Which is the main reason why care is not a virtue. See ibid., 19-22. for further discussion on this.

Ibid., 19.

Ibid., 38.

For a full explanation of these reasons, see Daniel Engster, "Rethinking Care Theory: The Practice of Caring and the Obligation to Care," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005).

For further discussion, see Alex Moore, *The Good Teacher: Dominant Discourses in Teaching and Teacher Education* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2004), 75-99.

37 Osguthorpe, "On the Reasons We Want Teachers of Good Disposition and Moral Character."

38 David Hansen, The Call to Teach (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995).


40 Lawrence A. Blum, Moral Perception and Particularity (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

41 Tronto, Moral Boundaries, 142.

42 Ibid., 136.

43 For example, see Hugman, New Approaches in Ethics for the Caring Professions., Sarah Banks and Ann Gallagher, Ethics in Professional Life: Virtues for Health and Social Care (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).