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BATH, Caroline

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# **Conceptualising Listening to Young Children as an Ethic of Care in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**

*This paper focuses on recent discourses and practices of listening to young children, in order to highlight listening as an ethical practice in early childhood education and care settings. The question is asked as to how discourses of listening should be viewed in theoretical terms. Several authors who define autonomy and rights issues as relational are explored and a feminist critique of Foucault's ethics of care argument is examined. Examples of recent research in the field of listening to young children are given and issues facing the status of the early years workforce are highlighted. The paper contends that an ethical view of listening can bring adults and children together in democratic care practices which challenge conceptions of childhood and reconnect ideas of care and education.*

## **I. Context and Aim**

In the new millennium, there has been a consistent growth of scholarly interest in the theme of listening to young children (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Lansdown, 2005; Rinaldi, 2006). Alongside these philosophical and methodological developments which build on Rinaldi and Dahlberg's earlier work in Italy and Sweden, there have been attempts to turn the concept of listening into policy and practice (for example, in the UK: DCSF, 2008; Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003; McLeod, 2008). Some of these developments give the impression that 'listening' is a recent phenomenon, rather than part of a long tradition with both philosophical and political precedents, for example, that of democratic education tracing back to John Dewey (1916) who suggested that intelligence had to be socialised through participation in decision-making within a democratically organised school. Thus, this paper contends that unless listening practices take account of and are conceptualised within philosophical and

political traditions, they remain hollow. It also suggests that listening is in danger of appearing a feature of ECEC practice that is already understood and therefore not in need of further discussion.

By outlining recent contributions to the discourse of listening to young children, this paper also argues that conceptualisations of listening are best understood if they are founded on an ethics of care which brings adults and children together in democratic practices, and reconnects ideas of care and education. Feminist perspectives are central to this vision and provide a lynchpin for connecting the theme of listening to children with that of the ethics of care. Feminist perspectives are also pertinent, in that child care and education are mostly seen as an arena of work for women with inferior status to the work that men typically do. Therefore, the paper asserts that theories of listening are central to a notion of young children's care and education as a socially and politically significant field of endeavour. Finally, it suggests that a 'pedagogy' of listening has implications not just for the conceptualisation of listening to children but also for re-conceptualisations of early childhood education and care (ECEC), particularly in the UK.

The first section of the paper tackles theories behind listening to young children in three ways; firstly, in terms of the hazards created by translating theory into practice; secondly, in terms of key political and educational theories; thirdly, in terms of links with children's rights discourses; and lastly, in terms of practice supporting theory.

The second section progresses the argument of section one further, by examining postmodern and feminist perspectives on the ethics of care. In the third section, these are applied to the context of work in ECEC settings and in the final section they are linked to a notion of democratic practices of listening to young children and adults in those settings and to conceptualisations of ECEC in general.

## **II. Listening to Young Children**

### **i. Hazards of listening**

One of the hazards of conceptual work is that its translation into policy and practice can obscure the need for its continued analysis and re-analysis at a theoretical level. Thus, in the case of listening to young children, scholarly discourses are at risk of being subsumed by discourses dominated by technical and ‘quick-fix’ approaches to practice. For example, listening to children has been broadly accepted as a good practice/ method for parents and professionals in the UK (NSPCC, 2009; Hamer and Williams, 2010). Listening is portrayed as synonymous with the aims of both education and nurture to varying degrees in the early childhood policies and curricula of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, the context in which listening occurs and the power differential of the participants involved are often problematic. As Brooker (2011: 140) points out, ‘tokenistic’ listening only reinforces differences of power and status. This suggests that an ongoing political analysis of the way that power operates in educational contexts should be central to the listening agenda. Furthermore, in a broader context, there are tensions between the possible individual and social benefits of being listened to which tie in with the Western societal emphasis on consumerism in the contemporary democracy of a capitalist economy. For example, the present UK government asserts the idea that public consultation is synonymous with individuals making choices rather than

with groups reaching decisions through a process that may include disagreement and compromise.

A further complication, as linked to the idea of listening to young and disabled children who may be non-verbal, is when listening enters a realm of interpretations which are even more reliant on contextual and developmental understandings of behaviour. At a theoretical level, this challenge to the practice of listening which has been debated by disability scholars (for example, in Corker and Shakespeare, 2002) also links with wider discussion about democracy and inclusion which suggests that so-called rational debate is often inherently exclusive (Young, 2000). Thus, it can be argued that an inclusive approach to listening embraces diverse expressions of collective ideas and opens the field to multi-modal approaches to communication. This places the language of debate alongside, for example, interpretations of body language and visual representation. With regard to methodological issues in research with young children, this is evidenced by the development of the techniques of the mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) which relies on visual and active ways of gaining children's perspectives. Most importantly, the mosaic approach implies the use of multiple, rather than single, methods.

## ii. Participatory concepts of listening

However, as Clark and others (2005) point out, even an inclusive approach to listening poses ethical dilemmas for interpretation which require a more deeply theoretical approach to listening practices. Such an approach mitigates against the dangers of ambiguity and intrusiveness which might outweigh the benefits of adults making decisions with children. This is especially the case when we consider the

perspective on power taken by Foucault (1987) who embeds power in the relationships between people and the desire of human beings to direct each other's behaviour.

Dahlberg and Moss (2005) suggest that listening has been linked both to a political idea of 'participation', as decision-making, and the ethical idea of 'an encounter'.

Lansdown (2004), meanwhile, has emphasised that participation includes children's expression and involvement in their own worlds. Whilst the notions of decision-making, 'an encounter' and expression are not contradictory, the broader definition of participation that they comprise clearly goes beyond what happens as politics in a public sphere.

Dahlberg and Moss's (2005) concept of the ethical encounter, drawn from the work of Levinas, locates this broad idea of participation in a pedagogical arena. This is not to be confused with the sociocultural approach of Rogoff (1990) who identifies young children's learning as a transformational cultural experience which is accessed by means of 'guided' participation by adults. Instead, the ethical encounter enters into philosophical notions of learning and constructs listening and, indeed, autonomy as 'an openness to the difference of the Other' (104) which acknowledges the difficulty of facing 'uncertainty and dissensus as possibilities not dangers' (104). Likewise, Vandebroek (2009: 169) discusses how difference and disagreement allow us 'to construct who we are'. By connecting the idea of an ethical encounter to a pedagogical approach to early education, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) also add weight to Rinaldi's examples of participatory practice in Reggio Emilia which point to a dominant sense of community and belonging. For example, Rinaldi (2005: 65) defines listening primarily as:

Sensitivity to the patterns that connect, to that which connects us to others; abandoning ourselves to the conviction that our understanding and our own being are but small parts of a broader integrated knowledge that holds the universe together.

In this conception, listening is a predisposition that children are innately suited for which allows 'their process of acculturation to develop' (2005: 66).

The 'pedagogy of listening' that is advocated by the Reggio preschools can be seen as an example of 'radical dialogue which alters the relationship between the teacher and pupil from one of knowledge transmission to a relationship where both parties are involved in making meaning and constructing knowledge together (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). Readings (1996: 165) also explored this type of pedagogical relationship with reference to the relationship between a university tutor and student and refers to it as 'listening to thought'. This cements the idea that listening, dialogue and learning are closely linked in educational practices where meanings and what counts as knowledge are negotiated and agreed.

### iii. Children's rights discourses

Despite ideas that situate listening to children as a postmodern and ethical approach to pedagogy, debate about listening to children might not be taking place without the attention to children's rights brought about by the United Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 12 is held up as an exemplar of children's participatory rights. It sets out that 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (UNICEF, 2008). However, this wording has

inevitably invited clarification of exactly *how* young children's views are to be best expressed and represented, as well as what constitutes maturity and, indeed, childhood. Clarification of Article 12 came with *General Comment 7* (released by The United Nations Committee in November 2005). This has strengthened the participatory intent as well as the practical application of Article 12 by saying that children's right to express their views should be recognised in 'the development of policies and services, including through research and consultations' (OHCHR, 2005: 7). MacNaughton et al. (2007) have suggested that this addendum signals the need for early childhood staff to become 'equitable collaborators' with children and recognise the essential contribution of children's expertise.

However, despite developments of the UNCRC, it is worth noting that Clark and others (2005, 11) are clear that a 'rather narrow, rights-based participation discourse' is a significant risk to a pedagogy of listening. They suggest that a rights discourse binds listening to aspirations of individual autonomy and self-realisation which contrast with the relational model set up by Levinas's ethic of an encounter and the Reggio Emilia sense of community belonging. Nevertheless, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) manage to contextualise the discourse of children's rights as a tool which, though useful, should not become technique and replace the 'responsible ethical and political practices' (31) advocated above. In effect, they suggest that rights discourses can form a bridge between dominant individual and desirable relational approaches to pedagogy, if they are regarded as tactic rather than icon.

Likewise, Dillen (2006: 248) characterises children's rights as an 'indispensable tool' which can make concepts such as caring, belonging and shared responsibility 'more concrete'. She also builds her argument on Levinas's philosophy, to emphasise that respect depends on the notion of 'responsibility for the responsibility of the other'



(Dillen, 2006: 245). This gives parents and carers responsibility to simultaneously protect and also ensure children's own sense of responsibility and, thereby, freedom. It recognises children as givers as well as receivers in relationships; as 'guides and teachers' of adults as well as their 'students and dependants'. On balance, Dillen suggests that children's rights discourses should be welcomed and utilised to encourage recognition of differences in a positive light; both between adults and children and between children themselves. Accordingly, rights are not in themselves, the basis for moral action but they do 'stipulate a minimum border' (Dillen 2006: 247). It is this minimum that parents and carers need to develop as the basis for a broader sense of ethical responsibility for children.

#### iv. Practising listening to young children

In summary, it appears that the insertion of listening into early childhood policy and practice is doomed to failure unless full account is taken of the implications of pedagogy, care and responsibility which are invoked by the concept. However, conversely, unless an idea is tested in practice, it cannot develop and inform theoretical debate. Therefore, to develop concepts of listening, it is also necessary to reflect on examples of well theorised attempts to listen to children in a variety of cultural and practical contexts.

Pascal and Bertram (2009) are among those who advocate that participatory work with children needs to take a high profile in practice as well as theory. Their recent research project, *Children Crossing Borders* (Bertram and Pascal, 2008a) was followed by the *Opening Windows Programme* (Bertram and Pascal, 2008b). This research with vulnerable groups of the children of immigrants in five different countries (France,

Italy, Germany the UK and USA) has, therefore, fed directly into practice. This model demonstrates that listening to children in research projects can link with everyday listening practices in ECEC settings. Importantly, Pascal and Bertram (2009) do not suggest that techniques for listening are finite. Neither do they allow their projects to arrive at easy conclusions. They also suggest that power in the relationship of the researcher/adult to subject/child needs to be treated with care to ensure that methods of listening are ethical. They acknowledge that methods need further development and that the issue of children's right to voice and responsiveness in their projects is not fully resolved. However, they do, along with Bath (2009), make the case for the importance of a variety of narrative techniques and in particular the making of videos to stimulate dialogue with children.

Pascal and Bertram's (2009) work endorses continuation of the ongoing development of methodological tools and approaches for listening to young children, such as Clark (2003 and 2004). This work suggests that the field of listening to young children can accommodate further theorising, hand in hand with practical advances. To that end, this paper now suggests that feminist ethical philosophy can provide us with a better understanding of listening to young children which is particularly pertinent in the ECEC context of a predominantly female workforce.

### **III. A Feminist Ethics of Care**

A modernist approach to the ethics of care, similar to the rights discourses which were discussed earlier, conceptualises autonomy as the production of sovereign subjects (Readings, 1991). However, as we have seen (Rinaldi, 2006; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005), the concept of autonomy can be defined in a postmodern light; less as independence

achieved through separation and rights claims and more as identity achieved through relations with others. For example, Sennett (2003: 120) draws on the psychological work of Winnicott and defines autonomy as ‘a strength of character based on the perceptions of others’. This approach to autonomy opens the way to a postmodern understanding of the concept; that the individual comes to know him or herself as distinctive only through accepting his or her difference from others.

However, Sennett (2003) suggests that this relational type of self-knowledge is risky in that it leads to a notion of equality based on trust which might encourage abuses of power. Thus, it can be argued that a postmodern interpretation of autonomy also requires a postmodern interpretation of power. In an interview shortly before he died, Michel Foucault, noted for his seminal philosophical work on power which has come to define postmodernism, aligned interpretations of power with interpretations of autonomy to illuminate his version of the ethics of care (Foucault, 1988). In this polemic, power is embedded in relations between people and sits alongside autonomy as an ethic of care for the self. This allows Foucault to define power over self, or self-control, as the way to regulate power over others and thus mitigate its potential for abuse. In this conceptualisation, an ethical self-identity includes renunciation of the self as a worldly self. Foucault draws on Roman and Greek philosophers, particularly the Stoics, to argue that care for self is ethical in itself and must precede care for others. He also states that its purpose is ‘to improve oneself, to surpass one’s self, to master the appetites that risk engulfing you’ (Foucault, 1988: 5).

Foucault’s position on self-mastery, although a check on the abuse of power over others, has led critics, particularly feminist academics, to doubt the level of his relational view of autonomy. His position also fails to answer Sennett’s (2003) dilemma about the trustworthiness of self-knowledge achieved through relationships with others.

Thus, feminist philosophers writing on the ethics of care have attempted to define their own view of a relational view of autonomy. For example, Selma Sevenjuisen (1998) suggests that care entails situated questions concerning responsibility in which the care ethicist sees herself as ‘a participant within caring practices’ which require that the cared for are listened to (61). By aligning these views with Aristotelian virtue ethics, Sevenjuisen does, in fact, share aspects of her philosophical base with Foucault (1988). However, crucially, her work departs from Foucault’s in that it is concerned with moral identity as a social practice rather than with care for self as a practice of freedom. Sevenjuisen (1998) has also succeeded in both critiquing the modernist view of autonomy and building on and stimulating a feminist ethics of care to include some of the classical ideas linked with democratic citizenship that we will consider later.

The problem with Foucault’s ethics of care for many other feminist philosophers is that, although he states that care for self implies complex relations with others (Foucault, 1988: 7), the classical references which underpin his views fail to problematise the context of a classical society in which citizens were exclusively male. Thus, Helen O’Grady (2004: 103) talks about how Foucault’s ethics ‘ignore the possible implications of structures of gender on an aesthetics of the self’. In this way, Foucault’s position is revealed as lacking an interrogation of the social models which subordinate others. O’Grady’s criticism of Foucault’s ethics of care is shared by Amy Allen (2004) who highlights the dichotomy between individual and self that Foucault’s position implies. Allen suggests that Foucault’s definition of social relations, as incurring relations of power, reinforces his perspective on the social dimension, as involving strategic games of control. This contrasts sharply with a view of reciprocal communication with others as the foundation for the formation of a coherent self (Allen, 2004).

Nevertheless, Foucault's ethics of care is upheld by many feminist critics as an important challenge to the normalising and disciplinary power/knowledge regimes illuminated in his earlier work and which have been crucial to the development of feminist academic theory. The essential dilemma of Foucault's care ethics, from a feminist perspective, is how to ensure that care for the self is transformational without inadvertently feeding into the very power/knowledge regimes which reinforce the subordination of women. To this end, it is interesting to turn again to Sennett (2003) who advocates that care of others, most often done by women, can be seen as 'useful work' with the dimensions of a craft. This tempers the tendency for care for others to be seen as self-sacrificing. This is particularly important within the context of an unequal society in which caring is historically based on a notion of pity which leads to a lack of mutual understanding between the carer and the cared-for (Sennett, 2003).

#### **IV. Divisions between Care and Education**

Whichever way we construct the rationale, it is undeniable that women make up the vast majority of the work force in relation to the caring professions and in particular the care and education of young children. It is also the case that these jobs are often poorly paid and that inequalities in the workforce are a barrier to the promotion of a relational ethic of care or a democratic ethos in ECEC settings. Moss (2006) states that in the UK teachers earn twice as much as their counterpart 'childcare' workers. They also often have higher qualifications and access to an occupational pension. Recent policy initiatives in England such as the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) (HM Government 2003) have attempted to broaden the career structure to bridge the

differential status of teachers and carers working with the under fives. However, the issue of equal pay for a worker with EYPS qualifications with that of a qualified teacher remains unresolved. These differences represent the material implications of the schism between concepts of care and education in the UK. Moss's (2006) analysis is that this schism is exacerbated by the concepts of professionalism which form part of a dominant discourse, relying on technical rather than political and ethical approaches to workforce development.

Gibbons (2007), writing about the context of ECEC in New Zealand, suggests that if care and education are seen as separate categories to be brought together in educational policies then the concept of care, like education, is inevitably drawn into 'the ruins' of 'troubled' knowledge and practices (124). This leads the carer to challenge the knowledge construction of care and education in educational theory. Gibbons (2007) cites Moss's (2006: 32) idea of the 'pedagogue' as the solution to this challenge; as someone for whom 'learning, care and upbringing are indivisible activities...not distinct fields that must somehow be joined up'. Gibbons (2007) suggests that bringing together care and education could be seen as a misguided enterprise founded on assumptions that distinguish caring as a private activity and education as a public activity. As Foucault's (1991) work elucidates, private worlds of care are governed by regimes of truth to the same extent as the public worlds of education, so a critique that crosses these boundaries is called for (Gibbons, 2007). This means that care and education should be seen as synonymous rather than tacked together.

Petrie and others (2006), in their study of European perspectives of children in care contend that the division between education and care is a particularly British (and it appears, according to Gibbons, Antipodean) phenomenon. To support this, they cite the difficulties in English of translation of the term 'pedagogy' and 'pedagogue'.

‘Pedagogy’ as applicable to some European countries, particularly those in Scandinavia, refers to what might be termed education in its broadest sense (Petrie and others, 2006) whilst ‘social pedagogy’ goes beyond this, to refer to social responsibility for children which embraces all types of service provision. This view asserts that pedagogy is centred on the upbringing of children in general and thus that the pedagogue is an intrinsically interdisciplinary role. Petrie and others (2006) also suggest that, if pedagogy is understood as relational, then listening informs the quality of the relationships formed. It is one assertion of this paper that an ethics of care approach to listening to young children could equate to a higher quality and a broader understanding of pedagogy in the context of ECEC in the UK.

## **V. Listening as a democratic care practice**

The objective of this paper is now to consider *how* listening to young children can be conceptualized and practised as a pedagogy which builds on the feminist ethics of care previously outlined. The key task here, I suggest, is to construct a rationale for listening to be seen as a ‘democratic care practice’ which involves everyone in an ECEC setting, not just children. A recent study by Brooker (2010) examines how a ‘triangle of care’ between key workers, parents and children is worked out in settings. Brooker (2010) connects ideas of care and listening by citing Noddings’ (2002: 13) notion of care as ‘receptive attention’. Bearing in mind Sennett’s (2003) reservations about the inequalities of care relationships, Noddings’ model sees both carer and the cared-for gain. Whilst acknowledging the different roles of the carer and cared-for, she suggests that a ‘generous inequality’ (1984: 67) exists between them, with the cared-for playing a

vital role in the caring relationship. Brooker argues that Noddings' idea of receptive attention links with Levinas's 'ethic of an encounter' (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005: 76) as a guiding ethic in early childhood settings. In this context, and in Brooker's study, the ability of a young child's key worker to 'respect and welcome' parents rather than to 'know and grasp' them is seen as a vital attribute. This, in turn, it is posited, will create equal and reciprocal relationships.

This model of a caring relationship also fits well with Sevenjuisen's previously cited notion of an ethics of care with links to ideas of citizenship. Sevenjuisen (1998: 61) suggests that both connection and dependence are important to the moral subject. The care ethicist is 'a participant within caring practices' and the recipient of care is someone 'to whom she listens'. Sevenjuisen (1998) uses Nancy Fraser's (1989) work on the politics of needs interpretation to suggest that people can have knowledge about their own subjectivity and express their own needs. She asserts that it is important to align needs with rights and widen rights discourses in the way that Dahlberg and Moss (2005) and Dillen (2006) suggest, as previously discussed. Sevenjuisen (1998) is clear that the moral pluralism of listening is not in total opposition to the universality of human rights and she also states (65) that democracy needs constant reassertion:

Radical pluralism is only possible if there is a political recognition of basic humanistic values and human rights and a legal order which guarantees these. In this respect democracy is a normative choice: democracy cannot be taken for granted but has to be defended in word and deed.

Thus, Sevenjuisen (1998) finds that universal certainties must be seen in a contingent light. Here, she draws on Tronto (1995: 14) who expresses a view of democracy in which the ethics of care are 'a mean between democracy and justice'. In



this scenario, care intervenes between the excesses of power and morality to provide ‘a *concrete* basis for making judgements (my emphasis)’ (Tronto, 1995: 18). This important statement emphasises care as a practice which speaks to contexts beyond the quotidian, in order to provide the rationale for a feminist model of inclusive democracy.

In terms of ECEC, this model of inclusive democracy is most evident in Moss’s somewhat idealistic (2009) conception of ‘democratic experimentalism’ in which settings become forums for citizens of all ages to come together for a mixture of ‘social, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, economic and political’ purposes and projects (35). This provides a way for citizens/members to bring concerns which appear private into a public space, thereby politicising them through a process of deliberation and debate. The wider implication of this for a concept of education is that knowledge and learning outcomes are no longer predetermined, since the greater project is the co-construction of knowledge. Moss argues that any ‘products’ which flow from this process are ‘immaterial’ (Hardt and Negri, 2005), in that they belong to the common good. Hence the model is one of innovation and experiment with Dewey’s (1937) notion of democratic education as a strong precedent. If we apply Sevenjuisen’s (1998) concept of an ethics of care to Moss’s alternative vision, it becomes possible to see ECEC settings as participatory forums in which the presence of the care ethic is exercised through responsive listening which then informs individual and joint decision making. The risk of this approach is that rights become contingent and may be subject to compromise, especially if pay and conditions for the ECEC workforce remain inequitable. However, if we apply Rinaldi’s (2005: 187) more idealistic vision, rights can become subject to ‘real negotiation’ and a dialogue in which transformation is unavoidable. This, then, suggests that it is possible to commit to listening as an ethic of care.

To return to Brooker's (2010) study, we find in 'the triangle of care' that the care for the child is mediated through the caring relationship of key worker and parent. In the case of very young children, it seems a realistic assumption that 'listening' involves parents interpreting children's needs and care practitioners understanding and responding to cultural backgrounds, in terms of family and social practices, in the way that Brooker advocates. This also links to the notion of social pedagogy put forward by Petrie and others (2006), in that children are listened to in a way that is not decontextualised from the rest of society. This paper, therefore, finally contends that listening to young children must involve an approach in which democratic care practices which implicates both adult and child participants in ECEC settings, so that the carer and the cared for both gain. This, in turn, means that a broader and interdisciplinary meaning of pedagogy, as cited above, would become more widely practised.

## **VI. Conclusion**

This paper has traced recent additions to the discourse of listening to young children in ECEC. These have been examined in the light of both ethical and rights based justifications which connect to ideas of participation. In parallel with this, feminist contributions to ethics of care discourses have been outlined, in terms of how they critique Foucault's later work on the same subject and also contribute to the idea of responsive listening. The notion of childcare as low status women's work has been identified as relevant to divisions between education and care in the UK and these divisions have been used to illuminate a broad concept of pedagogy as the basis for a 'more listening', and therefore a higher quality, vision of ECEC.

Brooker's (2010) study has provided an example of how care can be conceptualised as listening and vice-versa. The rationale for the caring relationship at the heart of Brooker's work has been supported by Sevenjuisen's (1998) justification of how a postmodern and feminist approach to the ethics of care can align with a rights-based approach to citizenship. Sevenjuisen's ethics of care has then been applied to Moss's (2009) study of 'democratic experimentalism', in order to contextualise listening and care within a democratic framework.

The main thrust of the paper has thus been to locate a pedagogy of listening to young children within a discourse of the ethics of care. This has allowed listening to connect with ECEC meaningfully in order to 'trouble' (Pascal and Bertram, 2009) the idea that listening is a technical practice that can be perfected. It has also challenged the low status of care as linked to 'women's work' and has contended that ECEC is currently the most politically and ethically important work that a citizen can undertake to develop a democratic society.

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