

Moral Precarity of Teaching in Neoliberal Times—and Why the Public Should Care With Teachers

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Doing good work as a public school teacher in the U.S. has become increasingly challenging in recent times as the education system remains under the assault of neoliberal reform and austerity measures. In this paper, I work towards arguing that the larger social order, where possible, should provide the conditions necessary for teachers to fulfil their responsibilities of care in schools. In arguing this, I follow care scholars Eva Kittay and Sarah Clark Miller in underscoring our responsibilities toward caregivers who attend to persons reliant on the care of others to survive and flourish. Both authors, in separate articles in a recently published book, bring to our attention the moral precarity encountered by caregivers and care workers working in a neoliberal age.¹ Using the experience of a teaching veteran working in a high-needs urban school, I illustrate below that teachers in their capacity as caregivers can similarly be subject to moral precarity because of the neoliberal conditions encountered on the job.² Plenty of research already points to the working conditions of public school teachers being far from favorable, and some educational philosophers have also argued for the necessity of remedying these dismal conditions so as to do right by teachers.³ I hope to add to this conversation a perspective from care ethics — a moral theory that, in my view, not only aptly reveals how problematic neoliberalism is as an ideology applied to education, but also presents a framework for clarifying the nature of our obligations to teachers.

This paper proceeds as follows. I first spotlight the experience of a veteran public school teacher, Nancy, to illustrate that the neoliberal conditions of teaching have hindered her from fulfilling her caring obligations as a teacher. In light of the constraints that Nancy has encountered in her caring work, I characterize some ways that a teacher's failure to care well for a student can expose them to moral precarity. In my conclusion, I briefly articulate, using

Kittay's account of a public ethics of care, that in view of the moral precarity that teachers can encounter in fulfilling their caring responsibilities, we owe it to them to provide the conditions necessary for them to thrive as care workers in schools.

NANCY'S STORY: CONSTRAINTS IN CARING

Nancy is an 18-year teaching veteran working in a metropolitan city's public education system. When we conversed in Spring 2021, she was a bilingual educator in an urban middle-school where most students came from working-class immigrant communities. One of the implications of the austerity measures in schools is the difficulty of hiring enough qualified teachers to maintain class sizes conducive for learning.⁴ Nancy tells me that when she started teaching nearly two decades ago, her class sizes averaged between 25 and 26 students. In recent years, the average number of students in her classes has steadily grown to 32 students.⁵ "This year, I have the most students that I've ever had in many, many years," Nancy tells me. An untenable class size, as I have illustrated elsewhere in the context of the 2019 Chicago Public School (CPS) teachers' strike, can impede a teacher's efforts to attend to all their students.⁶ Nancy, by identifying her growing class sizes as a source of frustration on the job, could be signaling that she is having difficulties with fulfilling her responsibilities of care toward her students in a classroom with too many students. 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, such relationships are key to providing good care.

In addition to the issue of growing class sizes, Nancy has been canvassing her principal for a teacher aide for her classroom for many years, but her efforts have been largely unsuccessful.⁷ Her awareness of the complex linguistic, academic, and socio-emotional needs of bilingual students appears to have prompted her to enlist more support so that the unique needs of her students can be more effectively met in her classroom. In her commentary below, she explains the resistance from her school administration in providing this additional support:

I actually think my principal doesn't care as much for bilingual students, because some of their test scores don't affect the performance of our school. Their grades don't matter so he's not willing to invest in them. I know this from him choosing to place additional teacher assistance in classes where high-performing kids are in. His attitude is telling me, "We can't do anything about these bilingual students." I don't see a strong effort on behalf of the school administration to help my students.

Nancy's school principal appears to be responding to the neoliberal business logic that has taken hold in public schools — specifically the reliance on performance measures in testable subjects to incentivize so-called more "efficient" behavior that leads to desirable outcomes on these measures. Mainly concerned with the test scores of students tracked by the district, the principal has little incentive to allocate whatever resources he has to Nancy's bilingual students whose English Language Learner (ELL) status has excluded them from high-stakes testing in their district. Nancy informs me that many bilingual students have not been given access to intervention programs nor resources to find out what is due to them. Many of them, quoting Nancy, have been "struggling forever [as] long-term ELLs," entering the bilingual program as kindergarteners but still reading at the second-grade level as eighth-graders. These students as well as other high-needs students, in my view, are not receiving the quality care that they deserve in a public school system in part because of the lack of essential wraparound services provided by paraprofessionals and school-related personnel (PSRPs). Given that high-needs students can face diverse and complex problems in mental health, learning difficulties, and primary health care, they may require care from a team of teachers and PSRPs such as librarians, teacher aides, and medical and social work professionals with the requisite and complementary competencies working together. What Nancy seems to be telling her principal with her request for a teacher aide is that she alone cannot be relied on to meet the wide-ranging needs of her bilingual students.

On top of large classes, another constraint impeding Nancy's caring efforts is the pressure that her school administration places on her and other teachers to award passing grades to students who fail to demonstrate preparedness for high school. For this group of students, unlike the ELL students, their grades count towards the school performance measures tracked at the district-level. Nancy describes her school administration as being "notorious" for their practice of approaching students in the last week before quarter grades are due to tell these students who have failed to complete any work in the entire quarter that they would pass the class under the condition that they complete a few pieces of arbitrarily assigned work. Upon convincing students to do these assignments, Nancy's administration would, in her words, "guilt-trip [the teacher] into allowing students to pass the class." She adds that teachers would even be pressured into changing student grades so as to boost the school's average passing rate and ranking within the district. Nancy perceives her principal's eagerness to "defend the reputation of the school by any means" to be "putting a lot of strain on teachers." She explains that she seeks to set high expectations for her students, but her school's practices are lowering the bar of what students need to learn.

The neoliberal logic that seems to be at play across the school practices described above in Nancy's experience is the emphasis on individual teachers to take on the primary responsibility of meeting the needs of their students. Even as Nancy's caring obligations intensify year-by-year with growing class sizes and increasing numbers of ELLs under her charge, her school leadership remains reluctant to provide her with optimal class sizes and extra teaching assistance for her to meet her obligations. By expecting Nancy to rely on her own means to fulfil the performance outcomes required of her and her students, Nancy's school leadership seems to be oblivious to the institutional role in supporting teachers and students in meeting higher academic expectations. This results in extra hours on Nancy's end being dedicated to preparing for classes, grading assignments, meeting students one-on-one, and speaking to family members after-hours. Tasking teachers to take on more than their fair share of caring obligations, amidst budget and staffing cuts, coheres with the neoliberal view of exalting independency and self-sufficiency as the ideal qualities of a worker.⁸

Yet, this neoliberal prescription on personal responsibility as a panacea to fulfilling one's caring obligations seems to be untenable insofar as it disregards the inequitable realities of caring.⁹ In the context of schooling, meeting the needs of students in a high-poverty urban school like Nancy's can take a heavy toll on the well-being of teachers in the absence of adequate institutional support, and I will now turn to show how the persistent encounters with challenges in providing good care can expose teachers to moral precarity.

DIMENSIONS OF MORAL PRECARITY IN TEACHING

The constraints that Nancy experiences in caring for her students are not unique to her. The other teachers whom I conversed with for my research on a teacher's caring labor spoke of similar situations in their own schools — where abysmal teaching conditions, unsupportive school administration, and a lack of autonomy in a culture of high-stakes testing thwart their endeavors to provide good care for their students.

Below, I employ theoretical resources available in the literature — namely, the concepts of a care-based ethical idealism, moral injury, and demoralization — to shed light on the moral precarity that teachers are subject to by the neoliberal conditions of teaching.

Care scholars recognize that our ethical ideal, or ethical imperative, may commit us to take responsibility for meeting the needs of others in our web of connections.¹⁰ This ethic of responsibility to ensure that persons with whom we are in relations receive the requisite care can be especially heightened when we are placed in formal or informal roles of caregiving. A one-caring can experience moral precarity when placed in circumstances where fulfilling caring responsibilities that are core to their ethical identity and integrity is made impossible; this sense of precarity can be exacerbated when the failure to meet these responsibilities results in harm towards others.¹¹ Our ethical identity, per Miller, refers to our conception of ourselves as moral beings capable of determining and striving towards life goals of importance to us — many of which may concern our professional pursuits.¹² Nancy's commitment to care for her students by not only meeting their linguistic and cultural needs but also

empowering them to interrogate oppressive structures and practices shines through in our conversation. She tells me that in the 2020-2021 school year, she has been assigned the greatest number of ELL students that she has ever had in her teaching career, with roughly 70 percent of her students reading below grade level. Despite her best efforts at caring for them, with the shrinking resources offered in public schools, she seems to be less certain that her students will receive the support to break out of the cycle of underachievement endemic in migrant communities. Describing the bilingual students as being left “in the shadows,” Nancy expresses feelings of anger and guilt at not being able to convince her school administration to provide her with more support. In conveying her helplessness, she appears to be berating herself for not being able to fulfil her responsibilities of care towards her students.

The importance of supporting teachers as ones-caring is underscored by Noddings, who recognizes that despite a teacher’s best efforts to care for their students, it is possible that they see little or no uptake of care by their students, and this can result in their caring responsibilities feeling burdensome, as has happened to Nancy.¹³ The ethical idealism of Nancy can also be said to have undergone diminution. In researching the reasons that result in committed veteran teachers leaving high-poverty schools, Santoro observes that the diminishment of a teacher’s work can also diminish the teacher’s sense of their self. She describes the ex-teachers whom she interviewed as locating teaching as a fundamental source of their identity and a way of being in the world.¹⁴ In other words, to be able to teach well constitutes a key part of who they are as persons in relation to others. For Nancy, caring well for her students enables her to express herself and her moral commitments as someone who was also once a bilingual student growing up in a poor immigrant community but was fortunate enough to have received the care needed for carving out a successful professional life for herself. She tells me that she has gone into teaching because she wants to be a role model for her students and to support them in achieving their academic ambitions as other supportive adults had done for her younger self. In my view, Nancy finds herself in a morally precarious state because her “corporatized” school has not provided her with the requisite conditions for

providing good care for her students; her identity and idealism as a one-caring can be understood as being under threat in a neoliberal order.

A one-caring can also have their ethical ideal diminished when they are forced to act against their commitment to care, and organizations can contribute to this diminution by demanding individuals to affirm beliefs antagonistic to care.¹⁵ Nancy, in reflecting on her school administration's practice of inflating student grades, describes dealing with the pressure from her school to partake in the practice as "one of the biggest challenges" in teaching. While she is intent on meeting the genuine needs of her students by providing honest feedback on their learning and by developing them as resilient learners, her school administration is more intent on exercising what Valenzuela and Rolón-Dow characterize as "aesthetic" or superficial care.¹⁶ A school structured around superficial care pursues goals and strategies that are blind to the subjective reality of students, with school leaders subscribing to a narrow and instrumentalist logic.¹⁷ The superficial caring that Nancy was forced to support as the students' grader and a care worker in a neoliberal regime appears to be at odds with what she as a one-caring strives to do — that is to promote the genuine flourishing of students. She remarks, "If you truly care for your students, you will work hard to prepare them to be successful." She characterizes her school's practice as "not caring," but instead to be "victimizing" and "harming" students, since it will in all likelihood inculcate the wrong values in them and set them up for more years of educational underachievement.

I interpret Nancy, from being co-opted against her will into perpetuating an uncaring environment in her school, to be suffering from moral injury: a condition that Miller claims in part explains the moral precarity that caregivers suffer under neoliberalism. I follow Meira Levinson in defining moral injury as "the trauma of perpetrating significant moral wrong against others despite one's wholehearted desire and responsibility to do otherwise."¹⁸ In investigating the ethical dilemmas in which educators struggle to uphold justice, Levinson notes that some educators may find it impossible to choose a just course of action because of contextual and school-based injustices. In being compelled to act unjustly, these educators perpetuate moral harm to others including students,

and in so doing, they suffer from moral injury in the form of a wounded moral integrity. As in Nancy's case, her moral integrity has been harmed because she perceives her failure to fulfil her caring duties to have denied her students from receiving the care that they deserve. Under the unjust conditions of teaching, she is faced with the impossible options of attending to some students but not others, and as she suggests, the lack of intervention support provided to bilingual students can lead to some of them making little improvement in their English language proficiency throughout their K-12 education and even suffering from a sense of alienation from their native culture. Further, as she is being forced by her school administration to transgress her caring ideals, she may deem herself to be complicit in sustaining a neoliberal agenda which deprives her disadvantaged students and their families of the care necessary for them to gain upward mobility.

I explore the final dimension of moral precarity — namely, demoralization — that teachers can be exposed to in a neoliberal age. Demoralization, according to Santoro, occurs in situations where the conditions of teaching evolve so drastically that moral rewards that were previously available are now rendered inaccessible.¹⁹ Access to the moral rewards of teaching is likely hindered for teachers like Nancy who perpetually encounter constraints on experiencing success in their caring endeavors. Nancy speaks about the overwhelming sense of exhaustion that she feels from having taught for nearly one decade in the same middle school where she does not always see eye to eye with the administration on what would best serve her students. “I have reached a point in my life where I’m exhausted,” she explains. “I need to reboot. I need to revamp.” Towards the end of our conversation, she shares with me her desire to leave her current school and to try her hand at teaching in a high school.

Fortunately, for Nancy, despite feeling demoralized about teaching in her current school, she still wants to give teaching a second chance. For other teachers, the sense of demoralization from perpetually failing to live up to their caring ideals may contribute to them leaving the system. Noddings notes that when a person's ethical ideal is persistently eroded by circumstances, they may come to a breaking point.²⁰ In researching the 2019 CPS strike, I came across

accounts contributed by three ex-CPS teachers on why they left the system.²¹ They left CPS in part because of the issues raised in the 2019 strike: overcrowded classrooms, lack of staffing support, and overall abysmal conditions such as broken photocopiers and filthy classrooms. One of them is English teacher Julie Kallas, who had taught in a school without a special needs teacher — despite half of her students having special needs.²² She justifies her decision to leave the classroom, “I finally felt that nothing I was doing in the classroom was actually going to make a difference.” I interpret that Kallas’ ethical ideal has been undermined by institutional conditions beyond her control; she has left teaching because she perceived no other alternative in the school system that would allow her to fulfil her responsibilities as a one-caring. Without adequate staffing of PSRPs and manageable class sizes, some teachers may struggle to competently facilitate the uptake of care in their students; with care incomplete in their students, these teachers may be impeded from feeling a sense of fulfilment in being renewed and growing as persons in the role of teacher. Consequently, their ethical ideal — or capacity to care — may diminish with time, and for some teachers, the accompanying sense of demoralization can contribute to them leaving teaching.

Having considered the ways that an education system subsumed under neoliberal ideology can place teachers in morally precarious situations, I conclude by briefly considering a public ethics of care as a potential model for societies striving to do right by teachers.

CONCLUSION: A PUBLIC ETHICS OF CARE IN SUPPORT OF TEACHERS

Kittay observes that the care worker is seldom able to receive reciprocal care from the dependent because of the inherent asymmetry in the caring abilities of the two parties; however, since the labor of care consumes the worker emotionally and physically, they become derivatively dependent on others for care to sustain themselves in their caring labor.²³ Kittay invents the term “doulia” to encapsulate a public ethic of care whereby social cooperation provides the care worker with the care they deserve.²⁴ The term “doulia” improvises on the term “doula,” the name of a postpartum caregiver employed to

help the new mother as the mother cares for her newborn. Just as the caregiver cares for their charge, wider societal structures such as social institutions and other individuals take on the quasi-role of a doula and step in to care for the well-being and interests of the caregiver such that they can continue caring for others. Hearing from Nancy's experience as a public school teacher, we saw that the neoliberal reform measures in public schooling have exposed teachers to moral precarity. If we recognize interdependency as a fundamental feature of our human condition, we will consider it our responsibility to support teachers, where possible, in leading a care-filled life as they work to care well for students in schools. To exercise *doulia* or social cooperation towards sustaining the caring labor of teachers within schools, members in society at large attend to the needs of teachers so as to indirectly facilitate the flourishing of caring relationships within schools. In instances where we are unable to directly care for others in need, we can take collective action to ensure that institutions and policies are effectively supporting these individuals in receiving adequate support in their care work.²⁵

On the concrete ways in which we can ameliorate the moral precarity experienced by teachers, it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper to lay them out. Moreover, I am inclined to agree with other care scholars that academics are probably better positioned to do the job of articulating normative principles in an effort to shape moral and political norms and preferences than to make prescriptions on specific policies and practices: a task that should be worked out through deliberative processes within local communities. Care ethics is after all committed to providing responsive, flexible, and particular care to individuals through personal relationships, with context sensitivity being one of the guiding principles of a public ethics of care.²⁶ A sustainable approach for individuals seeking to support teachers, I hypothesize, is to join local advocacy groups focused on improving public school conditions through legislative actions.²⁷ As we strive to improve public education, we may get closer to this aim with more of us in the social order stepping in to support the needs of persons who make education possible in the first place.

1 Sarah Clark Miller, “Neoliberalism, Moral Precarity, and the Crisis of Care,” in *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity*, ed. Maurice Hamington and Michael A. Flower (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 48-67; Eva Feder Kittay, “Precarity, Precariousness, and Disability,” in *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity*, ed. Maurice Hamington and Michael A. Flower (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 19-47.

2 While considering teachers as care workers and caregivers in this paper, I acknowledge that there are aspects of teaching such as the imparting of skills, knowledge, and values that set teaching apart from other caregiving professions.

3 Meira Levinson, “Moral Injury and the Ethics of Educational Injustice,” *Harvard Educational Review* 85, no. 2 (2015): 203-28; Doris A. Santoro, “Good Teaching in Difficult Times: Demoralization in the Pursuit of Good Work,” *American Journal of Education* 118, no. 1 (November 2011): 1-23; Doris A. Santoro, “Teaching’s Conscientious Objectors: Principled Leavers of High-Poverty Schools,” *Teachers College Record* 113, no. 12 (December 1, 2011): 2670-2704; Susan Moore Johnson, “The Workplace Matters, Teacher Quality, Retention, and Effectiveness,” Working Paper, Best Practices New Research (National Education Association, 2006); Susan Moore Johnson, Matthew A. Kraft, and John P. Papay, “How Context Matters in High-Need Schools: The Effects of Teachers’ Working Conditions on Their Professional Satisfaction and Their Students’ Achievement,” *Teachers College Record* 114, no. 10 (2012): 1-39.

4 Diane Ravitch, *Slaying Goliath: The Passionate Resistance to Privatization and the Fight to Save America’s Public Schools*, First edition (New York: Vintage, 2020), 251.

5 Nancy did not specify the reason(s) spurring her growing class sizes over the years. My own research into her school district indicates that it has been chronically underfunded with an increasing proportion of English language learners (ELLs) among its enrolled students for several years.

6 Yibing Quek, “An Interpretation of the 2019 Chicago Teachers’ Strike Through the Ethics of Care,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 40, no. 6 (November 2021): 609-27.

7 Nancy was finally assigned a teaching aide in the school year of 2019-2020 because of pressures placed by her district's teachers' union on her school administration.

8 Kittay, "Precarity, Precariousness, and Disability."

9 Joan C. Tronto, *Who Cares? How to Reshape a Democratic Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

10 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Second edition (University of California Press, 2013); Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

11 Miller, "Neoliberalism, Moral Precarity," 52.

12 Miller, 62.

13 Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach*, 181.

14 Doris A. Santoro, "'I Was Becoming Increasingly Uneasy about the Profession and What Was Being Asked of Me': Preserving Integrity in Teaching," *Curriculum Inquiry* 43, no. 5 (December 2013): 581.

15 Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach*, 116.

16 Angela Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S. - Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999); Rosalie Rolón-Dow, "Critical Care: A Color(Full) Analysis of Care Narratives in the Schooling Experiences of Puerto Rican Girls," *American Educational Research Journal* 42, no. 1 (January 2005): 77—111.

17 Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling*, 22, 263.

18 Levinson, "Moral Injury," 203.

19 Santoro, "Good Teaching."

20 Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach*, 105.

21 G Caneva, "Why I Won't Be Teaching in CPS Anymore," *The Chicago Tribune*, July 11, 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-opinion-teacher-residency-cps-exodus-20190711-7yuts4alv-vc5bkqfhzt5fmxia-story.html>; C Coleman, "Why Money Can't Buy You Teachers: Educators Need More than Raises," *Chicago Business*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.chicagobusiness.com/opinion/why-money-cant-buy->

you-teachers-educators-need-more-raises; J Kallas, “I Stopped Teaching in Chicago Because of the Issues That Teachers Are Striking over. Here’s My Story,” *Chalkbeat* (blog), October 17, 2019, <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/chicago/2019/10/17/i-stopped-teaching-in-chicago-because-of-the-issues-that-teachers-are-striking-over-heres-my-story/>.

22 I have also discussed Kallas’ decision to leave CPS in Quek, “An Interpretation of the 2019 Chicago Teachers’ Strike.”

23 Eva Feder Kittay, *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependence* (Routledge, 1999); E. F. Kittay, “Caring for the Long Haul: Long-Term Care Needs and the (Moral) Failure to Acknowledge Them,” *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 6, no. 2 (2013): 66-88; Kittay, “A Feminist Public Ethic of Care Meets the New Communitarian Family Policy,” *Ethics* 111, no. 3 (2001): 523-47; Kittay, “A Theory of Justice as Fair Terms of Social Life given Our Inevitable Dependency and Our Inextricable Interdependency,” in *Care Ethics and Political Theory*, ed. Daniel Engster and Maurice Hamington, First edition (New York: OUP, 2015), 51-71.

24 Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 68.

25 Daniel Engster, *Justice, Care, and the Welfare State* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Robert Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities* (University of Chicago Press, 1985).

26 Engster, *Justice, Care, and the Welfare State*, 28.

27 Ravitch in *Slaying Goliath*, 108-115, provides an extensive list of previous and ongoing ground-up advocacy efforts undertaken by parents, journalists, media personalities, scholars, religious leaders, and educators, as part of the “Resistance” movement, to oppose corporate reform of public education.