The Caring Transformation of National Education: Opportunities, Challenges, and Changes

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted all aspects of national education. It has not only highlighted the inadequacies of existing care arrangements but also spurred new care demands. Policymakers and educational institutions increasingly recognize the need to more effectively understand and support the well-being of their domestic students and provide them with more comprehensive care. This paper draws on theories of social material care to explore the possibility of using care as a guiding principle to steer national education in a more productive direction. The core argument is that a focus on care is crucial for promoting the well-being of international students and creating a more effective institutional environment for attracting, retaining, and supporting them. Furthermore, it is essential for redefining and achieving the grand goals of national education itself. This paper demonstrates these points through three "drafts," illustrating how a focus on care can reshape international education policy and institutional support and point to new directions for research on international student mobility.

Introduction: The need for greater student care in national education has perhaps never been more urgent. Researchers from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia have demonstrated that students in these countries are particularly vulnerable in areas such as mental health, racial discrimination, classroom learning challenges, and finding jobs related to their professions after graduation (Guo & Guo, 2017; Heng, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these difficulties and introduced new challenges (Gomes & Forbes-Mewett, 2021; Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2022). In particular, the shift to online learning has presented educators with new challenges, requiring them to implement teaching methods that foster engagement among students from diverse backgrounds (Aitchison et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2022; Naylor & Nyanjom, 2021). This has also made it more difficult for educators and educational institutions to understand the care needs of their students (Gravett et al., 2021). Beyond the operations of educational institutions themselves, the current era of globalization is accompanied by catastrophic climate change, increasing inequality, war, and authoritarianism (Ilieva et al., 2014; Silova, 2021). All these processes underscore the urgent need for national education to foster positive interpersonal relationships and meaningful connections, and to create conditions that foster greater care for humanity, other species, and the environment.

This paper explores the possibility of promoting well-being and guiding national education in a more productive direction by using care as a guiding principle. It draws on the sociometrical theory of care, which examines how interpersonal relationships are interwoven with space, place, and environment, and how these interweaving interacts with objects, bodies, and materiality. In the educational space, this means paying attention to how the ever-changing combination of human and non-human actors shapes learning, teaching, and connection both inside and outside the classroom (Fenwick & Landri, 2012; Gourlay, 2017; Gravet et al., 2021). The central argument of this paper is that focusing on care is crucial for promoting student well-being and creating an institutional environment that more effectively attracts, retains, and supports students. Moreover, it is essential for redefining and achieving the grand goals of national education itself. Therefore, the commitment to valuing education lies not only in its potential to "revive the industry" but also in its ability to open up new possibilities and directions for national education.

"Care as a mode of rethinking *national* education policy."

Care as a Mode of Rethinking National Education Policy

Reframing national education policy through the lens of **care** represents a move away from narrow, utilitarian understandings of schooling—where education is primarily a tool for workforce preparation or economic competition—and toward an ethical, relational, and justice-oriented vision of the public good. Care, in this sense, is not sentimentality; it is a political commitment to cultivating conditions in which all people can flourish.

1. Why "Care" Matters for National Policy

Most national education systems remain shaped by:

- **Accountability pressures** (standardised tests, league tables, audits)

- **Human-capital logic** (education as productivity investment)

- **Efficiency narratives** (cost-cutting, technocratic reforms)

- **Competition** (between schools, districts, students)

A care-based framework critiques these logics for narrowing what counts as "success," ignoring social inequalities, and diminishing the relational foundations of teaching and learning.

Care widens the policy aperture to ask:

What would education look like if the wellbeing of students, teachers, families, and communities—not metrics—guided policy decisions?

2. Care as an Ethical–Political Framework

Drawing on feminist ethics of care (Tronto, Noddings) and social-justice perspectives, a care-based national policy emphasizes:

Attentiveness

Policies must recognise diverse learner needs and social realities (e.g., poverty, trauma, disability, cultural identity), rather than assuming a universal student profile.

Responsibility

The state has a moral responsibility to create conditions for equitable education, especially for groups historically marginalized by race, class, gender, disability, migration status, or geography.

Competence

A caring system invests in teachers as skilled professionals, not technocratic executors of scripted curricula.

Responsiveness

Policies adapt based on feedback from communities and educators rather than being fixed, top-down mandates.

Solidarity and Justice

Care links individual wellbeing to collective rights, requiring redistributive policies and recognition of structural inequalities.

3. What a Care-Based National Policy Looks Like

Applying care to national policy shifts priorities across several domains.

A. Curriculum and Learning Goals

- Broader aims: social-emotional development, cultural belonging, civic engagement, ecological awareness.

- Inclusion of local, Indigenous, and community knowledge.

- Learning environments that foster connection, curiosity, and meaning—not just test preparation.

B. Teacher Policy and Professional Culture

- Reduced administrative burden and high-stakes evaluation.

- Increased autonomy, trust, and time for relational work.

- Policies that address teacher wellbeing, workload, and pay as foundational to educational quality.

C. Resource Allocation and Equity

- Funding formulas that recognise differential need rather than equal per-student distribution.

- Investments in health, nutrition, mental health, and family services as part of the education ecosystem.

- Policies aimed at eliminating racialised and socio-economic disparities in school conditions and outcomes.

D. Governance and Participation

- Decision-making that includes teachers, students, families, and local communities.

- Schools as democratic institutions rather than administrative delivery mechanisms.

- Localised flexibility within national frameworks to enable contextualised care.

E. Assessment and Accountability

- Multiple forms of evidence (qualitative, community feedback, student portfolios)

- Emphasis on growth, belonging, and engagement rather than narrow performance indicators

- Accountability systems that hold governments responsible for providing enabling conditions, not just holding schools accountable for outputs.

4. Care as a Response to Contemporary Social Realities

A care-based policy direction is particularly urgent in the face of:

- Mental health crises among students and teachers

- Growing inequality and precarity

- Climate change and ecological anxiety

- Digital divides and algorithmic harms

- Cultural polarisation and weakening civic trust

Care reframes schools as places that sustain democratic life, support resilient communities, and nurture collective future-making.

5. Care, Decolonisation, and Justice Within the Nation

Applying care domestically means addressing internal hierarchies, exclusions, and histories of harm:

- Recognising and dismantling systemic racism and ableism

- Valuing Indigenous and minority-language education

- Resisting "one-size-fits-all" national curriculum models that erase local identities

- Ensuring migrant and refugee students experience belonging, not assimilation pressure

Care therefore functions as both a healing and a transformative policy orientation.

Summary

Using care as a mode for rethinking national education policy reorients the purpose of schooling from producing competitive individuals to cultivating equitable, relational, and thriving communities. It shifts the central policy question from *"How do we raise test scores and economic productivity?"* to *"How do we build education systems that enable all children, educators, and communities to flourish—now and in the future?"*

 "Care as a mode of reframing institutional support."

Care as a Mode of Reframing Institutional Support

Reframing institutional support through the lens of **care** shifts the focus from procedural, compliance-driven service models to relational, responsive, and justice-oriented practices. Instead of treating support as a set of technical interventions or bureaucratic transactions, care-centered institutions understand support as an ongoing ethical practice situated within social, cultural, and power-laden contexts.

In this sense, *care is both a way of seeing and a way of structuring institutional life*.

1. Why Care Changes How Institutions Understand "Support"

Traditional institutional support tends to be:

- **Transactional:** Students, employees, or clients receive assistance in exchange for meeting predefined criteria.

- **Standardized:** One-size-fits-all programs or policies.

- **Reactive:** Support triggered only after problems emerge.

- **Efficiency-oriented:** Designed around throughput, productivity, and performance indicators.

A care-based framework critiques these tendencies for failing to consider:

- Individual and collective wellbeing

- Power asymmetries

- Cultural and structural inequities

- The relational conditions that underpin effective support

Care repositions support from "fixing problems" to **nurturing conditions in which people can flourish**.

2. The Ethics of Care as an Institutional Framework

Drawing from feminist care ethics (Gilligan, Tronto, Noddings) and organizational theory, care involves five interrelated processes:

Attentiveness

Institutions must notice real needs, not just those that are easily measurable. These counters the tendency to ignore marginalized groups whose needs do not fit standard categories.

Responsibility

Institutions acknowledge an ethical obligation to support people, moving beyond risk management or liability avoidance.

Competence

Support requires skilled, knowledgeable, culturally responsive professionals—not just automated systems or administrative scripts.

Responsiveness

Feedback loops ensure support evolves with changing circumstances.These challenges rigid protocols that ignore lived experience.

Solidarity and Justice

Care ties support to equity—redistributing resources, addressing structural oppression, and creating inclusive environments.

3. What Care-Based Institutional Support Looks Like

A. Human-Centered Design Instead of Bureaucratic Logic

- Services organised around people's lived experiences, not around departmental boundaries.

- Coordinated supports that reduce administrative burden for users.

B. Relational Infrastructure

- Trust-building, continuity of care, and long-term relationships.

- Staff training in empathy, trauma-informed practice, and cultural humility.

C. Proactive Rather Than Reactive Support

- Early identification of needs through attentive engagement.

- Holistic approaches that integrate wellbeing, academic/occupational success, and social belonging.

D. Flexibility and Contextualization

- Policy and support structures adaptable to different cultural, socioeconomic, and ability contexts.

- Alternatives to rigid eligibility requirements that often exclude those most in need.

E. Equity-Driven Resource Allocation

- Prioritizing groups disproportionately affected by systemic barriers.

- Recognizing that equal treatment does not equate to fair or caring support.

F. Recognition of Emotional Labor and Staff Wellbeing

Care cannot be sustained if the caregivers themselves are exhausted, undervalued, or unsupported. Institutions practicing care must invest in:

- manageable workloads,

- supportive leadership,

- reflective supervision,

- and professional autonomy.

4. Transforming Institutional Culture Through Care

Care reframes support not as a service *offered* but as a culture *lived*:

- Shifts institutional identity from compliance-oriented to values-driven

- Strengthens trust and accountability through relational practices

- Promotes inclusive, collaborative decision-making

- Reduces adversarial conflict between institutions and constituents

- Enhances community belonging and psychological safety

This transformation ultimately moves institutions from functioning as systems of control to functioning as **systems of human and collective flourishing**.

5. Care as Structural, Not Just Personal

A key misunderstanding is treating care as interpersonal kindness alone. A care-centered institution requires **structural embeddedness**:

- Policy frameworks that value wellbeing

- Procedures that prioritise dignity and respect

- Budgets that support caring practices

- Leadership that models relational ethics

- a framework tailored to universities, schools, NGOs, healthcare, or workplace settings

- a short conceptual definition

- or a practical toolkit for implementation.

"Care as a mode of rethinking research regard national students"

This reframes research practices themselves—not just policy or support—through the ethics and politics of care.

Care as a Mode of Rethinking Research Regarding National Students

Using care as a mode of rethinking research concerning national students radically reorients why, how, and for whom research is conducted. Rather than treating students as data points, test subjects, or policy inputs, a care-based approach positions them as relational beings embedded in social, cultural, political, and material worlds. This framework challenges extractive, deficit-based, and surveillance-oriented research traditions common in national education systems.

1. Why Research on National Students Needs Reframing

Traditional student-focused research often:

- Treats students as objects of study rather than partners

- Prioritizes national performance metrics (e.g., testing outcomes)

- Focuses on deficits ("gaps," "failures," "risk factors")

- Normalizes surveillance and datafication

- Ignores structural inequalities shaping student experiences

- Reinforces dominant narratives about citizenship, identity, and nationhood

A care-based approach seeks to repair these tendencies by foregrounding dignity, agency, and justice.

2. What "Care" Means in Research Contexts Drawing on feminist care ethics (Tronto, Noddings, Puig de la Bellacasa), care in research involves:

Attentiveness

Recognizing students lived realities, cultural identities, emotional worlds, and local contexts rather than homogenizing them as a national population.

Responsibility

Acknowledging the ethical obligations researchers have toward students, especially when researching historically marginalized groups.

Competence

Employing rigorous, culturally responsive, and contextually sensitive methods—not simply standardised surveys or test-score analyses.

Responsiveness

Letting student voices reshape research questions, methods, and interpretations rather than inserting them into pre-defined frameworks.

Solidarity and Justice

Using research to expose and challenge harmful structures rather than legitimizing inequality through "objective" measurement.

3. How Care Transforms the Research Process

A. Rethinking Research Questions Care prompts researchers to ask:

- Whose interests does this research serve?

- What forms of harm might this research reproduce?

- How do students define their own needs, aspirations, and identities?

- What structural conditions shape their experiences?

Questions move from prediction and classification to understanding, relationality, and justice.

B. Rethinking Research Design

- Participatory, co-designed methodologies with students

- Mixed-methods approaches that elevate narrative, lived experience, and context

- Slower, relational forms of data gathering

- Ethical protocols centered on dignity, not merely compliance

C. Rethinking Data and Interpretation Instead of treating students as "achievement data," care calls for:

- Interpretations that avoid pathologizing groups

- Contextual analysis of inequality and systemic factors

- Awareness of how national categories (race, class, region, migration status) shape findings

D. Rethinking Researcher–Student Relationships Care requires:

- Trust-building

- Transparency

- Reciprocity

- Minimizing extractive practices (e.g., taking stories without giving back)

Students become co-constructors of knowledge rather than subjects to be studied.

4. Research Outputs Through the Lens of Care

A care-based framework changes what counts as valid research impact:

- Findings centered on students' wellbeing, belonging, and flourishing

- Reports that challenge harmful narratives about groups of students

- Outputs accessible to students, families, and communities—not just policymakers

- Recommendations that address structural inequalities (funding, curriculum, teacher training, community supports)

- Reflexive accounts acknowledging researcher positionality and power

Research becomes a tool for empowerment rather than evaluation alone.

5. Why This Matters for National Contexts Nation-states often use research on students to:

- Compare groups

- Create academic hierarchies

- Justify policy interventions

- Shape narratives about identity, citizenship, or "national character"

Care interrupts these dynamics by:

- Questioning whose knowledge is represented

- Challenging deficit framings of minority or marginalized students

- Supporting plural understandings of national belonging

- Ensuring students' voices influence the national story about education

Care is thus a counter-methodology to technocratic, nationalist, or extractive research paradigms.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores the generative potential of care and uses it as a guiding principle to drive the transformation of national education. The paper theorizes care as a constantly evolving aggregate of social materiality and proposes three possible scenarios to illustrate how care can promote well-being and reshape national education policies, institutional support, and research targeting national students. In our time, we need more than ever to care for human and non-human subjects, other species, and the environment in a more effective way. At the same time, policymakers, educational institutions, and other relevant sectors are increasingly focusing on the concepts of well-being and care. Therefore, we have an opportunity to open new directions for national education; this can not only make the field more dynamic and caring for all students, faculty, and non-human subjects, but also redefine the fundamental goals of national education. The potential and transformative power of care and well-being lies here. This paper argues that understanding care from a social material perspective is particularly suitable for realizing this potential. Constructing a theory of care in this way focuses on the relationships between everyday practices and actors, and how these are intertwined with space, objects, other materialities, and power relations. However, in critiquing the practices and organization of care, it also suggests other options. In this sense, social materialism is a philosophy of practice. Social materialism views arrangements like neoliberalism as inherently unstable and therefore seeks to adjust and improve them to implement more ethical teaching and learning methods and construct more caring social forms. It sees this adjustment as part of a transformational plan aimed at reinterpreting the trajectory of national education. Simultaneously, it abandons the traditional practice of placing care within a "project" framework, instead considering how care can be integrated into all processes constituting national education. Therefore, researching IJILTEMAS how to reform national education around the concepts of care and well-being is both an urgent task and holds immense potential. Its key, and what it can offer, lies in the broad prospects inherent in well-being itself: creating conditions where humans, non-humans, other species, and the environment can all thrive. Disclosure of Interest: The authors have not reported any potential conflicts of interest.

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