

Constructs of Caring in Indonesia's Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

The role of women as the primary source of the ECE workforce has long been debated in the academic arena. In Indonesia, female ECE teachers are always preferred due to the maternalist perceptions that lead to under-appreciation of their labours. Based on historical data and ethnographic research, this article aims at demonstrating how caring has gone through a multiple process of re-interpretations that produced multiple meanings. These interpretations affect teachers' in the field as much as it affects the children. However, teachers are able to show their active roles and negotiated performativity, although their actions cannot exclusively exclude from the religious, colonial, social, political settings.

Keywords: *Early childhood education in Indonesia, early childhood education in NTT, women's caring practices, maternalism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Childhood Education (ECE). The issue is undetachable from the maternalist conception that disadvantage female educator. The maternalist caring is accused of essentializing women's roles. Caring performance is thought to only involve emotional and non-skills investments (Goldstein, 1998). However, the concept has been pervasive, thick and profound, entangling multiple interests that it cannot easily detach from the practices and even the knowledge. Ailwood (2017), for example, calls caring a "wicked problem" – a problem difficult to be solved without rocking the overall structure.

In Indonesia, the relationship between women and caring is socially and culturally constructed. Motherliness is perceived to be a natural part of being a woman. This preposition generates a tremendous consequence to the feminisation of ECE services, which play a role in making women unpaid labour (Newberry, 2012). The idealisation of caring with women also discourage high male teacher participation in the overall early learning period (Yulindrasari, 2017)

This article intends to produce an overview of how 'caring' in ECE is constructed, received, and appropriated in Indonesia across time and places. A historical review is used to excavate some colonial, religious, and political features that contribute to the shape of 'care.' Meanwhile, ethnographic data from Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) are deployed to provide contemporary situations on caring, mainly represented by tensions from the introduction of the child-centred approach (CCA). In this article, I demonstrate how the concept has been responded, instrumentalised and negotiated by female educators.

2. BACKGROUNDS

2.1. Essentialising Women's Caring through 'Kodrat'

Kodrat is an Indonesian concept from Islamic influence. Etymologically, *kodrat* comes from the word "qudrat" or "able to" which points at the biological differences between men and women. Nevertheless, the concept has been widely used to determine women and men's social and political responsibilities. *Kodrat* has been identified as the dominant discourse that governs the lives and relationships of women and men. Wieringa (1992) argues that *kodrat* idealises women who "don't speak out loudly, and certainly not in their own interests, don't push their own interests against those of husbands and fathers, but are instead compliant wives and mothers and dutiful daughters" (Wieringa, 1992, p. 110)

To many women, *kodrat* is the reason for their responsibilities in nurturing, raising and taking care of their children. *Kodrat* naturalizes caring as a maternal task that any woman can do it instinctively (Yulindrasari, 2017). The influence of *kodrat* is also engrained in the feminine caring principle of *asah, asih, asuh* (to sharpen, to love, and to care). The approach stresses on the importance of education and nurturance, harmony, warmth and protection to a child's growth - tasks that are considerably associated with caregiving roles of women than with men (Yulindrasari, 2017)

2.2. Colonial and Nationalist Legacy

The positioning of women in ECE can be traced from the colonial time. In the 19th century, the ideal caring practice could only be performed by European women (Stoler, 1996). During this period, nurseries were established to stop the negative influences of native mothers stereotyped as poor, lazy, and intellectually inferior, unfit for child-rearing. Also happened during the colonial time was the tradition of “uplifting the native,” which involved relationships between the educated middle-class Dutch or European women and the local aristocrat families or known as *priyayi* (Gouda, 1995).

The colonial strategy of uplifting offers women with a colonial hierarchy as it establishes superiority-inferiority - unequal positions and places among women, a system where a woman disempowers another woman from different race and social structure (Jolly, 1993). In a colonialist practice, maternalist caring is used to judge students' parents, especially mothers. The judgement is attached to middle-class maternalism and housewifely duties (Gouda, 1995). In this occasion, the knowledge of the parents is subjugated and becomes the target of the caring reform; a process referred to as “Othering” (Hughes & Macnaughton, 2000). Despite the significant transfer of authority to the national government, the colonialist practice that governs women's caring remains. The attitude is perpetuated, aligned and reinforced by policies enacted at the national and the global level.

2.3. The Rise of The Child-Centered Approach in Development Projects

At the global level, the neoliberalist development practices, and the modernist vision of global child adds weight the regulation of caring. The involvement of global governance began to strongly appear in 2000, as ECE became a domain of global development's interests (Adriany & Saefullah, 2015). International organisations formulated the strategy and drove the ECE expansions in countries of the global south, including Indonesia. Through their advocacy and funds, ECE projects in Indonesia proliferated at a rapid speed. Teaching and caring practices in ECE became a more regulated space.

The growth is not without tensions and resistances. Newberry (2012), for example, highlights how the neoliberalist idea of global childhood in ECE awkwardly sits next to the idea of women's empowerment. Learning focused on children's needs and interests became imperative that must be organized at all cost, overshadowing teachers' struggles with capacity, financial support, and professional recognition. Another direct consequence of the spread of ECE in the hands of donor agencies was the scrutinization of parenting styles against some pre-determined standards. Focus on either teaching or parenting has also shifted the development's attention from the need to address the structural poverty as the underlying

cause of weak education performance to mere problems of techniques and lack of knowledge.

3. THE CASE OF NUSA TENGGARA TIMUR

From my field observation in a small town of Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), the expansion of ECE has resulted in tensions around the issue of care. Two factors emerged around this issue. The first factor was the child-centred learning approach, which was introduced as part of the developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) during the expansion of the non-formal ECE package. The second factor was the internal dynamics of colonisation between Javanese and non-Javanese values, which appeared more as inter-cultural tensions.

3.1. Labelling

An interesting feature from the introduction of the child-centred principle to NTT was the generation of labelling and self-labelling among teachers. A teacher was identified as “kind” and “loving” when she spoke softly and acted femininely. Meanwhile, another teacher who had a serious face expression and spoke with a deep voice was deemed to be “evil” and “harsh.” Each of this identity formation can be associated with the dichotomy of child-centred and non-child centred principle, which represents a colonialist value of “Othering” (Adriany & Saefullah, 2015)

All teachers I interviewed were introduced to ECE learning after the non-formal ECE expansion took place in NTT from early 2006 to 2014. Their formative learning was focused on the introduction of child-centred learning, heavily inspired by the Beyond Circle and Centre Time (BCCT) - a private franchised DAP-based curriculum developed in the United States (US). Implementing CCA in NTT was challenging, as it requires significant removal of teachers' authority. A teacher states her challenge in implementing the CCA:

“This new approach [CCA] makes me feel guilty to what we [adults] have done to our children. However, I found it incredibly difficult to control myself. Children always want to run around. They don't care about the classroom's order. I cannot do much to stop them. Maybe that's what they want. I find it difficult to follow.” (Interview with Martha, 2015)

The use of CCA posed the teachers to the new struggle of defining caring and the objective of such practices. For some teachers, the CCA became a moral imperative, especially with the presence of Western donors. These teachers believed that the approach must have been carefully validated through some scientific examinations. As a consequence, individual children's interests and needs should always be prioritised, no matter how difficult the conditions and how uncertain the consequences for them were. Such practice would also grant particular teachers

with the reputation of reformed and modern teachers who could cope with the new demands from and a way to deal with globalisation.

3.2. Internal Colonialism

In this ethnographic research, participants felt that beneath the quality of CCA introduced by the people from Jakarta lied the intense persisting domination of Javanese culture and its oppressive character. The regulation of caring in the CCA was immediately associated with the Javanese prioritising the value of *alus* (refined), perceived to be the form of self-control, and the avoidance of *kasar* (rough), which represents rawness, coarseness, imbalance, and impurity (Anderson, 1990). This feature was read by the local teachers, who then decided to follow, resist, and negotiate. A teacher said:

“Yes, we want to have children who know how to line up, sit down properly, to be punctual, and receive instructions like those children in Java. However, we are not Javanese. We... are known to be ‘rough’ people. That’s us. But don’t judge us from our rough upbringing, our loud speaking style. We can’t never be Javanese. To judge us based on that value is not right” (Interview with Margaret, 2015).

Teachers believed that being “rough” is part of their culture. A teacher insisted that being “rough” had nothing to do with being evil or kind woman. Such character was not supposed to be judged based on the Javanese’s bias. However, it had to be placed as a continuity of children’s socialisation process and part of the teacher’s cultural identity.

4. DISCUSSION

The reason why care issue was heightened in a place like NTT is inseparable from the historical stereotypes and popular discourses about their child-caring practices. A child, in many cultures in NTT, is always a part of a family, a clan, a tribe. She or he is rarely seen as an independent individual. Most people believed on the importance of authority in passing on knowledge to the younger generation so that their family network can be carefully kept and socially respected (Nordholt, 1971). For many traditions, a child’s family represents his or her *Uma* (home); a sacred place to gain and re-gain strength, warmth, and for final return (McWilliam, Palmer, & Shepherd, 2014). Mothers and sisters provide critical symbols for this and bear the mediating task of connecting the ‘roughness’ of the outside world, dominated by male adults, with the family as the stable anchor that is safe for children’s fragility and nurturance.

The label of “violent” practice of childrearing among the NTT people could be traced back to a report produced by a European missionary in the 19th century about the communities of Flores Island (Adi, 2009). The stigma has been perpetuated by the modern development values, which

insists on the universalised conception of childhood. In the past decades, the introduction of policy, standards and assessment tools enable a more systematic judgement. Research, for example, used a screening sheet that outlined 36 harmful disciplinary acts to children (Tampubolon, Adi, Nur Hayati, & Hasyim, 2003). The universal mindset also conceptualises the use of disciplinary punishments in child-rearing more as a prerogative parental obsession with children’s obedience. The judgement positions parents as internal threats to their own children’s safety. As a statement from a teacher previously showed, this judgment has been internalized among NTT people. However, people’s belief on the fundamentality of “rough” characters has not shifted; on the contrary, resistance remains strong (Kiling & Bunga, 2014).

On a day-to-day basis, without looking at the complex confluence of individual subjectivities, local interpretations and many different needs and interests, caring cannot be easily defined, not to mention to be judged. Consequently, a tension persists. The proponents of the universal rights of the child believe that violence in child-caring practice could deprive children’s potential development. Meanwhile, parents see that disciplining their children is part of parental role and, to some extent, also part of their love for their children (Adi, 2009). This tension illuminated the disconnection between the main governing idea and the governed realities that fail to look at the broader contexts of NTT situations. The inter-familial relationships, dependency on social network and the impacts of external projects, including the religious belief, nation-building, modernisation, and market-driven pressures, to these critical structures.

In the case of NTT, the introduction of CCA has traversed through multiple layers and landscapes that are never neutral from political presumptions. Despite universal claims, research shows that the implementations of child-centred pedagogy historically vary (Chung & Walsh, 2000). The child-centred philosophy developed in Florida would have different meanings and receptions when it is implemented in Jakarta or Kupang. It is also important to note that the CCA is not a brand-new jargon in Indonesia’s ECE system. The approach has been introduced and used by the Froebelian kindergartens from the colonial period, adopted by the national government, and circulated among practitioners (Adriany, 2013). The neoliberalist development projects in the late 1990s re-invented the concept and turned it into a new buzzword under the human capital framework (Penn, 2011). In reality, this newly developed approach cannot be singled out from the existing interwoven materiality that contained colonial practices, the Javanese middle-class’ values, and the specific global and national political agenda of that time

The story of CCA in NTT resonates Connell’s (2007) argument on the global inequality of knowledge production. Produced in a western metropole, the CCA approach is spread in many peripheral countries, including Indonesia, to create metropole-colonies dependent relationships. In ECE context, the introduction of CCA insinuates a nuance of reform and prescribes what can be considered as “correct” child-rearing practices. To reach the margins, the CCA

needs to be further disseminated based on a variety of justifications, including poverty and the stigmas grown around people living with poverty. These whole processes involve mobilisation of multiple chains of networks: From headquarters in New York, DC, or Paris together with their country office branches in Jakarta, these global experts and knowledge were circulated further through the Indonesian governments, universities, and some influential people.

As a discourse, the emergence of child-centered knowledge would not be possible without marginalization of other knowledge and practices. In many cases, the local tradition of using hierarchy in child-rearing. Borrowing Chakrabarty's (2012) conception, child-centred learning as part of development agenda has been passed on through the acts of "provincializing" - a process that suggests "collaborative venture and violence" (Chakrabarty, 2012, p. 49). As a result, a mix of historical influences is interwoven and fused into the child-centred practices, including the unwritten cultural colonisation linked to the child-caring practices, one of which has been identified and articulated by teachers as the Javanese cultural oppressions to NTT cultures.

Women, as ECE educators stand at the forefront of these socio-cultural tensions. They are a critical actor in accommodating, mediating, and negotiating these multi-faceted meanings of CCA. Although CCA does very little in changing the conception of maternalist care, the approach affects women as educators as much as it affects the children. Langford (2010) critiques CCA mainly because it demeans some invisible gendered dimensions at play between the role of ECE educators, associated with caring and attentive maternal educators, and the child, whose active, independence, and curiosity mainly reflects the ideal male characters.

In NTT, the CCE represents a deeper intrusion of global value to the education of younger children. It contributes to a conceptualisation of female educators as a change agent positioned on a juncture between the "violent" environment and the centre as children's "safe haven". The reality is far from a binary opposition. As teachers, the women were also mothers, daughters, sisters and part of the community. Female educators, as shown in the previous section, were able to identify their positions, develop identities, and take meanings and opportunities from a range of roles. Their contributions are far more complex than the dichotomy of an accomplice to the international ambition on the child-centeredness or of a native guardian of local culture. At some points, their work and identity reflect a shared responsibility to make ECE recognisable in the eyes of donors and policymakers, as well as for parents and children, who appreciate a more mixed, realistic, a tactical approach far beyond the outlines of the CCA.

5. CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates the overall landscape of caring in ECE performed by women. From the beginning to the end, I show how caring is never free from political presumptions. The recent spread of CCA is not possible without the

process of provincializing - an instrumentalization of the existing caring materiality as both sources and targets for caring translations and circulations. For ECE teachers in NTT, the Javanese oppression was a more salient feature of CCA than *kodrat*, which is considered as a dominating discourse. The acceptance of *kodrat* and reaction to the Javanese value indicates the active presence of women's agencies as teachers and identity as people from NTT.

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