

Analysis of Educating Moral People: A CARING ALTERNATIVE TO CHARACTER EDUCATION – Nel Noddings

Description

Moral Education from the Care Perspective

Nel Noddings's™ care ethics approach to moral education conveys a significant paradigm shift from traditional character education models. She begins by comparing care ethics with character education, highlighting their shared goal of fostering better people rather than relying on better principles (Noddings, 2002, p. 1). Noddings stresses the importance of creating conditions that encouraging goodness rather than directly teaching virtues. The care theorists's™ emphasis on relational and contextual approaches highlights the importance of social virtues like congeniality and emotional sensitivity (Noddings, 2002, p. 2). Noddings critiques the simplistic definitions of virtues in character education, advocating for a more nuanced understanding that considers context (Noddings, 2002, p. 4). While both approaches aim to cultivate moral individuals, care ethics offers a transformative framework that challenges some fundamental assumptions of character education, inspiring a new way of thinking about moral education.

At the core of Noddings's™ theory is the assertion that morality is inherently relational and contextual rather than a set of fixed, universal virtues. As she argues, virtues are defined situationally and relationally (Noddings, 2002, p. 2). This perspective has profound implications for moral education, suggesting that ethical development occurs primarily through relationships and experiences rather than direct instruction in abstract virtues. Therefore, a vital aspect of the care approach is fostering caring relationships between educators and students. Noddings contends that children who are properly cared for by people who genuinely model social and ethical virtues are likely to develop those virtues themselves (Noddings, 2002, p. 1). She points out that teachers should focus on creating a caring classroom environment and modeling ethical conduct rather than directly instructing students on virtues (Noddings, 2002, p. 15). The author positions teachers as facilitators of caring relationships rather than mere transmitters of moral knowledge, emphasizing social interactions.

The care perspective's™ focus on the importance of attending to students's™ needs and intrinsic motivation for moral behavior contrasts with character education's™ reliance on extrinsic rewards and punishments (Noddings, 2002, p. 7). Noddings argues that such external motivators can undermine genuine moral development, a position supported by research in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This critique raises important questions about the long-term efficacy of traditional character education approaches. She advocates nurturing students's™ natural inclination to care by providing opportunities to practice caring and experience being cared for (Noddings, 2002, p. 25).

Noddings emphasizes developing students's™ capacity for empathy, emotional sensitivity, and responsiveness (Noddings, 2002, p. 14). The care perspective sees moral education as cultivating students's™ ability to recognize and respond appropriately to others's™ needs and feelings. By highlighting these relational skills, Noddings broadens the scope of moral education beyond the cognitive domain emphasized in Kohlbergian approaches (Noddings, 2002, p. 22-23).

Integrating critical thinking into moral education from the care perspective offers a potential bridge between cognitive-developmental approaches and virtue-based models (Noddings, 2002, p. 40). Noddings advocates for engaging students in ethical reflection and dialogue, echoing Habermas's (1990) discourse ethics. This synthesis suggests a more comprehensive moral education framework that addresses ethical development's affective and cognitive dimensions. Noddings contends that students should be encouraged to critically examine moral issues and dilemmas rather than simply accepting prescribed virtues (Noddings, 2002, p. 29). She advocates using literature and real-life scenarios to engage students in ethical reflection and dialogue (Noddings, 2002, p. 44).

The care approach takes a broader view of the moral domain than many traditional ethics frameworks. Noddings argues that moral education should address the question "How shall we live?" rather than focusing narrowly on duties and obligations to others (Noddings, 2002, p. 1). This expanded scope includes consideration of self-development and well-being as part of moral life, to indirectly develop students' moral motivation and character by immersing them in caring relationships and environments.

Philosophical and Historical Issues

A philosophical issue Noddings addresses is the longstanding debate over whether virtue can be taught. She acknowledges the ancient skepticism, dating back to Socrates, about the possibility of directly teaching virtues like arithmetic facts (Noddings, 2002, p. 3). Noddings largely agrees with this skepticism, which informs her preference for indirect approaches that create conditions conducive to moral development rather than attempting to directly inculcate virtues (Noddings, 2002, p. 65).

Noddings critically examines the philosophical underpinnings of character education, which has its roots in Aristotelian virtue ethics (Noddings, 2002, p. 64). The book engages with Kantian deontological ethics and utilitarian consequentialism, two dominant frameworks in modern moral philosophy (Noddings, 2002, p. 81). Historically, character education has been influenced by various factors, including changes in societal values, political ideologies, and educational theories. Noddings traces how character education has fallen in and out of favor in American schools. She notes its decline by the 1950s following empirical studies questioning its efficacy and resurgence in recent decades (Noddings, 2002, p. 81). Noddings critically examines this resurgence, arguing that many contemporary character education programs fail to address the fundamental critiques that led to its earlier decline. Noddings' exploration of the connections between care ethics and American pragmatism, particularly the work of John Dewey, highlights important philosophical lineages (Noddings, 2002, p. 59). Dewey argues for a unified set of ethical principles applicable both in school and in life, where conduct is shaped by social needs (the "what") and individual agency (the "how") (Noddings, 2002, p. 74). He sees a parallel between moral and other forms of conduct, suggesting society determines ends while individuals determine means. Dewey emphasizes ethical education must consider both social and psychological perspectives, recognizing the child as an individual and a societal member (Noddings, 2002, p. 74). Noddings shares her thoughts on Dewey's argument for not adequately addressing how to determine moral criteria beyond social norms. However, Dewey highlights "moral education", focusing on preparing active, responsible citizens in a democratic society (Noddings, 2002, p. 82).

The book's engagement with feminist ethics and philosophy provides valuable insights. Noddings' nuanced positioning of care ethics in relation to other feminist frameworks contributes to ongoing debates about the nature and scope of feminist approaches to ethics and education (Held,

2006). Furthermore, Noddings cautions that authoritarian regimes sometimes use character education for indoctrination (Noddings, 2002, p. 42)., highlighting the need to examine moral education's purposes and methods critically. Noddings argues that care ethics's relational ontology offers a more accurate and productive foundation than highly individualistic views of the self (Noddings, 2002, p. 88). She also talks about how "caring about" is foundational to justice and instrumental in establishing conditions for "caring for" to flourish. The balance between caring for those close to us and caring about distant others is crucial (Slote, 2007), and responsibility to ensure "caring about" results in "caring for" (Noddings, 2002, p. 88).

Curriculum and Moral Education

Creating a Caring Classroom Environment

One of the primary practical applications Noddings discusses is creating a caring classroom environment. She emphasizes the importance of teachers modeling caring behavior and establishing a classroom atmosphere where students feel valued and respected (Noddings, 2002, p. 16). She argues that a caring environment is essential for moral development, as it provides the conditions under which students can learn to care for others and be cared for in return (Noddings, 2002, p. 22). She also states that children who are properly cared for by people who genuinely model social and ethical virtues are likely to develop those virtues themselves (Noddings, 2002, p. 1). Noddings's recommendations for integrating care ethics into educational curricula and practices offer a comprehensive vision for transforming moral education. Her emphasis on permeating all aspects of schooling with ethical considerations challenges the compartmentalization often seen in traditional character education programs.

Use of Literature and Storytelling

Noddings advocates for using literature and storytelling as tools for moral education. She suggests powerful literary works can present complex ethical situations that engage students in moral reflection and dialogue. This approach helps develop students' moral imagination, empathy, and critical thinking skills. Noddings prefers using great literature over philosophical fiction concocted as moral dilemmas, as the former supports a broader, more diffuse conversation about ethical issues. She writes, "We prefer powerful literature to philosophical fictions concocted as moral dilemmas" (Noddings, 2002, p. 2). Using literature and storytelling as tools for moral reflection aligns with research on narrative ethics and moral imagination (Nussbaum, 1990). Noddings's approach offers a more nuanced alternative to some character education programs' often simplistic moral tales.

Dialogue and Conversation

Another practical application of care ethics in education is the emphasis on dialogue and conversation. Noddings recommends creating frequent opportunities for students to discuss ethical issues, both from literature and real life (Noddings, 2002, p. 44). These discussions encourage perspective-taking, critical examination of assumptions, and collaborative moral reasoning (Noddings, 2002, p. 120). This approach aligns with Freire's (1970) concept of dialogic pedagogy, which emphasizes the importance of dialogue in education. Noddings believes such conversations can help students develop their empathy and moral reasoning capacity. This approach has significant implications for classroom dynamics and teacher-student relationships, challenging traditional hierarchical models of moral instruction.

Experiential Learning Opportunities

Noddings also emphasizes the importance of experiential learning opportunities that allow students to practice caring and experience its effects, like doing community service projects, peer tutoring, and classroom responsibilities (Noddings, 2002, p. 109). Noddings argues that such experiences are crucial for developing students' capacity and motivation to care. She states experiential learning opportunities are essential for developing students' capacity and motivation to care (Noddings, 2002, p. 23). Noddings' advocacy for experiential learning opportunities aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and offers a practical approach to developing students' capacity for ethical action.

Integrating Ethical Considerations Across Subjects

Noddings advocates for integrating ethical considerations across academic subjects rather than treating moral education as a separate domain. She argues that subjects like history, science, and mathematics all present opportunities to explore moral issues and cultivate caring dispositions (Noddings, 2002, p. 96). This interdisciplinary approach challenges educators to rethink curriculum design and pedagogical practices across disciplines. Noddings argues the curriculum should address ethical considerations across academic subjects, integrating moral education into all aspects of schooling (Noddings, 2002, p. 38). The recommendation to integrate ethical considerations across academic subjects reflects a growing recognition of the need for interdisciplinary approaches to moral education (Colby et al., 2011).

Relational Skills Instruction

Noddings recommends explicit instruction in relational skills like listening, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution (Noddings, 2002, p. 42). She contends that these skills are essential for ethical behavior but are often neglected in traditional academic curricula. Educators can help students develop the competencies necessary for caring relationships by teaching these skills. Noddings states relational skills like listening, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution are essential for ethical behavior and should be explicitly taught (Noddings, 2002, p. 41).

Assessment of Caring School Climates

Furthermore, Noddings proposes a shift in assessment practices towards indicators of caring school climates rather than individual virtues. Her view on assessment aligns with recent movements towards more holistic, context-sensitive forms of educational assessment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014). Noddings suggests using surveys of student and teacher perceptions, observations of behavior and relationships, and reflective assignments to assess the effectiveness of moral education programs. She proposed shift in assessment practices towards indicators of caring school climates rather than individual virtues presents both opportunities and challenges for educational measurement (Noddings, 2002, p. 37).

Overall, Noddings provides a comprehensive and practical framework for applying care ethics in educational settings. Educators can foster moral development by creating caring classroom environments, using literature and storytelling, emphasizing dialogue and conversation, providing experiential learning opportunities, integrating ethical considerations across subjects, teaching relational skills, focusing on caring school climates, and addressing social justice issues. These practical applications of care ethics offer a valuable alternative to traditional character education approaches and challenge educators to rethink fundamental assumptions about the nature and practice

of moral education. Noddings envisions moral education as cultivating students'™ capacity and motivation to create and sustain caring relations in all domains of life. The curriculum should provide knowledge, skills, and experiences that support this lifelong ethical development. While her approach raises important practical and theoretical questions, it provides a valuable framework for addressing the complexities of ethical formation in contemporary educational contexts.

Critiques on Ethics of Care

Several scholars have raised concerns about the practicality and effectiveness of implementing care ethics in real-world educational settings.

- Lack of Structure and Clear Guidelines

One of the primary criticisms of Noddings'™ care ethics is the need for more structure and clear guidelines for implementation. Critics argue that care ethics is too vague and open-ended, making it difficult for educators to apply consistently across different contexts. For example, Joan Tronto (1993) argues that care ethics lacks the clear principles and rules necessary to guide moral behavior in complex situations.

- Subjectivity and Relativism

Another critique is that care ethics is inherently subjective and relativistic, which can lead to inconsistencies in moral education. Critics argue that because care ethics emphasizes relational and contextual factors, it can result in different moral standards for different individuals and situations. This relativism can undermine the goal of fostering a shared moral framework within a school community. As Michael Slote (2007) points out, the emphasis on context and relationships in care ethics can lead to moral relativism, making it difficult to establish consistent moral standards (Slote, 2007, p. 45).

- Practical Challenges in Diverse Classrooms

Implementing care ethics in diverse classrooms presents practical challenges, according to critics. They argue that the relational focus of care ethics requires a deep understanding of each student's™ unique background, needs, and experiences, which may be impractical in large, diverse classrooms. Amy Gutmann (1999) highlights that the relational demands of care ethics are difficult to meet in diverse classrooms where teachers may not have the time or resources to develop deep, individualized relationships with each student (Gutmann, 1999, p. 88).

- Overemphasis on Emotional Aspects

Some scholars argue that care ethics places too much emphasis on the emotional aspects of moral education, potentially neglecting the development of critical thinking and moral reasoning skills. For example, Thomas Lickona (1991) criticizes care ethics for focusing primarily on feelings and relationships at the expense of teaching students to reason about moral issues.

- Difficulty in Assessing Outcomes

Critics also highlight the challenge of assessing the outcomes of care ethics-based moral education. They argue that the relational and contextual nature of care ethics makes it difficult to measure its effectiveness using traditional assessment methods. Noddings acknowledges this challenge, stating

assessment should focus on indicators of caring school climates rather than individual virtues (Noddings, 2002, p. 59). However, critics argue that this approach lacks the rigor and objectivity to evaluate educational programs.

Reflecting on Personal & Professional Ethical Codes

“Ethical education is a lifelong education. It takes place simultaneously with our efforts to be human (Starratt, 1994b, p. 135).” Reflecting on my life and briefly going through the life events and all the relationships I have had over the years, I put great value on “honesty” over anything. It is true for personal and also for professional ethics as well. Life is built around relationships at home, work, or with my friends. I have the blessing of 30-plus years of friendship with my friends, and these are people who have a significant impact on my life. Our friendship is held through difficult times because the foundation is honesty, and we mirror each other to reinforce honest, genuine experiences. This trusted support system made me who I am and helped me persevere through hard times. Growing and maturing through relationships within the caring context aligns perfectly with Noddings’ components of care ethics, which are modeling caring behavior by demonstrating empathy, compassion, and ethical behavior and becoming role models to each other. As Noddings emphasized, meaningful conversations and dialogue with friends about feelings, values, and ethical dilemmas in deciding life situations strengthened the caring relationship.

By practicing, meaning continuing, repeating behaviors and dialogues that have worked out best for both, and by giving affirmation and validation, acknowledging caring efforts, healthy caring relationships have survived and continue until today. I could say that Noddings’ claims on ethics of care have worked out in my life through relational and contextual situations. I was taught to respect and follow teachers growing up in Korea. Teachers who made a significant impact in my life cared enough to set a time to talk to and encourage me. Also, having Jesus as a role model and having an intimate spiritual relationship has significantly impacted my ethics. His perseverance, perfect justice, and love on the cross have transformed me. His example of selflessness intrigued me and inspired me to do the same by serving in Tunisia. I believe in Noddings’ concept of “modeling”; it is an essential aspect of teaching, making what we do more than a job. As educators, we should not be afraid to do self-confessing; knowing who we are can impact our students and grow in caring relationships, calling for “continual reflection and discussion (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022, p. 261).”

References:

- Colby, A., Ehrlich, T., Sullivan, W. M., & Dolle, J. R. (2011). *Rethinking undergraduate business education: Liberal learning for the profession*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Herman, J., Pellegrino, J., Abedi, J., Aber, J. L., Baker, E., & Steele, C. M. (2014). Criteria for high-quality assessment. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Gutmann, A. (1999). *Democratic education*. Princeton University Press
- Habermas, J. (1990). *Moral consciousness and communicative action*. MIT Press.
- Held, V. (2006). *The ethics of care: Personal, political, and global*. Oxford University Press.

- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.
- Lickona, T. (1991). *Educating for character: How our schools can teach respect and responsibility*. Bantam Books.
- Noddings, N. (2002). *Educating moral people: A caring alternative to character education*. Teachers College Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1990). *Love's knowledge: Essays on philosophy and literature*. Oxford University Press.
- Pappas, G. F. (2008). *John Dewey's ethics: Democracy as experience*. Indiana University Press.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68-78.
- Shapiro, J. P. & Stefkovich, J. A. (2022). *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education: Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Complex Dilemmas*. 5th Edition. New York: Routledge.
- Slote, M. (2007). *The ethics of care and empathy*. Routledge.
- Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge.



Category

1. Uncategorized

Date Created

January 15, 2025

Author

admin