

Noddings, N. (2005). *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University.

How Can Schools Improve the Way Students are Cared for?

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Nel Noddings (2005) provides ideas on how to restructure the education system, making schooling a more responsive, humanistic, and existential experience for students. The basis of her vision, of course, is care. *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (Noddings, 2005) proposes a profound change in the way schools educate students including individualizing education to students' interests, talents, and aspirations, having members of the community to take an active role, and for topics of care to be at the forefront of what students learn.

What is care? Noddings (2005) argues that “a caring relation is, in its most basic form, a connection or encounter between two human beings—a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for” (p. 15) and this relation requires action from both parties. The cared-for must acknowledge, recognize, and respond to the act of care in order for it to be fulfilled. The relational definition of care argues that it does not matter if someone is cared for or not if they cannot or do not accept the care. Both people in the caring relation bear responsibilities. This contrasts with the view of caring as a virtue and complicates the way care is analyzed. Noddings (2005) lists the facets of care as: self, the inner circle, strangers and distant others, animals, plants, earth, ideas, and the human-made world.

Noddings (2005) lays out her reasoning for why the current system does not work; our society is currently focused on academic achievement, how to increase it and how to measure it. Further, the idea that a liberal

education with a set of standards and objectives of what is important does not represent what is best for each student. Noddings (2005) does not want to alienate traditional viewpoints in promotion of progressive values. Rather, she believes that by putting care at the center of education that both groups can be accommodated, and society can choose and use what works best from each side (Noddings, 2005). Her belief that there is not a set of universal knowledge that everyone should know challenges the current standards that have driven education in the United States.

What are schools trying to achieve and what are their purposes? Throughout the book Noddings (2005) asks readers to imagine they have a big, heterogeneous family and to think about how to best educate their children and nurture their varying talents and interests. She implores, “There is no end product—no ideally educated person—but a diverse host of persons showing signs of increasing growth” (Noddings, 2005, p. 165), because we cannot replicate the same education for everyone and because it is a process and not a simple formula or method. What is best for one is not best for all.

As educators “we can share what we have learned. But as soon as we impose our values on a new generation we risk losing those values that are most needed in a dynamic society—those that encourage reflective criticism, revision, creation, and renewal” (Noddings, 2005, p. 165). Noddings (2005) compares learning to democracy, constantly changing and

adapting. She writes, “it is an achievement—one that depends on the desire to communicate and the goodwill to persist in collaborative inquiry” (Noddings, 2005, p. 164). A common goal for education is to instill a love of lifelong learning in students. Education is a continuous process that does not end upon graduation. Should the current education system not change to reflect this idea?

Student generated questions, interests, and abilities should guide their studies, Noddings (2005) believes. This is in contrast to a liberal, well-rounded education that teaches students the important information from each separate discipline, grooming them for higher education. It is also different from technical education, narrowly preparing students for a particular field of work. The curriculum should not be organized by disciplines because, for example, “The average student need not think like a mathematician; lots of people other than mathematicians use mathematics effectively, and students should be encouraged to find their own uses for mathematics and choose their own attitude toward it” (Noddings, 2005, p. 150). By separating the various disciplines, students lose sight of real world application and how all disciplines impact each other and intertwine.

If students are encouraged to begin with a genuine question, they may find their way into all disciplines. For example, by starting with a lamp and asking, “how does this work?” students may take it apart and learn the mechanics, they can study the history behind it, they may also connect the math and science aspects, or even the design elements (Noddings, 2005, p. 148). Something so simple as a lamp can lead to endless possibilities for connections. What about its electricity use, who made it, what materials does it require and how are those attained? Noddings (2005) adds, “As a foci

of study, lamps and toasters are as important as quadratic equations and complex sentences” (p. 148). Electricians should be valued as much as mathematicians and allowing students to freely explore these topics is a way to communicate that sense of worth. Students wishing to become electricians deserve the same care and attention as those wishing to become mathematical scholars. To accomplish this, they do not need the same education but they should also not be shunned to separate schools or courses for that particular track.

Teachers are, we hope, well functioning adult members of society. Why should secondary teachers not be equipped to teach the basics of math, English, science, etc (especially as they relate to life skills)? Secondary schools have classes for sex education and driver’s education, but what about other topics such as personal finance or national and international politics and issues? Specialists in various fields can be useful when the focus goes beyond teachers’ scope, but math or science should not be left just to that one expert (Noddings, 2005). Topics can be (and in life, are) very connected and intertwined. Why do schools separate them so rigidly? In elementary schools teachers usually cover all of the main subjects, but in many classrooms they are not integrated with each other. Noddings (2005) does not specify the logistics of her vision, which some readers may view as a weakness of her book.

Noddings (2005) makes a great point about the futility of cramming students with knowledge that is promptly forgotten because it is not used, or it was not ever really needed, “and instead we should help them learn how to inquire, to seek connections between their chosen subject and other subjects, to give up the notion of teaching only for its own sake, and to inquire deeply into its place in human life broadly construed” (p. 178). To be able to

teach in this way educators would need a more interdisciplinary preparation program as well, but Noddings (2005) only touches on this topic.

I agree with Noddings' (2005) idea that teachers should be prepared to discuss basic ethics with students and to teach them the basic knowledge of all disciplines. Teachers are looked upon as role models and are held to high moral standards. Teachers should not only model ethical care, they should discuss it with students. Noddings (2005) writes about the four major components of moral education, which includes modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. Students need to see ethical caring in action, discuss it openly, ask questions, shape their own attitudes and beliefs through practice, and be confirmed by affirming and confirming the best in others. Open dialogue is another major component of Noddings' (2005) view for education. Questions do not always need a hard or right answer. All topics for debate should be discussed in school as they arise naturally is a controversial idea (Noddings, 2005). Noddings (2005) believes that all topics should be open to discussion including sex, love, drugs, animal cruelty, vegetarianism, world hunger, war, sanitation, poverty, violence, spirituality, etc.

Even if all parents provided optimal care and attention to their children, why, if we want them to grow up to be caring citizens and adults, would we not extend the circle of care and community to include the school? Another way to apply the theories in this book is regarding bullying. Why not promote caring relationships instead of anti-bullying? If educators and students truly cared and made an effort to understand what others do, bullying may be greatly reduced. This requires the carer to follow through and for the cared-for to acknowledge the caring relationship. It would not be enough for the bully to just try to care or to commit a caring

act without any response from the cared-for. But, by providing and fostering a nurturing and caring environment all parties would theoretically have someone to turn to. If adults were as involved as Noddings (2005) proposes, they would be more aware of student situations and problems. Further, if the school environment were a safe and open place to discuss certain issues that are sometimes the cause or topic of bullying that would also bring things more out into the open.

The evaluation process Noddings (2005) proposes is probably one of the most problematic ideas in terms of comparing her vision to the current system. She states several times that the nation is extremely concerned about test scores, accountability, and ways to measure student and teacher success (Noddings, 2005). With an open-ended curriculum, assessment would necessarily take on a whole new form to which Noddings (2005) asks not "have the students learned _____?" but more broadly "what have the students learned?" She also states "when deficiencies are identified, teachers and students together will have to ask which of these are most vital to remove and for whom" (Noddings, 2005, p. 180). Noddings (2005) would rely on self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and evaluation by community members whose careers relate to the students' current topic of study. Readers may see this proposition as undermining the position of teachers because a "general briefing on what students have been studying" cannot substitute for the knowledge the teachers gain every day by being with the student and teaching them (Noddings, 2005, p. 179). Additionally, I do not see this as a feasible goal, at least to the extent that Noddings (2005) proposes.

One very useful idea Noddings (2005) recommends is having older students teach younger students, which is beneficial for many reasons. From Noddings' (2005)

perspective, this is one way students can care for others in their community. She promotes the idea of intergenerational care and learning which helps both the carer and the cared-for. It builds community and gives confidence to the older students when they realize they do have knowledge and experience to offer. This would be one way students could perform meaningful community services, as she advocates. This is already a requirement in some high schools, but I believe it does need to be more significant to the students. Noddings (2005) proposes that supervision and performing the community services with adults is a way to accomplish this.

In my opinion, Noddings (2005) provides a very useful viewpoint for all educators and others invested in the

education system of what caring and responsive education might look like and how it would benefit the whole society. Ideally, amidst teaching students how to care for themselves, others, and the world around them, they would put their unique abilities to use and their curiosity for knowledge would blossom. How realistic or possible her theories are I am not sure, but I believe that many could be put into practice today, in a small way, and still make a positive difference for students. Even without the overhaul of the current system as she proposes, reminding us what the goal is for students is very important. This book would also be eye opening for non-educators in the community as Noddings (2005) implores all adults to be a part of educating the youth.