



THE POWER OF CARING: NEL NODDINGS' CONTRIBUTIONS TO PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATION

Abbas Ali ¹ & Dibyendu Bhattacharyya ²

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Education, University of Kalyani, West Bengal, India;

² Professor, Department of Education, University of Kalyani, West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:

Abbas Ali

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Abstract

Nel Noddings, a prominent philosopher and educator, has made significant contributions to the fields of philosophy and education through her exploration of the ethics of care. Her work emphasizes the importance of caring relationships as the foundation of moral education and pedagogical practice. This research paper examines Noddings' key ideas, including her critique of traditional ethical theories, her development of care ethics, and its implications for educational systems. By analysing her writings and their impact, this paper highlights how Noddings' philosophy challenges conventional approaches to education and offers a transformative framework for fostering empathy, responsibility, and interconnectedness in schools and society. The findings underscore the relevance of care ethics in addressing contemporary educational challenges and promoting a more humane and equitable world.

Keywords: *Caring Pedagogy, Feminist Philosophy, Nel Noddings, Philosophy of Education*

Introduction

The development of moral philosophy has traditionally been dominated by theories grounded in universal principles, rationality, and justice, such as Kantian deontology and utilitarianism. However, the emergence of the ethics of care, primarily articulated by Nel Noddings, represents a significant paradigm shift toward relational and context-sensitive moral reasoning. Noddings' work challenges the abstraction of traditional ethics by emphasizing the centrality of human relationships, empathy, and responsiveness in ethical life (Noddings, 1984; Held, 2006). Her perspective builds upon earlier feminist critiques, particularly those of Gilligan (1982), who highlighted the importance of care, connection, and interdependence in moral development. At the core of Noddings' philosophy is the idea that caring is a fundamental aspect of human existence and the foundation of ethical action. Rather than relying on fixed rules or impartial judgments, she argues that morality arises from the dynamic interaction between individuals within specific relational contexts (Noddings, 2003). This interaction is conceptualized through the relationship between the "one-caring" and the "cared-for," where ethical responsibility is shaped by attentiveness and receptivity to others' needs (Engster, 2007). Such a framework redefines moral education and philosophical inquiry by integrating emotion with reason and by prioritizing lived experiences over abstract theorization.

In the field of education, Noddings' contributions are particularly transformative. She critiques the overemphasis on academic achievement and standardized outcomes, advocating instead for an education system that prioritizes care, moral development, and the holistic well-being of learners (Noddings, 2002; Noddings, 2005). Her approach positions the teacher as a caregiver and moral guide, fostering environments where dialogue, trust, and mutual respect are central to the learning process. Contemporary educational research supports this view, indicating that care-based pedagogies enhance student engagement, emotional well-being, and ethical awareness (Robinson, 2011; Zhang, et. al., 2023). Thus, Noddings' ethics of care not only reconfigures moral philosophy but also offers a powerful framework for rethinking educational practices in a more humane and inclusive manner. This study seeks to explore the conceptual foundations, components, and types of care within her theory, highlighting its enduring relevance in both philosophical and educational discourse.

Concept of Ethics of Care

The ethics of care, developed by Nel Noddings, is a relational approach to moral philosophy that emphasizes interpersonal connections, empathy, and contextual responsiveness. Unlike traditional ethical frameworks such as Kantian deontology or utilitarianism, which rely on universal principles and abstract reasoning, Noddings' theory is grounded in lived experiences and

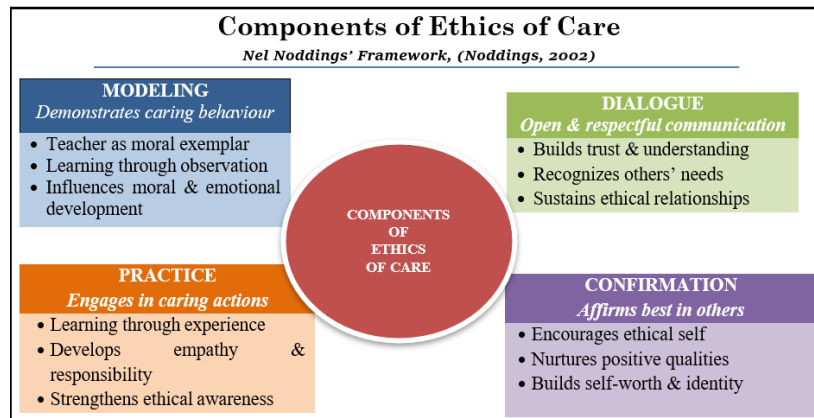
human relationships (Noddings, 1984; Held, 2006). She argues that moral action arises from the natural human inclination to care and from the recognition of others' needs within specific contexts (Noddings, 2003).

Central to this concept is the relationship between the "one-caring" and the "cared-for," where ethical meaning is constructed through mutual interaction and receptivity (Noddings, 1984). Caring is not merely an internal feeling but a dynamic relation requiring attentiveness, motivational displacement, and response (Engster, 2007). Furthermore, Noddings introduces the notion of the ethical ideal, which reflects an individual's aspiration to maintain caring relations and act in ways consistent with this ideal (Noddings, 2002). Scholars highlight that care ethics challenges the dominance of justice-based ethics by integrating emotion, partiality, and context into moral reasoning (Gilligan, 1982; Slote, 2007). Contemporary research also affirms its relevance in education and social theory, emphasizing its role in fostering inclusive and empathetic practices (Robinson, 2011; Zhang, et. al., 2023).

Components of Ethics of Care

Noddings identifies four major components that operationalize care ethics, particularly in educational and moral contexts: modelling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation (Noddings, 2002).

- **Modeling** refers to demonstrating caring behaviour in real-life situations. Teachers and caregivers act as moral exemplars, allowing learners to internalize caring attitudes through observation (Noddings, 2005). Research shows that modelling significantly influences students' moral and emotional development (Robinson, 2011).
- **Dialogue** involves open, respectful, and reciprocal communication. It fosters understanding, trust, and recognition of others' needs, which are essential for ethical relationships (Noddings, 2003; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004).
- **Practice** emphasizes the importance of engaging individuals in caring actions. Moral learning occurs through participation in real situations that require empathy and responsibility (Noddings, 2002). Empirical studies suggest that experiential learning strengthens ethical awareness and prosocial behaviour (Zhang, et. al., 2023).



- **Confirmation** is the process of affirming the best potential in others. It involves encouraging individuals to develop their ethical selves by recognizing and nurturing their positive attributes (Noddings, 2002). This component is considered central to moral education as it builds self-worth and ethical identity (Engster, 2007).

Together, these components highlight that caring is both a disposition and a practice, cultivated through social interaction and guided experience.

Types of Care in Noddings' Theory

Noddings distinguishes between two primary types of care: natural caring and ethical caring (Noddings, 1984; Noddings, 2003).

- Natural Caring** is spontaneous and arises from innate feelings of affection and attachment. For example, a parent's care for a child does not require moral reasoning; it is driven by genuine emotional connection (Noddings, 1984). This form of care serves as the foundation for all ethical relations (Gilligan, 1982).
- Ethical Caring** occurs when natural caring is insufficient, and individuals consciously choose to act in a caring manner based on their ethical ideal. It involves a deliberate effort to sustain caring relationships even in difficult or unfamiliar situations (Noddings, 2003). Ethical caring reflects moral commitment and responsibility beyond immediate emotional inclination (Slote, 2007).

Scholars argue that the transition from natural to ethical caring represents moral growth, as individuals learn to extend care beyond personal attachments to broader social contexts (Engster, 2007; Robinson, 2011).

Significance of the Study

Nel Noddings' contributions to philosophy and education are significant for several reasons. First, her ethics of care provides a compelling alternative to traditional ethical theories, which often prioritize abstract principles over concrete relationships. By centring care as a moral imperative, Noddings challenges the dominance of justice-based approaches and highlights the importance of empathy and responsiveness in moral decision-making. Second, her work has profound implications for education, offering a framework for creating more inclusive, compassionate, and student-centred learning environments. In an era marked

by increasing social fragmentation and inequality, Noddings' philosophy offers a timely and relevant approach to fostering interconnectedness and mutual respect. Finally, her ideas have inspired educators and policymakers to rethink the goals and practices of education, emphasizing the development of caring, responsible, and ethically engaged individuals.

Objectives of the Study

- To study Nel Noddings' critique of traditional ethical theories and her development of care ethics.
- To explore the implications of care ethics for educational theory and practice.
- To examine how Noddings' ideas challenge conventional approaches to teaching and learning.
- To assess the relevance of care ethics in addressing contemporary educational challenges.
- To highlight the transformative potential of Noddings' philosophy in fostering empathy, responsibility, and interconnectedness in schools and society.

Methodology of the Study

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine the philosophical and educational contributions of Nel Noddings. It is primarily based on documentary analysis of Noddings' major works, including *Caring* (1984/2013) and *Educating Moral People* (2002), along with relevant peer-reviewed journal articles and secondary literature. The method of thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring concepts such as ethics of care, relational morality, and pedagogical practices (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Textual data are critically analysed to interpret meanings within their philosophical and educational contexts. Additionally, an analytical-descriptive approach is used to connect theoretical constructs with contemporary educational practices. This methodology ensures a systematic and in-depth understanding of care ethics as both a moral theory and an educational framework (Nodding's, 2002; Bergman, 2004).

Nel Noddings' Contributions to Philosophy and Education

Nel Noddings, a prominent figure in educational philosophy, reshaped traditional educational paradigms by placing care at the heart of ethical and pedagogical practices. Her contributions can be thematically analysed through a close examination of her own words, revealing central themes such as relational ethics, the ethic of care in education, the role of receptivity and empathy, and education for the whole person. Through these themes, Noddings challenged conventional moral theories and reoriented educational philosophy toward a more compassionate and student centred approach.

A. Relational Ethics: "Caring is the foundation of ethical life."

One of the foundational themes in Noddings' philosophy is relational ethics the view that moral decisions emerge not from abstract rules, but from the context of relationships. She asserts, "Caring is the foundation of ethical life" (Noddings, 1984, p. 4). In contrast to Kantian duty-based ethics or utilitarian consequentialism, Noddings posits that ethics begins in the concrete reality of caring encounters. She emphasizes the relational context in which morality unfolds, stating that, "We are not primarily individuals who make moral decisions by applying universal principles; we are, first, relational beings" (Noddings, 2002, p. 21). This theme challenges the detachment of traditional ethics and suggests that moral understanding is cultivated through lived relationships. In educational settings, this means valuing the student-teacher relationship as a moral encounter in itself. Teachers are not just transmitters of knowledge, but caregivers whose emotional availability and attentiveness influence ethical development in students.

B. The Ethic of Care in Education: "The primary aim of every educational institution should be to produce caring people."

Noddings' second major theme lies in applying her ethic of care directly to educational philosophy. She writes, "The primary aim of every educational institution should be to produce caring people" (Noddings, 2005, p. 174). For her, education is not solely about intellectual achievement but about nurturing the moral and emotional capacities of students. She critiques the overemphasis on standardized testing and competition, proposing instead a model where the development of caring relationships between teacher and student is paramount. As she puts it, "When we care for others, we attend to them, listen to them, and respond empathetically" (Noddings, 1992, p. 23). Such practices foster an environment where students feel valued, thus enhancing both their academic motivation and personal growth. Noddings also champions curriculum reforms that reflect these values. She suggests including subjects such as home and family life, ethics, and moral education areas often marginalized in traditional schooling. This holistic approach underscores her belief that care should not be an auxiliary concern but central to educational policy and practice.

C. Receptivity and Empathy: "Caring involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference into the others."

The third theme involves the receptive mode of caring, where the carer (often the teacher) must genuinely enter the experience of the cared-for (the student). Noddings describes caring as an "engrossment in the other and a motivational displacement toward the other's wellbeing" (Noddings, 1984, p. 16). This calls for an open, empathetic attitude in which educators listen deeply and respond based on the student's expressed needs. She writes, "Caring involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference into the others" (Noddings, 1992, p. 16). This practice goes beyond sympathy; it requires teachers to put aside preconceived judgments and immerse themselves in the perspectives of their students. Such an approach supports differentiated instruction, anti-bias education, and trauma-informed teaching areas increasingly recognized as vital to equity and inclusion. Noddings warns against a superficial or mechanical application of care. "To say that one cares and then act in ways that contradict

that claim is to destroy trust” (Noddings, 2002, p.20). Authenticity, therefore, is essential, and caring must be enacted, not just professed.

D. Education for the Whole Person: “We must help students become not only competent but also caring and loving individuals.”

Another critical theme in Noddings’ work is her insistence on educating the whole person. She writes, “We must help students become not only competent but also caring and loving individuals” (Noddings, 2005, p. 2). Academic knowledge, while important, is not sufficient for meaningful human development. This holistic vision draws from Deweyan progressive education but adds an explicitly emotional and moral component. She criticizes the fragmentation of modern schooling and argues for an integrative model that includes emotional, ethical, and interpersonal development. Noddings explains, “Students must be cared for in order to develop as caring people” (Noddings, 1984, p. 22). Thus, care is both the means and the end of education. This perspective influences how teachers plan curricula, structure classrooms, and evaluate success. In a Noddings-inspired classroom, success is not just measured by grades, but also by indicators of emotional resilience, ethical reflection, and social responsibility.

E. The Reciprocal Nature of Caring: “Caring is completed when the cared-for responds in some way.”

Finally, a subtle yet vital theme is the reciprocal nature of care. Noddings stresses that caring are not a one-sided act but a relational dynamic that requires some form of acknowledgment from the cared-for. She notes, “Caring is completed when the cared-for responds in some way, indicating that caring has been received” (Noddings, 1984, p. 4). This insight adds depth to her ethic, showing that effective caring involves communication and mutual recognition. In schools, this challenges the view of students as passive recipients of knowledge or benevolence. Instead, it fosters mutual respect where students are co-creators in the caring relationship. Moreover, this reciprocity reinforces the moral development of both parties. Teachers, through attentive care, become morally enriched, while students learn empathy and responsibility by being part of these meaningful exchanges.

Narrative Summary

Nel Noddings’ contributions to philosophy and education are anchored in her development of the ethics of care, which contrasts with traditional, principle-based ethical theories. Her foundational argument that caring is the basis of ethical decision-making (Noddings, 1984)-resonates throughout her work and suggests a deep reconceptualization of moral and educational practices. Her emphasis on relational ontology challenges the dominant view of individuals as self-contained and autonomous. Instead, she proposes that we are fundamentally shaped by our relationships (Noddings, 2002). This reorientation demands that educational systems move from a model of standardization to one grounded in human connection.

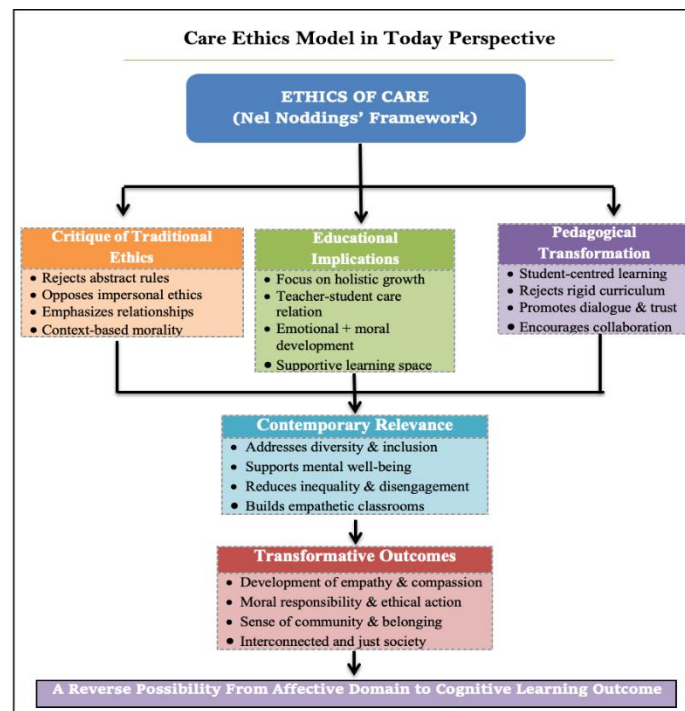
A cornerstone of Noddings’ philosophy is the concept of the one-caring and the cared-for, which places responsibility on the caregiver to be receptive and responsive (Noddings, 1984). This perspective transforms the teacher-student relationship, encouraging educators to view students not as passive recipients of knowledge but as active participants in a mutual relationship. The aim of education, according to Noddings, should be to produce “competent, caring, loving, and lovable people” (Noddings, 1992). This redefinition pushes educators to consider moral and emotional dimensions of schooling alongside intellectual ones. Furthermore, Noddings critiques universalist ethics, arguing that such frameworks neglect the rich, lived realities of individuals (Noddings, 2005). Her approach champions contextual sensitivity, where decisions arise from the nuances of real-world situations rather than abstract norms. Caring, for Noddings, involves empathy and receptivity-traits that enable people to engage deeply with others’ experiences (Noddings, 1984). This is sustained through dialogue, a process of mutual discovery and understanding (Noddings, 2002). In the classroom, this implies a participatory, student-centred approach where reciprocity is key. The ethical ideal, in her view, is to strive to be “the one-caring” in all possible situations (Noddings, 1984). Education, then, must cultivate not just knowledge but the moral disposition to care actively. Noddings critiques the efficiency-driven model of schools, arguing it undermines meaningful relationships and well-being (Noddings, 1995). She advocates for school reform that prioritizes community, attentiveness, and moral growth. Finally, Noddings insists that caring should permeate the entire curriculum. Whether in mathematics or science, teachers can adopt pedagogies that reflect the ethic of care through collaboration, relevance, and compassion (Noddings, 1992).

Nel Noddings’ philosophy of care redefines both ethics and education by placing relationally, empathy, and responsiveness at the core. Through her insights, we are reminded that education is not merely about transmission of knowledge but about nurturing whole persons in a web of caring relationships. Her work challenges educators to embody care in theory and practice, transforming classrooms into communities where ethical living is learned through example and engagement.

Findings

1. Nel Noddings’ critiques traditional ethical theories, such as Kantian deontology and utilitarianism, for their reliance on abstract principles and universal rules, which she argues often overlook the importance of interpersonal relationships and contextual nuances. In contrast, Noddings develops care ethics, which centres on the moral significance of caring relationships and the responsiveness to the needs of others. She emphasizes the relational aspect of ethics, where moral actions arise from empathy, attentiveness, and a commitment to fostering well-being in specific, concrete situations. Noddings argues that care ethics prioritizes the particular over the universal, advocating for an ethic rooted in emotional engagement and the inter connectedness of human experiences. This approach challenges the impersonal nature of traditional theories, offering a more holistic and human-centred framework for understanding morality.

2. Nel Noddings’ care ethics has profound implications for educational theory and practice, shifting the focus from rigid, outcomes-driven approaches to a more relational and empathetic model of teaching and learning. In this framework, education is seen as a process of nurturing students’ holistic development, emphasizing the importance of building trusting, caring relationships between educators and learners. Care ethics encourages teachers to attend to the individual needs, emotions, and contexts of students, fostering an environment where students feel valued and supported. This approach challenges traditional, hierarchical educational practices by prioritizing collaboration, dialogue, and the moral responsibility of educators to care for their students. By integrating care ethics into education, schools can become spaces that not only impart knowledge but also cultivate empathy, moral sensitivity, and a sense of community, ultimately preparing students to engage in caring relationships and ethical decision-making in their own lives.
3. Nel Noddings’ ideas challenge conventional approaches to teaching and learning by advocating for a shift from impersonal, standardized methods to a more relational and student-centred pedagogy. Traditional education often prioritizes measurable outcomes, rigid curricula, and a one-size-fits-all approach, which can overlook the diverse needs, emotions, and contexts of individual students. In contrast, Noddings emphasizes the importance of caring relationships, where teachers actively engage with students as whole persons, fostering trust, empathy, and mutual respect. Her approach critiques the overemphasis on competition and achievement, instead promoting collaboration, dialogue, and the moral responsibility of educators to nurture students’ emotional and ethical development. By centring care in education, Noddings challenges educators to create inclusive, supportive environments that prioritize the well-being and growth of every learner, ultimately transforming teaching and learning into a more humane and meaningful process.
4. Nel Noddings’ care ethics remains highly relevant in addressing contemporary educational challenges, such as increasing diversity, mental health concerns, and the need for inclusive, equitable learning environments. In a world where students face complex social, emotional, and academic pressures, care ethics provides a framework for educators to prioritize relationships, empathy, and individualized support. By focusing on the unique needs and contexts of each student, care ethics helps create classrooms where all learners feel valued and understood, fostering a sense of belonging and well-being. This approach is particularly vital in combating issues like bullying, disengagement, and inequality, as it encourages educators to act as compassionate guides rather than authoritarian figures. In an era dominated by standardized testing and technological advancements, care ethics reminds us that education is fundamentally about human connection and moral growth, offering a pathway to address the holistic needs of students in a rapidly changing world.
5. Nel Noddings’ philosophy holds transformative potential for fostering empathy, responsibility, and interconnectedness in schools and society by redefining education as a relational and moral endeavour. Her care ethics challenges the individualistic and competitive norms often prevalent in educational systems, advocating instead for a culture of mutual care and understanding. In schools, this approach encourages educators to model and teach empathy, creating environments where students learn to value and respond to the needs of others. By emphasizing responsibility, Noddings’ philosophy nurtures a sense of moral duty not only to oneself but also to the community, promoting collaborative problem-solving and ethical decision-making. On a broader societal level, her ideas inspire a shift toward interconnectedness, where individuals recognize their roles in sustaining caring relationships and addressing collective challenges. Ultimately, Noddings’ vision transforms education into a powerful tool for cultivating compassionate, responsible citizens who contribute to a more just and empathetic world.



Discussion

Nel Noddings, a prominent philosopher and educator, has made significant contributions to the fields of philosophy and education through her exploration of the ethics of care. Her work emphasizes the importance of relationships, empathy, and caring in both personal and educational contexts. Noddings argues that traditional ethical theories, which often focus on justice and rules, overlook the fundamental human need for care and connection. She posits that caring is not merely a moral obligation but a relational process that involves recognizing and responding to the needs of others. This perspective has profound implications for education, suggesting that schools should prioritize the development of caring relationships between teachers and students, fostering an environment where students feel valued and supported.

In her seminal work, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Noddings outlines the concept of the “care ethic,” which contrasts with more abstract, principle-based ethical frameworks. She introduces the idea of the “one-caring” and the “cared-for,” emphasizing the reciprocal nature of caring relationships. Noddings asserts that caring is not a one-sided act but a dynamic interaction that requires attentiveness, responsiveness, and engagement. In the context of education, this means that teachers must be attuned to the individual needs of their students, creating a nurturing environment that promotes both academic and personal growth. Noddings’ approach challenges traditional educational models that prioritize competition and standardized testing, advocating instead for a more holistic and relational pedagogy.

Noddings’ contributions have had a lasting impact on educational philosophy and practice, inspiring educators to rethink the purpose and methods of teaching. Her work underscores the importance of fostering empathy, compassion, and moral development in students, preparing them to be not only knowledgeable but also caring and responsible members of society. By integrating the ethics of care into educational theory, Noddings has provided a framework for creating more inclusive and supportive learning environments. Her ideas continue to influence discussions on curriculum design, teacher-student relationships, and the broader goals of education. As cited in this research paper, Noddings’ insights remind us that education is not just about imparting knowledge but also about nurturing the capacity to care for others, a principle that lies at the heart of a just and compassionate society.

Conclusion

Nel Noddings’ contributions to philosophy and education have had a transformative impact on how we understand morality, teaching, and learning. By centring care as a fundamental ethical and pedagogical principle, Noddings challenges conventional approaches and offers a more humane and inclusive framework for addressing the complexities of human relationships. Her work underscores the importance of empathy, responsibility, and interconnectedness in fostering moral development and creating equitable educational environments. As society continues to grapple with pressing social and ethical challenges, Noddings’ philosophy provides a timely and relevant guide for building a more caring and just world. This paper concludes that the ethics of care is not only a theoretical innovation but also a practical tool for transforming education and society, making Noddings’ contributions indispensable to the fields of philosophy and education.

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