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Analysis of **Nel Noddings** – The Challenge to Care in Schools

In her work, The Challenge to Care in Schools, **Nel Noddings** presents a radical change in the current educational setup. In her view, today's schools should be organized around centers or themes of caring. This idea has been prompted by the fact that today's schools have not reacted to social changes over the last twenty or more years, have put too much emphasis on achievement, and are largely ignoring the full range of human capacities that are evident in the population.

In the first case, schools are still organized around the idea that every child has two loving parents in the same household that are married to one another (a man and a woman) and that there is someone home at the end of the day to discuss the day at school and make sure that the child gets three meals. This could not be further from the truth. After teaching in a district for the last four years that has a free lunch program that ninety-five percent of the student body qualifies for it is easy to see that this idyllic setting no longer exists. Then, when looking at the overemphasis on achievement we see that all the focus on higher test scores and good grades has led us to inadequacy. We will do anything to make sure that the test scores are high and that means that we cram the students with information for the tests but don't give them a reason or a desire to learn it for the long haul. In today's school system we have, "forced all students to study a particular, narrowly prescribed curriculum devoid of content they may care about" (**Noddings**, xii). Finally, schools do not focus on any other abilities besides those that are academic. It is often not until high school that students with mechanical abilities or artistic abilities (for example) are able to further explore their interests and talents and even then the choices are limited and are not held in as high regard as the academic subjects. This thinking can be easily seen in any high school by watching an awards assembly – the ones who receive the awards and are honored are those with academic excellence in the core subjects and the athletes (both a small percentage of many high schools).

With **Noddings** new ideas, schools would be create a learning environment that teaches students to care for all that they see around them. This includes themselves, other human beings, animals, objects, and even ideas. She very closely believes that moral education is an important part of this curriculum. She feels that moral education, "should produce not only moral people but and education that is moral in purpose, policy, and method" (**Noddings**, xiii). **Noddings** is very careful to observe at this point that many people may call her ideas "anti-intellectual," but after looking carefully at her plans she states that she has nothing against achievement, but that it does not need to be the cornerstone of education, rather we need to teach children to care and to do this, "schools should instill in students a respect for honest work done well" (**Noddings**, xiv). I think that everyone could agree that we would all like our children to learn this as well as many adults. The only difference in **Noddings** approach is that she looks less at the subject matter and more at the person and what they want to learn to accomplish it.

In the first chapter of her book, **Noddings** looks at how schools have acted slowly in response to social change and the bottom line in this section is that the current trends of teaching that focus mainly on methods are not reaching all students. What these trends do is to boil down a topic to a set of steps that students must follow in order to achieve the desired result. However, what she pinpoints as is that

the desired result is probably not the students desired result, but the teacher's, or the schools, or the states. Therefore the student has less of a reason to care about the idea and even less of a desire to learn it. It is very evident that this is true if we look at teacher preparation programs over the last ten years. I myself was taught to conduct a lesson using a seven-step plan (Madeline Hunter), which includes everything including an objective saying how the student would learn but not why. This is very common and in many teachers' classrooms you would probably find binders of lesson plans all laid out for every subject. This is indicative of the push for methods seen in the last couple of decades. Now, when students are interested in these topics or methods they begin to act out in the classroom. So, in response to this there has been also a movement for behavior management and how to manage students through different methods. **Noddings** believes that this is the wrong way to confront education. She believes that we should look to and beyond Dewey's ideas of allowing students to create their own learning objectives. She feels that, "classrooms should be places in which students can legitimately act on a rich variety of purposes, in which wonder and curiosity are alive, in which students and teachers live together and grow" (**Noddings**, 12). **Noddings** believes that although the old system worked for a while it is time for some radical change and she wants to achieve this change through caring.

CARING

In order to understand what facet of caring she is looking at a definition is helpful. **Noddings** definition of caring is best looked at relationally. She defines a caring relation as, "a connection or encounter between two human beings" (**Noddings**, 15). In this relation both parties must contribute something or else the connection is broken and caring does not occur. This type of broken connection is seen easily and often in the teacher-student relation if one or the other refuses to acknowledge the other. What **Noddings** sees as caring in the classroom not only consists of the teacher caring about the student, but also helping the student learn to develop care with others and the environment around them including learning. An easy first step is to first develop a trusting relationship with the students individually and as groups. Once this has occurred teachers then need to listen to what students want to learn and allow some students to reject the material being studied to delve deeper into other topics. **Noddings** believes that, "all students want to learn; it is just a question of what they want to learn" (**Noddings**, 19). She does insist however, that students must learn to develop feelings about other people, animals, items and even ideas (as Gauss was "seized" by mathematics). All of her ideas, once explained make great sense and fit very well with the times that we live in and the children that we see in the classroom, but there must be some sort of model to help in implementation and with this she presents the idea of moral education.

MORAL EDUCATION AS A STUDENT ACTION PLAN

After reading this section of the book it occurred to me that it would be easy to take her four components to moral education (modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation) and use it loosely as a "lesson plan." **Noddings** however would not like the idea of a binding lesson plan but I realized that to maybe get people to observe and see new ideas at work sometimes new ideas need to be introduced into the framework of older ideas and methods. So, although **Noddings** would probably disagree with my thoughts over the next few pages I would hope that should would understand that for now it is the best that can be done with the current conditions.

In **Noddings** view moral education, "develops attitudes and skills required to sustain caring relations and the desire to do so (21-22)." Moral education is not new in our schools. In many schools systems

students are required to take classes that involve discussions on values or students are required to perform community service but in **Noddings** view these are activities are devalued when grades or credit are assigned because students desire is not based inwardly but rather outwardly for recognition or a grade. In her model, moral education contains for components: modeling, dialogue, practice and confirmation.

Modeling is a component that is seen all the time in schools today, however more often academically. The modeling that **Noddings** looks to is the demonstration of caring in our own relations with students are well as colleagues. If want students to show respect for others ideas and feelings we need to not only do so for them (no matter how angry or upset we are) but for those that we work with on a daily basis. She uses the example of an administrator telling teachers that he didn't care how they got the students to learn but to just do it, so that the schools test scores would be high. This models a non-caring attitude to the teachers that they inadvertently pass to the students. I also think its important to note that teachers need to model working relations with others to their students. Students pick up on strife between teachers in the workplace which models for them the idea that it's okay to not care about those they work with in the present and future.

The best way to facilitate modeling and caring is to use **Noddings** second component of dialogue. Most often when people speak of dialogue they mean that one person gets to put forth their idea and there is no response to that idea (this is what happens in almost all classrooms). However, in **Noddings** mind, dialogue is, "open-ended, in a genuine dialogue neither party knows at the outset where the outcome or decision will be" (**Noddings**, 23). This is easily seen when dealing with a difficult student – the discussion with that student goes much better if the teacher is willing to really listen to what is going on with the student rather than telling him or her how its going to be with the student having no chance at sharing his/her feelings.

In **Noddings** view of dialogue the benefits abound. Learners are allowed to question why, which then leads to more dialogue and can include others with more and more ideas. It also allows both parties to arrive at better-formed decisions form talking out all aspects of a topic. This then connects us and helps to maintain caring relations. This, in turn provides us knowledge of others in order to form more solid relations, which will provoke more dialogue. In **Noddings**, view a "perfect" dialogue is cyclical and will build stronger and stronger relationships and will help students to arrive at better-formed decisions in the long run.

In the third component of moral education, practice (one seen ALL the time in schools today) attitudes and mentalities are shaped by experience. **Noddings** says that, "if we decide that the capacity to care is as much a mark of personhood as reason or rationality, then we will want to find ways to increase this capacity (24). This means that we need to find instances and experiences for students to care as much as possible, but we need to make sure that these experiences are not menial activities. The conditions for practice must be right so students are able to truly model caring.

After the practice portion of moral education comes the component of confirmation. Confirmation is defined as, "the act of affirming and encouraging the best in others." **Noddings** believes that this only effectively works when we know other well enough. If there is no caring relation in place, there is no trust in the affirmation and therefore it can be taken as being hollow. She also, believes that there is no way to confirm students with formulas or slogans (i.e. – "All students can learn"). If we use formulas then we are not allowing students to decide what is important for them, we are telling them what is important. If confirmation is true, it will "lift us towards a better vision of a better self" (**Noddings**,

25). If the relationship that is performing the confirming is a trusting one, then one can see beyond the meanness of a particular action for the motives behind the actions.

The above paragraphs lay out **Noddings** four components for moral education. These very easily can lead to developing a unit for teaching that would be very unlike a typical classroom but would still include learning of “academic” topics while including the ideas of creating caring for others and ideas.

A PLAN TO CHANGE THE SCHOOLS

In the last chapter of the book **Noddings** lays out six steps that will aid in beginning a program based on care. Most of these six steps are not new but when used together it is easy to see how her plan would work. However, for all school systems this would still be a radical change.

Step 1: Be clear and unapologetic about our goal. The main aim of education should be to produce competent, caring, loving, and lovable people. This aim is one where some problems could arise within the staff and with some parents. Many people feel that “caring” is a value and that values should be taught at home. However, those people in disagreement must first understand what caring we are talking and how that kind of caring can benefit all children.

Step 2: Take care of affiliative needs. In this step **Noddings** strives to create a well-known environment for students by keeping them together with the same teacher for several years, in the same building, with essentially the same group of students. It is very seldom that this happens in schools today because of sheer numbers and the way that schools are scheduled. I would imagine that in the few smaller schools that are left, we could see that teachers and students would be together for several years because there is not a need for many teachers to teach a small number of students. This type of atmosphere allows the students and the teacher a time to create that caring relation and level of trust that is needed for the teacher to find out what the students really desire to learn and allows there to be open communication on both ends. A response in recent years to the idea of too little time in classrooms (especially in the middle and secondary schools) has been the idea of block scheduling. Although a step in the right direction, block scheduling is not doing what it is supposed to because most teachers are just lengthening their forty-minute lesson plan to fit eighty or more minutes and then assigning extra homework. Teachers in these situations must understand that they can take and explore many topics in depth with this time and that practice problems should take a back seat for a while.

Step 3: Relax the impulse to control. This is, for many teachers the hardest idea. Teachers must let the students take some control over their own learning and over the classroom. This does not mean that there needs to be chaos because if the relationship exists then there will be a well-learning classroom. Teachers should even get down and explore with the students, especially about topics they do not know much about.

Step 4: Get rid of program hierarchies. Although there is lip service in many schools that there is no tracking, there still is. We must provide both college and non-college bound students with a rich and interesting curriculum. All students need to opportunity to study calculus if they so desire and if a student really wants to learn it he/she will regardless of the background of mathematics.

Step 5: Give at least part of the day to themes of care. This would involve a complete restructuring of many middle and secondary schools. **Noddings** discusses this earlier in the book by explaining that an ideal school day would include half the day in examination of themes of care (learning how to treat

each other ethically, discussing existential questions, help them learn how to be on both sides, encourage caring for all aspects of the world) and the other half students studying topics of their choice in depth with teacher supervision, guidance and questioning. This sounds very intriguing but many if not all schools would not be comfortable doing this.

Step 6: “Teach them that caring in every domain implies competence. When we care, we accept the responsibility to work continuously on our own competence so that the recipient of our care is enhanced. There is nothing mushy about caring. It is the strong resilient backbone of human life.” **Noddings** is able to sum up her entire program in this one statement. It explains why we must care, for whom we must care, and reminds us that caring is not cuddling and hugging, it is more.