

# Noddings' Caring Education Theory and its Enlightenment to School Education

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**Abstract:** *Noddings, an American educator, has put forward the theory of Caring Education based on the thought of Female Ethics of Care. She believes that the core of school education is to teach students to care. The aim is to cultivate capable, caring and loving people who are worthy of love. Noddings' Caring Education Theory emphasizes the cultivation of caring students and caring teachers, pays attention to the continuity of education, and holds that school curriculum should be organized with the theme of care. The theory of Caring Education tells school teachers that they must respect students' subjectivity, embody students-oriented; establish caring teacher-student relationship, promote teacher-student interaction; attach importance to the practicality of moral education, and improve students' moral quality.*

**Keywords:** *Noddings; Caring Education; School Education; Educational Enlightenment*

## 1. Introduction

Caring and being cared for are basic human needs, without establishing a caring relationship with others throughout life, one can't be a complete human being. At every stage of our lives, we need to be cared for, understood, accepted, and validated. When a person is in infancy, he can't live without the care of parents, in school education, he can't live without the care of teachers and classmates, but not all people can gradually learn to care. There are those who genuinely care about knowledge, great causes, animals and plants, but lack empathy for their fellow human beings. Noddings, a professor at Stanford's School of Education and Columbia's School of Advanced Teacher Education, was acutely aware of this problem. It is argued that the main purpose of school education should be to teach students to care for themselves, for those closest to them, for those who have various relations with them, and for those who have no relations with them. Furthermore, they should care for animals, plants and natural environment, care for things made by man, and care for knowledge and learning.

## 2. The foundation of Caring Education Theory

Nel Noddings holds a bachelor's degree in mathematics and natural sciences, a master's degree in mathematics, a doctorate in philosophy and theory of education, and is a past president of the American Philosophical Association of Education and the John Johan Dewey Institute. 《The Challenge to Care In Schools: An alternative approach to Education》 is an important work of Nel Noddings on caring ethics and education. The book argues against the brutal academic discipline of American schools, which were too focused on academic achievement at that time. She argues that schools' primary aim is to care for children, all children should be taught not only to compete but also to care. The purpose of education should be to promote the healthy growth of those who are capable, caring, loving, and worthy of love.<sup>[1]</sup>

### 2.1 Existentialism

Noddings' theory of Caring Education was heavily influenced by Existentialism. Existentialism, which originated from Germany in the 1920s, is a popular philosophical school in the contemporary capitalist world, it emphasizes the value of individual existence. In the eyes of existentialists, the existence of man is the only real existence. For example, according to Buber, there are two kinds of relations between man and the outside world. One is the objective relation—"I-it" relation, the other is the relation of each person's inner mental world—"I-you" relation. Noddings agrees with the theory of the second relationship. In her caring education system, she regards the second relationship

between people as the most basic equal relationship, because she thinks that you and I are both "personal pronouns " without any distinction. <sup>[2]</sup>

## **2.2 Care Ethics**

Care Ethics appeared in the United States in the 1970s, but it was the product of the development of the women's movement in the 19th century. Gilligan, the first prominent representative of Care Ethics, argued that men and women differ in their moral development because of biological and cultural factors, and their understanding of the nature of morality is also different. Men and women make moral choices and judgments from the perspectives of Justice and Care respectively. She called the "male" morality "Just Ethics" and the "female" morality "Care Ethics". The Feminist Care Ethics is the theoretical basis of Care Education Theory. She affirms the position of care in education, but she believes that care is not a privilege of women, men can care as well. <sup>[3]</sup>

## **2.3 Humanistic Psychology**

Humanistic Psychology was born in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. Humanistic Psychology studies human nature and human values, the core of which is "people-oriented" , the goal is "to cultivate a complete human being" , emphasizes the satisfaction of human needs, especially higher needs. It holds that education should proceed from human nature, respect student's dignity and value student's emotion, promote students' body and mind, emotion, understanding and so on. In the process of education, teachers are the role of facilitators, they create a good environment to promote learning and growth, to help students achieve self-realization. Noddings agrees and applies these ideas to her own research, and believes that teachers and students should form a caring relationship—care for each other, understand, identify and accept each other, thus promoting each other's progress and development.

## **2.4 Dewey's theory of moral education**

Dewey is a famous American philosopher, educator, psychologist, and the synthesizer of Pragmatic Education. As the former president of Dewey, Noddings made a systematic study of Dewey's educational thoughts, and his theory of moral education was the source of Noddings' Caring Education Theory. According to Dewey, the formation of morality is a process of occurrence, which is the accumulation and transformation of moral experience. In different time and space conditions, the standards of moral judgment should be different, and there is no fixed moral precepts. <sup>[4]</sup>He emphasizes the initiative and enthusiasm of students in the learning process, and believes that activities and practice play an important role in students' moral development. Inspired by Dewey's thought, Noddings respects students' subjective status, opposes indoctrination and coercion, and advocates the establishment of a caring relationship between teachers and students to achieve educational democracy.

## **3. The content of Caring Education theory**

Noddings has repeatedly stressed that care is the cornerstone of all successful education, and contemporary school education can be rejuvenated by caring. The theory of Caring Education mainly includes four parts: cultivating caring students, cultivating caring teachers, teaching caring topics and emphasizing the continuity of education.

### **3.1 Cultivating caring students**

In American schools, students don't feel being cared for, because the goal of education is not this, it's full of brutal academic training. People desperately need to be cared for and crave a new type of relationship filled with care. Noddings argues that the claim that care is the primary moral end is not anti-intellectualism, but the assumption that standards, curriculum, and evaluation are consistent in order to develop students' intelligence is truly anti-intellectualism, which impedes the development of critical thinking and creativity. Care-based education is not opposed to intellectual development, and part of what students receive from others may include intellectual responses.

Noddings advocates that the primary moral purpose of education is to care for students and to cultivate their care. School is the center of care, a place where students are cared for and encouraged to care, not only to help all students understand the basic issues of human concern, but also to develop

their specific competencies in the area of care. She urges that the primary task of schools should be to care for children, emphasizing that they should not only be taught to compete, but also to care. The main purpose of education should be to encourage the healthy growth of those who are capable, caring, loving, and worthy of love.

### ***3.2 Cultivating caring teachers***

According to Noddings, teachers appear as caretakers in the educational process, and they have the responsibility to care for students and make students learn to care. Not only that, they need to provide caring role models; engage students in dialogue; and practice caring and attribute the best motivation. She emphasizes that teachers' caring behavior can give students a feeling of being cared for and make students feel valued. Noddings advocates that teachers should establish a caring relationship with students: teachers should care for students, and cultivate students' caring consciousness and caring ability; at the same time, students who are being cared for respond positively to teacher's care, thus promote the formation of the teacher-student relationship of care. Teachers and students establish "I-you" relations, teachers regard every student as the study main body, truly respects the student. Therefore, caring teachers play an important role in students' learning and development.

Caring teachers do not come into being spontaneously, they are cultivated through normal education. Noddings cites the university of South Carolina's Early Childhood Teacher Education Program, which argues that care is a complete feature of preschool. It is based on the idea that a society can't survive unless its members learn the sensitivities, motivations and skills of helping and caring for others. The program provides a course of care for normal school students. The aim of this course is to develop the concepts and skills by participating in the four levels of care. This course divides the cultivation of caring teachers into four stages: experiencing caring, practicing caring, establishing and maintaining caring relationships, and continuously reflecting and improving. Although the program is designed for young children, the core value of this care lies in the relationship between teachers and students through trust, cultivation and mutual respect, which is based on the concept of care.

### ***3.3 Teaching caring topics***

Noddings believes that in the era of rapid material development, we should directly introduce the content of care into the formal curriculum, let the topic of care close to students' study and life, and promote students' active thinking. Education based on the theme of care shows great respect for the whole human intelligence. It not only makes people kind and lovely, but also implies the continuous pursuit of ability. The introduction of the subject of care into the formal curriculum can expand students' cultural horizons and promote their further learning; the subject of concern links up standard subjects and gives students a holistic feeling in the process of education. Topics of care can also link students and subjects to major existing problems. The application of the theme of care can promote the formation of good relations between students and teachers, and help students develop the ability of care continuously and learn to care for others.

Therefore, the curriculum should serve educational purposes and organize education around care, which requires attention to a range of different forms of care: care for the self, care for those closest to you, care for all those who are related to you and those who are not, care for human life, care for the material world created by human beings, care for the environment, care for ideological knowledge. For example, in the area of "caring for oneself" , we can pay attention to the changes of one's growth and development at all ages, and the changes of one's way of knowing the world; in the field of "caring for strangers and global people" , we can study how to help others, international communication, exchange of study abroad. In the field of "caring for the man-made world" , students are encouraged to discover computer programs and explore the energy storage of electric vehicles. But we must recognize that different people have different views on the topics they care about. People from different races, ethnicities, genders, social classes, and religions also have different interests and perspectives.

### ***3.4 Emphasizing the continuity of education***

Noddings argues that it will be difficult for schools to achieve their academic goals without a focus on meeting students' needs for continuity and care. Care in education is different from some brief relationships in life, it is based on a solid foundation of trust and care. This relationship doesn't happen overnight. It takes time and requires continuity. There are four forms of continuity in the process of students' education: the continuity of purpose, the continuity of place, the continuity of person, and the

continuity of curriculum.<sup>[5]</sup>

School is the center of care, a place that cares about them and encourages them to care about others. Taking care as the primary purpose of education will make schools be a more open place. Parents, teachers, school leaders, and students know the primary purpose of activities will make everything in school meaningful. Noddings believes that school is an institution with multiple purposes, and putting moral purposes at the top of the school's agenda does not prevent the school from accomplishing other tasks. In order to build a caring community, students need continuity of place. The basic idea is to make the school a center of care like a family, to give students a sense of belonging. They should stay in one school for at least two or three years. Students need time to get used to it, take responsibility for their natural environment, and stay in the same school long enough to gain a sense of belonging and character.

Students not only need to live and study in the same place for a long period of time, but they also need to keep in contact with specific people for a long period of time. Noddings believes that teachers and students should spend at least three years together and study on a mutually satisfactory basis, rather than constantly changing. Because if teachers and students do not get along with each other for a long time, it is difficult to establish a relationship of caring and being cared for on the basis of full understanding of each other. She argued that if the school curriculum could be reconstructed from scratch, it should be constructed entirely around the subject of care. But that was not the case, so she took a gradual compromise, dividing the school's schedule in half, with half a day devoted to existing traditional subjects and half a day devoted to subjects of care. She tried to bring all the courses together with a kind of continuity across the subject areas and topics of care.

#### **4. The enlightenment of Caring Education Theory to school education**

The theory of Caring Education emphasizes that students are independent individuals, and school education must respect students' subjectivity; emphasizes the formation of caring relationship among people, and teachers and students in school also need to establish caring relationship; emphasizes that schools should involve students in practical activities, and attach importance to the practicality of moral education.

##### ***4.1 Respect students' subjectivity***

According to Noddings' theory, when teachers care about students, they should take into account the actual needs of students. Only when the cared behavior is perceived and accepted by the students can the completion of the cared behavior be explained. Therefore, teachers can't blindly from their own point of view, think that more assignments, remedial classes, tests are good for students. Instead, we should think about how academic knowledge is connected with students' life experience, respect students' interests and needs, and promote students to learn knowledge actively. Educators should go into the different life world, not only with their own eyes, but also with the eyes of students to observe, with the mind of students to feel. <sup>[6]</sup>According to Gardiner's theory of multiple intelligences, there are more than one element of human intelligence, so some students are good at one, while others may be good at others. Teachers need to pay full attention to each child's unique talents, abilities and interests, and fully respect their different interests and hobbies. A good teacher doesn't try to prove his or her abilities by making the subject be a strength of all students. Instead, he or she tries to make all students fall in love with their classes and truly learn. Education itself should be concerned about the overall development of students, concerned about the well-being of students. In the process of education, teachers should stimulate students' learning interest, coordinate with students' learning experience and promote students' understanding by excavating the connection between the subject and students' life.

Although current schools have emphasized reducing indoctrination and creating lively and dynamic classrooms, they have been forced by the selection of students for the high school and college entrance examinations. They have to put academic achievement first and pay attention to efficiency in teaching, the only way to evaluate it is to take a test. We should attach importance to the students' subject status in the learning process, and should not treat them as a "knowledge container", which allows them to accept the established ideas, moral norms and lack of care and respect. The practice of neglecting students' life reality and self-education ability makes students unable to use the feelings they get from life to verify the truth in books, unable to use the theory in books to guide the practical problems they encounter in life. When students are in the primary and secondary school stage, their body and mind are still growing, and their abilities are growing gradually. The development of the students is of great

plasticity and diversity, and their unique ideas and opinions must be respected.

Schools must give full attention to the diversity of students' development, create an environment which emphasizes caring rather than competitive, nurture the diverse interests and abilities of students. Recognizing that different students have different knowledge bases and learning experiences, we need to respect students' differences and teach them in accordance with their aptitude. Schools must pay attention to the differences among students, allow students to have different feelings and understanding of learning materials at different levels based on multiple intelligences, different interests and knowledge backgrounds, and pay attention to the unique development of students' personalities.

#### ***4.2 Establish a caring teacher-student relationship***

Noddings attaches great importance to teachers' motherly and meticulous care for students. Teachers who care about students will substitute effective punishment with recognition, and respect students' feelings and ideas. Its core is that if one wants to care about others, he or she must stand in the perspective of others to do things and think things, and he or she must integrate themselves into a person's life. <sup>[7]</sup>But she stresses that this is only part of the process, what we really need is a caring teacher-student relationship. The teacher acts as a caring person to care for the student, so that he or she can learn to care about others and things. Students as being cared people should not be passive, they should use positive response to promote the relationship between teachers and students. And in this process, students can learn to care and become caretakers in the future. Care begins with those who care, and ends with those who are cared for. In order for a relationship to be called caring, both sides have to work in their own unique ways, failure on either side will hinder the completion of care. The caretaker is one of the two components of caring relationship, whether the caring relationship can be maintained and communicated to the cared person depends on the caretaker's maintenance. And the continuity of teacher-student relationship is the most important, because students need competent teachers to care about them, and teachers need students to respond to their care.

The relationship between teachers and students is not only a simple knowledge-giving and receiving relationship, but also an interactive relationship of mutual learning and mutual concern. Teachers in traditional education regard students as passive learners—the slaves of learning, and ignore students' subjectivity. Modern teachers should deeply recognize the subjective status of students and regard the relationship between teachers and students as the equal relationship of "I-you". Students should be viewed in a developmental perspective in teachers' eyes. In this kind of relationship, the teacher gives the student with full of love, understanding and respect, the teacher and the student form a kind of good interpersonal relationship. It causes the student to have the positive emotion to the teacher, and open the door to promote the all-round development.

Noddings argues that both children rearing and students educating require a certain amount of time, require an interaction and continuity, both of which must begin with the building of a trusting relationship, and continue to maintain and improve this relationship. In order to establish the relationship between teachers and students, it is necessary to interact with each other for a long time. The teacher is the one who cares, the student is the one who is cared, the teacher cares about the student, the student feels the teacher's care and gives the response, it's a continuous existence. <sup>[8]</sup>The existence of teacher-student caring relationship creates an atmosphere full of respect and care, it can influence students' study and life. Good interpersonal relationship between teachers and students can help them to make progress in their studies and life, and better prepare for their entry into society. No matter what the major and the future job, any student needs to get equal care and be cared for.

#### ***4.3 Value the practicality of moral education***

Herbart once said, there is no education without teaching, there is no teaching without education. The teaching process must be accompanied by the existence of moral education, in fact, school education is the moral education for students in the final analysis. Moral education exists in the curriculum of primary and middle schools in China. The course of morality and life is offered in grade 1-3 of primary schools, and the course of morality and society is offered in grade 4-6 of primary schools. In junior and senior middle schools, they also have political course to improve students' moral quality. Although primary and secondary schools have set up special ideological and moral courses to carry out moral education for students, in many areas, these ideological and moral courses are taught by Chinese or mathematics teachers, leaving aside the professional problems of teachers, these classes are even changed directly into Chinese or math classes many times.

In the moral education courses offered by schools, only the basic moral knowledge is taught, and whether the students' moral ability has been improved is not known at all. Moral education includes four aspects: knowledge, feeling, will and practice. Carrying out specific moral practice activities can not only arouse students' initiative and enthusiasm, but also flexibly teach moral knowledge, it can also test the moral development of students from their words and deeds. Students' moral practice can greatly promote the formation and development of students' sense of responsibility, and finally produce a good moral character. Therefore, if the school education lacks any part of it, the student can't form the complete personality. \

Noddings' theory of Caring Education also attaches importance to the role of practice in students' learning process, and has designed a variety of activities for students. For example, in families, parents are advised to help their children keep animals and provide pet-care opportunities to develop a sense of responsibility; in schools, let children work with school administrators, work in restaurants, offices; in the community, send students to hospitals, parks, feedlots to participate in service activities. These activities can develop students' awareness of care and behavior habits. We must realize that moral education is not enough only by imparting theoretical knowledge, practical activities can help students realize its real value, and finally embody the educational nature of teaching. The practical nature of morality determines that moral education can not only rely on intellectual or theoretical indoctrination, but also must transform these moral knowledge into the activities or practices of the student's main body. In order to improve the moral quality of the students, let them carry on the moral practice truly, only then can produce a good education effect.

## 5. Conclusion

Although Noddings' theory of Caring Education has been studied by many scholars, it can also give us some enlightenment in our school education under the condition of more and more serious educational involution. In order to return to the true state of education, we should advocate mutual respect and care between teachers and students, and establish a caring teacher-student relationship instead of blindly competing and comparing.

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