

Analysing the Philosophical Ideas of Nel Noddings on Empathy and Care

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Abstract

The relationship between the teachers and students for a longtime was always looked up to as one that is built and nurtured on elements of trust, love and care. But this unfortunately has gone amiss. This relationship has now succumbed to the onslaught of market-driven economy where education is a 'good' to be bought and teacher a mere vehicle to deliver these goods keeping the paying capacity of the client in mind. Therefore, 'care' as a lived value is not a priority. The usual malaise which plagues the system is the focus on examinations and marks and not on the learning outcomes. When learning outcomes are the least of your concerns then the collateral damage is the absence of empathy and care in students. This paper is an attempt to provide insights into the strategies and activities which may be used with students in order to inculcate these values looking at the rich repertoire of ideas put forth by Nel Noddings who happens to be an authority on the subject.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to present a model for educationists both at the school and higher education level in order to infuse the indispensable elements of empathy, care and reflection in educational discourses. The analysis is based on the

philosophical ideas of the American Philosopher Nel Noddings who has written extensively on the importance of empathy, care and critical thinking for educating students. Nel Noddings (2012) enlightens us that, though the word empathy is relatively new to the vocabulary, added just in the early

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part of the twentieth century, it is still important for us to understand that it is not the same as sympathy. Empathy according to Nel is the ability to feel the other person's pain and misery without being a part of the journey which inflicted the pain. She further adds that being empathetic includes doing every bit to bring the individual out of that painful experience. However, it is important to understand that the act of being empathetic or to empathise is also a process. This process begins with actively listening and according full attention to the narration of the painful incident or experience by the individual who has gone through it. Noddings (2010) further cautions that for empathy to be nurtured by teachers in their students it is critical that they bond with each other or feel attached with each other in order to succeed in the induction of the feeling to understand the other person's pain. However, if the relationship between the teacher and taught is not cordial then in all probability it shall nearly be impossible to evoke this feeling in students by the teacher. In the perspective of 'care', Noddings (2012) adds that teachers in an institution ought to nurture students with utmost care in the first place. This caring should be undertaken by beginning with listening to the student voices with patience and without being judgemental about them. Teachers need to understand the needs and interests of students by giving them umpteen opportunities

to share their concerns, anxieties, fears, joys, struggles, trials and jubilations. This is best done by creating an environment which is fearless, non-threatening and is based on the foundations of love and trust. A caring teacher also makes sure that they empower the student with the necessary knowledge and skills needed by them to traverse the journey of life. This teacher is not merely obsessed with the mechanical achievement of the goals laid down by the curriculum but with the larger picture that is the overall well-being of their students. Caring teachers make sure that they are competent enough to transact the curriculum effectively by building the knowledge pools of their students. They constantly strive to upgrade their own knowledge and skills in order to give their best to their students. This includes teaching the core subject by drawing on the interconnections with all the related subject areas and presenting a holistic picture. Such enriched teaching learning environment not only prods the students to the peak but also pushes the teacher towards the acquisition of new knowledge thus making the exercise essentially mutually rewarding. Looking at empathy, care and critical thinking from the rich philosophical lens provided by Nel Noddings has enabled the author to build a model to nurture the same in educational institutions. It is important to begin with clarifying the concept of empathy and care as given by Noddings.

UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF EMPATHY AND CARE

It appears to be a simple process when you think of inculcation of 'empathy' and 'care' but in reality it is rather complex. Many theorists have defined empathy, but keeping in mind the connotation given by Noddings (2010), the one given by Stueber is the most apt. According to Karsten Stueber, "Empathy as understood within the original philosophical context is best seen as a form of inner or mental initiation for the purpose of gaining knowledge of other minds (Stueber 2006)." When a teacher teaches students to empathise or in other words to feel the responsibility to alleviate the pain of those around them it is important that there is an attachment between the teacher and students after all empathy is one of the crucial aspects of emotional literacy. If the teacher and the taught are sharing a strong bond to each other or are attached to each other then they will be able to cultivate empathy in the students. However, if empathy is taught as a technique in a mechanical manner and the teacher is either disliked or has no attachment with his or her pupils then in all probability there shall be no empathising in the given situation. In other words, the concept of empathy as given by care theorists makes attachment to be a prerequisite for its cultivation. Secondly, the students need to be motivated to recognise the needs of others around them. It means they

need to be sensitive and attentive to the feelings of hurt or pain of others irrespective of the fact whether they were or were not a part of inflicting the same. In most of the situations when we listen to the hurtful or painful experiences of others we are able to be aware of what the person is going through and thus we feel for them. This experience, thus, enables us to defer our own engagements for a short period of time in order to direct our energy towards the fulfillment of the needs expressed by the person in need. Nel Noddings (2010) has identified this as 'motivational displacement' which finally helps us to respond. It has also been seen that with our immediate circle of family and friends we are empathetic involuntarily, however, with others it necessitates moral effort. Let us now look at the concept of 'care'. The concept of care is discussed here as a part of the ethical caring which is relational as in the case of the teacher and the taught. Caring in institutions is important as it has a direct bearing on learning. According to Noddings (2005) there are four basic components of moral education which are the foundation to the establishment of caring relations. The first which holds prime importance is 'Modeling' in other words teachers need to be role models of care for their students to look up to. If teachers exhibit a caring behaviour and attitude there is a high possibility that students would emulate them. The second aspect which is indispensable

to develop caring as a value in students is 'dialogue'. Teachers need to engage in meaningful dialogues with our students not only on subject knowledge but on their concerns, fears, anxieties, longings, experiences, etc., such that they are able to understand them better. When teachers and students share their feelings with each other according full attention in the process to understand each other they develop an interpersonal bond which enables them to relate to each other better. For any dialogue to be productive it is important that it takes place in an environment where both parties listen to each other patiently. Further Noddings (2005) points out that when we engage in caring, dialogue helps us to get a feedback on our efforts to care. It is also important for teachers to engage in dialogue for discussing the different dimensions of care with their students.

The third important element in care is practice. It is well known that one learns what one practises repeatedly, therefore, as teachers it is important that to give ample opportunities to students to be involved in caring. Once caring becomes a part of their mental scheme it shall come to them automatically. It is also to be noted that when the students engage in practise it is important that they are under the supervision of their teachers or mentors to ensure that the interactions are rightfully caring. This practice according to Noddings (2005) should also involve

a critical reflection on their acts of caring in order to equip them with a better understanding in their future encounters with those they cared for.

The final critical element in care theory is confirmation. This means an approval which comes about, about the act of caring. For example, the students volunteered to work in earthquake hit neighbourhood states and worked hard in the restoration practices on ground and when the teacher acknowledges the painstaking efforts of the students with respect to the support they rendered to the earthquake survivors then this leads to confirmation of the motive of care. But there is a word caution here by Noddings (2005) that this confirmation shall hold value or remain valid only if the teachers and students share a loving and cordial relationship with each other. Thus, when a teacher engages in confirmation they should acknowledge the goodness in the students and applaud them for the same. This act of confirmation is neither mechanical nor formulaic. It is a recognition of something worthwhile a student has undertaken according to their capacities. Therefore, as a teacher one must remember that this yardstick cannot be used to give confirmation in all situations of care giving.

STRATEGIES TO INCULCATE EMPATHY AND CARE IN STUDENTS

Nel Noddings (2006) and a number of other educators have been

advocating, since long, a complete reorganisation of the curriculum especially in schools such that issues which surround human existence gain prominence. But this concern has not been taken seriously by the curriculum planners and policy framers. The only emphasis we find is on academic achievement in terms of grades or marks and on competition instead of cooperation. Now, in this prevailing environment in educational institutions the educators have this phenomenal responsibility of cultivating an empathetic and caring heart. To begin with, the first strategy to this is to develop caring relations with pupils which begins with '*Listening*'.

a. Listening to student voices

When teachers listen attentively and patiently to the students, in the process they gain their students' confidence. In such an environment it is more probable that students will acknowledge and accept what they are being taught. Since it is a caring relationship any pedagogical intervention will be welcomed readily and will not be seen as a hindrance. Also when the teacher listens to his or her students the students will feel motivated to engage in a dialogue with them and this shall empower teachers with crucial information about them, such as their interests, needs, hobbies, talents, fears, problems, etc. According to Noddings (2012) this in turn shall prove worthwhile to teachers to organise their lessons in

order to cater to the individual needs of their pupils and also increase their own proficiency for catering to their needs. For teaching different subjects teachers need to bring in diverse connections with varied disciplines including existential questions in the discourse. In the course of such conversations students get that spark of learning which was somewhere amiss. For example, as a Biology teacher apart from teaching the content in the syllabus one needs to touch on the meaning of life, care, existence, holistic growth when dealing with reproduction, evolution, etc. When a teacher does so, the students are able to make connections between the subjects taught and the larger canvas of life. Therefore, teaching no longer remains routine it becomes more interesting, invigorating and challenging both intellectually and emotionally. Secondly, it is also important for teachers to listen to the conversations in which students engage with their peers and observe them while they are working in groups as this gives a clear perspective on the way they are developing.

b. Discussions enabling self understanding

It is a well-established fact that teachers cannot achieve success with students through sermonising and ordering them about dos and don'ts. It is important to raise key issues which are related to the lives of our learners. For example, a group of

students were found to be repeatedly laughing on one another in the class whenever any student raised a question or offered a comment on the theme being discussed. The teacher then decided to stop the discussion and very politely asked one of them in the group that was laughing to tell all how it would feel if the class started laughing on them. The students immediately responded that they would feel bad and the task was done. The behaviour was not repeated and the entire class got the message. On another occasion while discussing the evil of dowry in a class on gender studies a student shared her experience. She felt humiliated when the entire family of the groom came to her place and not only asked her to walk in front of all of them to check for any disability, to which she obliged under pressure from her family, but to her shock then took out a measuring tape to measure her height, to which she put her foot down and walked out. She was applauded by the entire class for her brave decision. And then what followed was a number of other students narrating their similar experiences and discussing the need to say a loud 'no' when one should. Many a times these discussions in the class may also begin by the teacher taking the lead to discuss their own oversights and predicaments. When teachers acknowledge uncertainties in turn they support learners in the arduous task of learning how

to live with inevitable uncertainties. In this voyage of self discovery through dialogue, the narration of stories selected carefully may also be included, depending on the age group being catered to. Here most of the theorists have cautioned that stories if used directly to teach virtues may not be successful. However, if the narration of stories takes place in the concerned subject instead of a moral science class or a value education session it shall have the needed effect as we all know for sure that moral science lessons are seldom taken seriously. Most importantly the stories narrated or enacted should be followed by an engagement in dialogue on the lines of asking students to share their experiences related to the story. One word of caution is the key here that if students engage in ethical behaviour, educators may praise them or pat their back but presenting awards to them on public platforms like the school assemblies or other functions can be really problematic. The reason being, that this encourages competition to do good only if there are rewards. What educators must aim at is to create a culture of care giving through repeated dialogue on moral concerns under guided practice such that students are intrinsically motivated to care for all the beings around them. This takes place when they understand the meaning of self and their existence as a part of this universe.

c. Selecting and Managing Ideas on Care in the Classroom Discourse

There is no doubt that in order to teach empathy and care the best strategy is to indulge in the practice of the same by nurturing relationships with students based on unconditional love and trust. According to Noddings (2007) caring is not just a nebulous feeling but requires constant effort to work in the best interest of our students. In institutions as teachers or teacher educators one needs to begin with paying attention to cooperating with students in the activities in which they engage and share their own hopes, expectations, dreams, desires, fears and reservations with them. Secondly, the themes of care need to be carefully infused in the classroom discourse, for example, while discussing history, the harmful effects of war may be discussed, in Geography caring for the people displaced due to floods, earthquakes, fires, etc., can be discussed, in a Social Science class caring for the elderly, for strangers, etc., may be included, to teach harmony and brotherhood and in language classes the themes, such as empathy, love, friendship and care through poems, plays and stories may be brought in. In philosophy, the teachers may engage students in meaningful discussions on care ethics, philosophies of existentialism and humanism and give examples drawn from the biographies

of philosophers. In psychology, the discussions on care for the differently-abled, adjustment with peers and surroundings, model behaviours, parenting, coping with a bereavement in family, life skills to say no to smoking, drinking and drugs when you encounter peer pressure, coping with the trauma of bullying, etc., may be included. In sociology, the issues surrounding poverty, social stratification, discrimination, racism, sexism and citizenship may be discussed. In mathematics, inequitable distribution of wealth between nations, statistics depicting the crime rate in our country, correlation between crime rates and the penalties imposed. This is a controversial statement. In economics, care related to environmental economics with respect to the impact of globalisation, etc., can be discussed. In biology, the different stages of development and the care aspects associated with them and also issues related to creating environmentally friendly habits, behaviours and attitudes for a green planet, may be discussed. In physics and chemistry, the benefits of technology and their associated threats, may be discussed. And yes in medicine all aspects of care and ethics related to nursing and care giving by doctors, nurses and other care givers which leads to holistic healing can be discussed. Noddings (2007) also elaborates that these themes of care may be discussed either by engagement of students

by way of interdisciplinary teams clubbing students stage-wise and conducting workshops or symposia on the same involving the students or the themes may be selected individually and discussed during an individual teacher's class during the semester. Another way of discussing varied issues surrounding care is to engage in brainstorming on themes spontaneously whenever the topic in question warrants. In other words, it shall be deemed irresponsible of us teachers ethically and morally if we fail to include discussions on care while transacting the course curriculum. Noddings (2007) also cautions us that during the course of the discussion it is important that in an emotionally charged environment when students start sharing their personal experiences in front of their teachers and peers they need to safeguard them by letting them know the pros and cons of sharing information privy to them. We also need to be very sure that questions which ensue during the course of these conversations do not make the individual who is sharing his or her thoughts or experiences uncomfortable or in other words the questions are not intrusive in nature. Discussions, debates, role plays, workshops, seminars, symposia may be held around the themes of care to make this journey enjoyable both for the teacher and the taught.

d. Creating institutional support mechanisms to teach 'care' effectively

Administrators, curriculum developers and policy framers need to understand that care is a grave concern and it ought to be taught as a basic human value. Noddings (2007) examines the preparations which institutions and educators require to delve on the teaching of care effectively. Firstly, educators need to be fundamentally clear that one of the key objectives of responsible and responsive education is to cultivate the capability to care and for this the educators need to be caring themselves in the first place. For an atmosphere of care to flourish we need to have educators engaging meaningfully with their students on a regular basis in small groups, i.e., the teacher student ratio ideally for this kind of involvement should not be more than 1:20. Another important aspect which needs to be kept in mind is that teachers and students need to have a longer association, i.e., the class teachers especially in schools should remain the same for a couple of years. This shall enable the development of caring relations between them along with a sense of belonging for the school. This shall also help develop a bond of love and trust between the teachers and students over a period of time thus creating an enabling environment for teaching of themes of care. It is natural for human beings to be sensitive to each other's needs once

they feel attached to each other. The primary and elementary schools still have the curriculum enriched with themes of care for the teacher to weave her discussion on. However, it is seen that at secondary and senior secondary stage where students are grappling with adolescence and issues surrounding it there is hardly any platform or content in the texts or readings which focusses on care. On the other hand, teachers are under tremendous pressure to generate high test scores and thus their main mission of teaching care to their pupils takes a backseat. Institutions need to rework their vision and mission with respect to what they need to develop in the first place. A teacher, after parents, at home should be regarded as the primary care-giver and to facilitate the teacher in this role it is important to understand that we cannot afford to burden our teachers with menial jobs which require them to be stuck either with scoring a huge number of answer scripts or be glued to their laptops or desktops preparing results. And above all the most critical change which the system warrants is a change in the attitude of administrators and policymakers towards understanding that teachers are the most important change agents in the lives of students and we need to give them ample time and opportunities to nurture the spirit of care in their pupils instead of overburdening them with routine mechanical chores.

e. Use of method acting to cultivate empathy

Susan Verducci (2000) on extending the work of Nel Noddings on 'Care Ethics' has tried to explore the use of method acting in inculcating empathy. When you understand life, the times, the influences, the cultural setting, the historical setting, etc., by reading about the character you are to play, this exercise enables you to empathise with the character too. The element of dramatic empathy does influence you as an individual when you play the character. However, it is required to understand that whether it is drama or movies both are a powerful media to reach out for an emotional response from the target audience. Plays and movies carefully selected for discussions do provide a fertile ground for engagement in critical thinking and reflective practice on issues surrounding empathy and care. Drama, thus, enables students to make connections with their own lives and the lives of others around them thus making it possible for educators to infuse themes of empathy and care very subtly through the hidden curriculum. Verducci (2000) emphasises the uses of the techniques of dramatisation in order to sensitise the students to the issues of empathy and care. But in no way does she establish a cause and effect relationship between drama and empathy, leaving it for educators to research further.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, it is high time that teachers and teacher educators realise that if we do not make efforts to inculcate empathy and care in our students then we are failing in our duty towards humanity at large. It is dangerous to cater to the development of a critical thinking mind without nurturing an empathetic and caring heart. We ought to explore the use of the

strategies outlined by Nel Noddings and analysed in this paper in order to bring back the lost love, care and trust in relations in institutions. To begin with let us love our students unconditionally and non-judgmentally and listen to their concerns with complete attention so that the journey with respect to inculcating care as a value is fruitful and fulfilling both at the same time.

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