

caring in education

In this article Nel Noddings explores the nature of caring relations and encounters in education and some of the difficulties educators have with them. She also looks at caring relations as the foundation for pedagogical activity.

contents: [introduction](#) · [caring relations and encounters in education](#) · [why is the relational view difficult for many educators?](#) · [caring relations as the foundation for pedagogical activity](#) · [conclusion](#) · [further reading and bibliography](#) · [links](#) · [how to cite this article](#)

It is sometimes said that “all teachers care.” It is because they care that people go into teaching. However, this is not universally true; we all have known teachers who are cruel and uncaring, and these people should not be in teaching at all. But even for the majority who do “care” in the virtue sense—that is, they profess to care and work hard at their teaching—there are many who do not adopt the relational sense of caring. They “care” in the sense that they conscientiously pursue certain goals for their students, and they often work hard at coercing students to achieve those goals. These teachers must be credited with caring in the virtue sense of the word. However, these same teachers may be unable to establish relations of care and trust.



Caring relations and encounters in education

The relational sense of caring forces us to look at the relation. It is not enough to hear the teacher’s claim to care. Does the student recognize that he or she is cared for? Is the teacher thought by the student to be a caring teacher? When we adopt the relational sense of caring, we cannot look only at the teacher. This is a mistake that many

researchers are making today. They devise instruments that measure to what degree teachers exhibit certain observable behaviors. A high score on such an instrument is taken to mean that the teacher cares. But the students may not agree.

Sometimes they agree grudgingly. “She’s tough,” a student may say with some admiration. “She makes us work hard.” Students in such situations often do what they are told, but they have no real interest in what is being taught. They just plod along, driven by the teacher, and escape studies whenever an opportunity arises. They come to equate caring with coercion and good teaching with hard work and control. Guiltily, they recognize the teacher as “caring,” but they do not themselves feel cared for.

Many studies in recent years have described schools and classrooms in which teachers profess to care and work hard, but students still complain, “Nobody cares!” (Eaker-Rich & Van Galen, 1996; Institute for Education in Transformation, 1992; Lyman, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). Researchers studying such schools must look at teachers, students, and situations. Sometimes the conditions of schooling are so bad that teachers who want to care and students who want to be cared for cannot form the kind of relations we would properly label caring. Then something must be done to change the situation. Perhaps teacher and students need more time together to develop a relation of care and trust? Perhaps classes should be smaller? Perhaps the pressure of standardized testing should be reduced so that teacher and students can explore topics of mutual interest more deeply? Perhaps more attention should be given to students’ interests? Developing a rigorous curriculum that builds upon or, at least, includes student interests is a challenging and satisfying pedagogical task, but teachers need extra time and encouragement to work this way.

The phenomenological analysis of caring reveals the part each participant plays. The one-caring (or carer) is first of all attentive. This attention, which I called “engrossment” in *Caring* (Noddings, 1984), is receptive; it receives what the cared-for is feeling and trying to express. It is not merely diagnostic, measuring the cared-for against some pre-established ideal. Rather, it opens the carer to motivational displacement. When I care, my motive energy begins to flow toward the needs and wants of the cared-for. This does not mean that I will always approve of what the other wants, nor does it mean that I will never try to lead him or her to a better set of values, but I must take into account the feelings and desires that are actually there and respond as positively as my values and capacities allow.

In a caring relation or encounter, the cared-for recognizes the caring and responds in some detectable manner. An infant smiles and wriggles in response to its mother’s caregiving. A student may acknowledge her teacher’s caring directly, with verbal

gratitude, or simply pursue her own project more confidently. The receptive teacher can see that her caring has been received by monitoring her students' responses. Without an affirmative response from the cared-for, we cannot call an encounter or relation caring.

Why is the relational view difficult for many educators?

The relational view is hard for some American thinkers to accept because the Western tradition puts such great emphasis on [individualism](#). In that tradition, it is almost instinctive to regard virtues as personal possessions, hard-won through a grueling process of character building. [John Dewey](#) rejected this view and urged us to consider virtues as “working adaptations of personal capacities with environing forces” (1930, p. 16). Care theorists expand this Deweyan insight and emphasize the role of our partners in interaction as a central factor in “environing forces.” We recognize moral interdependence. How good (or bad) I can be depends in substantial part on how you treat me. Acknowledging our moral interdependence means rejecting Kant's claim that it is contradictory to make our ourselves responsible for another's moral perfection. Care theorists insist that we must, indeed, accept such responsibility. Without imposing my values on an other, I must realize that my treatment of him may deeply affect the way he behaves in the world. Although no individual can escape responsibility for his own actions, neither can the community that produced him escape its part in making him what he has become.

Another reason that the relational view is difficult for some educators to accept is that people in almost all cultures have been taught to believe that “teacher knows best.” It is part of our duty as teachers, then, to *know* and to use our knowledge to initiate the young into a community of knowing. To some degree, this view is clearly right, undebatable. We all feel this obligation keenly. But the world is now so enormously complex that we cannot reasonably describe one model of an educated person. What we treasure as educated persons may be very different from the knowledge loved or needed by other educated persons. Therefore, we cannot be sure (beyond a small but vitally important set of basic skills and concepts) what *everyone* needs to know. Every student will need much knowledge beyond the basic but what John needs may differ greatly from what Ann needs. Caring teachers listen to John and Ann and help them to acquire the knowledge and attitudes needed to achieve their goals, not those of a pre-established curriculum.

But surely there are some things that children must learn even if they are not inclined to do so. Of course. However, even here, we proceed carefully. As [Martin Buber](#) advised us, the teacher “fails the recipient [of selected knowledge] when he presents this selection to him with a gesture of interference... Interference divides the soul in his care into an

obedient part and a rebellious part. But a hidden influence proceeding from his integrity has an integrating force” (1965, p. 90). Care theorists would add that this “integrity” belongs not so much to the teacher as individual but to the teacher-in-relation. The caring teacher strives first to establish and maintain caring relations, and these relations exhibit an integrity that provides a foundation for everything teacher and student do together.

Relations in which a virtuous carer is so dedicated to his own view of what the cared-for should be and do often lack this integrity. It may be helpful to remind readers of cases that illustrate just how badly caring-as-virtue can miscarry. In [Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*](#), Thomas Gradgrind—a fictional teacher who has become a universal stereotype of rigid, facts-only teaching—forbids even his beloved daughter Louisa from “wondering” or indulging in fantasy. No fairy tales or fantasies for Louisa! She grows up without imagination and entirely out of touch with her own feelings. Gradgrind loved his daughter; in the virtue sense, he cared. But he could not, until it was really too late, establish a caring relation.

In a harrowing real-life case, consider the family of the great philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Unable to make their inflexible, dictatorial father understand their hopes and longings, three of Wittgenstein’s brothers committed suicide. Wittgenstein himself admitted that although he needed love, he was unable to give it. The father cannot be held solely responsible for these multiple tragedies, but neither can he be totally absolved, nor can the society that supported conditions of lonely individualism and hierarchical obedience. Both fathers, real and fictional, “cared” for their children. But their care was directed by their own vision of what their children should be and do. They were not capable of doing the work of attentive love required by caring-as-relation.

Caring relations as the foundation for pedagogical activity

I do not mean to suggest that the establishment of caring relations will accomplish everything that must be done in education, but these relations provide the foundation for successful pedagogical activity. First, as we listen to our students, we gain their trust and, in an on-going relation of care and trust, it is more likely that students will accept what we try to teach. They will not see our efforts as “interference” but, rather, as cooperative work proceeding from the integrity of the relation. Second, as we engage our students in dialogue, we learn about their needs, working habits, interests, and talents. We gain important ideas from them about how to build our lessons and plan for their individual progress. Finally, as we acquire knowledge about our students’ needs and realize how much more than the standard curriculum is needed, we are inspired to increase our own competence (Noddings, 1999).

On this last, the matter of competence, it might be said that caring implies competence. By that I mean that teachers in caring relations are continually pressed to gain greater competence. The caring relation is essential as a starting point and a continuous framework of support, but it is not enough by itself to ensure competent teaching. Many parents establish caring relations with their children but yet are unable to teach them what they need to know. They simply do not have the requisite knowledge. Teachers must know their subject matter well, but even that is not enough. As we listen to our students, we become aware that their interests are enormously varied. Not only are their individual interests various but the topics forced on them by the school are many and multifarious. As teachers, we must help students to bring these interests and topics together in ways that have meaning for them. Mathematics teachers, for example, must be able to draw on philosophy, biography, history, fiction, poetry, science, art, music, and current events. In doing this competently, teachers help students to make connections between school studies and great existential questions.

Such teaching also tends to increase students' fund of cultural knowledge. We sometimes forget just how powerful incidental learning can be. No responsible educator would claim that all significant learning can be achieved incidentally, but much that we acquire this way becomes more nearly permanent than the material deliberately transmitted and tested in the planned work of classrooms. The great privilege enjoyed by some children is that they have become participants in an on-going [conversation](#) with caring, knowledgeable adults. They pick up all sorts of wonderful things in these conversations. Teachers, like well-educated parents, can invite students into such conversations.

In conclusion

Earlier, I mentioned the philosopher, Wittgenstein, in connection with parents who seem to care in the virtue sense but fail dismally in establishing caring relations. If I were once again teaching a high school mathematics class, I would tell an additional story about Wittgenstein. He and Adolf Hitler were born six days apart in the same year (1889), and they attended the same secondary school (a couple years apart) in Linz, Austria. Neither man was capable of forming stable, loving relationships. But how is it that one was consumed by hatred and the other by heart-wrenching pity for the suffering of human-kind? This is the sort of story that might open a stimulating conversation that could lead in a number of directions depending on how students respond and how well prepared the teacher is to follow up promising leads.

Do these stories, then, become part of the regular curriculum? Should students be tested on their details? I should hope not! Stories such as these should be offered as free gifts—no “strings attached.” What is learned from caring teachers willing to share their

knowledge and their pleasure in learning is often incidental and very powerful precisely because it is given freely. We live in an age that concentrates too narrowly on the specification of what must be learned and on testing to be sure that it has indeed been learned. There should be time and space for free gifts in teaching. But notice, again, that the giving of such gifts requires great competence in teachers. They must have large repertoires at their fingertips and the artistry to use them well.

Caring relations also provide the best foundation for moral education. Teachers show students how to care, engage them in dialogue about moral life, supervise their practice in caring, and confirm them in developing their best selves. Character education, now very popular in the U.S., tries to inculcate moral virtues by direct instruction, but educators are then left with the problem of evaluating their efforts. How can we tell if the virtues have been acquired? In contrast, teachers who work from the care perspective are in constant touch with their students. Their evaluation follows much the same pattern as that of parents. Watching students, listening to them, working with them, living with them, teachers have a reasonably clear picture of how students are developing. There are no guarantees, of course. We cannot shape students as we do pottery. But the establishment and maintenance of caring relations provide a sound framework within which to conduct moral education.

Finally, we might note that educating from the care perspective reduces the need for formal testing. Hardly anyone would deny a need for some testing; if for nothing else, we need to test for diagnostic purposes. However, just as the need for formal evaluation in moral education becomes largely unnecessary, so the current demand for standardized testing should be minimized. The present insistence on more and more testing—even for young children—is largely a product of separation and lack of trust. When parents do not know the teachers of their children and teachers have not formed caring relationships with their students, it is predictable that demands for “accountability” would be heard. If no adult has time to spend with a child—shared time that yields dependable and supportive evaluation—then society looks for an easy and efficient way to evaluate: test, test, and test year after year. Then fear and competition take the place of eager anticipation and shared delight in learning. Although we may find out by such methods whether children have learned (at least temporarily) certain closely specified facts and skills, we do not get a full picture of what each unique child has learned and how he or she has built on the gifts we offer. What we learn in the daily reciprocity of caring goes far deeper than test results.

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Links

See the article in these pages: [Nel Noddings: the ethics of care and education](#).

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How to cite this article: Noddings, N. (2005) 'Caring in education', *the encyclopedia of informal education*, www.infed.org/biblio/noddings_caring_in_education.htm.

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