

Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education
Book Analysis

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Provide a critical analysis of *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* with reference to the Sinclair Paper *Have We Got the Cart Before the Horse?*.

I. Summarize the ethical theories and practices presented and their relationship (if any) to the Sinclair/Kohlberg Paradigm

Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education provides a compelling argument for the ethics of caring. Noddings is critical of traditional character education, and she presents care theory as a better way forward. The principle of caring forms the foundation of her ethical theory and she argues that the “ethic of care is grounded in the human condition” (Noddings, 148). Accordingly, Noddings’ theories emphasize a relational ethic, which informs her recommendations for educational practice:

Education should be organized around themes of care rather than the traditional disciplines. all students should be engaged in a general education that guides them in caring for self, intimate others, global others, plants, animals, the environment, objects and instruments, and ideas. moral life so defined should be frankly embraced as the main goal of educational achievement. 99

In order to teach caring, Noddings advocates for the inclusion of more conversation (formal, informal, and ordinary) into the classroom setting (118, 146). This practice is also firmly rooted in relation-focused theories of moral development, emphasizing that learning takes place in a social context and is dependent on the formation of trusting relationships. In order to achieve the ultimate goal of a moral society, Noddings argues that children must learn what it is like to care and be cared for. It is from this place of mutual caring that other moral attributes can grow.

At a basic level, Kohlberg and Noddings are concerned with teaching ethics and moral development. In fact, they also seem to agree on some techniques and practices for teaching practice, like the use of stories. Despite the shared focus on the question of how to create a more ethical society, there are major theoretical and practical differences between Noddings and Kohlberg. In her book, Noddings writes from a feminist perspective. She is of the opinion that other moral development theories and educational practices, like Kohlberg’s stages, are rooted in masculine values and written

from a “male” perspective. Her ethics of care applaud the value of caregiving roles, that have been traditionally female. Noddings argues that the ultimate goal of education should be the creation of caring relationships. While Kohlberg focuses on individual reasoning, Noddings is more concerned about the “maintenance and growth of moral relations” (22).

Noddings and Kohlberg differ greatly on their conception of the goal of ethics education. Noddings argues that one of the ultimate goals of moral education is to create people that are capable of caring and being gracious recipients of care. However, according to Kohlberg’s stage theory, this is only a stage three [3] level of moral reasoning, and in his view, there are more sophisticated levels of moral development to aspire to - ultimately autonomous morality, divorced from human relationships (Sinclair). Thus the ultimate aspiration, according to Kohlberg, is full autonomy, whereas Noddings ethic of care is fundamentally rooted in the creation and maintenance of relationships. Noddings explicitly states that she has reservations about the value of Kohlberg’s stages of reasoning in the classroom, and states that Kohlberg’s stages are “more suited to research than teaching (Noddings 64).”

Despite obvious differences, there is a place for both paradigms to be included in moral/ethical pedagogy. While Noddings is primarily concerned about the lack of the feminine experience in the phenomenologies of good and evil, she does not advocate for the exclusion of the masculine experience. Noddings states that both gendered perspectives should be represented in the school curriculum (102).

II. Comment on the relevance of the book to any hands on applicability re: both the professional and personal life of the student (eg. what, if any, is the direct value of this book to those working in the field of public health? what might be the personal usefulness to similar people? how does the book help address the various objectives of this course?)

This book is academically-focused, with most of the practical suggestions pertaining specifically to teachers in schools. However, the concepts surrounding the ethics of care can be extrapolated and applied to the field of public health, particularly the work done in health promotion with youth and in schools.

The ethics of care echos the underlying motivation behind resiliency-focused programming in the health unit. Research on the developmental assets supports many of Noddings' arguments. Noddings describes students who are able to survive in the face of difficulty:

Students must believe that the adults in their schools and communities care about them and that their well-being and growth matter. Kids seem to be able to survive material poverty, and many can ignore much of the violence in the media - or at least keep its effects to a minimum - if they have continuing relationships with adults who obviously care for them (26).

This ability to succeed despite adversity is the very definition of a resilient youth. Research shows that resilient youth possess developmental assets. The developmental assets are forty [40] positive experiences and qualities that are the “building blocks” that young people need to grow up healthy and responsible (Search Institute). The more assets a child or youth possesses, the less likely he/she is to engage in high-risk behaviors, including risky sexual behavior, substance misuse, tobacco use, violent behavior and dropping out of school (Standards, Programs, and Community). As highlighted above, the presence of supportive, caring adult relationships is a key factor in the success of children and youth in dealing with difficulty. Additionally, caring neighbourhoods, caring school environments, and communities that values youth are other key developmental assets that Noddings' writing supports. The concept of “care ethics” are fully embedded in the developmental asset approach to programming, which has been adopted as a best-practice for public health units. This approach has shifted programming approaches from single-risk factor interventions (eg. addressing substance use, sexual behavior, or nutrition) to a comprehensive health promotion approach.

Noddings also advocates for expanding the role of schools, as not just an academic institution, but a school should be a “full service school” that promotes a caring environment. The Ontario Public Health Mandate, and corresponding School Health Guidance Document emphasizes the importance of “health promoting schools” or the “whole school approach” as the best-practice in promoting physical, mental and psychosocial health (Standards, Programs & Community). Health promotion literature supports Noddings' assertion that the creation of a caring school climate has a positive influence on academic performance. Research on comprehensive school health

programs have shown a positive relationship with school-level academic indicators (Rosas, Case and Tholstrup; A Correlational Study).

Noddings' book also contains information with personal resonance for me. I volunteer for the Harmony Program in which volunteer music teachers lead music lessons for high-risk youth. In exchange from free lessons, youth participants pay-it-forward by volunteering in elsewhere in the community. The ethics of caring and the goals of this program are supported by Noddings' work. While we do hope to impart tangible musical skills through the lessons, the more important consideration is providing positive adult role models, cultivating civic engagement and building trusting relationships between the volunteers and the youth participants. I feel like the most valuable impact of the program has been the conversations and the relationships that have developed. This is what Noddings argues should be the goal of education. While this after-school program is not a part of the mainstream educational setting, it has been a very positive experience to be involved and to see the trust and relationship building. Noddings emphasizes the need for continuity in order to sustain caring relationships. This is a challenge for the Harmony program, as it is for many other volunteer-based initiatives. While little funding is required for the program, it looks like many of the instructors will be moving on after this year due to other commitments (further schooling, job opportunities etc.). It will difficult to re-build the Harmony program. Continuity continues to be an issue, particularly in volunteer and non-profit work, because funding priorities are constantly changing and the nature of work has people moving more frequently, which has led to some of the difficulties in establishing supportive and strong communities.

There were numerous themes highlighted in *Moral Education* that align with my views and thus had particular resonance. Some of these themes include the basic idea that people are social creatures and need relationships to make meaning out of life. In the words of Noddings "Human beings are social animals. We seek not only love and companionship but civic association. The longing for community arises from a deep need to feel part of something larger than ourselves" (Noddings, 65). In my earlier community development work, I saw this need to be included in the community first-hand. This was confirmed in a compelling way when I observed the devastating health implications of exclusion and marginalization. Despite the need for more kindness,

compassion, and care in our immediate surroundings, I have also seen many well-intentioned “Mrs. Jellybys” who are so preoccupied with distant suffering that they are unable to recognize the needs of those immediately around themselves. This theme was alluded to in the film *Sargent Shriver: The American Idealist*. One of the interviewees indicated that working with Sargent Shriver was exhausting and difficult, because he was so focused on alleviating the suffering of others around the world, through the Peace Corps and the War on Poverty, that he seemed oblivious to the needs of those directly in his purview.

III. Include a general comment on the overall degree of readability and interest that the book possesses, aside for any direct applicability to this course and or the environmental health field.

In *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education*, Noddings provides the theoretical underpinning for a shift in educational policy and practice. While she provides compelling arguments for ethics of caring, the role of conversation, and the necessity of the inclusion of feminist perspectives in education, the overall writing style of the book is heavy-handed and relies heavily on elevated, academic language.

While I did find many of the topics to have resonance with my personal experience, I did not feel Noddings provided clear, applicable guidance necessary to transform practice. The book was highly theoretical and provided few practical strategies. While one of the stated goals of the book is to transform education, I did not think she provided clear instruction on how her ethical theories could be incorporated into the educational system. Further, due to the highly theoretical nature of her writing, I found it difficult to find suggestions that could be applied in the public health context. Noddings does highlight many interesting topics, and she writes from a feminist perspective, which is refreshing. While I did appreciate her holistic approach to education, which can be extrapolated to comprehensive health promotion work, I was disappointed in the book. Brought down from the academic stratosphere, this book would have been much more compelling if there was clearer application to real-world, contemporary issues.

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