

# School Counsellors and the Ethics of Care

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## Abstract

Noddings (1984) claims that human caring and the memory of being cared for must be given a central place in education. Her underlying assumption for this claim is that caring teacher–pupil relationships not only enhance the intellectual development of students but also promote their social, emotional, and thinking skills by creating a safe learning environment. Counsellors can play a critical role in promoting caring relationships in schools. Noddings’ ethics of care approach, and its critique, provides a strong theoretical foundation for guidance counsellors in promoting this concept in schools.

## Introduction

The role of counsellors in promoting caring teacher–pupil relationships has received surprisingly little attention in the published literature. Their role has traditionally involved caring for students, by providing individual or group counselling, and being a consultant to staff in classroom-related matters (Lewis, 1992). However, increased demand for their services has confined some counsellors more and more to their offices, leaving less time to provide direction for school-wide programmes. This paper constructs an argument for counsellors to play an increased role in promoting caring relationships. It begins by reviewing the literature on the ethics of care, based on the seminal work of educational philosopher Nel Noddings (1984), from which the theoretical basis of the argument is derived. This is followed by a selective critique of “an ethics of care” through the work of other educational thinkers, highlighting a number of weaknesses. The paper concludes with a discussion of the role of counsellors in promoting an ethics of care in schools.

## Literature review

Recent decades have seen a revival of discussions in educational literature around the subject of educating the “good citizen” (advocated by Dewey in 1916) and the emergence of discussions on the importance of caring in schools (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings,

1984). Despite these voices, however, the predominant emphasis – both in the literature and in practice – has remained on the development of cognitive abilities, and intellectual skills among students (Schaeffer, 1998), and the “results are everything” approach has become increasingly popular (McGill, 2001).

One view is that the purpose of schooling is to enable individuals to be life-long learners and prepared for their lives ahead (Cohen, 2001). If this perspective is accepted, then one might ask if there is a place for teaching social, emotional and reflective thinking skills in the school programme, given the importance of these skills in the course of life, or whether we should instead continue with the assumption that these skills are taught by parents or learned spontaneously in social settings such as schools, churches and sports clubs. The need to attend to “the whole child” is not a new viewpoint (Boyd, 1993; Mayeroff, 1971; Schaeffer, 1998). The main issue is why some teachers have failed to respond to “the whole child” in practice. It is therefore timely to examine Noddings’ concept of the ethics of care as it relates to holistic teacher–student relationships, and to ask if there is a role for school counsellors in promoting it.

Ethics, as the philosophical study of morality, has mainly been concerned with “moral” reasoning and the establishment of principles that can be logically derived. These include principles such as justification, fairness and justice, among others (Noddings, 1984). Noddings moves the discussion of ethics beyond the sphere of logical inferences. She suggests that the concept of caring, a logical *non sequitur* in comparison with many of the traditional subjects with which ethics and moral philosophy are concerned, must hold a central position in discussions of the ethics of education.

The concept of caring has been discussed under many terms: compassion, empathy, feeling, emotion, love, concern, confirmation and recognition of another. All of these are, to some extent, synonyms and manifestations of the concept of caring. But given the vagueness and subjective nature of these terms, a range of interpretations is possible, and objective study of the subject becomes difficult. Noddings addresses this problem by developing a conceptual model of an ethics of care (1984).

In order to establish her conceptual foundation free of equivocation, Noddings (1984) gives distinct names to the two parties involved in the care relationship. The first member is the *one-caring* (i.e. the one who expresses care); the second is the *cared-for* (i.e. the one who receives care). Noddings contends that naming allows us to speak about these basic entities without explaining the entire conceptual apparatus repeatedly, and it prevents the “smuggling” of meaning through the use of synonyms.

Caring, as described by Noddings, involves engrossment and motivational displacement by the one-caring in the direction of the cared-for. This implies that the one-caring must have strong empathy with the cared-for and must be motivated to act

on the cared-for's desires and needs, and this must be received by the cared-for. In the educational context, the relationship of the one-caring (i.e. the teacher) is focused and centred on the cared-for (i.e. the student). Noddings suggests that what is most valuable in the teaching–learning relationship are the attitudes and characteristics that are demonstrated through acquaintance and are understood as caring by students. As a result, the mannerisms of the teacher, or even a glance in the direction of the student, may express the general sentiment, “I care about you.”

What conditions are necessary for caring to occur? Engrossment by the one-caring is one condition. Engrossment, or a desire or regard for another's (or others') well-being, does not need to be intense or invasive on the part of the one-caring; the concept does not force caring into the model of romantic love. Instead, unlike romantic love, the engrossment of caring is devoid of self-interest. According to Noddings, pedagogical caring is developed from the analysis of caring itself and not from the formal requirements of teaching as a profession. It is in this empathetic pedagogical relationship that Noddings finds growth and development for the student. To care is to attend to the “whole person”. In this approach, the teacher goes beyond providing intellectual education by also responding to pupils' needs to learn about loving and caring relationships in order to survive the complexities of conflict, pain and trouble that often accompany life.

Two further aspects are generally considered by Noddings to be necessary components of caring: first, the trustful acceptance of the care-receiver by the care-sender; and second, the presence of actions that tangibly demonstrate care. This implies that the student (i.e. the one who receives the care) must trust the teacher and accept his or her actions as caring, and that the teacher (i.e. the one giving care) must perform actions that tangibly demonstrate these intentions. To care, according to Noddings, is to be in a relationship where *both* parties contribute to the relation: i.e. that caring must not only be given, it must also be received. This suggests that the ethics to be developed is one of reciprocity, but this view of reciprocity is not that of contracting. There is not a promise on the part of either party to behave in a certain way. Instead, the focus is on how to meet morally. This arises out of natural caring, the relation that the one-caring enters out of love or natural inclination and the cared-for accepts as caring (Noddings, 1984). Noddings further contends that natural caring is a human condition that people consciously or unconsciously perceive as “good”. It is a condition which most humans strive toward and long for, and it is this longing for a caring relationship that provides the motivation for morality in relationships.

To care for students in the most significant sense is to help them grow. This concept is much revered by counsellors. By serving them through caring, teachers teach not

through domination but through caring and by providing opportunities for students to “feel cared for” (Mayeroff, 1971, p.1). Caring is a way of relating to someone that involves development – in this case, like a teacher caring for students by assisting them to care not only about themselves but also about others, and thus take responsibility for themselves and for others alike (Mayeroff, 1971). As such, caring has both intrinsic and instrumental value in education. Intrinsic because of people’s inherent preference for caring relationships, and instrumental because of its impact on learning and the development of essential social, emotional and intellectual competencies on the part of students.

### Problems

Critics of Noddings question the role of the cared-for in this reciprocal relationship. Their concern is the teachers’ capacity to maintain a caring relationship in the absence of a favourable response from students, or the difficulty in caring for all students when faced with a large class of students. For example, Terrence (1995) asserts that reciprocity is not a necessary component of caring. Instead, he contends that caring can happen without the care-recipient responding or accepting the care-giver’s offers or efforts, and that to care in anything approaching an ideal sense has nothing to do with the response. He admits, however, that it may be difficult to keep on caring when no clear feedback is provided. Good teachers typically try to keep on caring – even in the absence of feedback – by remaining attentive to their students’ needs and trying different ways to teach them, i.e. to gain their response. Terrence further argues that some teachers whose classes are heterogeneous, multicultural and crowded experience conflict, difficulty and stress in trying to meet authoritarian expectations, and that even if such teachers aspire to cultivate the disposition of co-operative inquiry and connectedness, the authoritative structures usually in place in schools, and the education system’s demand to produce “outcomes”, make it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve this.

Another critical point in practice relates to the Noddings’ notion of engrossment. Her notion of engrossment involves total empathy with students’ motivations and desires. Noddings ignores the shortcomings and frailties of “human nature” and neglects the possibility that extended efforts to offer care may, if unreciprocated by the cared-for, lead to feelings of resentment and bitterness on the part of the one-caring. If caring leads to the expectation of reciprocity, and if these expectations are unfulfilled, the one-caring (i.e. the teacher) can develop damaging and unhealthy sentiments – e.g. “after all I have done for you ...” – that in turn can impede the relationship and be harmful to the cared-for, i.e. the student.

Also relevant to this discussion is Noddings' expectation that there will be an action component to caring. When considering the *act* of caring as an integral part of the caring process, are we saying that the teacher who does not follow a student who storms out of the classroom is failing to care? If Noddings is correct, and if action is indeed an important part of an ethics of care, then a simplistic interpretation might conclude that this scenario represents an absence of care. At times, however, a lack of apparent action does not imply the absence of care. In this case it might be an indication that the teacher respects the right of the student to take time out, or that the right of the teacher or other students has been transgressed and an appropriate disciplinary consequence within the structure of the school must follow before the student is permitted to regain entry to the class.

To further illustrate the practical implication of Noddings' view on the action component of caring, one can imagine a teacher who, in desiring to care for a student, learns everything she or he possibly can about the student's circumstances and discovers that the parents are unemployed and under punishing financial burden. Let us further suppose that this caring teacher finds the time and resources to assist them financially, and that all this is done out of sincere love, willingly and cheerfully. What happens if the parents want to be independent of others or have a latent longing in this direction? Can we say that the teacher's act was caring? This too would be a simplistic interpretation, as such actions – however well-intentioned – are likely to cause hurt and embarrassment contrary to the intentions of caring and respecting individuals' rights to decide what is good for them within the boundaries defined and accepted by society.

Yet another point of debate about Noddings' model of care relates to the responsibility of the teacher to decide whether to enter a caring relationship. Would this choice involve selecting a few to enter into this relationship with? Or should it imply the inclusion of all whom one teaches? To choose a few is to deny others, which may be interpreted as an uncaring act of exclusion, while attempting to enter into caring relationships with *all* students is likely to stretch one's emotional resources to their full or beyond, resulting in premature burn-out. Small classes do facilitate this process, however for this to happen schools need financial and human resources often beyond their means.

Concern has also been expressed with regard to the notion of caring being *received* by the student (Terrence, 1995); i.e. the student must see, feel and accept the teacher's behaviour as caring for caring to have happened (Noddings, 1984). This puts the responsibility for the success or failure of the caring relationship entirely on the one-caring, i.e. the teacher. Although the student's feeling of being cared for is an indication

of the teacher's success in caring, the absence of this feeling cannot automatically be said to indicate a lack of care on the part of the teacher. This notion presents another dilemma. What if the student's needs – i.e. those feelings that make him or her feel cared for – are undesirable and not in his or her best interests? For example, should the teacher oblige for the sake of a student's satisfaction and good feelings when the student does not feel like completing homework, or would like to take time out to go shopping, or desires to play loud music in class interrupting the learning of others? I suggest not. In these cases acceptance of the student's desires (advocated for by Noddings) is the antithesis of the notion of care. I also propose that not all students are developmentally and experientially qualified to decide what will ultimately profit them the most.

A further issue arising from Noddings' notion of care is the possibility of multiple simultaneous demands on the teacher. If caring is intended to please the cared-for, which one of the student's demands should the one-caring respond to, particularly when the teacher is faced with contradictory needs for school achievement versus the need to attend to parents' requirements such as taking time off school to babysit, care for elders, or perform religious duties?

Applebaum (1998) highlights a problem with regard to the application of Noddings' concept of care, and maintains that to accept caring as inherently "good" without consideration of the social, economic and political context in which caring occurs, is to impede the ability to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate caring. Applebaum does not deny the value of caring, but is adamant that it must be viewed in the context of social, political and economic relations and not independent of them. Similarly, Boler (1999) points out that discussion of emotions, including care, must pay careful attention to differences in culture, socio-economic positioning, gender, race and class. She claims that "the dominant culture applies inconsistent norms and rules to different communities; likewise, each culture reflect their own internal norms and values with respect to emotional rules, expressions, and variable modes of resistance to the dominant culture's values" (p. 8). This will have implications for Noddings' position in terms of who will decide what constitutes care in the face of these differences influencing the pupil-teacher relationship.

Beck and Kosnik (1995) argue for "taking care when caring for students" but they caution against being too careful and not providing the warmth students so badly need. What they are chiefly concerned about is "emotionless schooling". They note the increasing demand for proficiency in the three "R's"; for clear, logical thinking; and for higher standards of achievement in science, mathematics, history, literature and the like. They express disappointment at finding limited discussions of love, and for

mastery of the “three C’s” (care, concern and connection), in contemporary curricula. To Beck and Kosnik, schools should concentrate on creating an environment in which students of all races, classes and cultures feel cared for.

The education literature often calls for the creation of an emotionally safe, trusting environment in the classroom (Cohen, 2001; Mayeroff, 1971; Noddings, 1984; Shaeffer, 1998). In response to those who feel teacher–student caring relationships may lead to noisy and unproductive classrooms, Mayeroff (1971) suggests that warmth, love, tenderness and care toward students do not necessarily lead to a chaotic classroom. Instead, with thoughtfulness and clear boundaries, a productive but friendly classroom environment can be created in which order is preserved, but not at the expense of love, tenderness and care. To achieve this successfully, Beck and Kosnik (1995) emphasise the importance of mutually discussed arrangements. These arrangements are class rules and guidelines arrived at through consultation, and apply to both the teacher and students. They also note that it is not enough for teachers to like and care about students, but that students must learn to care about each other.

The desirability of caring in student–teacher relationships is firmly established in the literature (Beck & Kosnik, 1995; Boyd, 1993; Noddings, 1984). What remains debatable is how to address the questions left unanswered by Noddings and if there is a role for school counsellors in promoting the concept of care in the classroom.

### **The potential role of guidance counsellors**

Despite their ever-increasing responsibilities and the rising demands placed on them, school counsellors have done and continue to do a remarkable job in meeting students’ needs (Worzbyt & Zook, 1992). Worzbyt and Zook acknowledge school counsellors’ limited resources in terms of time, finances, equipment and personnel, and they recognise how these can be responsible for the frustrations experienced by some counsellors. However, they suggest that rather than concentrating on resource issues alone, the solution to these frustrations may also lie in shifting the emphasis of the counsellors’ role from one of service provision to one of leadership.

Leadership has been defined in many ways, for example providing direction, searching for opportunities, challenging the *status quo* and introducing creative solutions and pathways. Kouzes and Posner (1987) identify five practices in leaders who manage to gain a significant positive change for their organisations. These leaders challenge existing process, inspire a shared vision, enable others to act, model the desired behaviour, and encourage forward movement.

School counsellors are the only people who have both the time allocation and the responsibility to take a leadership role in providing a comprehensive approach to

the care of students. Academic staff, while committed to caring principles, have knowledge transfer and assessment as their primary responsibilities, while administrative staff typically have their hands full with managerial matters. Counsellors, for all their responsibilities, face fewer such constraints. They occupy an inherently prominent role and have specialist training and a knowledge of student experiences that makes them especially well-suited to a leadership role in promoting an ethics of care in schools. School counsellors hold a key position of responsibility in schools. This gives them the opportunity to breathe new life into existing school processes by introducing an ethics of care for debate amongst the staff, inspiring them to be part of a team, and advocating for and modelling caring.

How then might this be accomplished? An important first step would be to engender school and community support and lead the way in implementing school-wide caring practices. As part of a holistic approach to caring for students, counsellors often work with families and other community agencies, and these contacts are a source of support when introducing a concept such as caring, which is seen by most as inherently good, into school processes. A more obvious first step is for counsellors to make a choice regarding their own position in the process. According to Worzby and Zook (2002), this involves deciding whether to maintain the *status quo* of school counselling or to show leadership in promoting caring relationships in the school. Such clarity is essential if counsellors are to be effective in creating sustainable change based on an ethics of care.

The journey involves a wide range of other steps and practices, such as identifying opportunities to introduce the idea of developing caring relationship with students; showing a willingness to take risks; seeing mistakes and barriers as learning moments and challenges to be overcome; enlisting the support of teachers, administrators, Boards of Trustees, ancillary staff and community volunteers; maintaining a high degree of enthusiasm in spite of setbacks; arriving at a shared vision within the school community; personally modelling care in one's own practice; and playing a major role in maintaining the courage, enthusiasm and spirit of others as they sign up to the process and agree to adopt it in the school.

Counsellors can adopt a variety of ways to accomplish a caring approach within schools. At one end of the spectrum, direct teaching and detailed instructions can be provided and a concept of caring can be introduced didactically, for example in the same type of stand-alone course that might be used to teach a language or some other skill. This might involve such things as the teaching of "reflective skills". At the other end of the spectrum are "modelling" approaches. These are based on the belief that consistent modelling of behaviour (in this case, caring behaviours and attitudes) will

result in its adoption by the target group (Mayeroff, 1971). The modeller might be the counsellor and the adopters the teachers, or the modellers might be the teachers and the adopters the students. One can also choose a middle ground with combinations of the two approaches. Whichever path is chosen, a key point to remember is that schools and their communities have different needs and different characteristics. The success of any care-promoting initiative will depend on the extent to which the approach is tailored to the unique needs and circumstances of each setting. “Cookie-cutter” approaches (producing one model of caring for all) seldom allow much scope for this kind of tailoring and adaptation. Given the vital role of staff as flag-bearers, and their intimate knowledge of their school’s unique characteristics, their input must be given a central place. Staff need to be given opportunities to clarify unresolved issues *vis-à-vis* the caring approach; identify potential difficulties associated with this concept, such as those found in Noddings’ model of caring; and then encouraged to offer their opinions toward the development of a shared vision of caring and how to promote it. This principle also applies during the implementation process, where it manifests as the need for a reflective questioning that enables participants to ask questions such as: “What are we trying to achieve?” “What are the potential difficulties?” “How are we going about it?” “How can we bring all stakeholders on board?” “What approaches will work?” “How will we know it works?” and “How should we evaluate it?” This is essential to building and maintaining a shared vision and commitment among all participants.

It is important to acknowledge the complexity of working in schools. Most teachers are committed to caring principles, but they are faced with a multitude of demands from administrators, parents, students and society at large that makes caring for students in the context of their social, political, economic and cultural experiences a daunting task. However, teachers are in a powerful position and have a choice to practise, or not practise, caring. Not all students will respond or come to recognise and appreciate caring, but this should not be a barrier to practising it within the classroom setting. As professionals charged with the responsibility for their students, teachers need to be given opportunities and support towards developing a caring approach.

## Conclusion

It is clear that school counsellors play a major role in caring for students. They are in a unique position to extend this care to classrooms by promoting an ethics of care as a pattern for relationships between teachers and students. The visibility and unique professional training of guidance counsellors puts them in an ideal position to pursue

such changes. This is an opportunity to have a vision to nurture, to practise leadership and management skills in transforming this vision into reality, and to demonstrate power and political skills to support the birth of new ideas and processes in the school (Worzbyt & Zook, 1992).

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