

TEACHERS AS MORAL AGENTS: THE ETHICS OF CARE AND EDUCATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji tentang etika kepedulian melalui konsep yang dikembangkan oleh para pemikir ulung, seperti Nel Noddings dan Joan Tronto. Konsep tersebut dapat diintegrasikan secara efektif ke dalam praktik pendidikan. Etika kepedulian menekankan pentingnya perhatian terhadap orang lain dan lingkungan melalui tindakan nyata, sebuah prinsip yang sangat relevan dalam konteks pendidikan. Berdasarkan tinjauan literatur dari karya-karya kunci tentang etika kepedulian, penelitian ini secara khusus menggunakan kerangka Noddings sebagai lensa analitis primer. Hasil temuan menyoroti bahwa kolaborasi antara guru dan siswa sangat krusial untuk menumbuhkan karakter peduli. Selain itu, teladan dan dukungan dari lingkungan sekitar sangat penting untuk memotivasi individu sehingga dapat memberikan kontribusi positif yang substansial kepada masyarakat dan lingkungan. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa peserta didik muda, termasuk mereka yang berkebutuhan khusus mampu memberikan kontribusi positif yang signifikan bagi masyarakat dan lingkungan. Sebagai simpulan, pendidikan yang berakar pada etika kepedulian tidak hanya mendukung perkembangan moral siswa, tetapi juga menjadi fondasi untuk memupuk generasi yang lebih empati dan bertanggung jawab secara sosial.

Kata kunci: etika kepedulian, pendidikan karakter, pendekatan relasional, agen moral

Abstract

This article examines the ethics of care through the concepts developed by prominent thinkers in the field, such as Nel Noddings and Joan Tronto. Their concepts can be effectively integrated into educational practices. The ethics of care emphasizes the significance of attending to others and our environment through concrete actions, a principle especially pertinent within educational settings.

Drawing upon a comprehensive literature review of key works on the ethics of care, this study primarily utilizes Noddings' framework as its foundational analytical lens. The findings highlight that collaboration between teachers and students is crucial for cultivating a caring character. Furthermore, positive role models and support from the surrounding environment are vital in motivating individuals, thus enabling them to give positive contributions to society and the environment. This demonstrates that young learners, including those with special needs, can make significant positive contributions to society and the environment. In conclusion, education rooted in the ethics of care not only supports students' moral development but also lays the groundwork for fostering a more empathetic and socially responsible generation.

Keywords: *ethics of care, character education, relational approach, moral agents*

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INTRODUCTION

Across many school systems, education struggles to keep pace with today's ethical demands, including accelerating ecological degradation, widening social fragmentation, and policy regimes that prioritize what is easily measured over what most needs cultivating, like empathy, responsibility, and relational understanding. As curricular standards and assessments crowd out relational work, classroom life risks becoming technical and transactional rather than formative. Such matters are influenced by how teachers, as model role models, respond to that care deficit in schooling.

While scholarship in the ethics of care has long argued that care is both a moral orientation and a practice (Noddings, 2005; Tronto, 2013, 2020), its implications are still unevenly realized in everyday pedagogy and teacher preparation. Too often, moral formation is treated as an add-on, rather than as the organizing principle of school life.

A powerful example of the urgent need for the ethics of care in education can be seen in Greta Thunberg's action. In August 2018, Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old Swedish student, staged a solo protest outside the Swedish parliament with a sign reading 'School strike for climate' (skolstrejk för klimatet), an act that sparked the global Fridays for Future movement. Her action, initially perceived as unusual, rapidly gained media attention and public support, evolving into a worldwide youth-led initiative that demanded urgent political action to combat climate change. This movement has since become a powerful symbol of ecological concern and intergenerational responsibility, amplifying young people's voices in the face of global inaction.

Through the *Fridays for Future* movement, Greta Thunberg mobilized her schoolmates to stage regular Friday demonstrations, urging governments to implement science-based climate policies that prioritize ecological sustainability and intergenerational justice over short-term economic gain. Her initial solo protest, though unconventional, quickly gained widespread media attention and evolved into a global youth-led campaign. Central to this movement is a call for global solidarity grounded in moral concern for the Earth's sustainability and biodiversity. Her appeals to care for the planet and for future generations, reflecting the ethical sensibility articulated by Joan Tronto, whose theory of care emphasizes attentiveness, responsibility, and the recognition of interdependence between human and non-human life (Tronto, 2013). The resonance between Thunberg's activism and Tronto's framework illustrates a shared vision of ecological justice rooted in relational care and collective responsibility (Gorman et al., 2024).

The significance of moral education lies in its capacity to awaken ethical sensitivity, and this includes helping students recognize their responsibilities toward others and the environment. As Tronto (2020) notes, when individuals say "I don't care," it does not necessarily reflect disinterest but rather a lack of moral engagement. For Tronto, care is not just an emotional attitude but a practice—an active, relational commitment to sustaining and

improving the world. Drawing on Fisher, Tronto defines care as “a species of activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Tronto, 2020: 18). Similarly, Barnes (2012) and de la Bellacasa (2017) emphasize that care includes both moral reasoning and embodied action—whether through interpersonal relationships, environmental stewardship, or civic participation. In this context, care becomes a framework not only for ethical living but also for transformative education, capable of shaping the way students relate to others and to the Earth.

Therefore, there is a need to explore the ethics of care in educational contexts, particularly focusing on how teachers can cultivate caring relationships that contribute to students’ moral development and ethical awareness. The urgency of this study arises from the increasing disconnect between formal education and the lived ethical challenges faced by younger generations—ranging from ecological degradation to social fragmentation. As schools continue to emphasize measurable outcomes and standardized knowledge, there is a growing need to reassert the moral dimension of teaching. It is arguable that centering the ethic of care, understood as attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness, should be a primary aim and structuring logic of schooling (Noddings, 2005; Tronto, 2013). Practically, this means relational and dialogical teaching, continuity in teacher–student relationships, ethical neutrality that recognizes each student as an individual, and explicit cultivation of ecological responsibility as part of civic formation.

Following the issue of disconnect between formal education and the lived ethical challenge, this study employs a qualitative-interpretative approach, drawing from feminist care ethics, environmental pedagogy, and critical reflections on moral education in practice. The discussion is structured into three key sections. The first section outlines the philosophical foundations of care ethics. The second explores teachers’ roles in the ethics of caring using Greta Thunberg as a representative case. Finally, the third

section reflects on how teachers who model care and sustain reciprocal relationships help cultivate empathy, a sense of responsibility, and environmental engagement with their students as potential future citizens of the world.

DISCUSSION

Noddings (2015, 2018) relates caring as part of moral education and divides it into four components: *Example* (modelling), *Dialogue*, *Action* (practice), and *Confirmation* in education. In the *modelling* component, teachers should pay attention to the development of their students as carers among the cared for. Teachers must be models of what it means to care for their students through every aspect of their behavior. Caring is not taught through textbooks but through teachers' actions that show a caring attitude in their interactions, i.e., their students at school, between colleagues, parents, and – if possible – everyone they encounter.

Another essential element of care in education is dialogue. Caring relationships are nurtured through meaningful and sustained dialogue between teachers and students, as well as among peers. Since care can be expressed in various ways, teachers need to encourage students to critically examine different behaviors and consider their emotional and ethical responses. For instance, a teacher may treat all students equally in the name of justice. However, such uniform treatment does not always translate into each student feeling genuinely cared for. Today, many students experience a sense of obligation to care in return when they feel deeply cared for by their teachers. This sense of reciprocity opens the space for reflection and ethical inquiry. Teachers can facilitate this process through intentional dialogue—conversations that invite students to articulate their perspectives and evaluate their own caring practices. Dialogue thus becomes a medium through which students explore the nuances of moral responsibility, fairness, and empathy. As Noddings (2015) asserts, authentic care involves a willingness to engage with others as they are, affirming their individuality and freedom. She refers to this form of acceptance as

an engagement grounded in relational ethics. In this sense, dialogue is not merely a tool for exchanging ideas; it becomes an entryway into understanding what it means to care and be cared for in the educational context.

Practice or *action* in moral education may take the form of training children to care as a way to form good behaviors. To create individuals who are concerned for others, we must invite students to act in a caring way towards others and reflect on their actions. Showing them how open dialogue helps them understand why caring is essential. In addition, there is also cooperative learning; teachers must explain to students that the purpose of collaborative learning is to help, understand, share, and support each other. This ability means that teachers can learn from their students while the students learn from their teachers through actions. Cooperative learning was a system where they did something together to achieve their goal.

Confirmation or affirmation involves recognizing and supporting the best qualities in others (Noddings, 2014, as cited in Nucci et al., 2014: 171). A closely related concept is discernment, which has been described in recent care ethics scholarship as the capacity to perceive and respond thoughtfully to the needs of others. For instance, Seton Bennett (2023) defines discernment as the process through which caring agents identify what is truly needed by those in their care and respond with attentiveness, empathy, and moral judgment—thus enabling individuals to feel recognized and valued. In educational contexts, this means valuing students not merely by judging their actions, but by seeking to understand their intentions and responding in ways that affirm their dignity and potential for growth (Bennett, 2023). Therefore, trust and persistence are indispensable in affirmation. Persistence is essential because caring requires a continuous effort to understand others, even when it becomes difficult or emotionally demanding. It reflects a commitment to stay engaged in a caring relationship over time. Meanwhile, trust ensures that the caregiver is perceived as sincere and dependable, fostering a climate where care can be received

openly. Together, these elements support the caregiver's credibility and reinforce the search for understanding the other's intentions. Recognizing these four components—attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness—enables teachers to frame care as a deliberate pedagogical practice, strengthening the rationale for applying an ethic of care in teaching and learning.

In addition to Noddings' four components of moral education, Tronto (2020) offers a complementary perspective by identifying four distinct phases of care. First, *caring about* refers to recognizing the needs of others—whether individuals or groups—as shaped by both cultural and personal contexts. Second, *taking care of* involves assuming responsibility and responding to those needs through intentional action. Third, *caregiving* is the practical phase in which care is physically enacted, often requiring direct interaction with the person or object being cared for. Finally, *care-receiving* occurs when the recipient of care responds, providing feedback that may confirm the adequacy of the care or highlight areas requiring further attention. This dynamic exchange emphasizes that caring is not a one-sided act but a relational process that evolves through mutual responsiveness.

Beyond the four main phases, Tronto (2020) identifies further important aspects that deepen our understanding of care. First, caring is not only an action but also involves emotional engagement and thoughtful reflection. This idea aligns with Ruddick's (1989) view of *maternal thinking* as a form of practical reasoning, though later scholars, such as Keller (2010), have reframed it to avoid essentialism by emphasizing care as an ethical and culturally sensitive practice. Engster (2007) similarly argues that care requires emotional intelligence and attentiveness, grounded in both reason and moral commitment. Second, Tronto expands the understanding of care beyond its basic phases by drawing attention to the complexities within care relationships. She emphasizes that care is not free from tension; for instance, situations may arise where individuals resist being cared for in order to maintain their autonomy. She also discusses the ongoing negotiation between

universal care obligations—such as helping anyone in need—and particularistic practices shaped by cultural and relational contexts. Furthermore, Tronto argues that effective care requires concrete resources: time, skills, and access to supportive environments. Most importantly, care must fulfill a threshold of meaningful concern, fostering a sense of belonging, value, and recognition within a community. These insights illustrate that care is far from being a private or sentimental act; rather, it is a political and ethical practice embedded in relational and structural dynamics.

This understanding aligns with Barnes (2012) and Taylor (2017), who affirm that Tronto's phases of care unfold both at the personal level and as a form of collective responsibility. Caring is not confined to individual moral action but is embedded in social structures, requiring shared commitment. They emphasize the mutuality in care processes, where both the caregiver and the recipient engage emotionally and ethically. Building on this, Noddings (1986, 2013) and Caine et al. (2020) note that care is often associated with the feminine, based on assumptions about women's natural emotional dispositions. However, such assumptions have been challenged by scholars like de la Bellacasa (2017), who reframe care as an ethical relation grounded in connectivity and situated interdependence. This shift opens the way for a broader ethics of care that transcends essentialist gender views and repositions care as a critical, inclusive, and transformative practice.

1. Rethinking Morality through the Ethics of Care

The ethics of care, as articulated by Nel Noddings, originates from the concept of natural caring—a spontaneous, emotionally grounded form of care that emerges within close relationships. While natural caring requires no deliberation, *ethical caring* demands conscious commitment, especially when natural affection is absent. Noddings introduces morality as an active virtue, rooted in two emotional experiences: first, the instinctive sentiment of natural caring (e.g., a mother caring for her child), and second, the reflective

sentiment that arises when we recall such caring moments (Damayanti, 2022: 48).

Noddings juxtaposes different moral philosophies: Kantian ethics stresses duty and rational obligation, whereas Humean ethics, through her interpretation, values emotion and “active goodness” in moral life. For Noddings, the ethics of care aligns with virtue ethics (Noddings, as cited in Damayanti, 2022: 49), where moral growth is nurtured through relational responsiveness. This inner moral imperative is expressed through what she calls the “I must” — a sense of obligation born from care, not imposed externally (Noddings, 1986; Zhang & Zheng, 2021). Tronto (2020) builds on this by asserting that care is fundamental to moral theory and particularly relevant to the lived experiences of women. She argues that “caring enough” is a high moral ideal, yet not a given; it must be cultivated. Similarly, Noddings (2015) views care not only as emotional responsiveness but also as a relational commitment, shaped by ethical awareness.

In examining the ethical discourse around care, two key challenges emerge. First, language often minimizes the moral dimension of care by focusing on success or failure rather than intention or sincerity. This linguistic framing reduces care to outcomes, undermining its ethical weight. Second, language sometimes obscures responsibility. For instance, phrases like “it happened naturally” can excuse individuals from actively engaging in care (Tronto, 2020). These tendencies reveal the complexity of care as a practice—not merely a sentiment or rule, but an integrated moral action that combines specific actions with general dispositions (Engster, 2004). From this perspective, care is not a detached moral duty but a response to real human needs, embedded in concrete relationships (Noddings, 2013). It affirms our social nature and reminds us that moral responsibility emerges from relational life, not just from abstract principles (Engster, 2007; Widdershoven, 2025b).

Care also involves internal conflict, a tension between ethical intent and emotional reluctance. For example, the question, “Why

should I help someone who may misuse my kindness?" reveals the inner skepticism that complicates care. To understand this, three aspects must be considered. The first is the temporality aspect, which denotes that oral responses are shaped by past experiences of giving and receiving care (Ricoeur et al., 2009). Memory plays a central role in how individuals respond to moral situations. Second, relational context refers to power dynamics, roles, and emotional proximity that influence how care is offered or resisted (Noddings, 2013). The last is cultural context, in which caring values vary across communities and are embedded in religious, social, and political frameworks (Collste, 2017; El Hassani et al., 2023).

Noddings proposes that memory can serve as an intuitive ethical guide, shaping how we care in the present. Her ethics of care prioritizes empathy, relational understanding, and responsiveness, which she sees as key to restoring genuine human relationships (Hamington & Rosenow, 2019; Sander-Staudt, n.d.). Rather than imposing moral rules, she advocates for nurturing the capacity to care with intentionality and awareness.

According to Barnes (2012) and de la Bellacasa (2017), caring is a demanding moral act. It requires emotional sensitivity, ethical judgment, and contextual understanding. Individuals must navigate complex realities, interpret responses, and make difficult choices in uncertain situations. Therefore, caring is not passive—it demands action, moral discernment, and the ability to respond to fluid, ambiguous realities.

Furthermore, Barnes (2012) and Hartmann (2024) emphasize that justification is essential in some care ethics models. In these models, care must be based on moral reasoning to be ethically valid. However, for Noddings, care draws its ethical power not from justification, but from relational presence and responsiveness. Rather than viewing care as a duty to be justified, Noddings maintains that ethical responsibility emerges from caring relationships. As she and Widdershoven (2025a) assert, moral justification in care ethics is not the goal—moral awareness is. We

are obligated not by rules but by the relational reality of others' needs.

Tronto (2020) further critiques universal moral reasoning, arguing that it fails to address the political and emotional realities of moral life. Universal frameworks may claim neutrality, but in practice, they often exclude context. Tronto contends that morality should evolve through relational and political action—centered on mutual concern and collective responsibility. Caring is never neutral: it exists in a world marked by patriarchy, power, and privilege. It is a situated practice that can challenge structures and build solidarity.

In many cultures, women's moral identity has historically been shaped by their association with caregiving. As Tronto (2020) notes, the social construction of care has often been placed around women, reflecting societal control over their power and roles. Drawing on Carol Gilligan, Noddings (Kohlen & McCarthy, 2020; Mortari, 2025; Noddings, 2002) affirms that women tend to prioritize concrete, everyday moral decisions over abstract ethical principles. This tendency arises not only from their roles in human relationships but also from how they value themselves as caregivers. Women are seen as the nurturers, caretakers, and relational weavers who sustain the social fabric—making them, in many contexts, the ethical experts in care (Kohlen & McCarthy, 2020; Noddings, 1986). Tronto further argues that caring is not merely a private virtue but a public necessity that fosters a more moral and just society. This framing sets the foundation for understanding how acts of care—especially by women—can shape social consciousness, including in young people.

2. Teachers' Roles in the Ethics of Caring

Why should we be educated? This foundational question troubled Noddings, not merely because of the demands of a technologically advancing world, but because she recognized that education must serve a deeper, moral purpose. While technological progress is often cited as a primary reason for education, Noddings

argued that such progress, in itself, is insufficient if it is not grounded in ethical reflection and human values. She draws on Franklin Bobbitt's view to support the idea that technology, no matter how advanced, still requires morally grounded individuals to direct its use. Technology is not inherently value-laden; it is shaped and applied according to the ethical orientation of its users (Noddings, 1993; Tampang.com, 2024; Zhang & Zheng, 2021).

What distinguishes Noddings' stance is her insistence that education must first and foremost cultivate character and responsibility. For Bobbitt (1941), this meant that moral education should be as expansive as life itself, since human beings are called to engage in a wide range of social, civic, and ethical activities. Education, then, is not merely a tool for producing skilled workers for a technological economy, but a moral enterprise aimed at forming complete human beings—capable of care, judgment, and responsible action, regardless of gender (Noddings, 1993). By foregrounding moral and social development as the core of education, Noddings affirms that the ultimate purpose of being educated is to nurture the kind of individuals and communities capable of sustaining a humane and just society.

However, many schools have little concern about ethics and their responsibility for the moral development of students. A 2023 global survey by UNESCO on values education found that less than 35% of school curricula explicitly integrate moral or ethical education, with a strong focus remaining on academic achievement and standardized testing (UNESCO, 2023). This reveals a persistent gap between formal education and moral formation. For this reason, Noddings (as cited in Koggel & Orme, 2019) suggests that schools explore the ethics of caring and make a significant overhaul on all sides.

Through an examination of John Dewey's progressive educational thought, Noddings (2003) states that a teacher has an obligation to anticipate, evaluate, and support valuable activities and free students to undertake projects that benefit them. Dewey emphasizes that learning can be truly meaningful only if it is rooted

in a genuine, reciprocal relationship between students and teachers. Feiman-Nemser (2007) emphasizes that teacher education must engage deeply with the foundations of philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy in order to prepare teachers to support students' intellectual and moral development (as cited in Hansen, 2007: 134). For Noddings, the teacher functions almost like a mother, nurturing the formation of individuals with moral capacities. To do that, teachers must understand the personalities, needs, and aspirations of their students in depth (Mortari, 2025).

As mentioned earlier, Noddings (2015, 2018) outlines four key components of moral education: modeling, dialogue, practice (action), and confirmation. Restating this here is important to highlight how dialogue and action are not only central in theory but also function as practical tools for developing ethical understanding, nurturing care, and recognizing others' motives. Noddings emphasizes that dialogue and action are essential for developing ethical ideas, caring, and attributing motives. In engagement, Noddings recognizes that every child possesses unique caring skills.

To form a constructive motive in children, a teacher must have the ability to make common questions from students fundamental and build their confidence. This can help students explore their ethics, that is, their personal values, moral reflections, and sense of right and wrong, with awe and concern, as they begin to understand how their actions relate to the well-being of others and to broader social responsibilities. Good teachers must see, think, act, and speak very well to look wise to their students. Words that motivate and support student development must be given to them. When teachers find that their students are doing something wrong, they should approach them and speak to them about it privately to explain why the act should not be done. Through this personal dialogue, children will be able to accept their mistakes without feeling blamed.

Proper education involves the purpose and spirit for which children are being educated. For this reason, according to Noddings,

a teacher must build a relationship based on caring and trust. Teachers and students can form an objective cooperative education system through this relationship. In the ethics of caring in education, the student's contribution to learning is acknowledged. Students need to be encouraged to be active in learning activities, especially those related to learning in their daily lives. In addition, the ethics of caring does not accept authoritarian teachers but instead supports the interdependence between teachers and students in the learning process.

3. A Caring Education: Critical Response

One clear example of this influence is Greta Thunberg. Her public concern for the environment, which has inspired millions, prompts a deeper inquiry into the relationships that shaped her moral formation. Thunberg's example of moral courage and care for the world serves as a powerful entry point to examine the broader role of educators in nurturing ethical sensitivity among students. Her activism—grounded in a personal sense of responsibility toward the planet—demonstrates how moral awareness can emerge from early educational experiences and develop into meaningful public engagement.

Thunberg has shared that she first learned about climate change at the age of eight, during a school lesson, which sparked a growing concern for the environment (Thunberg, 2018). This formative moment suggests a transformative link between environmental education, personal reflection, and civic action. Inspired by such real-life acts of care, teachers' roles, through relational and responsive pedagogies, can embody and cultivate an ethic of care within their classrooms—an approach aligned with Nel Noddings' educational philosophy, which emphasizes the importance of modeling care and fostering reciprocal relationships between teacher and student (Noddings, 2015: 230–233). Thunberg's case illustrates that moral imagination and ecological responsibility can be nurtured from a young age when learning environments

emphasize attentiveness, empathy, and the moral significance of our relationship with the Earth (Thunberg, 2020).

As previously mentioned, Thunberg first learned about climate change through her teachers, suggesting that morally engaged educators can play a crucial role in cultivating caring and socially responsible individuals. This invites reflection on what kind of teacher is needed to help raise a child like Thunberg—one whose moral agency is grounded in care for others and the planet.

Building on the previous discussion about Greta Thunberg's formative experience in school, it becomes clear that one significant figure—her teacher—played a pivotal role in shaping her early environmental awareness. Thunberg has recalled that a classroom lesson on global warming and climate change profoundly affected her understanding of the planet's fragility and injustice (Tait, 2019). The teacher's introduction to Earth's suffering and the human role in its decline helped plant the seeds of empathy, concern, and a sense of responsibility in a young student. This example illustrates how the role of educators extends beyond the transmission of academic content to include moral influence and character formation—specifically, fostering values such as care, empathy, and environmental awareness.

When Thunberg began working to save the environment, she did not do it for herself. In her mind, other people would continue to inhabit Earth, and she thought of these future generations. Although her actions appeared simple—sitting in front of the Swedish parliament holding a poster to stir the hearts of passersby—they disrupted the status quo and inspired others to join her cause. What, then, prompted Thunberg to take this action? Why did she feel such deep concern for other people and the environment?

These questions are closely related to the ethics of care, a moral framework that emphasizes relationality, empathy, and responsiveness to the needs of others. Caring, in this ethical perspective, is not merely an emotional response but a deeply moral orientation that guides how we live and act in relation to others.

Noddings sees that the ethics of care is rooted in a feminine approach to moral reasoning; one that values context, relationships, and lived experiences over abstract rules and universal principles. Noddings argues that caring is often associated with the feminine, not because women are biologically destined to care, but because social roles have long shaped women's experiences around nurturing, empathy, and attentiveness to others' needs. Recognizing caring as a moral ideal within this framework helps illuminate the significance of Thunberg's actions: she demonstrates how relational ethics can motivate civic engagement and transformative change.

Around the world, young people—many of whom are students—are becoming vocal agents of change, calling out injustice and demanding environmental accountability. This youth-led moral agency often includes individuals with diverse neurodevelopmental profiles, thereby challenging conventional assumptions about who is entitled to lead. Their ethical stance is not only articulated through protest and advocacy but also embodied in everyday choices: minimizing waste, practicing ecological mindfulness, and engaging in civic actions for climate justice (Hicks & Holden, 2007). These youth-driven initiatives highlight the urgency of integrating environmental ethics and care-based education into school curricula to foster relational responsibility and planetary well-being.

Within the Indonesian educational context, forest school (known as “sekolah alam” in Indonesian) offers a concept that integrates environmental awareness with everyday learning by encouraging students to care for the earth through sustainable farming, waste sorting, and ecosystem restoration (Basmatulhan, 2022). In this setting, teachers model care by cultivating empathy, responsibility, and action, which are the core of the teaching of the ethic of care (Dzikira, 2025). Similarly, community-based learning initiatives in rural schools in Yogyakarta empower students to engage in local health and literacy programs, emphasizing interdependence and mutual respect. These examples illustrate how

the ethics of care are not abstract but can be enacted in daily educational practices.

Another essential element in successful parenting and children's education is cooperation between parents and school institutions, represented by teachers. The rise of daycare centers in major cities is an example of this collaboration between parents and institutions that offer informal education. Such provisions are responses to recent events. The development of the emancipation movement enabled more women to work outside the home, leading working mothers to entrust their children to maids, daycare centers, or their grandparents (Jirzanah & Budisutrisna, 2023). These daycares and other forms of care have shown that they offer alternative forms of maternal care. Caring itself has evolved over time (Pangastuti, 2023), adapting to the needs of the societal environment in which children and younger individuals exist. Research in developmental psychology consistently highlights that maternal sensitivity in daily interactions plays a significant role in forming a child's emotional security, empathy, and early moral understanding (Feldman, 2007; Symons, 2011). When schools are used primarily as daycares due to work demands and reduced parental involvement, especially maternal care, this can have consequences for the depth of children's emotional and ethical development. This disengagement is not to blame, but a call to re-emphasize the essential role of parents, particularly mothers, as early caregivers in their children's growth and holistic education.

How should schools respond to the urgent ethical demands of today's world? Beyond updating curricula, schools need to be transformed into spaces of authentic and relational learning. Education must not be reduced to mere content delivery, but rather become a process that fosters moral imagination, active engagement, and care. As Noddings (2003) critiques, many educational institutions operate like mechanical systems—comparable to buses in which students are passive occupants, moving through rigid structures without meaningful agency. In such settings, learning becomes uninspiring, and students are

alienated from the very knowledge they are supposed to internalize. Schools should, instead, become environments that awaken curiosity and invite dialogue. Educators are challenged to shift from being transmitters of knowledge to becoming facilitators of ethical inquiry and emotional growth. Bennett (2023) reaffirms this by emphasizing that the teacher's role is to accompany students in exploring values and forming identity through care, not through control. This ethical responsibility extends beyond the classroom: families, schools, communities, and broader social systems must collaborate in cultivating a culture of care. The task is not merely pedagogical but civilizational—reimagining education as a shared endeavor rooted in mutual respect, attentiveness, and relational responsibility.

The primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring. Parents, police, social workers, teachers, preachers, neighbors, coaches, and older siblings must all embrace this primary aim. It functions as end, means, ... All must accept responsibility (Noddings, 1986, pp. 172-173).

Education must help students become able to explore themselves. A teacher should learn from Socrates so that children become accustomed to expressing their opinions and are encouraged to do so. In his teaching methods, Socrates always positioned himself as an ignorant person. He asked every young person he met simple questions about everyday life. This triggered them to think critically about what is best in life and explore their insights, inviting them to continue seeking and testing their lives to become wiser. Zhang and Zheng encourage that, "...teachers must respect students' subjectivity, embody student-oriented; establish caring teacher-student relationship, promote teacher-student interaction..." (2021: 74). Additionally, they mention that primary and secondary schools in China have introduced dedicated courses in ideological and moral education. However, the implementation

often lacks coherence with care-based educational philosophy. In some regions, these subjects are taught by teachers of unrelated disciplines—such as Chinese or mathematics—who might be inadequately prepared to cultivate emotional understanding, ethical reflection, or relational sensitivity in students (Zhang & Zheng, 2021). This practice illustrates a broader issue: when moral education is treated as a technical subject rather than as a relational and affective process, the ethic of care is often overlooked. It demonstrates the importance of equipping educators not only with subject knowledge but also with the emotional and ethical competencies needed to foster caring relationships in the classroom.

In the Indonesian educational context, Lentera School Indonesia in South Jakarta can be set as an example of a school that makes efforts to meet students' needs in learning, both in terms of knowledge and life experience (Sekolah Lentera Indonesia, n.d.; Yayasan Lentera Insan Kreatif, n.d.). Founded by Munif Chatib, this inclusive school employs an individualized learning approach that recognizes each student's multiple intelligences. Teachers are trained to care not only about academic outcomes but also about the emotional and spiritual development of their students (Nasrollahi et al., 2020; Matterson & Gatti, 2022). For instance, students with autism or ADHD are fully integrated into regular classrooms with support from special education teachers and peer mentors, emphasizing an inclusive and empathetic learning environment (Fauzi et al., 2025). The caring relationship between teachers and students is considered more important than rigid curriculum targets, in line with Noddings' vision.

Nel Noddings laments the decline of dialogical and reflective teaching methods in contemporary education. For her, it is a significant loss that schools rarely prioritize the kind of exploratory, philosophical conversations that once formed the bedrock of genuine learning. Drawing inspiration from H.G. Wells, Noddings warns that the modern human mind is "at the end of its tether" —no longer used to exploration, lacking further evolutionary direction, and struggling to address its own crises of meaning (Noddings,

2013: 147). In such a condition, students are often trained to memorize and perform, rather than to reflect and inquire. To counter this, Noddings advocates for a return to Socratic teaching—a model grounded in dialogue, questioning, and moral exploration. Teachers, she argues, must reintroduce the art of asking: *What is wisdom? What matters most in life? How should we live?* These questions are not only philosophical but also profoundly ethical, shaping the development of thoughtful, caring, and morally responsive persons (Noddings, 2006: 251–253). In this light, the classroom becomes a space for cultivating both intellect and empathy.

Therefore, the question is: what is missing in contemporary education? First, critical thinking and imagination patterns are infrequent in the classroom. However, when critical thinking and imagination are taught with a relational and reflective approach, they can become a valuable medium for developing empathy, ethical reasoning, and the ability to listen and respond to others—skills central to the ethics of care. As Noddings (2006) and Nussbaum (2007) emphasize, encouraging students to engage in thoughtful dialogue about moral dilemmas and human values through philosophical inquiry supports the formation of a caring and responsible character. Thus, introducing philosophy in age-appropriate, dialogical ways aligns with the ethic of care by fostering critical thinking grounded in human connection. Agreeing with Nussbaum, it is believed that philosophy education should be provided since children are in high school (Damayanti & Engliana, 2022). It should begin by examining the essential philosophers and their thoughts. Then, students should be invited to discuss and reflect on how these ideas relate to their lives.

Moral education requires not only ethical commitment but also philosophical depth. An educator today must be equipped with interdisciplinary insights—ranging from child psychology to political awareness and cultural understanding of the communities they serve. Teachers who grasp philosophical thinking tend to be more reflective, adaptable, and attentive to the psychological

diversity of their students. Moreover, moral education is not the sole domain of philosophers; it necessitates collaboration across fields. Practical innovations often emerge when philosophical concepts are translated into policy or pedagogy through interdisciplinary cooperation. One such example is the partnership between Amartya Sen and Mahbub Ul Haq, where Sen's capability approach was operationalized by Ul Haq into the Human Development Index (Atrey, 2018; Haq, 2008; Nussbaum, 2007).

Nussbaum (2007) further emphasizes the necessity for philosophers to work closely with psychologists, educators, and even artists, arguing that such collaboration enables moral philosophy to engage deeply with lived human experiences. However, one enduring challenge is the gap between philosophical ideals and pedagogical practice. Philosophers may lack the professional skill set required for classroom teaching or curriculum design. Acknowledging this limitation, Nussbaum encourages philosophers to cultivate partnerships with practitioners to bridge theory and practice (Nussbaum, 2007; Tufford & Dylan, 2025).

Noddings (1993, 2015) affirms that it is time for teachers to engage seriously with philosophy—not only to enrich their ethical sensibility but to foster meaningful dialogue in the classroom. A teacher with philosophical insight cultivates wonder, models critical questioning, and invites students into shared explorations of moral responsibility. Classroom discussions should encompass topics such as human dignity, violence, power, gender, and ethical self-knowledge. According to Kohlen and McCarthy (2020), students must be guided to reflect on their motivations, sense of agency, and character formation within the contexts of religion, politics, and social norms.

Furthermore, caring relationships are at the heart of good education. Noddings (2005) insists that students thrive when they are cared for by teachers who know them well, not merely as cognitive beings but as moral and emotional individuals. One of her most practical proposals is the idea of continuity in student-teacher relationships, whereby the same teacher accompanies students

across multiple years. This sustained contact fosters trust, deepens relational understanding, and enables teachers to respond to the unique developmental trajectories of their students. Rather than fragmenting instruction through a rotating system, continuity strengthens the classroom as a space of long-term ethical engagement (Noddings, 2005; Sevilla, 2016).

Neutrality, meanwhile, is an essential ethical stance for educators. As Sevilla (2016) notes, teachers must remain impartial on sensitive issues—such as religion, race, and identity politics—while still acknowledging the humanity of every student. This neutrality is not indifference; rather, it enables teachers to respond to each student as an individual, not as a representative of a group. Such responsiveness is vital to building ethical, caring, and dialogical relationships in education.

Ultimately, care in education is more than sentiment; it is action-oriented and reciprocal. It requires time, attentiveness, and an openness to the other's growth. Dialogue between teacher and student must be grounded in trust and mutual recognition. When caring becomes intentional, continuous, and pedagogically embedded, it transforms the classroom into a community of ethical learning (Kohlen & McCarthy, 2020; Noddings, 2005; Tufford & Dylan, 2025).

CONCLUSIONS

Teachers, families, and broader social environments must be engaged in a paradigm shift where care is recognized not as a secondary trait, but as a central ethical value in education. Being naturally caring is not a weakness but a profound human strength. When domestic or emotional labor is devalued, we overlook its essential contribution to human flourishing.

Modern individuals may claim autonomy, but they still long to be heard, loved, and understood. While technology offers tools, it cannot replace human presence. Greta Thunberg's activism exemplifies how care—formed in personal and educational

contexts—can manifest into global moral action. Her voice, though young and neurodivergent, has stirred ecological conscience across generations. This concrete example shows that care, when nurtured, moves beyond sentiment to action.

The implication for education is clear: teaching must no longer focus solely on cognitive or technical proficiency. Curricula and teacher training should include empathy, emotional awareness, and social responsibility—not as optional skills but as core ethical competencies. When care becomes central to educational philosophy and policy, we do not merely form capable individuals; we nurture compassionate citizens who think critically and act responsibly for others and the world.

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