

What Are the Eight Duties of a Teacher in Nel Nodding's Philosophy of Education?

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ABSTRACT

This article delineates the core duties of a teacher as articulated within Nel Noddings' ethics of care, a relational philosophy that fundamentally reconceptualizes education. Moving beyond conventional models of instruction, Noddings positions the teacher as a "carer" whose primary ethical obligation is to foster authentic, reciprocal relationships that support holistic student development. The teacher's responsibilities encompass authentically modeling care through daily actions; engaging in open, exploratory dialogue; creating opportunities for students to practice caring; confirming students' best moral motives and potential; responsively attending to expressed and inferred needs; cultivating an overarching classroom climate of care; prioritizing caring relations over systems of control and standardization; and practicing engrossment and motivational displacement. These interconnected duties collectively reorient pedagogy from a focus on authority and curricular delivery to one centered on ethical encounter, responsiveness, and the nurturing of students' capacity to care. The argument demonstrates that in Noddings' framework, the caring relation is both the essential means and a paramount end of education, wherein academic learning and moral development are inextricably linked within a context of trust and mutual respect. The teacher's ultimate aim is to educate individuals capable of sustaining caring relationships throughout their personal, civic, and intellectual lives.

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Intruduction

Teachers play an important role in the development of the individual's personality and that of individuals in society, and this begins at school. Education is the main foundation for building an individual's identity, and Noddings attaches central importance to this issue. In the view of this philosopher, education is a way of life in which cooperation takes precedence over competition, and therefore, democracy based on cooperation, care, and participation arises from the context of education (Mohajel, 2025, 123)¹. In other words, schools are the starting point for building a democratic person. Therefore, according to Noddings, the social goal of education, which is to raise a democratic person, recommends tolerance and tolerance in the educational system in religious discussions in schools (Mohajel, 2024, 123).

The teacher-student relationship is conceptualized as a dynamic, interpersonal process that evolves through continuous interaction and communication within everyday educational contexts. In contemporary higher education, this relationship is often framed within a structure of authority and the transmission of professional knowledge, with a predominant focus on a unidirectional flow of knowledge from teacher to student (See more: Chen M-K and Shih Y-H, 2025). Nel Noddings, an American philosopher, presented one of the first comprehensive conceptions of care and argued that caring is the foundation of morality. She held that interpersonal connections form the bedrock of mankind and that one's relationships with others define who they are as a person.

Liz Jackson in *Emotions: Philosophy of Education in Practice* (2024) emphasis on care as core of education. She writes that “for Noddings, caring is at the heart of human life (1984). As she observes, none of us would be where we are without having been cared for. Thus, appropriate caring behavior and relations are key to becoming a person who can contribute and participate in society. For Noddings and other care ethicists, caring is a practice (i.e., something we do), within a relation (one cares for another) (Jackson, 2024, 33).

In Nel Noddings' philosophy of education, rooted in her ethics of care, the role of the teacher is fundamentally transformed from a traditional instructor to a "carer" engaged in a relational, reciprocal, and responsive practice. The teacher's primary mission is to foster ethical, caring relationships and to support the holistic development of students. In other words, Noddings (1998) argues that, from the perspective of the ethics of care, moral education is grounded in four key components: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. Specifically, teachers are expected to model caring behaviors, thereby cultivating the capacity for care in the teacher-student relationship. Noddings believes that “because I have mentioned the centrality of moral education in the ethic of care, it makes sense to start our discussion of care and education with

¹ In Noddings' philosophical thought, the concepts of education, care, and democracy are deeply interconnected and thus cannot be examined independently; the reader is compelled to explore the relationships among these concepts. See more: (Mohajel, 2025).

the ethic's approach to moral education" (Noddings 1995, 131). In this article, I will try to show that the teacher has eight key tasks in educating students, an issue that Nel Noddings has addressed in various ways in her writings. Here are the key aspects of the teacher's role according to Noddings:

1. Teacher and Modeling Care

The teacher demonstrates care through their actions and attitudes. By genuinely listening, showing respect, and responding to students' needs, the teacher embodies the caring relation. This modeling teaches students how to care for others. According Noddings, "Modeling is important in most schemes of moral education, but in caring, as in character education, it is especially important. In contrast to cognitive developmentalists, we are not primarily concerned with moral reasoning, although, of course, we do not ignore reasoning. We are mainly concerned with the growth of our students as carers and caredfors. We have to show in our own behavior what it means to care. Thus, we do not merely tell them to care and give them texts to read on the subject; we demonstrate our caring in our relations with them" (Noddings, 1995, 131).

Noddings argues that the modelling of care in education must be genuine rather than performative. Educators should not 'put on an act' of caring, but instead allow their daily actions to reflect their true moral character. Through experiencing authentic care, students learn how to care for others, making moral education fundamentally relational. She says that "Our first task is to model caring. We must show in our daily actions what it means to care. At the most basic level, we must do this because we do care; our behavior must be a genuine reflection of our moral selves. We do not put on an act because the "kids are watching," and we relate to them as we hope they will relate to each other. Some time ago, I talked with a school principal who bragged that he was tough on his teachers because he "cared about the kids." I gently warned him that his teachers might very well treat their students as he was treating them. When our emphasis is on accountability, rules, assessment, and penalties, we are likely to encourage self-protective conduct—behavior that will stave off criticism and keep those in authority off our backs. In contrast, when we emphasize responsibility, we pledge ourselves to respond with care to the needs of those for whom we are responsible and to encourage them to respond with care to their peers (Nodding, 2013, 119).

Therefore, we can say that there are key features of modelling of care in her philosophy of education. For example, care is relational, not abstract. For Nel Noddings, care does not exist as an abstract moral principle like justice or duty (like Kantian ethics). Instead, it exists only within relationships between a *one-caring* and a *cared-for*. Moral action arises from encounter, attention, and response, not from applying universal rules. She rejects traditional ethical theories that prioritize impartiality, rational principles, and universality, arguing that they

overlook the moral significance of human relationships. Noddings clearly defines care as relational:

Caring is not just a set of behaviors; it is a relation that must be completed by the recognition of the cared-for (Noddings, 2003, 15).

Noddings extends relational care to social ethics “Care is always situated. It arises out of real relationships, not from detached moral reasoning” (Noddings, 2002,12).

For Noddings, care exists only when it is enacted in a concrete relationship. It is not enough to intend to care or to follow moral rules; care must be experienced and recognized within an interaction. In *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984), Noddings defines care as a relational process involving two roles: the one-caring – the person who responds attentively and receptively and the cared-for – the person who receives and, in some way, responds to that care. Therefore, for Noddings, Care is shown in real interactions (listening, attentiveness, responsiveness). Care is completed only when the cared-for acknowledges or receives the caring. “Caring involves a connection or encounter between two human beings—a carer and a recipient of care” (Nodding 1984, 9). Also, Noddings believes that “the relation of caring... involves an engrossment or motivational displacement on the part of the one-caring” (Noddings, 1984, 18).

2. Teacher and Dialogue

From the start, mother and child engage in a constant, evolving physical dialogue, shown through instinctive, reciprocal bodily responses such as milk release, uterine contractions, sensual sensations during nursing, and the baby’s instinctive rooting for the breast. Noddings says that “ From the beginning the mother caring for her child is involved in a continually changing *dialogue*, crystallized in such moments as when, hearing her child’s cry, she feels milk rush into her breasts; when, as the child first suckles, the uterus begins contracting and returning to normal size, and when later, the child’s mouth, caressing the nipple, creates waves of sensuality in the womb where it once lay; or when, smelling the breast even in sleep, the child starts to root and grope for the nipple (Noddings, 2002, 128).

In Noddings’s philosophy of education, dialogue is integral to the ethics of care and is explicitly treated as one of the four essential components of a caring educational relationship. In her model of care-based moral education, Noddings identifies “modelling,” “dialogue,” “practice,” and “confirmation” as mutually reinforcing elements essential for cultivating caring relationships in educational contexts. Dialogue, in this framework, is the interaction through which caring is explored, understood, and evaluated. She holds that everything we do, then, as teachers, has moral overtones. Through dialogue, modeling, the provision of practice, and the attribution of best motive, the one-caring as teacher nurtures the ethical idea. She cannot nurture the student intellectually without regard for the ethical ideal (Noddings, 1984, 179).

We know that in Noddings's ethic of care, the teacher is not a neutral dispenser of knowledge but a relational caregiver whom she calls the "one-caring." As one-caring, the teacher's aim is to attend to the needs of the student — whom she treats as a "Thou" rather than an object — and to foster their moral and intellectual growth through genuine connection. The teacher's first priority is the student, not the subject matter. For Noddings, dialogue in the teacher's role has moral as well as pedagogical significance. In other words, dialogue helps students explore ethical issues and their own moral feelings. And also, it fosters critical thinking and perspective-taking. Moreover, dialogue builds trust and deeper relational bonds — central to care-based education.

This shows that the teacher's role through dialogue in Noddings's philosophy is not simply to transmit information but to nurture students' moral selves through engaged, reflective conversation. Specifically, teachers are expected to model caring behaviours... and fostering open, reciprocal dialogue between teachers and students is essential. In *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984/2013), Noddings identifies dialogue as one of the four key components of moral education, alongside modeling, practice, and confirmation. Dialogue is not merely classroom talk or question-and-answer exchanges; rather, it is a genuine, reciprocal engagement between teacher and student. According to Noddings, dialogue allows students to express their lived experiences, concerns, and moral questions and it supports the development of moral understanding through relationship, not rule transmission. So, she emphasizes that moral education emerges from encounter and response, and dialogue is the space where such encounters occur.

So, we can say that for Noddings dialogue is essential to education. In a true dialogue participants engage in mutual exploration, a search for meaning, or the solution of some problem. The teacher or leader does not have the answer at the outset, and the eventual outcome is uncertain. In the best homes dialogue often addresses the tension between expressed and inferred needs. What is the best thing to do? Johnny wants to do X. Father is not sure that this is a good course of action, at least at this time. Why not Y first? In a true dialogue both parties are open to discussion (Noddings 2002, 287).

According to Noddings, a teacher should use dialogue to establish more effective communication with students. In other words, emphasis on collaboration suggests a corresponding emphasis on communication in the form of dialogue, and dialogue requires both listening and speaking (Noddings, 2013, 10).

3. Teacher and Practice and Confirmation

In Nel Noddings' philosophy of care, practice and confirmation are two key elements of caring education. Practice refers to the idea that caring is learned and strengthened through action, not just theory. Teachers model caring behaviors—such as attentiveness, responsiveness, and

empathy—so that students experience care in practice and learn how to care for others through real relationships.

In Noddings' philosophy, practice refers to actively doing caring actions repeatedly so caring becomes a habituated part of one's moral life. She argues that caring isn't learned only by talking about it or understanding it in theory—students need opportunities to practice caring behaviors and reflect on them to develop a caring disposition. This idea is most fully elaborated in the chapter on Moral Education, under the section "Practice", where she discusses how caring practicum helps students grow in care (Noddings, 1984, 184).

Confirmation means recognizing and encouraging the best potential in students. The teacher affirms students' efforts, values, and moral growth, helping them see themselves as capable and worthy. Confirmation is not blind praise; it is a thoughtful response that supports students' ethical development. Together, practice and confirmation help create a caring educational environment where students grow both academically and morally. In Noddings' philosophy, confirmation is an educational practice in which the teacher affirmatively recognizes and encourages the moral and personal growth of the student. It is part of caring moral education and differs from general praise or imposition of a fixed ideal. Rather, it involves (1) recognizing something admirable or worth developing in the student's choices, character, or efforts, (2) encouraging the student toward that "better self", (3) knowing the student well enough to see what is genuinely valuable from their own perspective.

Confirmation has close relation with others. According to Noddings, "confirmation can only be performed when a relation has been established. The one doing the confirming has to know the one who is confirmed well enough to make a reasonable, honest judgment of what the other was trying to do. When we confirm someone, we attribute to a questionable act the best possible motive consonant with reality. To do this, we must have sufficient knowledge of the other to make it plausible that this better motive was actually operating" (Noddings, 2006, 113).

Confirmation is about seeing and nurturing the student's own emerging ideals, not imposing a uniform standard on everyone. It involves trust, knowledge of the student, and continuity in the relationship because without these, the teacher cannot accurately perceive what the student is striving for.

For example, Noddings explains that in confirmation "we identify a better self and encourage its development. To do this we must know the other reasonably well...we recognize something admirable, or at least acceptable, struggling to emerge in each person we encounter." (confirmation discussion in Noddings' moral education section) (Noddings, 1984, 198).

4. Teacher and Responsiveness to Needs

Noddings describes caring in terms of relations between one-caring and cared-for. The one-caring (e.g., a teacher) attends to and interprets the expressed needs of the cared-for (student) and responds in ways that genuinely meet those needs—not through abstract rules,

but through attentive, contextual understanding. Responsiveness involves engrossment (deep attention) and motivational displacement (shifting focus toward the other's needs). Therefore, in her educational discussions, Noddings argues that teachers should listen, understand, and respond to students' emotional and academic needs, thereby creating meaningful learning relationships. This responsiveness transforms education from a purely cognitive exercise into a moral and relational practice. Specifically, teachers must observe and interpret what students communicate about their needs. Teachers must respond appropriately—not uniformly or mechanically, but based on students' individual contexts and expressions and responsiveness is not passive; it demands active attention and judgment.

Instead of a rigid, standardized curriculum, the teacher responds to the individual needs, interests, and capacities of each student. Academic instruction is important, but it is integrated within a framework of addressing the whole child—intellectual, emotional, social, and physical needs. In Nel Noddings' *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, she argues that the ethical act of caring in education centers on the teacher's responsiveness to the expressed needs of the student. This responsiveness is not about applying abstract rules or standards, but about being genuinely attentive to and meeting the needs as they are lived and expressed by the student.

For Noddings, the ethical teacher must be responsive to students' needs—not merely follow rules or curricula, but attend to and respond to what the student actually expresses and requires. This responsiveness emerges from caring relations and is central to effective moral education (Noddings, 1984, 170).

5. Teacher and Creating a Climate of Care

In Noddings' philosophy, the teacher plays a central role in creating a "climate of care" within the classroom. This goes beyond individual acts of caring; it involves establishing an environment where caring relationships, trust, and ethical attention to students' needs are normalized. A climate of care is characterized by mutual respect between teacher and students and attentive listening and responsiveness to students' academic, emotional, and moral needs and also recognition and encouragement of students' efforts and moral growth (confirmation). Noddings emphasizes that care must permeate the classroom culture, making ethical education an ongoing, relational experience rather than a set of rules or abstract principles. Noddings says that "A climate of care is achieved when caring is woven into the daily life of the classroom, when students feel seen and supported, and when teachers consistently respond to both academic and personal needs" (Noddings, 1984, 175).

In *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (2005), Noddings argues that teachers must help create a climate of care in schools by being responsive to students' needs, fostering trusting relationships, and modeling caring behavior. This caring environment supports students

socially, emotionally, and academically by making interpersonal concern more foundational than standard accountability measures. with refrence to pages of this book

6. Teacher and Shifting Priorities: Care Over Control

Noddings, a prominent philosopher of education, fundamentally reorients the role of the *teacher* by shifting educational priorities from *control*, *authority*, and *standardization* to *care*, *relationships*, and *ethical responsiveness*. Drawing on her ethics of care, she argues that education should be grounded not in domination or rigid discipline but in genuine human connection. This shift challenges traditional models of schooling that emphasize obedience and performance over relational well-being. All us know that Conventional educational systems often position the teacher as an authority figure whose primary responsibility is to maintain discipline, transmit knowledge, and evaluate students. Control is exercised through rules, surveillance, standardized testing, and hierarchical power structures. In such models, students are frequently treated as objects to be managed rather than persons to be understood.

Noddings begins by criticizing schools that prioritize control, efficiency, and academic outcomes over human relationships. She argues that modern schooling relies excessively on rules, standardized testing, and authority structures that distance teachers from students. She notes that such systems emphasize obedience rather than moral understanding, reduce teaching to technical performance and Ignore students' emotional and relational needs (Noddings, 2005, 3-5). Schools, she argues, often value "order and productivity more than caring relationships" (Noddings, 2005, 3-5).

7. Teacher and Being "Engrossed" (Attentive) and Motivational Displacement

In Nel Noddings' ethic of care, engrossment refers to the teacher's open, receptive, and nonjudgmental attention to the student as a unique person. It is a receptive, attentive mode of consciousness in which the caregiver or teacher is fully present to the other. Engrossment is not detached observation, analytical judgment, or evaluation against predetermined standards; rather, it involves open listening, emotional receptivity, and a willingness to be affected by the other. As Noddings explains, engrossment entails "receiving the other into oneself" rather than imposing one's own agenda. In other words, engrossment is not detached observation or technical assessment. Instead, the teacher listens deeply and tries to understand the student's feelings, needs, and perspective. According to her, engrossment is the first essential element of caring. "Engrossment is an open, nonselective receptivity to the cared-for." (Noddings, 1984, 14).

For teachers, being engrossed means seeing students as persons before learners, attending to emotional, social, and moral needs—not just academic performance and finally, suspending personal agendas to understand what the student is actually experiencing. In schools, this contrasts with standardized, outcome-driven teaching that leaves little room for personal

attention. Noddings argues that “in Caring, I used the word engrossment to name this form of attention, but the word has been too often misinterpreted did not intend to suggest that an individual (carer) should be engrossed in another individual (cared-for) as a lover might be engrossed in the beloved. What I meant to suggest is that the carer is engrossed in (or receptively attentive to) the needs expressed in an encounter (Noddings, 2010,47). She also holds that “his attention or engrossment is thoroughly receptive; that is, when we really care, we receive what the other person conveys nonselectively (Noddings, 1998, 50) Noddings explains this term with example:” A’s motive energy begins to flow toward B and his projects. Consider a typical example. Ms. A, a math teacher, stands beside student B as he struggles to solve an equation. Ms. A can almost feel the pencil in her own hand. She anticipates what B will write, and she pushes mentally toward the next step, making marks and erasures mentally. Her moves are directed by his. She may intervene occasionally but only to keep his plan alive, not to substitute her own. She introduces her own plan of attack only if his own plan fails entirely and he asks, “What should I do?” (Noddings, 2002, 17) She adds “motivational displacement follows on the heels of attention if A is sympathetic to B’s plight. If B is in pain, A will want to relieve that pain (Noddings, 2002, 17)

According to Noddings, authentic education depends upon caring relationships. Academic success is more likely to follow when students feel seen, valued, and understood within the learning environment. As she writes, “Students learn best when they are cared for and when they themselves care” (Noddings, 2005, 27). Thus, the teacher’s ethical role is not merely instructional but fundamentally relational and moral.

8. Teacher and Educating for Moral Life

For Noddings, educating for moral life is synonymous with educating for relational competence and sensitivity. The teacher's primary moral task is to establish, maintain, and enhance caring relations. Moral growth happens when students repeatedly experience being cared for and are guided in their practice of caring for others. For Noddings, moral education as a moral duty for the teacher arises from his moral care. “Ethical caring, the relation in which we do meet the other morally... [arises]... out of natural caring – that relation in which we respond as one-caring out of love or natural inclination. The relation of natural caring... [is] ... the human condition that we, consciously or unconsciously, perceive as ‘good’. It is that condition toward which we long and strive, and it is our longing for caring – to be in that special relationship – that provides the motivation for us to be moral. We want to be *moral* in order to remain in the caring relation and to enhance the ideal of ourselves as one-caring (Noddings 1984, 4-5).

This makes education an intrinsically moral enterprise, where the how of teaching is as important as the what. Noddings redefines the moral landscape of education from a courtroom where rules are argued to a web of relationships that need to be tended with attentive love. The teacher is the chief gardener in that space. She in *Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should*

Teach (2006) focuses on curriculum content that matters for life. It proposes topics central to moral understanding, such as learning about war, parenting, and nature, advocating that schools engage students in deep, critical dialogue about these life-centered themes.

Conclusion

Based on the comprehensive analysis provided, the role of the teacher in Nel Noddings' ethics of care is fundamentally transformed from a traditional knowledge-transmitter and authority figure to a relational carer and moral educator. The result is a holistic, student-centered pedagogy where the primary mission is to foster ethical, caring individuals through authentic relationships. This philosophy redefines effective education as a deeply moral enterprise. The eight key tasks of the teacher, as derived from Noddings' work, are not isolated duties but interconnected practices that collectively create a climate of care:

1. **Modeling Care:** The teacher's primary task is to *genuinely* demonstrate care through daily actions and attitudes. This authentic modeling, not performative, teaches students what it means to care by allowing them to experience it firsthand within the relationship.
2. **Engaging in Dialogue:** Education is driven by open, reciprocal, and uncertain dialogue. This practice moves beyond instructional talk to become a mutual exploration of meaning, ethics, and perspective, building trust and nurturing the student's moral self.
3. **Providing Practice and Confirmation:** Caring is a skill honed through action. Teachers must create opportunities for students to *practice* caring. Coupled with this is *confirmation*, where the teacher, based on deep knowledge of the student, recognizes and encourages their emerging "best self," affirming moral growth.
4. **Demonstrating Responsiveness to Needs:** Effective teaching requires *engrossment*—a receptive, non-judgmental attention to the student—and *motivational displacement*, where the teacher's energy shifts to support the student's needs and projects. Instruction is adapted to the individual, addressing holistic needs rather than adhering rigidly to a standardized curriculum.
5. **Creating a Climate of Care:** The teacher's responsibility extends beyond individual relationships to cultivating an entire classroom environment where care, trust, mutual respect, and responsiveness are the normalized foundation for all social and academic activity.
6. **Shifting Priorities from Control to Care:** Noddings challenges the conventional model of teacher-as-controller. She advocates replacing systems of authority, obedience, and standardization with a priority on relationship-building, ethical responsiveness, and the well-being of students.
7. **Practicing Engrossment and Motivational Displacement:** These are the foundational psychological states of the caring relation. Being "engrossed" means receiving the

student with full, receptive attention, while "motivational displacement" is the conscious act of aligning one's efforts with the student's needs and goals.

8. **Educating for Moral Life:** Ultimately, all these tasks converge on the core purpose: educating for moral life. This is defined not as the imposition of abstract rules, but as the cultivation of relational competence, sensitivity, and the sustained practice of caring and being cared for.

In conclusion, Noddings' philosophy presents a coherent and radical re-visioning of the teacher's role. The teacher is an ethical carer whose practice is governed by the quality of the relationship with the student. Academic learning is situated within and enhanced by this relational context. Success is measured not solely by cognitive achievement but by the development of the student's capacity to care for others, contribute to society, and realize their ethical ideal. Noddings contends that caregivers must understand the needs of those they care for through "empathy." In the university teacher-student relationship, educators should be attuned to students' individual differences, recognize their learning difficulties, and address their emotional needs. By engaging in active listening and demonstrating understanding, teachers can foster a relationship built on trust and respect. Practical strategies to implement this approach include: facilitating open dialogues with students, encouraging them to express their thoughts and concerns, providing regular individual counseling sessions, and showing genuine care for students' academic, psychological, and career development. Additionally, incorporating learning narratives or reflective activities into teaching practices can promote reciprocal understanding (Chen M-K and Shih Y-H 2025). Therefore, the teacher's key task is to weave together modeling, dialogue, practice, confirmation, responsiveness, and engrossment to create an educational experience that is, at its heart, a moral apprenticeship in human connection.

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