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The implications of Nel Noddings' ethics of care for fostering teacher-student relationships in higher education

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Nel Noddings' ethics of care offers a sophisticated and comprehensive theoretical framework for critically reimagining the teacher-student relationship within the context of higher education. This paradigm stands in stark contrast to traditional pedagogical approaches that predominantly emphasize cognitive outcomes, often at the expense of emotional and social development. By incorporating Noddings' ethics of care into the dynamics of teacher-student interaction, higher education institutions have the potential to foster a more supportive and nurturing learning environment—one that not only facilitates intellectual growth but also nurtures students' emotional well-being, sense of social responsibility, and a deeper sense of belonging. Noddings' conceptualization of care invites us to reconceptualize the teacher-student relationship, recognizing it as not solely a transactional exchange of knowledge, but as a relational practice rooted in emotional and ethical care. Consequently, higher education must recalibrate its focus to emphasize the integration of personal values with social responsibility. By cultivating a culture grounded in care and dialogue, higher education can facilitate the holistic development of students, equipping them with the empathy and social consciousness needed to become responsible global citizens. This approach is closely aligned with the humanistic principles underpinning broader educational objectives. This paper seeks to examine the application of Noddings' ethics of care in higher education, investigating its potential to enrich and transform the teacher-student relationship.

KEYWORDS

care, ethics of care, higher education, Nel Noddings, the teacher-student relationship

1 Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a widely accepted framework for promoting sustainable development. SDG4 goal 4.7 pursues the "sustainability" of education to promote sustainable development for country. Higher education is crucial to sustainable development for country. In the pursuit of sustainable development, a humanistic spirit is a universal force that is manifested in the pursuit, maintenance and safeguarding of human dignity, value and potential. Higher education must place greater emphasis on the cultivation of meaningful teacher-student relationships (Chen and Shih, 2025; Sánchez-Carracedo et al., 2021; Shih, 2024; Wang and Shih, 2023, 2022).

The teacher-student relationship is conceptualized as a dynamic, interpersonal process that evolves through continuous interaction and communication within everyday educational contexts (Hughes et al., 2012). 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. However, as educational philosophy evolves, an increasing number of perspectives emphasize the importance of fostering authentic, student-centered relationships between educators and learners. Traditionally, teacher-student relationships have been understood as professional interactions centered on knowledge transfer and student learning outcomes. From the standpoint of care ethics, however, this relationship should not be reduced to a one-way transfer of knowledge. Instead, it should be characterized by a reciprocal interaction that incorporates emotional engagement, care, and shared responsibility. Within this framework, teachers are not merely conveyors of academic content; they also assume a pivotal role as supporters and guides in students' developmental journeys. Teachers must demonstrate sensitivity to students' academic progress, emotional well-being, and psychological needs while providing the necessary guidance and support. This redefined teacher-student relationship not only contributes to academic achievement but also nurtures students' mental health and emotional development. Nel Noddings' care ethics offers a comprehensive theoretical framework for reconceptualizing the teacher-student relationship in higher education. Noddings asserts that education should be grounded in principles of trust, empathy, and responsiveness to the needs of others, with care functioning as a fundamental ethical practice. Central to Noddings' care ethics is the concept of "relational responsibility," which posits that educators must attend to both the emotional and intellectual needs of students, thereby fostering an environment of mutual care and support. This model stands in stark contrast to traditional teaching methods, which often prioritize cognitive outcomes while neglecting emotional and social development. By integrating care ethics into the teacher-student relationship, higher education institutions can cultivate a more supportive learning environment that promotes intellectual growth while simultaneously nurturing students' emotional well-being, social responsibility, and sense of belonging. Noddings' concept of care challenges us to recognize that the teacher-student relationship is not simply about knowledge transmission; rather, it is, at its core, a practice of emotional and moral care. Consequently, higher education should place equal emphasis on individual values and social responsibility. By fostering a culture rooted in care and dialogue, it can facilitate the holistic development of students. This approach aligns with the broader educational goal of human-centered pedagogy (Noddings, 1995, 2002, 2012, 2013). This article aims to explore the application of Noddings' care ethics in higher education and its potential to strengthen and enrich the teacher-student relationship.

2 Nel Noddings' ethics of care

Nel Noddings (1929–2022), an American educator, philosopher, and feminist is lauded around the world for her contributions to educational theory, philosophy of education and care ethics (Adhikari and Saha, 2023). Nel Noddings' foundational work on the ethics of care, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, was first published in 1984 and has since undergone three revisions, with the third edition released in 2013. Following its initial publication, Noddings further developed the discourse on ethics of care while also engaging with broader philosophical questions in education. This paper's philosophical analysis is primarily based on the following

works by Noddings: *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (3rd ed., 2013), *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* (2002), and Philosophy of Education (3rd ed., 2012). Noddings' conception of the ethics of care positions ethics as inherently relational and contextually situated. Rather than being dictated by universal principles or abstract rational justifications, ethical actions emerge from an individual's responsiveness to the needs of others and their felt sense of responsibility toward them. Within this framework, ethical motivation is derived from relational interactions—specifically, the recognition of and response to the needs of the other—rather than from rigid adherence to prescriptive moral rules or fixed virtues (Adhikari and Saha, 2021; Noddings, 2002, 2012, 2013; Bergmark, 2019).

Noddings' Ethics of Care is an ethical theory that emphasizes interpersonal relationships and mutual care. It suggests that education should be centered on care and views it as a fundamental moral practice. This theory challenges traditional moral concepts, particularly those that focus on abstract ethical frameworks centered on reason, rights, and duties, and argues that moral behavior should be rooted in specific, emotional relationships. In Noddings' Ethics of Care, care is seen as a reciprocal, ongoing relationship rather than a one-way action. She introduces the concept of "relational responsibility," suggesting that educators and students should establish a relationship of mutual care. This relationship should not only address students' intellectual needs but also their emotional needs. Educators are responsible for both the emotional and intellectual development of students, while students should actively respond to these cares, creating a collaborative learning environment. Noddings emphasizes that this ethical framework differs from traditional education models, which are often focused on cognitive outcomes. Traditional models tend to overlook emotional and social development, emphasizing the transmission of knowledge and standardized academic assessment. In contrast, Ethics of Care argues that education should consider students' emotional well-being, sense of social responsibility, and belonging, thereby creating a more humanistic learning environment. In conclusion, Noddings' Ethics of Care provides a fresh perspective, encouraging us to reconsider the nature of teacher-student relationships in education, emphasizing the importance of emotions and interpersonal relationships, and advocating for care-based educational practices. Regarding Noddings' ethics of care, this article explores Noddings' discussion on the meaning, characteristics, and concept of "care" and "ethics of care" (Noddings, 1995, 2002, 2012, 2013). The following sections will explore these aspects in detail:

2.1 The concept of "care"

In her article *The Caring Teacher*, feminist ethicist Noddings (2001) provides a sophisticated analysis of the concept of "care," framing it not merely as an attitude but as a profound relational dynamic rooted in human interaction. More significantly, Noddings conceives care as a mode of being—an existential orientation that transcends discrete actions and reflects a foundational approach to engaging with the world. As Noddings (1998) argues, care should not be reduced to a personal virtue; rather, it constitutes an ethical stance that fosters authentic and sustained connections between individuals and their broader social and material environments. Within this

conceptual framework, a caring relationship is characterized by the reciprocal and responsive involvement of both the caregiver and the cared-for. Noddings (2001) emphasizes that care emerges through the relational encounter between these two parties, each of whom plays an essential role in co-constructing the experience of care.

2.2 The characteristics of "care"

"Care" is frequently conceptualized as an ethical relationship, a perspective that has been most extensively applied within the realm of interpersonal dynamics, particularly in dyadic, one-to-one interactions (Becker and Becker, 1992). Within such relational contexts, the presence of at least one caregiver and one care recipient is assumed. In delineating the fundamental characteristics of care, Noddings (1998) contends that individuals possess the capacity for receptivity (the ability to be attuned to others), recognition (the awareness of others as distinct and significant beings), and responsive emotional engagement. These elements together imply that all beings with reflective consciousness are inherently capable of grasping the ethical and existential significance of care. Moreover, care can be understood not only as a relational practice but also as a symbolic expression of the human condition, embodying essential attributes that constitute what it means to be human (Noddings, 1998, 2016; Shih et al., 2022).

2.3 The discourse on "ethics of care"

The concept of the ethics of care was first articulated by American psychologist Carol Gilligan in her groundbreaking work In a Different Voice (1982), in which she challenged dominant paradigms in moral philosophy that prioritized abstract principles over relational and contextual considerations. Drawing on empirical studies of female moral reasoning, Gilligan proposed a distinct moral voice—centered on care, responsibility, and responsiveness—as an alternative to justice-based ethics (Noddings, 1998). Building upon Gilligan's foundational insights, feminist educational philosopher Nel Noddings significantly expanded and systematized the ethics of care in her 1984 work Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education, extending its theoretical scope into the domain of moral education. Noddings sought to formulate a relational and situational ethical framework grounded in concrete human encounters, emphasizing the moral significance of emotional communication and interpersonal dynamics such as receptivity, engagement, commitment, and response (Fang, 2001). Central to Noddings' ethics of care is the relational configuration between the carer and the cared-for, in which both parties play active roles in constituting the moral encounter. The ethical validity of care, she argues, is contingent not solely on the intention of the caregiver but on the recognition and reception by the cared-for (Noddings, 2012). Moreover, while care has traditionally been associated with emotional sensibility, Noddings enriches the discourse by incorporating a cognitive dimension into her framework. This includes the ability to anticipate others' needs, consider multiple perspectives, and engage in reflective deliberation regarding moral intention and action. Consequently, care is not confined to affective intuition but involves rational processes that guide ethical decision-making (Becker and Becker, 1992). As Noddings (2012) contends,

moral responsiveness must be both emotionally attuned and cognitively informed. The ethics of care, therefore, does not dismiss rationality but rather integrates it with emotional intelligence to achieve a more holistic ethical practice. In this synthesis, ethical deliberation must remain attentive to the lived experiences and emotional realities of moral agents, foregrounding the relational and affective dimensions of ethical life (Fang, 2001). As a leading figure in the philosophy of education, Noddings has made a profound contribution to rethinking the purpose and practice of education through the lens of care ethics. While indebted to Gilligan's initial formulation, Noddings developed a more comprehensive and operationalizable model, applying the ethics of care to educational settings, particularly in the context of moral and character education. Her work has reshaped educational discourse in Western societies by emphasizing the centrality of care in teacher-student relationships and pedagogical responsibility. A defining feature of her approach is the conceptualization of care as a reciprocal moral practice, grounded in empathy, mutual trust, and sustained relational engagement. Within this paradigm, the educator is not merely a transmitter of knowledge but a moral agent responsible for nurturing the intellectual, emotional, and social development of students. This perspective fundamentally challenges traditional education models that frame learners as passive recipients of abstract knowledge. Instead, it posits that students' emotional well-being and social connectedness are integral to their educational experience. Noddings' ethics of care thus calls for an expanded conception of moral responsibility in schooling—one that transcends the narrow confines of cognitive achievement to embrace the moral cultivation of empathy, ethical awareness, and social responsibility. In this framework, education becomes a deeply humanistic endeavor, oriented toward the development of the whole person and the fostering of ethical communities (Fang, 2001; Noddings, 2012).

In conclusion, Noddings' ethics of care provides a robust philosophical foundation for educational theory, offering a critical reexamination of traditional educational paradigms through its ethical conceptualization of care. Her theory has not only made a lasting impact on academic discourse but also offers valuable insights into the practical application of moral education within schools. At its core, the ethics of care emphasizes the significance of emotional and social development, advocating for an educational approach that holistically addresses the well-being of students. It highlights the essential role of care as a foundational ethical principle within the educational process (Fang, 2001; Noddings, 2002; Lin and Shih, 2024).

3 Reinterpreting teacher-student relationships in universities through the ethics of care

Reinterpreting teacher-student relationships in universities through the lens of the Ethics of Care presents a novel perspective, highlighting the significance of care, emotional engagement, and moral responsibility in educational interactions. This framework centers on the sensitivity to others' needs, the development of emotional connections, and the mutual responsibilities shared between individuals. Such principles offer essential insights into the dynamics of higher education, particularly in cultivating a supportive learning environment and enhancing understanding and collaboration

between educators and students. These considerations are especially pivotal in fostering a more inclusive and empathetic academic culture.

3.1 The core concepts of the ethics of care

The ethics of care, rooted in feminist theory and notably advanced by scholars such as Carol Gilligan, challenges the notion that moral behavior is solely based on adherence to rules and duties. Instead, it advocates for a moral framework grounded in emotional care and concern for others. This approach emphasizes the importance of reciprocal care and attentiveness to others' needs, positioning these acts not merely as social norms or outcomes of rational deliberation but as intrinsic moral responsibilities. The core tenets of the Ethics of Care can be outlined as follows: (1) Interpersonal relationships as the foundation of ethics: The Ethics of Care asserts that ethical behavior should center on interpersonal relationships, rather than relying exclusively on abstract moral principles or rules. It underscores the significance of emotional connections and acts of care, particularly in intimate and dependent relationships, such as those within families or caregiving contexts. (2) Vulnerability and dependency: A key feature of the Ethics of Care is its recognition of human vulnerability and dependence on others. It acknowledges that everyone may, at various points in their lives, find themselves in situations where they require assistance. Consequently, ethical actions are envisioned as prioritizing care for those who are vulnerable or in need of support. (3) Responsibility and reciprocity: The Ethics of Care stresses the importance of reciprocity in caregiving. It emphasizes that caregiving is not a one-sided act but one based on mutual responsibility. Care is framed not as self-sacrifice but as a relationship marked by mutual respect and empathy. (4) The balance of emotion and reason: In contrast to traditional ethical theories that often treat emotion and reason as distinct or opposing forces, the Ethics of Care posits that emotions—such as compassion, sympathy, and love—serve as an essential foundation for moral judgments and actions. This perspective offers a more emotionally nuanced ethical framework compared to deontological or utilitarian approaches. (5) Contextual relevance: Unlike abstract, universal moral rules, the Ethics of Care emphasizes the specific emotional needs and interpersonal dynamics inherent in each situation. It advocates for ethical decision-making that takes into account the particular circumstances, rather than relying solely on universal moral principles. Overall, the Ethics of Care is a moral framework that places significant emphasis on human interactions, highlighting the roles of emotions, care, and responsibility. It offers profound ethical insights into caregiving, family relationships, and the dependency dynamics within social structures (Noddings, 1998, 2012).

3.1.1 Interpersonal relationships as the foundation of ethics

Teachers should cultivate a deep understanding and consistent practice of reflective inquiry, particularly when mentoring student teachers, with their approach grounded in the principles of the ethics of care. The ethics of care asserts that moral actions should be grounded in emotional connections and mutual care within interpersonal relationships, rather than being based solely on abstract moral principles or universally applicable rules. This ethical framework emphasizes that emotions and interpersonal interactions

are fundamental to moral judgment and behavior, particularly in caregiving, intimate, and dependent relationships, such as those between family members or between teachers and students. At its core, the ethics of care focuses on understanding the connections and responsibilities between individuals, prioritizing sensitivity and responsiveness to the needs of others. Unlike traditional deontological ethics (e.g., Kantian ethics) or consequentialism (e.g., utilitarianism), which focus primarily on the outcomes of actions or adherence to rules, the ethics of care places equal importance on the emotional relationships and moral responsibilities between the actor and the recipient of care. In the educational context, the ethics of care encourages educators to prioritize fostering nurturing relationships with students, recognizing their unique needs, and demonstrating greater empathy and care throughout the teaching process. This perspective not only enhances the psychological and emotional well-being of learners but also contributes to the creation of a more supportive and inclusive learning environment (Noddings, 1995, 2002, 2012, 2013; Wang and Shih, 2023).

3.1.2 Vulnerability and dependency

A central tenet of the ethics of care lies in its profound acknowledgment of human vulnerability and interdependence. This ethical framework recognizes that individuals, at various stages of life, may find themselves in situations where they are dependent on others for assistance, whether due to physical frailty, emotional distress, or a lack of social support. Vulnerability, in this context, is understood as an intrinsic aspect of the human condition, manifesting in instances such as aging, illness, psychological challenges, or other circumstances. The ethics of care asserts that ethical behavior should not merely be guided by abstract moral principles or universal norms; instead, it advocates for a prioritization of care for those who are vulnerable or dependent. This perspective places the ethical responsibility of individuals on a foundation of empathy and responsiveness, emphasizing that care and support for those in need should be the central focus of moral action (Noddings, 1995, 2002, 2012, 2013).

3.1.3 Responsibility and reciprocity

The ethics of care emphasizes the reciprocal nature of caregiving, positing that care should not be regarded merely as a unilateral act but rather as a relational dynamic grounded in mutual responsibility. This ethical perspective highlights that caregiving relationships ought to be bidirectional, rooted in principles of mutual respect and empathy, rather than being solely characterized by self-sacrifice. Within this framework, care is conceptualized not only as a response to the needs of others but as an ongoing process of interaction, understanding, and shared moral responsibility. The notion of reciprocity suggests that caregiving is not only a means of promoting the well-being of others but also contributes to the cultivation of interdependence and empathetic social connections, fostering a more collaborative and supportive social fabric (Noddings, 1995, 2002, 2012, 2013).

3.1.4 The balance of emotion and reason

In contrast to traditional ethical frameworks, which typically position emotion and reason as opposing or independent forces, the ethics of care asserts that emotions—such as empathy, compassion, and love—constitute a fundamental basis for moral judgment and action. This perspective provides an ethically more nuanced framework than deontological or utilitarian approaches, underscoring

the constructive role of emotions in the ethical decision-making process. Within the ethics of care, emotions are not viewed as antithetical to deliberation; rather, they are seen as complementary to reason, working in tandem to facilitate the enactment of moral behavior. As such, emotions are not only integral to moral judgment but also serve as a vital foundation for understanding others' needs and fostering interpersonal relationships, thereby rendering moral actions more comprehensive, intricate, and inherently rooted in human connection (Noddings, 1995, 2002, 2012, 2013).

3.1.5 Contextual relevance

The ethics of care emphasizes the specificity of situations rather than abstract universal moral rules. This ethical perspective argues that ethical decisions should take into account interpersonal interactions and emotional needs in each specific context, rather than relying solely on universal moral principles or abstract ethical rules. The ethics of care focuses on relationships between people, suggesting that ethical behavior is not just about following rules, but is built on understanding, compassion, and attending to the concrete needs of others. In general, the ethics of care is a moral framework that highlights the role of emotions, care, and responsibility in interpersonal interactions. It provides profound ethical insights into dependence dynamics in caregiving, family relationships, and social structures. The ethics of care is concerned not only with the outcomes of moral actions but also with the interpersonal relationships and emotional needs behind those actions. It challenges traditional ethics, which often simplify moral judgments into abstract universal rules, advocating for judgment within specific contexts, focusing on relationships, understanding, and compassion. For example, in education, teachers may face diverse needs and backgrounds among students. The ethics of care encourages teachers to deeply understand each student's specific situation and adjust their teaching methods according to the students' emotional needs and individual circumstances, rather than relying solely on generic teaching standards (Noddings, 1995, 2002, 2012, 2013).

3.2 Reframing university teacher-student relationships through the lens of Noddings' ethics of care

Noddings' ethics of care emphasizes the interactive relationship between the "one-caring" and the "cared-for," asserting that education should be founded on care and understanding, while prioritizing the needs, feelings, and growth of individuals. In the context of university teacher-student relationships, Noddings' care perspective offers the following key insights.

3.2.1 Building trust and empathy in teacher-student interactions

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 (Noddings, 1995, 2002, 2012, 2013).

3.2.2 Emphasizing the moral responsibility of the teacher-student relationship

The goal of education should be to care for the connection between students and the world, and this should be considered in educational practice and policymaking. Noddings conceptualizes care as a form of "moral commitment," highlighting that teachers serve not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as facilitators of students' personal and intellectual growth. Teachers bear the moral responsibility to support the comprehensive development of students, fostering their growth into individuals with a strong sense of social responsibility. Practical strategies include the integration of social practice and service learning into curriculum design, thereby promoting students' engagement with and care for society. Additionally, creating a supportive learning environment where students feel understood and respected is crucial. Through modeling ethical behavior and demonstrating social responsibility, educators can cultivate students' moral awareness and their sense of civic duty (Noddings, 1995, 2002, 2012, 2013; Shih, 2022).

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. Additionally, fostering open, reciprocal dialogue between teachers and students is essential. Teachers are also encouraged to consistently practice care, thereby facilitating students' acquisition of care-related skills. Ultimately, through the recognition and validation of students' personal and academic journeys, teachers can establish and deepen the caring relationship between themselves and their students.

3.2.3 Developing a culture that fosters dialogue and reflection

Noddings argues that effective caring relationships are grounded in "responsive dialogue," where interactions between teachers and students are marked by openness, active listening, and reflection. This dialogue fosters an environment in which students are supported in developing critical thinking skills and achieving personal growth. Practical strategies for implementing this approach include facilitating critical discussions in the classroom to encourage diverse perspectives and questioning. Promoting peer learning communities allows students to learn collaboratively while providing mutual support. Additionally, reflective learning journals can guide students in deeply reflecting on their learning processes, helping them gain insights into their intellectual and personal development (Noddings, 1995, 2002, 2012, 2013).

3.2.4 Fostering a culture of compassion and collective community awareness

Noddings suggests that care is not merely an individual act but a cultural atmosphere that is cultivated. In universities, the joint effort of faculty and students to create a culture of care can foster

collaboration and support within the academic community, while also providing students with a sense of belonging. Practical strategies include organizing interdisciplinary exchanges and community events to promote multicultural understanding and dialogue. Through collaborative faculty-student initiatives, such as joint research and community service projects, trust and cooperation can be strengthened. Incorporating the philosophy of care into campus policies can also drive support for physical and mental well-being, as well as the sharing of learning resources (Noddings, 1995, 2002, 2012, 2013).

4 Discussions and conclusions

Further discussion is warranted regarding how the ethics of care intersects with the structural features of higher education—such as large class sizes, the prioritization of research productivity, and the increasingly diverse and evolving needs of students. Large lecture formats have become the norm in many universities; however, such structures constrain opportunities for meaningful interactions between instructors and students, thereby impeding the development of authentic teacher-student relationships and compromising the overall quality of teaching and learning. In light of these challenges, it is essential to offer concrete strategies and illustrative examples that demonstrate how faculty members in higher education can enact a pedagogy of care. For example, Tripon (2024) highlights efforts to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment responsive to the specific needs of STEM students, and presents practical approaches through which caring pedagogy can be effectively implemented in higher education settings.

Furthermore, there should be a more nuanced engagement with the critiques of care ethics, including concerns about the potential exploitation of teachers through emotional labour and the culturally contingent meanings and expectations surrounding "care." Such critiques highlight the risk that care ethics, if uncritically applied, may inadvertently reinforce gendered or normative assumptions about the role of educators, while overlooking the diverse ways in which care is understood and enacted across different cultural and institutional contexts.

Finally, a more nuanced and critical engagement with the ethics of care is necessary, particularly in addressing concerns related to the potential exploitation of teachers through emotional labor and the culturally contingent interpretations of "care." While care ethics underscores relationality and emotional engagement, scholars have cautioned that such emphasis may inadvertently intensify the emotional burdens placed on educators—especially women—thereby contributing to professional burnout and psychological exhaustion (Lynch, 2010; Zembylas, 2005). Moreover, the meanings and practices of care are not culturally neutral or universally defined; rather, they are shaped by specific sociocultural and political contexts. Tronto (1993), for example, argues that care must be understood as a political and situated practice, deeply embedded in broader structures of power and cultural norms. Accordingly, applying care ethics in educational settings requires careful critical reflection on its potential to reinforce gendered expectations or cultural biases. It is imperative to explore how an ethically grounded, context-sensitive approach to care can be cultivated—one that affirms the relational

dimensions of teaching while also safeguarding the well-being and professional autonomy of educators. Such an approach not only deepens our theoretical understanding of care ethics but also offers valuable ethical direction for educational reform in increasingly diverse and complex learning environments.

The carelessness of education has its origins in the classical Cartesian view of scholarly work, namely that it is separate from emotional thought and feeling and that the focus of education is on educating an autonomous, rational person, *Homo sapiens*, whose relationality is not regarded as central to her or his being. Further, it is grounded in the separation between fact and value that is endemic to contemporary positivist norms that govern not only scientific and social scientific thought, but also the organization of higher education. What is new about new managerialism in higher education is the moral status it accords to carelessness (Lynch, 2010).

Nel Noddings is arguably one of the premier philosophers of education in the English-speaking world today (Bergman, 2004). Drawing on Nel Noddings' ethics of care, this manuscript investigates how a relational and care-centered approach can strengthen teacher-student interactions and foster a more compassionate learning environment in higher education.

Nel Noddings, an American philosopher and educator, has received global recognition for her contributions to educational philosophy, educational theory, and care ethics. Given that her ethics of care offers a relational and practice-oriented perspective on morality and moral reasoning, it is unsurprising that it has significantly influenced moral education and the ethics of teaching. In the ethics of teaching (Saha et al., 2023; Tuckwiller et al., 2024).

In contemporary higher education, the teacher-student relationship is often defined by a hierarchical dynamic of authority and expertise, with a predominant focus on the unidirectional transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. However, as educational paradigms evolve, there is growing recognition of the need to cultivate authentic, human-centered relationships between educators and learners. Nel Noddings' ethics of care provides a robust theoretical framework for re-evaluating these relationships. Grounded in the ethical primacy of care, Noddings argues that education should prioritize relational practices characterized by trust, empathy, and a deep responsiveness to the needs of others. At the core of Noddings' ethics of care lies the concept of relational responsibility, which underscores the moral duty of educators to address both the emotional and intellectual dimensions of student development. This framework also encourages students to engage in reciprocal acts of care, fostering a collaborative and responsive educational environment. Such an approach challenges conventional pedagogical models that emphasize cognitive outcomes and standardized assessment at the expense of emotional well-being and social development. By integrating care ethics into the teacher-student relationship, higher education institutions can foster learning environments that not only support intellectual achievement but also promote emotional resilience, social responsibility, and a sense of belonging (Noddings, 1995, 2002, 2012, 2013). This article aims to examine the application of Noddings' ethics of care within the context of higher education, with a particular focus on its capacity to transform teacher-student interactions. In the context of university teacher-student relationships, Noddings' ethics of care offers the following key insights: (1) Building trust and empathy

in teacher-student interactions; (2) Emphasizing the moral responsibility of the teacher-student relationship; (3) Developing a culture that fosters dialogue and reflection; (4) Fostering a culture of compassion and collective community awareness. Finally, through the lens of Noddings' ethics of care, the teacher-student relationship in higher education can be redefined, positioning educators not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as facilitators of students' holistic growth and well-being. This relational approach not only enhances academic achievement but also nurtures students' emotional resilience and moral development. The ethics of care offers a transformative perspective, reframing education as not solely the dissemination of knowledge and rational thought but as a deeply relational and empathetic endeavor centered on human connection and mutual development.

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M-KC: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Y-HS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

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