

# The Caring Subversion of Nel Noddings: An Appreciation

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By Alfie Kohn

My undergraduate mentor had a life-changing impact, both as a teacher and a human being, on innumerable students he taught over the course of nearly three decades.<sup>1</sup> So on his 95th birthday about a hundred of us took a full day to tell him so. We drove or flew in from all over the country and, one after another, described his influence on us. “How wonderful that we’re doing this while he’s still alive,” I thought.

With Nel Noddings, a philosopher of education at Stanford who died last year at 93, I’m afraid I missed my chance. I’ll have to settle for telling you, rather than her, how much I admired not only the specific ideas she unspooled but how she was always provocative in the best sense of that word, challenging the conventional wisdom in a way that was the opposite of doctrinaire. Her thinking was nuanced, erudite, and often surprising. She was also a lovely person.

An expert on John Dewey, Noddings was steeped in the thinking of Martin Buber as well, not to mention feminist theory and a great deal more. She invited us to think carefully about choice and autonomy, pointing out that democracy involves much more than voting and describing the ways in which we constrain

kids' autonomy. ("We cannot enter into dialogue with children when we know that our decision is already made," she once remarked.) She did deep dives into such topics as character education and critical thinking. The second, and perhaps most influential, of her many books defended the proposition that ethics can be based not on abstract obligation and universal principles but on care, which is to say, on "receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness."

Here's a sample of her wisdom that I quote every time I speak about parenting: Because we often don't understand why children do what they do, and because they often live up to – or down to – our expectations, Noddings urged us to attribute to them the best possible motive for their actions that's consistent with the facts.

Noddings's philosophical commitments led her to engage with contemporary education policy, and she was greatly troubled by much of what she saw. She often warned that the top-down, test-driven, corporate-styled approach to school reform made it extremely difficult to do right by students. "The worst feature of current moves toward standardization," she wrote, "is the insistence that *all* kids meet the same standards, regardless of their interests and aptitudes. This insistence is claimed to be a gesture toward equality, but it really is a sign of contempt for the wide range of human talents and the necessary work done by many of our citizens."

Her criticism of high-stakes standardized tests in particular emerged from her deep concern for children's well-being but also from her impatience with the empty slogans ("raising the bar," "accountability") that fuels this practice. Decades ago she warned that we would "lose half a generation to this nonsense," an estimate that would prove far too conservative. "Standardized tests are loaded with trivia – questions that most successful adults cannot answer and would indeed scorn to answer." She observed that teachers were caught in a Catch-22: cautioned not to teach to the test while being pressured

indirectly to do exactly that. If the objective is really to learn whether a school was failing, she said, why not just use “the windshield test”: Drive by a given school and see if you can’t make a reasonable guess.

Even apart from the standards-and-testing mania, Noddings was a consistently insightful and incisive critic of traditional schooling. As a former high school math teacher, she was particularly unimpressed by how that subject was typically taught, as well as by the emphasis placed on math relative to other things kids might learn. “Why decide that the road to equity is established by coercing everyone into becoming proficient in mathematics?” she asked.

More broadly, and controversially, she rejected “the deadly notion that the schools’ first priority should be intellectual development.” Instead, “the main aim of education should be to produce competent, caring, loving, and lovable people.” She emphasized the need to rethink vocational education, not only because we should provide wider access to practical and career-based education but because that kind of education should be valued just as highly as a college-prep curriculum rather than regarded as a second-rate, fallback option for those who can’t hack calculus and world history. (In a delicious aside, Noddings noticed that “basket weaving” is sometimes used as a colloquial shorthand for a silly, unchallenging activity, whereas it is in fact neither pointless nor particularly easy.)

Drawing on her own experience in the classroom, Noddings wrote about not only what we teach but how we teach it. She exposed the gratuitous cruelty of calling on students who would rather not speak at the moment. She offered ideas for how teachers might discuss controversial topics. She lamented that “schools have a way of taking exciting material and reducing it to mush” – and she pointed out how rare it is for teachers and students to engage in “ordinary conversation” with one another.

I think what most impressed me about Noddings, though, was how she took ideas that most of us regard as uncontroversial, if not self-evident, and then either teased out their radical implications or pushed us to ask whether they really made sense at all. An example of the first move was her book-length consideration of the fact that “children (and adults, too) learn best when they are happy.” (She also observed that “happy individuals are rarely violent or intentionally cruel.”) This led her to pose a series of questions about the intellectual, psychological, and moral costs of schooling that not only ignores these simple facts but seems to be rooted in a glorification of suffering and a belief in original sin. Indeed, we could have predicted how the standards-and-testing movement would undermine meaningful learning just by virtue of how miserable it makes kids (and teachers!).

Noddings was at her best when she challenged us to think twice about ideas that are accepted uncritically. A few examples:

- \* Is it desirable to promote a sense of “community”? Well, not necessarily, because “communities often act like bloated individuals.”

- \* Should we always try to do our best? “Or should we choose intelligently and bravely those tasks to which we will give our best?...To expend equal effort...on everything is a sure road to mediocrity.” (Similarly, she added, “Like honesty and courage, perseverance is not always a virtue.”)<sup>2</sup>

- \* Many of us who criticize the practice of presenting students with an endless stream of facts about, say, science or math like to argue that students should instead be taught to “think like a scientist” or mathematician or historian. But Noddings wasn’t sure. First, she pointed out that there isn’t a single way that each of those experts thinks. Second, she proposed that we might instead show students how to use those disciplinary tools “to think about their own purposes. For example, carpenters don’t

need to think like mathematicians, but they do need to think about and use mathematics in their work.”

\* Does a given educational policy encourage more girls to choose careers in traditionally male-dominated fields? A good question. But why, Noddings wanted to know, aren't we also asking how successful an intervention has been in encouraging more boys to choose to be nurses or preschool teachers? By the same token, it's fine to talk about educating “for citizenship,” but might sexism explain why this goal so often eclipses the goal of educating for “private life” – how to sustain a relationship, raise a child, make a home, be a neighbor?

\* Many people have focused on improving the scientific research on which prescriptions for teaching are based. Noddings took a step back and argued that we needed to defend the premise that the scientific method should enjoy a privileged status given that vital insights about education can also be derived from other fields of study such as anthropology, literature, history, and philosophy.

\* Should we join Paulo Freire in creating a pedagogy of the oppressed? Sure, but it may be even more urgent to create a pedagogy of the *oppressor*, Noddings said. Affluent kids need to “become conscious of the possible effects of their lifestyles on the lives of others.”

\* Should adults teach by setting an example for children? Well, that strategy may be overrated, Noddings mused, because “when we focus on ourselves as models, we are distracted from the cared-for.”

\* Perhaps the reason we seem to keep failing in our efforts to help students question and carefully analyze the status quo is that powerful institutions and individuals actually don't want that to happen: “Many in our society fear what may result from widespread and competent critical

thinking.”

To illustrate that last point, Noddings quoted William Galston, a political theorist and advisor to politicians, who declared that the state should not “prescribe curricula or pedagogic practices that...invite students to become skeptical or critical of their own way of life.” Noddings commented: “Socrates would weep. But, of course, people who feared critical thinking in his time knew what to do with Socrates.”

Speaking of weeping, I once sent her a link to a short documentary video that someone had uploaded to YouTube about progressive education. It ends with the narrator intoning, “Today, an overwhelming majority of U.S. educators are convinced, through happy, impressive results, that these...teaching methods are best equipping today’s youngster for today’s world.” I commented that this was heartening news indeed – as long as you ignored the fact that the film was made in the 1940s.

“It’s enough to make me cry,” Nel replied, “and I don’t cry easily.”

## NOTES

1. His name was George Morgan. It’s unlikely you would have heard of him unless you were one of his students. He wrote just one book, *The Human Predicament*, which was read mostly by his students. (This was in keeping with what might be called IPP – Instructor’s Primary Prerogative: You may always assign your own writings.) George was the only professor at Brown University who was not affiliated with any department; trained as a mathematician, he left that field in order to teach interdisciplinary courses with names like “Conceptions of Man” and “Possibilities for Social Reconstruction.”

2. Noddings also winced at teachers who pushed students relentlessly while praising the few who managed to live up to those sky-high expectations. Such instructors are often admired for being both demanding and encouraging, but if “You are the best!” just means “You can do A.P. calculus,” then this suggests that only those who master differential equations are “the best.” Surely “a student should not have to succeed

at A.P. calculus to gain a math teacher's respect."

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