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ABSTRACT

Nel Noddings makes the case that producing caring and competent people ought to be the principal goal of education, suggesting that educators establish the conditions in which students with differing interests, capacities, and needs can achieve things that are educationally worthwhile. This paper considers how Noddings approaches two questions fundamental to curriculum theory and practice. One is where the curriculum maker should begin and the other is how Noddings would reconstitute the school curriculum. Noddings believes that a "preactive" curriculum, a body of materials prepared in advance and intended for instruction, has inherent educational limitations. Noddings advocated an interactive view of curriculum that grows from the interactions among teachers, students, and materials. Her objections to coercion and standardization do not mean that she favors educational anarchy. She suggests recasting the language for reform rather than being trapped by it. Standards, for example, if applied to individual children, may be a wonderful means of educational planning. Rather than requiring all students to learn the same material through the same activities, Noddings would invite each student to participate in forming the purposes that direct his or her activities. In effect, she would devise individualized standards to the extent practicable. She acknowledges that there is material all children do need, but stresses that it is a mistake to establish arbitrary learning standards and accountability mechanisms that take no account of the individual capacities and purposes of children. A curriculum constituted on an ethic of care implies the development of competence on the part of the teacher and the student. (Contains 19 references.) (SLD)

Caring and Competence: Nel Noddings' Curriculum Thought

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Caring and Competence: Nel Noddings' Curriculum Thought[1]

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Nel Noddings argues that producing caring and competent persons ought to be the principal goal of education. She suggests that educators establish "conditions in which students with multifarious interests, capacities, and needs can achieve things that are educationally worthwhile" (1995, p. 1). How these "conditions" can be secured and what they may look like is the topic of this paper. A comprehensive treatment of this topic is clearly impossible within the confines of a brief paper. Therefore I shall restrict myself to how Noddings approaches two questions fundamental to curriculum theory and practice: 1) Where should the curriculum maker begin? 2) How would Noddings reconstitute the school curriculum?

Where Should the Curriculum Maker Begin?

Noddings believes that a "preactive" view of curriculum—that is, a body of materials prepared in advance and intended for instruction (Jackson, 1966)—has inherent educational limitations. It is, of course, the prevailing view of curriculum, which is embodied in current standards (and policed by high-stakes tests). But such a view of curriculum disregards what is most educationally vital: a meaningful connection between the interests and capacities of pupils and the curriculum. Without this connection, we encounter the same problem of educational "waste" that John Dewey (1990) deplored in

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The School and Society: "the gap existing between the everyday experiences of the child and the isolated material supplied" in the curriculum (p. 76).

Noddings advocates an interactive view of curriculum—that is, the outcome of the interactions among teachers, pupils, and materials (Jackson, 1966)—rather than a preactive view. From this perspective, learning outcomes are only one of the educator's proper concerns. Many activities, Noddings (1993) observes, may be worthwhile (and we will rightly continue to promote them) even if we cannot state exactly what children are learning from them. The quality of present experience, not just pre-specified learning outcomes, should be valued.

The current national preoccupation with accountability, however, rewards only those who master learning standards. This insistence on a "one best system" is scarcely new in American education (see Tyack, 1974), but Noddings warns that interactive curriculum is especially vulnerable if judged solely by conventional learning measures such as test scores. In response to criticisms during the 1970s, for instance, open educators succumbed to the temptation of claiming their pupils learned information, concepts, and skills as well as children taught a conventional curriculum by traditional methods. This was a perilous strategy, Noddings (1993) warns. Children whose lessons emphasized knowledge transmission almost certainly *did* learn more of this type of material. Comparing based on a stacked deck overlooked other major issues such as what children experienced in open education that is not captured by standard measures.

Noddings' objection to coercion, standardization, and so forth is hardly to suggest she favors educational anarchy. On the contrary, she believes educators ought to be accountable and educational standards be upheld. But she warns we should be more

thoughtful about what we mean by these terms. Too often, the language of reform becomes a trap. For example, the expression "every child can learn" is dangerously seductive. In spite of its altruistic ring, it has caused real harm.

It has been used, Noddings (1997a) points out, to coerce teachers into "motivating" all students to care about and succeed in all school subjects. Left entirely unconsidered is that some youngsters may have no interest in learning material foisted on them (by standards makers or other authorities). In any genuine sense, it may be impossible to "motivate" all students to learn everything, the occasional "hero" teacher story notwithstanding. Setting unrealistic expectations for which educators are held accountable, however well intentioned, is harmful; it breeds resignation and pessimism.

Noddings suggests recasting the language of reform rather than being trapped by it. For example, applied to individual children rather than a conglomerate, standards setting may be a wonderful means of educational planning. Rather than requiring all pupils learn the same material through the same activities, she would invite each student to participate in forming the purposes that direct his or her activities. As Dewey (1963, p. 67) recommended, Noddings would devise, in effect, individualized standards (to the extent practicable in a given context).

This also recasts pupil activity, teacher roles, and learning outcomes. Pupils will engage more readily in activities in which they have intrinsic interest. Teachers are responsible for making sure the pupil's purposes lead in educationally worthwhile directions, thus becoming more guides than knowledge dispensers. Assessments of learning outcomes will center on "What did each pupil learn?" rather than "Did all the pupils learn X?"

Critics might respond that teacher-pupil planning comes at the expense of progressive organization of subject matter. Even Dewey pointed to this danger (1963). But as long as the teacher carries out this planning process responsibly, Noddings believes, such concern is misplaced. She is not suggesting the kind of formless program of study instituted by A. S. Neill (1968) at his free school, Summerhill. Noddings full well realizes that teachers must counsel pupils on both the educational direction of their studies and the future consequences of a pupil's program of study. Sometimes, for instance, pupils may need to be steered toward topics in which they are have no direct interest because it is necessary for further work in the field or college admission. The teacher should always be honest about why this material (and how much of it) is required for the student's purposes. The teacher should not create the impression that the pupil is somehow deficient for lacking interest in the material.

Although she would minimize compulsion, Noddings (1998) nonetheless believes there is material all children *do* need. She points out, for instance, that we should be "rightly appalled" when students complete the 8th grade without mastering basic skills and concepts that are necessary for satisfactorily making one's way in the world, let alone the building blocks of further work in any academic field. Among these basics she includes being able to read ordinary material, write a clear message consistent with their purposes, speak standard English well enough to negotiate in the public world, and display some sense of their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

Standards makers, however, have confounded what all children truly need with what disciplinary specialists deem desirable for anyone planning further work in their fields. Noddings, who is a former math teacher, is unafraid to take on shibboleths such as

all adolescents "need" geometry and algebra for their future careers. Contrary to prevailing dogma, Noddings (1997c) points out, these branches of mathematics are used in adult life by only a tiny minority of the pupils forced to take them. It is college entrance requirements (and the college curriculum) rather than the alleged "need" for geometry and algebra that account for their prominent place in the school curriculum. Do high-school students whose future careers involve no mathematics beyond arithmetic need to study the same (and as much) math as students who will go on to be engineers, accountants, or mathematicians? What might adolescents uninterested in math profit from learning instead? What are the purposes of math in general education and whose interests do these purposes serve? Do efforts to assure girls get equal opportunities with boys in math also unintentionally serve to devalue occupations traditionally associated with the experience of women? Where are the equity efforts in domestic science, nursing, and childcare (see Noddings, 1990)?

Thus far, I have suggested that Noddings rejects prevailing views of where the curriculum maker should begin. She believes it is fundamentally mistaken to establish arbitrary learning standards and accountability mechanisms that take no account of the individual capacities and purposes of children. These policies hinder rather than help in the development of caring and competent persons. Further, she argues these same policies are not only undesirable but also poorly thought through. Tests based on standards compare all children, for instance, but ignore differences in aptitude, life circumstances, and so forth. The tests competitively rank children but also schools, districts, and even states. This approach guarantees that there will be predictable winners and losers because someone has to be below average. Some individuals and groups will permanently be

relegated to the bottom of the heap. (Indeed, the New Jersey Commissioner of Education, who recently left office, called for new statewide tests because too many students were passing!) As will be shown in the next section, Noddings urges a more generous spirit in planning educational programs.

Curriculum Reconstituted

A curriculum constituted on an ethic of care implies the development of competence. If, for instance, teachers truly care about their pupils then they will take seriously the need for professional competence on their own parts. Competence, in this scheme, is both cognitive and moral. A student may attain great competence in subject matter but fail to care about it (or about other persons). Such individuals, Noddings maintains, are inadequately educated however high their test scores. How would she organize the curriculum to educate the caring and competent individual?

One important step is to break down the isolation of formal citizenship from everyday, including domestic, life. Although "citizenship" is proclaimed as the central aim of American education, it is construed in public terms, excluding persons' roles as family member, child rearer, homemaker, and so forth (Noddings, 1999, p. 481). In the Western tradition, these "private" roles have historically been separated from the public sphere. Almost exclusively, the public sphere has been deemed the educator's legitimate concern.

This separation is harmful in many respects. It consigns, for instance, roles traditionally more associated with females to a second-class status. Further, it leads to the impression that significant thought and activity are confined to the public sphere. Activities such as child rearing, literally without which society would disintegrate, are classified as outside the intellectual realm.

Like Jane Addams, Noddings (in press a) underscores that in any comprehensive scheme of education its cognitive and moral aspects are inseparable. This leads Noddings (2001) to recast the content of the traditional academic subjects. For example, in social studies she would assign as much weight to "home making" as to "nation making" (p. 31).

As well as recasting these subjects, however, she also challenges their stranglehold on the curriculum. Even Dewey never really challenged this stranglehold (Noddings, 1992a, p. 11). She maintains that much valuable subject matter is excluded from the curriculum because it falls outside the concerns of the conventional disciplines. She uses homemaking as an illustration (Noddings, 1992b, 2001). Besides its practical uses, homemaking could be an intellectually challenging course. It can and should be multicultural, examining, for example, what it means to make a home (or be homeless) in various cultures and times. It could draw, she notes, on a range of the traditional subjects such as economics, art, nutrition, geography, history, technology, and literature.

A further important feature of Noddings' view of curriculum is its recognition that competence is most likely to develop in a pupil who feels cared for. Such care naturally entails concern for the individual's interests and capacities. This requires teachers and pupils get to know each other fairly well. Prevailing curricular-instructional arrangements, however, work against these types of teacher-pupil relationships developing. High school teachers, for instance, may see 150 pupils a day for one year or even one semester. This is likely to defeat the best efforts of even the most caring and dedicated teachers to get to know any but a handful of their pupils well.

In contrast, Noddings argues, our educational purposes should determine instructional arrangements. Continuity of the teacher-pupil relationship should outweigh

other considerations such as administrative convenience. She would have teachers remain with the same group of youngsters for two or three years (voluntarily on the part of both teacher and pupil). Teachers would then be positioned to attend to the interests and capacities of each pupil.

Noddings (1992a) also recommends small rather than large schools. Large schools often produce anonymity, an environment in which pupils (and teachers) feel "no one cares." In recent decades, she observes, large schools are justified as unavoidable. It is charged that small schools lack economies of scale. She responds that alienation, which may flourish in big schools, is surely too high a price to pay. Similarly it is said that small schools cannot provide a comprehensive curriculum. But Noddings (in press b) disputes this too. She notes that even the small high school in which she worked in the 1960s and 1970s offered a more varied curriculum than many large, comprehensive high schools today. The chief obstacle to making schools smaller is simply a failure to set proper priorities in schooling.

The same concern about priorities impels her view of academic subject matter. The needs of children should play the decisive role in determining what schools teach. In general education, she thinks our preoccupation with the traditional academic subjects is harmful. This preoccupation leads to snippets of information, or superficial coverage of material soon forgotten. It serves well neither the needs of deeply interested students nor the general education of average students.

As an alternative, Noddings (1998) proposes that youngsters have opportunities to study in some topic in depth, with "depth" referring most to lateral connections across customary subject boundaries. For instance, students in a study of the westward

movement students might read novels or short stories, explore the climate and natural environment, examine how well (or poorly) various groups fared, look at paintings, and consider family life.

Conclusion

This account of Noddings' curriculum thought is but one possible rendering. I have, for instance, neglected topics such as the use of stories in teaching (Noddings, 1997b) and small group work (Noddings, 1989); they may have served equally well. My main concern, rather, has been to get to the heart of matters. Perhaps this is best represented by Noddings' own words in the fullest statement of her curriculum thought, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (1992a): "We should educate all our children not only for competence but also for caring. Our aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving, and lovable people." (p. xiv).

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