Empathy in Action: Nurturing Sustainable Educational Change through Nel Noddings' Ethics of Care

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Abstract: This introduction synthesizes the research presented by the contributors to this special issue to explore sustainable educational practices for refugees. A common thread across the articles is that they share components of Nel Noddings' ethics of care framework, which emphasizes establishing welcoming, nurturing, and supportive environments that enable refugees to build meaningful relationships while honoring their cultural identities. We recommend action steps gleaned from the 11 papers in this issue that call for the concerted efforts of all those involved. Central to this vision are teachers, who serve as the backbone of the education system; however, to fulfill this role, they must be equipped with the necessary resources and skills to foster culturally responsive educational environments that emphasize students' identities and provide equitable learning. This introduction underscores the importance of holistic and relational approaches as foundational to achieving sustainable educational equity for refugee learners.

Keywords: Community, empathy, empowerment, equity, inclusive

Purpose

As researchers and educators working with refugees, our primary objective when we drafted the call for submissions for this special issue, "Educational Equity for Refugees: Sustainable Practices," was to focus on projects that provide equitable and sustaining educational opportunities. These opportunities are significant given the continuous rise in the number of refugees worldwide (UNHCR USA, 2024), which warrants conscientious efforts to create fair and just educational environments. Educational equity for refugees requires a fundamental rethinking of traditional pedagogical approaches to sustain their diverse cultural and linguistic identities.

As Django Paris (2012) proposed, culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) supports "the value of our multiethnic and multilingual present and future" (p. 93). Rather than fitting refugees into a

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standardized educational setting, CSP challenges us to resist monolingual ideologies and practices, advocating for inclusive systems that honor and nurture the cultural and linguistic assets that refugees bring. CSP encompasses various approaches to sustain and nurture the cultural practices of refugees from various parts of the world. The articles included in this special issue go beyond fostering multilingualism to suggest practices that spread cultural pluralism and equality and address power imbalances. Looking more closely at the various frameworks adopted by the authors, we notice that they all have various components of Nel Noddings' ethics of care framework. In this article, we aim to (a) highlight the findings suggested by the contributing authors and their connection to Noddings' ethics of care and (b) suggest effective and sustainable practices to ensure that refugees have fair and inclusive educational opportunities.

Noddings' philosophy of the ethics of care provides a solid foundation for the special issue, offering critical insights into the relational, empathetic, and context-specific dimensions of education. Rooted in the belief that ethical action arises from caring relationships and attentiveness to others' needs, Noddings (1984) reframes traditional education, challenges the dominant frameworks, and argues for an approach grounded in compassion, dialogue, and responsiveness to individual backgrounds and experiences. Noddings' philosophy is especially relevant to the context of refugee education globally, where systemic inequities and the challenges refugee learners face demand pedagogical practices that prioritize care, connection, and holistic support. As we intend to highlight in this special issue, we urge educators to create sustainable educational equity for refugees that addresses learners' academic needs and their social and emotional well-being, fostering an environment of trust. In keeping with Noddings' ethics of care, the special issue contributors advocate for practices that center on relational connection and community partnerships to nurture meaningful and transformative educational experiences for refugees. Through this lens, the ethics of care serve as both a theoretical and practical guide for reimagining education for refugees that is more inclusive, responsive, and aligned with their lived realities.

Fostering a Nurturing and Supportive Environment

Noddings' emphasis on the ethics of care is a reminder that education is not merely about transmitting knowledge but, more importantly, about fostering the holistic development of individuals. Educators are not just conveyors of information; they are mentors, guides, and caregivers. Noddings encourages us to view our students as individuals with unique needs, emotions, and aspirations. By recognizing the humanness in each learner, we can create more compassionate and nurturing educational spaces. Working with refugees requires this nurturing approach where we focus on the whole student and recognize that they have individual needs and thus strive to provide holistic support that attends to their physical, emotional, social, and mental well-being. Adopting a nurturing approach ensures that teachers provide high-quality academic content and attend to students' human needs, thus fostering growth and development (Fischer & Bidell, 2006; Hos, 2016). To achieve this, teachers need to see students as people with their own challenges and lives and strive to connect with them and build close relationships (de Arriba Rivas & Ibáñez Ruiz del Portal, 2023). Fostering these connections enables teachers to go beyond academics to help students take care of themselves and feel empowered.

This approach is clear in Dilara Özel and Zeynep Sümer's "Peace Education Program Adaptation: A Sustainable Way for Harmony," where students were exposed to various activities that helped build a community. Barriers were removed through content that allowed students to familiarize themselves with each other's cultures and backgrounds, build empathy, and create a sense of belonging. The researchers clearly rejected a one-size-fits-all approach and set out to

understand the needs of the refugee students and adapt the program to fit those needs. They encouraged "Listening to Each Other" moments and provided opportunities for dialogue (Noddings, 2009), which enabled the students to focus more on learning about themselves and others. Refugees and local students shared about themselves through dialogue while creating opportunities to see commonalities and bridge differences. Engaging in dialogue was essential as it opened doors to communication and allowed for building trust and empathy.

In "Education and Integration in Countries with Syrian Children: Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Germany and Turkey" Mehmet Fansa and Mehmet Sayıcı assess the educational provisions of five countries hosting large numbers of Syrians displaced by civil war – Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and Germany – against a holistic education model (Arnot & Pinson, 2005; Pinson & Arnot, 2010). According to Arnot and Pinson (2005), holistic education is an approach that addresses a student's academic, social, cultural, and emotional needs by accounting for individual, interpersonal, and school-level factors. A holistic approach to educating refugee-background students goes beyond enacting policies that provide access to schooling and implicitly relate to care by attending to students' social and emotional well-being. The authors conclude that holistic education is not taking place in the displacement settings they evaluated, which still struggle to ensure access to all students, particularly at the high school level.

Lisa Ruth Brunner, Takhmina Shokirova, Mostafa Gamal, and Sharon Stein provide nuance to the concept of care at the institutional level by illuminating the 'care/control nexus' in "Higher Education's Care/Control of Refugee and Displaced Students." The authors problematize the recruitment and reception of displaced students in Global North institutions, which alternatively frame these students as "charity," "cash," "competition," "labor," and "threat." Brunner and colleagues assert that even well-intentioned acts of care can function as control due to the reproduction of Western superiority through paternalistic procedures and surveillance.

Similarly, Rosalie Metro, Ma Maysi, and Joe Decker investigate the pathways and barriers to higher education for 1.5-generation Myanmar refugee-background youth in "Beyond Resilience: Barriers and Pathways in Higher Education for Double First-Gen Myanmar Refugee-Background Youth." They coin the term "double first-gen" to describe students who are both first-generation college students and first-generation immigrants and employ a critical grounded theory approach to understand the available supports and gaps. The authors move beyond individual resilience, focusing on structural factors such as the role of diverse K-12 schools and supportive higher education institutions in fostering belonging and access. The paper depicts the multidimensional experiences of refugee-background students and outlines ways that institutions can foster welcoming environments and facilitate successful post-secondary transitions.

Building Strong Relationships

Teaching is relational in nature and requires reciprocity from both teachers and students, hence the need for engagement. From an ethics of care perspective, reciprocity calls for attentive listening, compassion, and mutual respect and support. For this to happen, teachers need to model what giving care means. This modeling goes beyond showing concern and love to being engrossed in caring, which involves deeply understanding the needs of the one being cared for and responding accordingly (Noddings, 1984). Building strong relationships within our classrooms is also one key element of strong refugee education. It is essential to take the time to get to know our refugee students and their backgrounds and build strong relationships to help create a sense of belonging and trust.

Silvia Scolaro and Matilde Tomasi's contribution, "Second Language Teaching with Refugees: Educational Experiences and Welcoming Environments," examines humanizing practices in teaching adult learners. Using a qualitative case study, they investigated the previous educational experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in Italy to address the unique challenges that adult learners face in learning a new language. Their findings revealed the impacts of different schooling cultures and difficult living conditions on students' attitudes toward school. However, they also found that teachers' efforts to build trust, foster relationships with and among students, and respond to their individual needs through a bottom-up pedagogical approach helped to lower the affective filter (Krashen, 1985) and increase self-confidence.

In Oksana Vorobel and Heather Finn's study, "Engagement and Educational Equity: Ukrainian Refugees' Experiences in the Community College Second Language Writing Classroom," engagement is associated with self-betterment and developing a sense of community. Being engaged in learning caused the participants to make connections and feel secure and happy. It enabled them to share without fear of being judged, as their faculty ensured equity. The professors created the right environment to engage the students through their choice of topic and by bringing in authentic materials relevant to the students' lives. They also provided scaffolding and support and allowed for plenty of practice. Overall, the professors created opportunities for the students to thrive, increasing engagement and allowing for educational equity. Understanding that education is not a one-size-fits-all approach is essential for students' success. In Vorobel and Finn's research, students' needs and interests were addressed, the materials were relevant to their daily lives, and they could incorporate what they already knew to participate in the discussions. Allowing the students to bring in their knowledge and perceive it from an asset-based perspective is powerful in ensuring they see their self-worth while focusing on what they can do rather than what they lack (Beachboard, 2022). From an ethics of care perspective, teachers do what is in the best interest of their students and focus on ensuring they are successful by viewing them in a positive light (Hawk, 2017).

In 'I Saw the Look on Her Face:' Engaging the between Spaces of Work with Refugee-background Students and Families," Ramona Fruja Amthor and Kevin Roxas examine how refugees and families navigate complex intersections of identity, belonging, and agency in their educational experiences. Fruja Amthor and Roxas foreground the tensions rooted in being labeled a refugee, exploring how students navigate the opportunities and constraints imposed by this identity. The authors advocate for practices that move beyond essentializing categories, emphasizing the importance of creating spaces for self-definition where students' multiple identities are valued and acknowledged. The findings challenge educators to embrace nuanced approaches that combine empathy with systemic and structural critique. By adopting these "in-between" spaces, teachers are encouraged to balance relational care with an awareness of systemic inequities that impact refugee communities. The authors critique the reliance on empathy-driven and volunteer-based practices and propose systemic development prioritizing equity and agency.

Noddings also emphasizes the importance of empathy in education. She reminds us that to truly understand our students, we must step into their shoes and view the world from their perspective. This empathetic approach enables us to tailor our teaching methods to their individual needs, making learning more meaningful and relevant. It also helps us create an inclusive classroom where every student feels valued and respected. In addition to human-centered approaches, ethics of care also calls for tailoring our teaching and materials to meet the needs of each student and providing additional support to those who may need it. Incorporating ethics of care goes beyond teaching a language to creating a supportive learning environment that addresses the well-being

and growth of each student. By making care a central tenet of refugee education, we can empower students to acquire language skills and flourish as confident and culturally aware individuals.

Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms

The ethics of care framework has always been compelling in our own work with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. Fostering an inclusive and supportive environment that respects, values, and celebrates each student's cultural and linguistic diversity is critical when working with multilingual learners (MLLs). Ethics of care also calls for tailoring our teaching and materials to meet the needs of each student and providing additional support to those who might require it. Gay (2010) asserts that knowledge about culture is essential to all learning. Bringing students' cultures into the classroom allows them to see themselves represented in the materials and the discussions. It enables them to draw on their backgrounds, experiences, and prior knowledge to engage in the learning process (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Including students' cultures is a way to foster openness to diverse knowledges and opinions and to understand life from multiple perspectives. In doing this, we allow education to be inclusive and representative of everyone. Samuels (2018) discussed the benefits of culturally responsive learning and building trust and connections among students, which challenge systemic inequalities and promote students' growth and development. Engaging in dialogue leads students to think critically and reflect, eventually allowing them to better understand themselves and those around them (Noddings, 2009).

In "Examining Teachers' Efforts to Educate Refugee Students at One Elementary School in Texas," Nathern Okilwa, M. Michelle Kelley, and Kerry Haupert explain that refugee students had multiple opportunities to share their experiences and unique knowledge with the rest of the students. These were key learning moments as they allowed refugee students to stand out and placed them in a positive light. These learning moments occurred in the students' discussion about chocolate and where it comes from, and their interest was sparked once they realized that chocolate is grown in one of their classmates' countries. The teachers in this study allowed refugee students to use their funds of knowledge by creating a recipe book. This is an excellent way to engage the students in a meaningful, authentic writing activity and representative of who they are. This activity also enabled the students to collaborate with their families as they worked on their favorite recipes. The recipe book was the culmination of a group effort, which emphasized individual backgrounds and was an authentic, meaningful product. It reflected students' investment in learning and represents their unique identities and cultures.

In "Accessing Educational Resources and Support: Newcomer Refugee Mothers' Challenges and Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic," Saliha Al and Mehtap Akay explore the challenges and resilient practices of Turkish refugee mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. They use Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theory to foreground the linguistic, aspirational, and social capital these families bring to their children's education. The study highlights the importance of humanizing pedagogies that value refugee families' strengths and build authentic partnerships between schools and communities.

Linda Molin-Karakoç's scoping review, titled "Exploring the Digital Literacies of Refugees from a Funds-of-Knowledge Perspective," identifies five ways that incorporating digital practices can disrupt deficit orientations in language education for refugee students, applying the asset-based funds of knowledge framework (Moll et al., 1992). This approach involves teachers learning about and centering students' family and community knowledge as assets in the classroom, thereby fostering an inclusive and culturally responsive environment. Specifically, Molin-Karakoç highlights ways that educators can bridge interest-based digital practices and academic activities,

employ digital technology to affirm student identities, promote agency through choice, build social relations online, and foster intercultural digital communities to bring learners' funds of knowledge into the classroom.

Emmanuel Chukwuebuka Umeh proposes an equitable and inclusive pedagogical model for high school mathematics teachers in "Math-Trivium Framework for Newcomer Students: Orientation for High School Teachers on Equitable, Inclusive Instruction." This asset-based model incorporates culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Paris & Alim, 2017), mathematics competency, and technological literacy theories to leverage refugee-background students' indigenous knowledge and prior mathematical experiences. While Umeh focuses on newcomer African refugee youth, the paper demonstrates how students' cultures can be incorporated meaningfully into the instruction of new content and skills, thus contributing to a caring and supportive environment.

Action Steps

Teachers and researchers around the world are exerting great efforts to create safe and welcoming environments for refugee students. However, a considerable amount of work remains, and nurturing, caring, and supportive environments necessitate the involvement of all parties. This involvement requires that we consider actions that attend to responsiveness in relationships and dismantling inequities.

Pedagogy & Practice

The papers in this volume substantiate previous research demonstrating the power of culturally responsive pedagogy to enact care toward refugee-background students. Okilwa et al. (2025) highlight the importance of incorporating culturally responsive education for building positive relationships and learning environments. Molin-Karakoç (2025) underscores the significance of adopting an inquisitive mindset and a research-oriented approach to understanding students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). In line with this, Vorobel and Finn (2025) and Umeh (2025) endorse an asset-based approach that celebrates students' cultures and experiences and stimulates engagement. Franco et al. (2024) show that teachers who enact culturally responsive community-building practices are viewed as caring. Furthermore, Comstock et al. (2023) indicate that teachers who intensify their culturally responsive teaching beliefs self-report an increase in culturally responsive teaching practices. Similarly, drawing on and engaging parents' cultural wealth promotes a child's learning (Karsli-Calamak et al., 2022). Thus, we must communicate the importance of such practices to parents and teachers and encourage them to partake in activities and training that enable them to foster community relationships.

Moreover, educators must go beyond culture to understand and address students' individual needs. For instance, Scolaro and Tomasi (2025) assert that understanding adult learners' prior educational experiences and present circumstances is crucial for creating a welcoming and motivating learning environment. Metro et al. (2025) also advocate for trauma-informed and equity-centered educational practices to support refugee-background youth in transitioning to higher education. However, Fruja Amthor and Roxas (2025) warn against the danger of defining these students primarily by damage-focused trauma discourses and deficit-based labels such as SLIFE (students with limited or interrupted formal education); instead, they urge teachers to critically examine the categories and instructional materials used for refugee-background learners. Similarly, Brunner et al. (2025) offer hyper-self-reflexivity tools for those working with refugee-

background students in higher education institutions to become more aware of assumptions, biases, and complicity in harmful practices. These varied practices are rooted in an ethics of care, prioritizing refugee students' holistic well-being rather than attending only to language acquisition or academic progress.

Systems & Support

It is not enough that teachers care for students and try to be welcoming and inclusive; they face limitations and need support to increase their effectiveness and widen their impact. At the systems level, policies must facilitate holistic educational approaches to ensure that learners' academic, emotional, and social needs are met through appropriate instruction as well as wrap-around services such as language and psychological support so they can reach their full potential (Fansa & Sayıcı, 2025). For Özel and Sümer (2025), establishing a long-lasting effect and creating sustainable caring environments necessitates mass collaboration. It requires the concerted efforts of NGOs, districts, administrators, teachers, students, and parents since each of these parties has a significant role to play in ensuring that refugee students receive the help and support they need and can thrive in an environment where they are seen, included, and have equitable learning opportunities.

Strengthening the impact of teachers and parents also calls for equipping them with the necessary skills. Teachers must be trained to build classroom and school communities (Goodlad et al., 2004). Doing this will enable the students to understand better and connect with each other. It will also cause parents to want to invest in their children's school because they see it as a place where families are welcomed and appreciated. Finally, many states are adopting "grow your own" initiatives, which focus on addressing the shortage in the teacher workforce while increasing diversity (Wood, 2022). Okilwa et al. (2025) recommend recruiting teachers from diverse backgrounds, which aligns well with increasing opportunities for culturally responsive teaching since these teachers are more likely to be familiar with other cultures. However, we must be more intentional and tailor these programs to certify teachers who foster sustainable ethics of care and equitable teaching practices.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, wars and displacement continue to happen every day, which means that migration is ongoing, and people will flee their countries looking for safety and refuge. Given this, we need to better prepare ourselves for such crises and work diligently to help refugees find peace and comfort in education. Finding these can only happen when we enforce culturally sustaining pedagogies deeply rooted in ethics of care and recognize the assets refugees bring and the importance of their identities and linguistic backgrounds. Only then can we say that we are providing equitable learning opportunities to empower refugees and prepare them for a future where they can be productive and efficient citizens.

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