

Commentary

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The Practice of Care in Education: Shadow Teachers, Disability, and Inclusive Schooling

Abstract

This commentary examines the important yet often invisible role of shadow teachers in inclusive education through the lens of care ethics. Based on a year-long field engagement within a private, elite, inclusive school in the Delhi–NCR region, it highlights the essential role played by shadow teachers in supporting inclusion for students with disabilities. Shadow teachers provide academic and social support, facilitate their social participation, and serve as their advocates within the school. The work of Noddings (1984, 1992) and Held (2006) helps conceptualise them as important practitioners of care. Despite the unique position that they occupy, shadow teachers remain structurally unacknowledged by the school, which devalues the care work done by them. The surveillance and their limited agency affect the recognition of their work, creating precarious employment conditions. This commentary highlights the need to value the practice of care performed by shadow teachers as an essential aspect of the ethos of inclusive education.

Keywords: Care, disability, inclusive education, shadow teachers

Introduction

Envisioned on the principle of social justice, the inclusive education model predates both the segregated and integrated approaches of learning for persons with disabilities. This has been a long-standing demand for the various stakeholders, and only recently have governments and international organisations begun to prioritise it through various policies and programmes. However, the successful implementation of such policies often relies on the contributions of multiple actors who are both directly and indirectly involved in the educational process. Shadow teachers are one such group, primarily existing outside the formal workplace and structurally unacknowledged. They are the individuals who provide one-on-one support to learners with disabilities within a mainstream inclusive setting. Although not formally acknowledged, they play an important role in mediating academic knowledge, as well as in

enabling and facilitating the participation of students with disabilities in the school. Often employed by the parents themselves, they become the primary caregiver and teacher of their student in school, taking care of the child's varying needs.

This work is based on a year-long field engagement in a private, elite, inclusive school in the Delhi–NCR region. It engages with 15 shadow teachers and attempts to answer questions about the role of the shadow teacher in the school's ecosystem and how their structural invisibility affects their capacity to perform their duties in an inclusive school. This commentary conceptualises shadow teachers as occupying a vital yet unacknowledged position in the school ecosystem. They lack institutional recognition and capital yet play a crucial role in the pedagogic process. By exploring the role of shadow teachers, this commentary explores how inclusion is made possible through informal pedagogical labour, which is situated outside the formal teaching workforce. Going beyond framing them as informal carers or teaching assistants, this work situates shadow teachers as active participants in the formal education process of students with disabilities.¹ This commentary relies on understanding the role of shadow teachers through a framework of "care" as conceptualised in the works of Noddings (1984) and Held (2006).

Methodology

This commentary is based on a year-long ethnographic study conducted in a private inclusive school in Gurugram, Haryana, in India. The analysis is based on observations in various school spaces, daily informal interactions, and semi-structured interviews with 15 shadow teachers, as well as broader engagement with the school's everyday routine.² The fieldwork was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines and received prior ethical clearance. The names of the school, shadow teachers, and students have been changed to protect their identities and ensure confidentiality.

¹ The work on inclusive education in India largely focuses on the practices of learning in inclusive schooling. Little attention has been paid to the role of various stakeholders, especially those such as privately employed shadow teachers.

² This work forms a part of my doctoral thesis which involved everyday interactions with mainstream teachers, special educators, school administrators, and parents of the students. This particular paper, however, draws primarily on the narratives, and centres the voices, of shadow teachers.

Shadow Teachers in Inclusive Schools: A Conceptual Overview

A shadow teacher plays an important role in mainstream inclusive schools by providing specialised support to children with various disabilities (Aristya, Sowiyah, & Rini, 2024; Vidhyanidhi Education Society, 2024). They ensure that students with disabilities have equal opportunities and the necessary resources to reach their full potential alongside their peers in a general classroom setting. Their responsibilities extend far beyond traditional teaching methods.³ One of their primary tasks is to create and implement individualised learning plans which are tailored to each student's unique learning needs (Vidhyanidhi Education Society, 2024). In collaboration with the educators, they are instrumental in designing assessments, modifying teaching materials, and developing specific strategies to meet individual learning needs. Shadow teachers also guide students, helping them improve their focus, communication, and participation in class while managing their behaviour.

In addition to academic support, shadow teachers foster social development by encouraging interactions with peers, helping children gain confidence and understand social cues, and are expected to regulate the behaviour of students with disabilities (Aristya, Sowiyah, & Rini, 2024). They play a crucial role in maintaining communication between mainstream teachers and parents, ensuring that support remains consistent and that progress is regularly evaluated. With their specialised knowledge and skills, shadow teachers are essential for creating an optimal learning environment in inclusive settings.

Care Ethics as a Theoretical Framework

The works of Noddings (1984, 1992) and Held (2006) are central to understanding the practice of care as a theory in education. While Noddings (1984, 1992) focused on developing the philosophical basis and its application in educational practice within the ethos of care, Virginia Held (2006) developed and shifted the focus on care as a distinct moral theory.

Noddings (1984) began her discussion by critiquing what she called the “language of the father” in ethics. This focuses heavily on rules, logic, and universal principles while

³ Shadow teachers and para-teachers are central to the school-based support system, but their roles should not be confused. Shadow teachers provide individualised assistance to students with disabilities, whereas para-teachers are contract teaching staff hired to address general instructional shortages, and cater to the entire class.

overlooking human feelings and relationships. Instead, she argued that relationships are the foundation of human life, and that caring is the starting point for ethical understanding. At the heart of her framework is the “caring relation” which is composed of two roles: the “one-caring” who shows attentiveness and openness to another’s reality, and the “cared-for” who helps sustain the relation through acknowledgement and response. For Noddings (1984, 1992), the ultimate ethical aim was to preserve and deepen these caring relations, since the ethics of care has a direct impact on education systems. She criticised schooling for valuing verbal and mathematical achievement while disregarding other abilities and proposed a reorganisation of education around “centres of care” such as care for self, care for others, and care for the larger world of ideas, among others. Rather than reducing the process of learning to methods, this vision emphasised trust, continuity, and dialogue in the relationships between teachers and students. In her view, the purpose of education should be to foster the capacity to care and be cared for.

Held (2006) built on these ideas. Like Noddings (1984, 1992), she critiqued traditional perspectives of treating people as abstract or independent individuals, who are detached from the real context of relationships and dependence. She pointed out that reducing people to “cases” or “types” denies their personhood and turns them into mere objects. Both Held (2006) and Noddings (1984, 1992) argued that human interdependence is central, and that moral weight lies in recognising and responding to the needs of others, not in following impersonal rules. Held (2006) extended these ideas by focusing on how care relates to justice. She argued that traditional theories prioritise justice in terms of equality, rights, and impartiality, and insisted that care provides a broader moral foundation within which the system of justice should operate. For her, care is both a condition for human existence and a moral necessity.

Both of them moved beyond theory to envision broader change. Noddings (1984, 1992) advocated for schools to nurture caring individuals, while Held (2006) viewed care as a radical force capable of reshaping society itself.

Structural Invisibility and the Devaluation of Care Work

“[I am] a nobody” was the reply given by Akash, a 22-year-old shadow teacher, when asked to reflect on his role in the school. He further went on to say that the school does not respect them, and that “we are zero,” essentially quantifying his self-perceived position in the school’s ecosystem. Akash was not alone. All shadow teachers who were interviewed echoed a similar

sentiment, with some also expressing their disappointment and hurt when they were repeatedly reminded and explicitly told that since they were employed by the parents of the students rather than by the school, they were not a part of the institution. This sentence would be repeated and highlighted by each of them in the interviews conducted.

In another instance, on the occasion of the Annual Day, the post-event snack boxes which consisted of a small sandwich, a juice box, and a small packet of biscuits were not provided to them. The “shadows,” as they were often referred to in the school, were expected to contribute their labour equally to the functioning of the event by managing and assisting not only their student but at times others as well—but were not provided with refreshments by the school. “*Dekh lo, ma’am*” (see what they are doing, ma’am), smirked Kriti, a shadow teacher in her mid-30s, letting out a giggle while her eyes expressed the hurt that she was masking. The “shadows” also do not hesitate to express their displeasure, especially to the teachers of the Special Education Needs (SEN) department. Considering it a safe space to discuss concerns beyond their professional duties, it is a place where they would come to take a breather or occasionally seek advice from the school’s special educators. While they mostly received sympathy, on other occasions, they were reminded by the special educators themselves that they are not the teacher or the “resource of the school,” echoing the narrative set by the school administrators.

While these episodes may appear to be exceptions, they are not. Instead, such instances of ignorance are commonplace in the school. Kriti feels the shadow teachers are “invisible” to the entire staff, who not only ignore their presence but also, on most occasions, fail to acknowledge and praise any work done by them. This could be the academic progress achieved by the student under their guidance, or for the work that they do for the school itself, including substituting for a class when the teacher leaves for a while, helping with class decorations, or even aiding in managing other students during school assemblies and events. However, on the occasions that they do get noticed by mainstream teachers, it is not for the right reasons. Being at the receiving end of high surveillance, their “misbehaviour” is often highlighted more and subject to scrutiny. Their unique position within the school often puts them at a higher level of monitoring and disciplinary measures. One example of this is that they are required to deposit their phones upon entering the school, a practice not applicable to other staff members.

This occurs due to a devaluation of care work. The work done by them—which extends beyond academic duties and, in most cases, can also involve taking care of the sanitation needs of the students—puts them on a precarious path. The multifaceted role of shadow teachers often goes unrecognised. Their work embodies “caring relations,” as Noddings (1984, 1992) would argue. The lack of acknowledgement signifies a dismissal of care work as merely “sentiment” rather than recognising its crucial pedagogical value. Noddings (1984) further went on to say that since traditional educational structures prioritise “academic achievements,” “objective evaluations,” and “trained intelligence” over caring, the contributions that do not fit into fulfilling these duties are overlooked. Held (2006) stated that these positions are also occupied by those who are “relatively powerless,” which is the case for shadow teachers who occupy relatively marginalised social positions, including those based on gender, caste, class, and regional identity. Furthermore, when their work is viewed as merely supplementary rather than integral to the student’s education journey, it results in the devaluation of care, which Held (2006) argued is both a value and a practice.

Care in Practice at the School

A shadow teacher stays with the students throughout the day. They are active participants who are at the core of making classrooms inclusive, due to their unique position. As highlighted earlier, they are involved in all aspects of a student’s educational journey within, and at times, even beyond the boundaries of the school. They are “agents of access” since they translate policy into practice through their everyday acts of “care” in academic support, as well as facilitating social participation.

Zohran is a student with Down syndrome. Although he is in Class IV, his learning level is at Class I due to his inherent limitations. His shadow teacher, Rhea, with immense patience, helps him and guides him through his mathematics worksheet of single-digit additions. She kneels beside his dedicated desk in the SEN room and matches Zohran’s tentative pencil strokes with encouragement until he gains the confidence he needs. Noddings (1984) advocated for this pedagogy based on the ethics of care, where teaching arises from “engrossment” and “motivational displacement” on the “cared-for” (student). Here, the “one-caring” (shadow teacher) adopts the student’s perspective, coming to the same level and guiding him. Rather than simply transmitting academic instruction, she is responding to the student’s unique learning needs.

Later on in the year, when she understood Zohran's limitations more thoroughly, she placed candies and chocolates on the table, helping him relate the mathematical equations to real-life situations. A similar approach is adopted by Shilpa, who, to impart life skills to her student Arnav, a student in Class VIII with intellectual disability, started teaching him the concept of money with fake notes during his school breaks. She eventually plans to take him to a shop to convert the lesson into real-life application.

The "shadows" also emerge as the biggest advocates for their students in the school's premises. Rhea recalls that her responsibility also includes defending Zohran's exclusion from school events and tackling the instances of ridicule aimed at him by his peers. She steps in immediately and fills the immediate redressal gap created by the school. By actively addressing the exclusion and ridicule Zohran faces, she enacts the commitments of care ethics as discussed by Held (2006), wherein her advocacy is deemed necessary to counter marginalisation and contribute to a socially just school environment.

Care Beyond the Professional Role

The role of the shadow teacher is learned more through lived practices in school than through formal training. Many enter the profession with little or no specialised training, motivated by practical considerations such as the need for income, engaging in part-time work experience while seeking stable employment, or to avoid physically demanding work environments. Yet, the demands of the job manifest into notable personal and professional transformations.

Anika often feels like an elder sister to Anya, an eight-year-old student with autism and an intellectual disability. Similarly, Kriti and Anjali, both in their mid-to-late 30s and mothers of teenagers, refer to their students as "*mera bachcha*" (my child). They openly admit to investing the same level of care and effort in their students as they would for their own children. This terminology (*mera bachcha*) fosters a kin-like closeness, indicating that relationships of care can be affective and fictive, rather than solely biological. The bonds formed between the student and the shadow teacher often resemble those of elder siblings, or even parents, depending on the age difference. For instance, Akshay, a Class VI student, works with a shadow teacher named Keshav, who is only seven years older than him. The relatively small age difference allows their relationship to take on a sibling-like quality. Special educators frequently harness these affective kinship bonds in their teaching strategies. For example, when a special educator aimed to discipline Akshay, she would pretend to scold Keshav, and when

Keshav “misbehaved,” she would direct her anger towards Akshay. The emotional connection between them was so strong that it would often bring tears to their eyes, effectively reinforcing the special educator’s disciplinary intentions.

However, this job can be precarious. “Shadows” such as Anika often find themselves delaying their own career aspirations, choosing to remain in their positions until they find a suitable replacement teacher.

These relationships exemplify the core concept of pedagogy of care established between the “one-caring” (shadow teacher) and the “cared-for” (student) and are characterised by “engrossment” and “motivational displacement” (Noddings, 1984). Examples of “shadows” caring for their student the same way they would do for their own kin, or delaying their own career plans to ensure more stability for their student demonstrate a commitment to the ethical ideal of care, wherein care goes beyond the natural affection to conscious actions to maintain the caring relation, even if it comes at a personal cost (Noddings, 1984). Similarly, the case of Akshay and Keshav illustrates how caring is also being “received” by the cared-for, which is essential for the completion and sustenance of such relationships (Noddings, 1984; Held, 2006).

Conclusion

This work explores the idea that the position of the shadow teacher within inclusive education is paradoxical: one of centrality in practice, yet invisibility in policy. Within the school’s ecosystem, the role of “shadows” is defined through the practice of care, as seen in the works of Noddings (1984, 1992) and Held (2006). Shadow teachers mediate between institutional structures and curricular expectations, while also handling the embodied realities of students with disabilities and being caregivers. Their practice of care extends beyond pedagogic instructions into advocacy and emotional support, creating affective bonds. Their actions, therefore, shape a learning environment that is relational and not just instructional (Noddings, 1984). Thus, their contribution to the functioning of the inclusive education setup is regulated by ethical and relational engagements.

However, while their position is at the centre in practice, they are structurally invisible in the policies of the school. Their non-recognition as official participants within the school allows the institute to escape accountability to their labour. Furthermore, while the practice of care

enables them to redesign and rework their pedagogy and make it more response-oriented, the lack of policy recognition hinders their agency and controls their freedom. Additionally, care is not only given but is also constantly evaluated. Thus, it can be said that the absence of formal recognition for shadow teachers' work is not merely an administrative oversight, but a mirror to the broader neglect of "care," which both Noddings (1984, 1992) and Held (2006) hold at the centre of the purpose of education.

To embody the true spirit of inclusive education, policies must centre "care" in their pedagogies. Inclusive education systems are incomplete without it, and when the "one-caring" is denied institutional recognition, surveilled, and controlled, it potentially disrupts care and risks the ethos of inclusion.

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