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THE ETHICS OF CARE UNDER THE STRAIN OF SPATIAL SATURATION: A DIALECTIC OF PEDAGOGICAL SURVIVAL IN BRAZZAVILLE HIGH SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Education in the Republic of the Congo, much like in many sub-Saharan African nations, is currently ensnared in the "paradox of democratization": while access to schooling has become widespread, this openness has devolved into a dehumanizing form of massification. This research examines the feasibility of the ethics of care—defined as the practical expression of pedagogical concern and solicitude—within high schools in Brazzaville, where spatial saturation has reached critical thresholds. Adopting a rigorous qualitative approach that combines in situ observations with in-depth interviews of 24 teachers, the study analyzes the deleterious impact of this infrastructural overcrowding. It specifically explores the erosion of Self-Efficacy (SE) among educators who must confront the daily challenge of bloated class sizes. The findings reveal a paradoxical "dialectic of survival": beyond a physical "frontier of recognition" imposed by overcrowding, teachers deploy strategies of distributed care as an ultimate lever for preserving human dignity. Ultimately, this investigation demonstrates that benevolence—the pivot of current educational reforms—will remain a mythical horizon as long as spatial dignity is not restored as a sine qua non condition for an authentic and inclusive pedagogical relationship.

Keywords: Ethics of care, Spatial saturation, Inclusive schooling, Self-efficacy, Democratization.

1 INTRODUCTION

The educational landscape of sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly that of the Republic of the Congo, is currently at the intersection of profound systemic tensions. What Merle (2017) calls "segregative democratization" highlights a major structural fault line. Studies by Hugon (2010, p. 14) have shown that, although universal access to education represents a fundamental political achievement, it has also generated massification whose harmful effects undermine the quality of educational support. Under the pressure of these numbers, the demand for quality erodes (Dubet, 2004; Duru-Bellat, 2006), turning the ideal of equal opportunity into the administrative management of student flows. This saturation of educational space disrupts teachers' vigilance: unable to support every individual learner, they are compelled to filter their attention in order to preserve their own psychological well-being. Inclusive schooling therefore emerges not

merely as a theoretical concept, but as a means of fostering active benevolence, capable of turning institutional hospitality into genuine equity in educational pathways through "distributed care."

This ambition to transform the institution into a genuine "caring community" nevertheless encounters the intractable reality of spatial saturation. In the Republic of the Congo, although national regulatory frameworks, including the 1995 Education Framework Act and international commitments such as Sustainable Development Goal 4, prescribe an ethic of care, everyday practice starkly contradicts these ambitions. The classroom becomes a "mass structure" in which overcrowding imposes involuntary dehumanization. This situation creates what Hall (1971) calls a major "proxemic constraint," turning space into a pathogenic agent that overwhelms participants' regulatory capacities and transforms the classroom into an disabling environment. An aporetic contradiction thus emerges: the political injunction to show benevolence is materially nullified by an emergency architecture, condemning the ethics of care to remain a discursive ideal while physical reality imposes a pedagogy of survival.

In light of this observation, spatial precarity calls for deep reflection on ethical stance and the realities of work. The enactment of the ethics of care (Tronto, 1993) is constrained by an emergency architecture that obstructs the conditions necessary for a close, responsive encounter with learners. This tension, intensified by a growing sense of helplessness, directly undermines teachers' sense of self-efficacy.

The purpose of this study is therefore to analyse what we call the "dialectic of pedagogical survival." It explores how, amid spatial turmoil, practitioners oscillate between defensive withdrawal of attention and forms of relational innovation. The approach seeks to document the erosion of teachers' power to act (Clot, 1999), caught between ideal prescriptions and impossible material conditions. Beyond documenting a crisis, this research aims to highlight resilience strategies that preserve professional dignity in a disabling environment.

This investigation is guided by a fundamental question: how can pedagogical benevolence, as a cornerstone of inclusive ethics, be put into practice amid the spatial entropy of overcrowded Brazzaville high schools? This problem raises three interconnected issues generated by density. First, it examines the narrowing of the attentional field, whereby saturation eventually impairs practitioners' ability to identify individual needs within the mass. Second, it considers the transformation of teachers' sense of self-efficacy (SSE) when they are forced to abandon their role as mediators of knowledge in favour of maintaining order. Finally, the study investigates the tactics through which an ethic of solicitude can be reconfigured despite the loss of proxemic distance, a condition essential to intersubjective relations.

Underlying these questions is the central assumption that spatial saturation imposes an "economy of survival" that dictates drastic attentional selection. This assumption has three dimensions. The first concerns peripheral invisibility: recognition of individual learners is confined to the teacher's immediate "action zone," leaving the edges of the classroom pedagogically invisible. The second anticipates a shift in professional satisfaction: teachers' self-efficacy may derive less from teaching success than from their ability to neutralize entropy through silence. Finally, we hypothesize that "distributed care" emerges as a resilience strategy, with teachers tacitly delegating part of their vigilance to student relays in order to maintain a semblance of educational connection.

The central aim of this investigation is to model practitioners' adjustment mechanisms and sources of resilience in response to this pathology of school space. It seeks to assess the impact of physical density on learners' invisibility while examining the transformation of teachers' sense of self-efficacy (SSE) as they move from an ethic of conviction to an ethic of survival. Ultimately, the study documents inventive strategies for maintaining relationships in order to assess the emergence of "distributed care" as a last means of preserving humanity in overcrowded settings.

Our research follows a three-part analytical framework. First, it examines the foundations of the ethics of care and the sense of self-efficacy (SSE). Second, it draws on fieldwork to map the realities of school overcrowding. Finally, it develops a model of adaptive responses.

2 CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of the "dialectic of pedagogical survival" rests on the relationship between two fundamental psychopedagogical pillars: the ethics of care (the "will" to act with solicitude) and the sense of self-efficacy (the belief that one is "capable of acting"). The collision of these two dimensions with the saturation of school space profoundly transforms professional practice.

Before analysing how it deteriorates, the ethics of care must be defined. According to Tronto (1993, p. 103), care is "a generic activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible." In education, this definition means that teaching is not limited to transmitting knowledge; it is also a practice of sustaining relationships and responding to learners' needs. Care is therefore a relational and political

dynamic requiring three material and psychological conditions: available attention, accepted responsibility, and an effective response. Spatial saturation is precisely what compromises the viability of this dynamic.

2.1 The Ethics of Care Under the Strain of Spatial Saturation

Understood from a political perspective, the ethics of care moves beyond mere intention and becomes a multidimensional praxis. It is structured around four interdependent pillars that sustain the integrity of educational practice: caring about (attentiveness), taking care of (responsibility), care-giving (the provision of care), and care-receiving (the recipient's response). In schools, this structure underpins a "pedagogy of presence," in which recognition of otherness is a sine qua non for learning.

However, analysis of overcrowded environments shows that space acts as a structural determinant that fragments this chain of solicitude:

- Erosion of attentional vigilance (caring about): The initial stage of care depends on the ability to discern. Massification, however, produces "pedagogical opacity": the saturation of teachers' sensory channels impedes the identification of individual needs. The person disappears behind a statistical unit, and vigilance becomes a general, undifferentiated perception of the mass.
- Neutralization of relational action (care-giving): Care is a situated activity requiring fine management of proxemics. In overcrowded high schools, the disappearance of interpersonal distance and the imposition of close quarters saturate the working space. Such enforced proximity does not create closeness; on the contrary, it prompts practitioners to withdraw defensively, making authentic contact materially and psychologically impossible.
- Disruption of ethical feedback (care-receiving): The validation of care depends on how it is received. According to Noddings (2013), care is complete only when the recipient signals recognition. The environmental turmoil of overcrowded classrooms breaks this feedback loop. Teachers are left in an ethical impasse: they act without being able to verify whether their actions have been effective, undermining the very meaning of their professional mission.

2.2 The Sense of Self-Efficacy (SSE): From a Driver of Action to an Attentional Regulator

The sense of self-efficacy (SSE) is central to teaching in crisis situations. Far from being merely a variation of self-esteem or a diffuse confidence in one's abilities, Bandura (1997, p. 3) defines self-efficacy as an individual's "beliefs in their capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments." In education, this metacognitive construct concerns not so much theoretical mastery of subject knowledge as the practitioner's conviction that they can mobilize the resources needed to meet classroom demands. This powerful mediator of action shapes the effort invested, persistence in the face of obstacles, and emotional thought patterns. In overcrowded settings, SSE thus becomes an arbiter between engagement and withdrawal, because teachers' perceptions of their own effectiveness ultimately condition their ability—or inability—to inhabit the school space.

If care defines the intentionality of action, SSE is its operational driver, functioning as a selective filter for executive resources in a spatially disabling environment. Faced with excessive cognitive demands, teachers whose SSE declines often adopt protective strategies. This "attentional blindness" should not be interpreted as moral abandonment, but as a survival mechanism intended to prevent empathy fatigue. SSE then acts as an attentional circuit breaker, narrowing the field of vigilance to avoid collapse under the overwhelming number of learners. Conversely, robust SSE encourages "pedagogical tinkering" (Perrenoud, 1996, p. 76), in which spatial constraints cease to be an unavoidable fate and become an environment in which micro-strategies of resistance can sustain pedagogical availability despite the surrounding turmoil.

2.3 The Praxeological Shift: Towards "Organizational Care"

The relationship between SSE and care culminates in a profound shift in the object of care. To preserve their professional integrity in the face of helplessness, teachers shift their mission in ways that reconfigure their sense of competence. Success is no longer assessed in terms of individual learning, but in terms of the group's systemic stability. SSE becomes rooted in the ability to neutralize entropy and maintain the continuity of the syllabus, marking a transition from "mediational self-efficacy" to "control-oriented self-efficacy."

Through a major ethical shift, solicitude moves from the "learner as an individual" to the "classroom as a structure": this is the emergence of organizational care. Teachers "care for" the balance of the classroom system to prevent collective collapse, marking a transition from an ethic of conviction to an ethic of professional survival. As Falzon (2013) suggests, in this context the bureaucratization of relationships and emotional withdrawal should not be regarded as professional shortcomings; they are adaptive resources required by a mass architecture that inherently denies individuality.

3 METHODOLOGY

Grounded in an explicitly interpretive epistemological stance, this study moves away from purely quantitative approaches in order to capture the "reality of activity" (Clot, 1999) in depth. It seeks to convey the complexity of teachers' lived experience of large classes, treating spatial saturation not as a simple statistical variable but as a factor that reshapes practitioners' professional identities.

3.1 Study Setting and Sampling Strategy

A multi-site case study was necessary to document the "dialectic of survival" across different architectural configurations in Brazzaville. The investigation was conducted in four public high schools, strategic sites experiencing demographic pressure:

- The accumulation of routines in the north: Thomas Sankara High School and Révolution High School serve as historical observatories where massification has become a structural feature of the profession.
- The peak of saturation in the central-southern area: Emery Patrice Lumumba High School and Réconciliation High School, with their extremely high urban density, make it possible to analyse "proxemic constraint" in its most disabling forms.

A purposive sample of 24 teachers (E1–E24) was selected from these institutions. Selection favoured practitioners with at least five years of experience, ensuring a critical perspective on the intensification of massification. Balance across high-coefficient subjects and gender was also sought to prevent the observed tensions in self-efficacy (SSE) from being biased by discipline-specific factors.

3.2. Triangulation as a Heuristic Validation Strategy

The empirical robustness of this study rests on a dialectical cross-checking of participants' accounts and observed practice. This triangulation does not simply juxtapose data; it seeks to illuminate the opacity of pedagogical relationships in overcrowded settings.

Inspired by Kaufmann's (1996) approach, the interview is used here as

a means of eliciting accounts that remain close to participants' lived experience. This approach makes it possible to identify, on the one hand, "occupational workarounds"—informal practical knowledge developed to circumvent spatial obstacles—and, on the other, ethical distress arising from the seemingly insurmountable gap between the ideal of solicitude (care) and the material impossibility of acting effectively in overcrowded environments.

In parallel, a twenty-hour observation protocol documented the physical reality of classroom life. This process led to the development of two key concepts:

- The "recognition boundary": We identified an imaginary line beyond the third row, past which a student tends to lose their status as an individual interlocutor and merge into the "sound mass."
- Proxemic segmentation: Observation made it possible to quantify an 80% decline in "eye-contact time" between the first and last rows. This technical indicator is essential for assessing whether benevolence can extend beyond the spatial "elite" near the teacher (the front rows) and reach the classroom's peripheral areas.

3.2 Thematic Analysis and the Ethics of Evidence

The empirical material was processed through an iterative process of semantic reduction. Using thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2013), the corpus was broken down to identify structuring units of meaning: survival strategies, mechanisms of anonymization, and ethical dilemmas. This categorization made it possible to model typical stances (defensive withdrawal, heroic solicitude, and helplessness), which were then examined in relation to theoretical frameworks of care (Tronto, Noddings).

Finally, the rigour of this protocol is grounded in a strict research ethic. The anonymity of sites and participants, ensured through alphanumeric coding, together with the collection of informed consent, safeguards the traceability and integrity of the accounts gathered. This approach now makes it possible to examine the findings and identify how teachers adapt their practice to the mass.

4 RESULTS

A cross-analysis of our data, combining professional life narratives and records of in situ observations, shows that spatial saturation in Brazzaville high schools is not merely a logistical variable. It becomes a systemic actor that redefines teaching and reshapes participants' psychological structures. This section presents the collision between ethical ideals and the material reality of the mass through three main themes.

4.1 Atrophy of the Attentional Field: From Individuality to a Moving Mass

The first pillar of the ethics of care, theorized as caring about (Tronto, 1993), rests on teachers' ability to perceive another person's needs. Our findings, however, demonstrate a sharp breakdown in this sensory vigilance. During interviews, teachers described a form of "numbing" in which otherness disappears in favour of managing a flow. As teacher E3 explains, beyond the "fifth desk," the learner loses their status as a subject and becomes part of a moving, noisy mass.

Observation of classroom sessions empirically supports this perception: we recorded a breakdown in proxemic vigilance once the distance exceeded five metres. At that distance, eye contact, which is central to individual recognition, diminishes. Our field notes reveal what may be described as "attentional blindness" (Chabris & Simons, ibid.): students who are visibly withdrawn, asleep, or disengaged in the back third of the classroom elicit no pedagogical response. This involuntary exclusion does not reflect a lack of benevolence, but rather a cognitive economy of survival. Faced with the impossibility of processing the countless signals emitted by a hundred faces, teachers narrow their attentional field to the front rows, rendering the back of the classroom invisible.

4.2 The Functional Transformation of SSE: From "Helping Students Learn" to "Maintaining Silence"

This degradation of space directly affects the sense of self-efficacy (SSE), a driver of professional engagement. Our data indicate a semantic and identity shift: competence is no longer assessed in terms of knowledge transfer, but in terms of maintaining order. A "care-oriented" SSE gives way to a "control-oriented" SSE. Teacher E15 expresses this shift with bitter clarity: professional "pride" is now reduced to the absence of physical conflict and the formal completion of the class register.

In observed practice, this transformation takes the form of a static, defensive occupation of space. In most cases, the teacher remains "entrenched" behind the desk, which is perceived as a bulwark against the human tide. Teaching is almost exclusively frontal and top-down, while dictating summaries serves as a kind of "sound cover" intended to fill the space and prevent chaos. Individual interaction time is almost non-existent (close to 0% of the observed lesson time), illustrating a degraded ethic in which teachers "care for" the overall classroom structure to prevent its collapse, at the expense of supporting individual learning pathways.

Despite this disabling environment, our findings reveal active resilience among teachers, who refuse to lapse into complete disengagement. We observe what we call "improvised care": micro-strategies designed to preserve small spaces of humanity. During interviews, teachers describe the "gymnastics" (E2) required to maintain physical contact and reject being confined behind the blackboard.

In situ observation reveals a choreography of resistance: some teachers use the few narrow passageways available to perform small acts of recognition. A nod, a fleeting tap on the shoulder, or a sustained glance towards the "invisible students at the back" act as signals that maintain the relationship. More remarkably, informal "sentinels" emerge: we observed teachers tacitly delegating part of their vigilance to student leaders. Because they are physically close to their peers, these students provide relay care, alerting the teacher to distress or helping a classmate. This proxy-based solicitude signals the emergence of an improvised caring community, the last line of defence against the dehumanization imposed by the architecture of mass schooling.

4.3 Tactical Inventiveness: Improvising Care as a Form of Resistance

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solicitude signals the emergence of an improvised caring community, the last line of defence against the dehumanization imposed by the architecture of mass schooling.

5 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Comparing our data with the theoretical framework goes beyond simple empirical validation and prompts a critical reconsideration of classical models. Under conditions of saturation, analysis of the "reality of activity" shows that teachers' adjustments, although far removed from ideal pedagogical standards, form the basis of a genuine ethic of professional survival.

This discussion examines three major shifts in teaching practice: the transformation of sensory vigilance into a strategy of cognitive economy; the reconfiguration of professional competence around security and control; and the emergence of community solidarity to compensate for the limitations of one-to-one relationships.

5.1 Narrowing the Attentional Field: An Ethical Selection for Survival

Although caring about has traditionally presupposed constant sensory availability, our findings introduce an important qualification: in overcrowded settings, attentional withdrawal is not the absence of care but a condition that makes care possible. This numbing is not indifference; it is a response to excessive allostatic load (McEwen, 2000). Overwhelmed by stimuli—noise, heat, and overcrowding—teachers switch off their empathic receptors to avoid emotional exhaustion.

Beyond the "fifth desk," teachers make a tragic biocognitive trade-off: they disengage from those students to avoid a nervous breakdown that would paralyse the entire class. The invisibility of the back rows thus becomes the cost of "situated hospitality" (Meirieu, 2022). Emergency architecture turns proxemic distance into a neuropsychological protection boundary, shielding practitioners from collapse in the face of the "unthought mass" (Saillot, 2023). However, this defence mechanism imposes a "double penalty" on learners: while attentional withdrawal ensures teachers' survival, it creates a genuine "spatial segregation of learning." In saving the system, practitioners involuntarily abandon the most vulnerable students—those who, through avoidance strategies or a lack of educational capital, sit precisely in the shadow zone where the pedagogical relationship breaks down.

5.2 The Metamorphosis of SSE: Dignity Through Security and Control

Contrary to Bandura's (1997) classical theory, which would associate an inability to teach with a collapse in self-efficacy, our findings reveal a paradoxical form of identity-based resilience. Teachers do not necessarily feel ineffective; instead, they shift their markers of professional worth towards what Wittorski (2021) calls professionalization through constraint.

The use of the desk as a bulwark and dictation as a sound-cover strategy can be understood as a heroic mastery of entropy. This marks a transition from "prevented work" to "heroic work" (Saujat & Sanchez, 2019). By replacing "helping students learn" with "maintaining silence," teachers exercise a micro-politics of stability to prevent collective collapse (Galand, 2022). This shift shows that self-efficacy is no longer rooted in teaching success, but in the management of flows. Teachers move from the role of educators to that of social regulators, dealing not with individual human beings but with a moving "human mass" whose entropy must be contained.

5.3 Tactical Inventiveness: The Emergence of "Horizontal Care"

The most significant departure from the classical literature lies in the externalization of care. Whereas care is traditionally understood as an asymmetrical relationship, our findings reveal the emergence of "distributed care," consistent with theories of the democracy of care (Laugier, 2020). Solicitude is no longer a top-down act but a circulating force that permeates the group.

The informal appointment of "sentinels" illustrates the emergence of an enabling environment (Vidal-Gomel, 2023): unable to act alone, teachers mobilize collective intelligence. This pedagogical improvisation goes beyond individual resistance to establish a genuine "pedagogy of forced cooperation" (Reverdy, 2023). Such organic solidarity helps restore the care-receiving feedback loop: where teachers could no longer perceive an individual student's response, they now receive validation from the class collective, which manages to "hold together."

Table 1: Summary Table of the Dialectic

Dimension of practice	Ideal stance (Care)	Reality of the mass (Survival)
Object of care	The learner (individuality)	The system (stability of the flow)
Source of SSE	Teaching and learning success	Maintaining silence / order
Physical space	Mobility and proximity	Entrenchment (desk as a bulwark)
Type of relationship	Direct one-to-one relationship	Distributed care (sentinels / collective)

Source: created by the author with the help of AI

Institutionalize peer tutoring: Since "distributed care" naturally emerges through student sentinels, institutions would benefit from formally training these peer supporters. This could reduce teachers' cognitive burden while valuing horizontal solidarity as a civic competence.

This radical reinvention of ethics shows that care can persist through a rebound effect even when institutions no longer guarantee bodily dignity (Isambert, 2021). However, this resilience should not be turned into an apology for deprivation. "Distributed care" remains a heroic improvisation in response to institutional dysfunction; it is a creative answer to a failing school architecture and can in no way absolve institutions of their responsibility to guarantee material conditions worthy of a genuinely inclusive school.

Integrate large-class management into initial teacher education: Future teachers' sense of self-efficacy should be strengthened through specific modules on teaching large groups and managing environmental stress, reducing the dissonance between ideal methods and actual classroom practice.

6 CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

This study shows that spatial saturation in Brazzaville high schools is not merely a logistical challenge, but a profound ethical and identity-related ordeal for teachers. Our findings reveal a "dialectic of survival" in which teachers, caught between the ideal of care and the tyranny of the mass, make costly trade-offs: atrophy of sensory vigilance, a shift in self-efficacy towards security and control, and tactical inventiveness through the "improvisation of care."

In this disabling environment, several levers can be activated to restore a measure of spatial and relational dignity:

- Institutionalize peer tutoring: Since "distributed care" naturally emerges through student sentinels, institutions would benefit from formally training these peer supporters. This could reduce teachers' cognitive burden while valuing horizontal solidarity as a civic competence.
- Create "breathing spaces": Where class sizes cannot be reduced immediately, classroom ergonomics must be reconsidered. Establishing clear circulation routes, even narrow ones, would allow teachers to move beyond their "entrenchment" behind the desk and regain a physical presence among students seated farther away.
- Integrate large-class management into initial teacher education: Future teachers' sense of self-efficacy should be strengthened through specific modules on teaching large groups and managing environmental stress, reducing the dissonance between ideal methods and actual classroom practice.

These findings should be interpreted in light of the study's exploratory, qualitative design and its focus on 24 teachers in four public high schools. They illuminate situated professional experiences rather than establish causal effects or support statistical generalization. The absence of students' own accounts also limits understanding of how distributed care is received, particularly by learners seated at the back of the classroom. Future research should therefore combine teachers' and students' perspectives, compare schools with different spatial configurations, and examine whether changes in circulation, peer support and class size improve participation and access to individual feedback.

The study's main contribution is to connect the material organization of classrooms with the practical conditions of educational care and teachers' sense of self-efficacy. Distributed care offers a useful interpretive perspective on collective responses to overcrowding, but its educational effects remain to be evaluated. Peer tutoring should be supervised and should support, rather than replace, teachers' responsibility for learners. Restoring spatial and relational dignity consequently requires institutional investment alongside professional development: teachers' ingenuity alone cannot compensate for sustained infrastructural shortages. Caring for schools in the Congo thus entails creating conditions in which every learner can be seen, heard and supported.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript

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