

Perceptions of Teacher Caring: Questions and Implications for Teacher Education

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Rationale

Both preservice and inservice teachers' conceptions of "a really good teacher" emphasize social and affective variables such as caring and concern for children (Weinstein, 1989). When asked to describe what characteristics or behaviors make teachers effective, a sample of preservice and experienced teachers mentioned caring more often than any other variable (Perry, 1990; Perry & Rog, 1992) and when a group of educators was asked to reflect on one very positive and one very negative memory from their own schooling, the positive images included a caring adult at least as part of the picture, and the negative images contained an element of humiliation or frustration (Maine Leadership Consortium, 1990).

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Many believe teachers' caring about their students is important in the development of a healthy self-image by the child (Segal & Yahraes, 1978), and, therefore, teacher caring behavior can influence student self-esteem. Constance M. Perry (1991) found positive correlations between student self-esteem and student perception of teacher caring. Caring also has been described as an essential element in the lives

of persons who have had extraordinary achievements, and as a fundamental ingredient in motivation for all persons (Csikzentmihalyi, 1988). Dwight Rogers and Jaci Webb (1991) cited interviews with elementary school teachers and students to support their conclusion that an ethic of care is essential to the definition of effective teaching. Carol Gilligan (1982) proposed that classroom decisions be grounded in such an ethic. John I. Goodlad, Roger Soder, and Kenneth A. Sirotnik (1990) stress the necessity of the development of this ethic in teacher education programs and Nel Noddings (1988) views the moral and social growth of students as a major responsibility of schools and caring as necessary to meet that responsibility. Yet many children, especially adolescents, feel uncared for in schools (Comer, 1988, Perry, 1991; Noddings, 1992; Rog, 1993).

Being cared for means being understood, received, respected, and recognized. Such a definition refers to personal caring and is viewed by some as going beyond the academic functions of classrooms and the professional work of teachers. Personal caring addresses the most fundamental human needs of security and attachment (Noddings, 1986, 1992). This view of caring redefines the role of teachers in the lives of their students and therefore, must also redefine teacher education. A second form of caring that is more accepted as a legitimate part of the teachers' role is professional caring. Professional caring addresses issues of caring to perform one's best at his or her job (Quaglia, 1993). Such caring goes beyond the affective to encompass all behaviors related to effective teaching, such as designing curriculum, choosing effective teaching strategies, and assessing progress. Professional caring has always had recognized implications for teachers and teacher education.

Objectives

This research focuses on adolescent student perceptions of teacher caring. If teacher caring is an essential component to the success of many students then whether students perceive teachers as caring or uncaring is of great importance. Frequently teachers will report "adolescents don't think we care, but we really do" (Center for Research and Evaluation, 1992). Are students just unable to perceive that teachers care? To explore adolescent perceptions of teachers' personal and professional caring the following objectives were established:

1. Determine the extent that adolescents perceive teachers as caring;
2. Identify significant differences between adolescent perceptions of teacher personal and professional caring;
3. Determine if perceptions of teacher personal and professional caring differ by gender; and
4. Determine if perceptions of teacher personal and professional caring differ by grade level.

Method

The sample consisted of 4863 secondary school students grades eight through 12 from both urban and rural northeast locations. The caring statements (see Figure 1) pertain to personal caring for students and professional caring as reflected in the perception that teachers want to do the best teaching they can. The response options ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The statements are a portion of the Aspirations Survey (1992) which is in part based on Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi's (1988) findings regarding the importance of caring for motivation and therefore for aspirations.

To meet the objectives of the study responses of "agree" and "strongly agree" were combined. This was done after reversing item responses that were stated in a noncaring manner. To determine differences between personal and professional caring, t-tests were computed. In order to determine potential differences by gender and grade level analyses of variance were computed. The analysis by grade level omitted grade eight because of the relatively small sample size (N=363).

Figure 1

For the following statements, please indicate if you Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), or Strongly Disagree (SD) with each statement.

Teachers at my school...				
make it difficult for me to "be myself."	SA	A	D	SD
care about my problems and feelings.	SA	A	D	SD
are too critical and insensitive to others.	SA	A	D	SD
make me feel shy or uncomfortable around them.	SA	A	D	SD
are serious about things that are important to them.	SA	A	D	SD
work hard and are proud of what they do.	SA	A	D	SD
expect to be good at what they do.	SA	A	D	SD

Results

Fifty-eight percent of students believe their teachers care about their problems and feelings, while 42 percent believe their teachers are too critical and insensitive and 30 percent believe teachers make them feel shy or uncomfortable. A greater percentage perceive teachers as exhibiting professional caring than personal caring, yet a majority do perceive teachers as personally caring (see Table 1).

We found there was a significant difference between adolescent perception of teacher personal and professional caring (Table 2). A significant difference was also found by gender. Females perceived their teachers significantly more personally and professionally caring than did males (Table 3). Grade differences were also noted. For both personal and professional caring, the higher the grade the more

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Table 1
Teachers at My School

(Percent Who Strongly Agree)	<u>Total N</u>			<u>Grade</u>				
	<u>M</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>12</u>	
	4863	2352	251	M=183	623	523	553	470
			1	F=180	660	539	614	518
Personal Caring								
1. ...make it difficult for me to be myself.	40	47	34	48	44	43	38	32
2. ...care about my problems and feelings.	58	55	61	62	56	56	58	59
3. ...are too critical and insensitive to others.	42	45	38	39	44	45	42	35
4. ...make me feel shy or uncomfortable around them.	30	29	31	32	33	33	30	24
Professional Caring								
1. ...are serious about things that are important.	88	86	90	88	85	89	88	89
2. ...work hard and are proud of what they do.	77	74	80	83	76	77	76	75
3. ...expect to be good at what they do.	87	84	89	85	85	88	87	88

Table Two
Perceptions of Personal and Professional Caring

	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>
Personal Caring	4556	2.62*	.61
Professional Caring	4519	3.01 *	.51

*p<.001

Table 3
Personal and Professional Caring by Gender

	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Personal</u>		<u>Professional</u>		
			<u>SD</u>	<u>F Value</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>F Value</u>
Male	2141	2.56	.60	26.01*	2.95	.53	29.81*
Female	2346	2.68	.61		3.07	.49	

*p<.0001

Table 4
Personal and Professional Caring by Grade

<u>Grade</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Personal</u>			<u>Professional</u>		
		<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>F Value</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>F Value</u>
9	1170	2.56	.62	12.83*	2.98	.54	1.71
10	947	2.57	.60		3.02	.51	
11	1056	2.62	.61		3.03	.50	
12	922	2.71	.57		3.02	.49	

*p<.0001

likely students were to perceive their teachers as personally and professionally caring. There was a significant difference for personal caring only (Table 4).

Interpretation of Data

The majority of adolescents in this study perceived teachers as both personally and professionally caring with professional caring perceived significantly more often. Although a majority of adolescents perceive that their teachers are personally caring, many do not. Is it because the adolescents can not perceive teacher personal caring or do some teachers not exhibit personal caring for some students? Perhaps it is some of both.

James Rog (1993) found that students and teachers see caring differently. Teachers are more likely to see caring in academic (professional) terms. Teachers care about helping students do well in school. Students are more likely to perceive caring in personal terms. Do teachers care about them as people? Even though students may not describe caring in professional terms, when specifically asked as in this study, students were much more likely to see their teachers exhibiting behaviors we call professional caring than personal caring behaviors.

In looking at the results by gender, we found females perceive teachers as more caring than males. These results may be supported by studies which have found adolescent females to show more concern for others than males (Perry & McIntire, 1993; 1994) and/or to females' tendency to use caring rather than justice as a mode of moral judgment (Gilligan, 1982). One could conclude females are more likely to perceive care because they are more likely to exhibit it. This raises obvious questions. Does the gender of the teacher play a role in the perception of care by students? Can we conclude female teachers are more likely to exhibit caring behaviors?

Markedly fewer students perceive teachers as making it difficult for them or perceive teachers as making them feel shy or uncomfortable in grade 12 than grade nine. This could be explained from various perspectives. Teachers at different grade

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levels may treat students differently, because of student maturity level, or familiarity with the student over several years. It may be easier to show a caring nature toward someone who is 17 or 18, rather than someone younger who may not want or outwardly appreciate a nurturing adult.

The results suggest that the concept of teacher caring is multi-dimensional. Not only are there different types of teacher caring, but the different types of caring are perceived differently by gender and grade level. One can conclude from the data that to say teacher caring is important means little without an understanding of the type of caring (personal or professional) being discussed and the gender and grade level of students being cared for.

Implications for Teacher Education

Because many adolescents, as shown by this study, are capable of perceiving both personal and professional caring, teachers can no longer dismiss adolescents' view that teachers don't care. Both preservice and inservice teachers need to learn to model personal and professional caring behaviors. Yet that is no easy task since students and teachers view caring differently (Rog, 1993). Such differences require that teachers exhibit caring in ways that students are likely to perceive as such. Caring is not accomplished without overt action (Noddings, 1984). Charles B. Hayes, Alice W. Ryan, and Elaine B. Zsella (1993) in a study of sixth and eighth grade students' perceptions of caring teacher behaviors found the following teacher behaviors regularly perceived as exhibiting caring:

1. Provider of fun and humor (reflecting a light hearted classroom atmosphere);
2. Helpful with academic work;
3. Encouraged success and positive feelings;
4. Interested in the student as a person;
5. Provider of good subject content;
6. Willing to counsel the student;
7. Responsive to the individual (outside the classroom).

Numbers four, six, and seven are certainly personal caring while the others appear to be professional. Hayes *et al.* (1993) also found significant differences in perceptions of caring behaviors among ethnic groups and occupational prestige groups. If caring teacher behavior is valued then teachers need to be aware of these behaviors and how they may differ for individual students. Further research is needed to identify such behaviors. Then they must be taught as a component of teacher education programs.

Other implications may be less obvious. Teachers and teacher educators need to examine their caring behaviors in relation to student gender and grade level. The differences by both found in this study must be explored. The possibility that modeling of caring by teachers must vary by gender and grade level as well as by factors identified by Hayes *et al.* (1993) has vast implications for teacher prepara-

tion. The study clearly shows teacher caring is a complex process. Such a complicated issue as caring can not be simply taught in a class or two in a teacher education program. If there is value in teacher caring and students perceiving such, then caring must be integrated into the entire process of educating future teachers.

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