“But I’m Just Their Teacher-Why Should I Care?”: The Effects of a Caring-Centered Environment in the Literacy Achievement of ELLs

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Abstract
A caring-centered ethic should exist in the multicultural classroom throughout a students’ academic career (Pompa, 2006). This paper will explore the concept of caring-centered communities and define what a caring-centered multicultural classroom looks like. The latter part of the paper reviews the impact that a caring-centered environment has on literacy achievement of English Language Learners (ELLs) and professional development for caring-centered multicultural education will be examined.

Introduction
At a recent lecture offered at university in a South Texas border town, Dr. J. Johnson stated, “Nobody comes into the field of education because they want to meet AYP; they come into education because they care” (“The Power of Purpose, Passion, and Persistence in Changing School Districts” conference, June 21, 2010). As Dr. Johnson commented in his lecture, the public often says that all teachers care about their students and that people go into the field of education because they care about children, which made us realize and embrace even more our passion for teaching. However, this is not universally true of all educators. Many have had a teacher they perceived as overwhelming, cruel and uncaring towards the students. While some teachers are not meant to be in the education field, others are unprepared and lack the professional development to help them.

Teachers today are faced with a multicultural setting in many public school classrooms, but many pre-service teacher preparation programs and in-service workshops are not preparing these teachers to effectively address the issues which accompany a multicultural setting. The population of the United States has changed over time; a record 1,046,539 individuals were naturalized as U.S. Citizens in 2008; the leading countries of birth were Mexico, India, and the Philippines (Lee & Rytina, 2009). This increase in immigration which the United States has experienced during the last two decades has caused a concomitant rise in diverse populations in our classrooms. Consequently, the challenges classroom teachers must face to ensure no student is left behind have become overwhelming. Why should teachers care about their students when they are striving to meet the demands of accountability? Is their job to teach their students the required curriculum, or is it to nurture them?

Jacobsen, Eggen, and Kauchak (2006) assert that struggling students improve academically as a result of teachers who care about them as individuals and learners. They further state that it is practically impossible for educators to succeed without authentically caring about their pu-
pils and their learning. Moreover, a student is more apt to learn when motivated by a caring teacher who makes them feel at-ease. Current motivational theorists have emphasized the realization of belonging and not feeling excluded as key factors in an individual’s motivation to learn (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990; Glasser, 1998; Maslow, 1987). Could a caring-centered multicultural classroom offer this sense of belonging that our students need?

Federal law dictates no child should be “left behind.” To succeed in achieving this demand, it is imperative that we staff our classrooms with individuals who authentically care for the cognitive and physical well-being of students. In this era of accountability that obliges teachers to ensure the academic success of all students, our educational system requires the incorporation of caring in the curriculum and delivery methods implemented in our multicultural classrooms. Goldstein contends that when educators care for their students they can make better curricular decisions. He states, “We must not shy away from considering and discussing the more difficult aspects of this association” (Goldstein, 1998, p.17). A caring-centered ethic should exist in the multicultural classroom throughout a student’s academic career (Pompa, 2006). Therefore, we must integrate caring into multicultural classroom settings. This paper will explore the concept of caring-centered communities, define what a caring-centered multicultural classroom looks like and examine professional development for caring-centered multicultural education. The latter part of the paper reviews the impact that a caring-centered environment has on literacy achievement of English Language Learners (ELLs).

Caring-Centered Communities

According to Epstein (1995), schools which create a culture of care involve both students and their families. In order for students to succeed, all key stakeholders must be involved in creating a caring-centered community. Moreover, all of these constituents must equally share the responsibility for creating this caring educational community (Epstein, 2003). Pang, Rivera, and Mora (1999) agreed and noted that the principal force of a valuable caring relationship is for parents, students, teachers, and administrators to work collaboratively to create useful and effective instructional strategies which increase the students’ expected abilities. Educators must get involved and explain to parents the importance of their involvement because united we can help our students become successful in fulfilling their educational careers. Epstein (2003) declares that children who feel cared for and encouraged to work diligently in the role of student are more likely to attempt their best at learning, appreciate the goals of education, develop positive attitudes and school behaviors, and stay in school (Epstein, 2003, Pompa, 2006).

It is essential to eliminate negative attributes such as stress for teachers and students. Teachers who have been in the profession for years maintain that each year it gets a little more challenging. Discipline problems, standardized tests, parental negligence, and lack of time are among the highest complaints of teachers (Perlmutter, 2004). In creating a caring-centered community, stress is alleviated which provides a more comfortable learning environment. Students who feel comfortable in the classroom are more willing to participate and learn (Chirichello & Chirichello, 2001). Schools, families, and communities generate the conditions of caring that augment the likelihood of student academic achievement by sharing the same educational and personal interests in our students (Epstein, 2003). The importance of caring-centered communities is evident and
research has delineated patterns of involvement among parents and the schools to ensure that the caring-centered communities are implemented successfully.

Schools should deliberately create a caring community, and research has evidenced important patterns relating to school-parents partnerships which should serve as a guide for educators (Epstein, 2003). The following are the school-parents partnerships:

- Partnerships lose strength as the student advances in school, unless schools and teachers collaboratively create and continuously execute partnership procedures at each grade level.
- Presently, there is more family involvement in communities of higher economic status, unless schools and teachers in lower socio-economic communities collaboratively create positive partnerships with their students’ families.
- Lower socio-economic communities receive more negative feedback from schools regarding problematic issues students are experiencing, unless schools actively create balanced partnership programs which incorporate positive feedback celebrating the endeavors of students.
- Usually, parents not living close to the school, single parents, and parents employed outside of home are less involved at school, unless the school schedules diversified times and places for volunteering opportunities and occasions to support the students and the school in order to give all parents ample choices in attending.

In addition to these patterns, Epstein (2003) has also drawn three behavioral conclusions based on her studies: (a) just about all families care about their children, want them to succeed, and are eager to obtain better information from schools and communities so as to remain good partners in their children’s education; (b) just about all teachers and administrators would like to involve families, but many do not know how to go about building positive and productive programs and are consequently fearful about trying. This situation creates a “rhetoric rut,” in which educators are stuck, expressing support for partnerships without taking any action; and (c) Just about all students at all levels—elementary, middle, and high school—want their families to be more knowledgeable as partners about schooling and are willing to take active roles in facilitating communications between home and school. However, students need improved information and guidance than most currently receive. Students need more information regarding how their schools view partnerships and how they can conduct important exchanges with their families about school activities, homework, and school decisions.

Research conducted by Epstein (2003) indicated that caring communities can be built on purpose. Furthermore, caring communities might include families who may not initiate involvement on their own, and by their own reports, just about all families, students, and teachers believe that partnerships are important for helping students to succeed across the grades (Epstein, 2003). In addition, Noddings (2003) stated educators must recognize that care cannot be taken lightly and should be a major purpose of the schools. Teachers must acknowledge caring for students is essential in teaching; developing a community with a high capacity for care is a key objective of responsible education. Furthermore, when this philosophy of caring is implemented in the classroom, teachers encourage dialogue, are sensitive to the needs and passions of the students, and create relationships through the relevant and rigorous curriculum and modes of instruction (Rogers & Webb, 1991). However, as the caring-centered community is established, attention should also
be focused on the needs of the multicultural classroom.

**Caring-Centered Multicultural Classrooms**

“In an age when violence among school children is at an unprecedented level, when children are bearing children with little knowledge of how to care for them, when the society and even the schools often concentrate on materialistic messages, it may be unnecessary to argue that we should care more genuinely for our children and teach them to care” (Noddings, 2003, p.59). Goldstein wrote that the ethic of care allows teachers to embrace the concept of caring in such a way which enables them to enhance and to deepen their understanding of teaching; caring in a way that goes beyond gentle smiles and the warm hugs usually found in elementary schools (Goldstein, 1998). Pang, Rivera & Mora (1999) affirmed multicultural education arises from an ethical purpose to care for and teach all children. A caring-centered multicultural classroom is directed by teachers who embrace a moral obligation to care for their students within the framework of the students’ culture and diverse language acquisition. Every child needs general knowledge that goes beyond the basics, but every individual student has different needs. The caring-centered teacher listens to all students and helps them to attain the knowledge and attitudes needed to achieve their personal goals, not those of a pre-established curriculum. Pang, Rivera, and Mora asserted that the effective caring teacher is able to fuse cultural and language aspects into the pedagogy of his or her classroom (1999). Taking this into account, a caring-centered multicultural classroom stresses the creation of trusting relationships as the groundwork for building an effective academic and social climate for instruction (Chaskin & Rauner, 1995; Erickson, 1993). Lin (2001) affirmed that teachers see their contributions to societal equity in their efforts to create an educational system that places the academic, emotional, and social needs of children at the center of their multicultural classroom. To ensure this, caring-centered teachers display certain characteristics depicted in the following graphic representation (Noddings, 1988):
Goldstein asserted, “Thinking about our caring for our students using Noddings' work as a starting point enables educators to understand more fully the intellectual aspects of caring, and allow us to think of caring as a sound foundation for curricular decision making” (Goldstein, 1998, p.6). Modeling for students, especially in elementary school, is a very useful tool for teachers. Therefore, modeling caring relationships and interaction are an effective tool for creating a caring culture by providing schemas of the concept of caring and love (Swick, 2007). Moreover, there are similar themes and characteristics in schools when identifying what constitutes a caring environment. A school must have clear and common goals and expectations of the students, there must be a collaboration among all key stakeholders, and there must exist a culture of trust and shared beliefs. The optimal commonality among caring schools is the sense of ownership from the teachers in policy development and implementation (Sautner, 2008). Clearly the culture of caring begins with the school and funnels into the classroom.

Evidence of caring, community involvement, and cultural affirmation in the multicultural classroom lead to greater academic and social achievement such as higher student moral, active student participation, and increased academic achievement (Lin, 2001; Pang, Rivera & Mora, 1999). Moreover, Rogers and Freiberg (1994) recognized teacher empathy, a positive classroom environment, and trusting relationships as key elements for promoting effective educational settings where children develop positive attitudes and ownership of their education in a supportive multicultural environment. Additionally, the multicultural perceptions of what define a caring person, according to different races, has also been studied. Ruben Garza (2009) conducted a study with the purpose to analyze the differences between White and Latino perceptions of a caring teacher. The study found five similar themes between the responses of the two different ethnic groups. The students’ perceptions were categorized into five themes. First, the students recognized caring teachers as those who were readily available for the students. Secondly, teachers who provided scaffolding and relevancy during a lesson were also perceived as caring. Thirdly, students also identified teachers who modeled kindness through his or her actions as caring individuals. Furthermore, another caring characteristic in teachers was the authentic interest in students outside the classroom walls. Lastly, students characterized those who provided emotional encouragement in the classroom environment also as caring. Although some researchers have argued there are great differences between the perceptions of care among different cultures, the similarities among them are much greater than the differences; they are universal and transcend cultures. However, Garza (2009) found only one difference being the priority each group gave to each theme, yet the same themes were nonetheless evident. Educators, therefore, can be confident that caring is perceived generally the same in its importance across all cultures. Adequate professional development will ensure effective implementation of a caring school culture (Patterson, Gordon, & Price, 2008).

**Impact in ELLs’ Literacy Achievement**

The ethic of care does not suggest that the mere implementation of caring relations will accomplish everything in regards to the literacy education of ELLs. However, the caring relations established by the educators and the students lay the foundation for successful pedagogical activity. As educators listen to their students’ needs and cultural differences, they gain the students’ trust, which in turn, leads students to be more open to what their teachers are trying to teach them. Moreover, Noddings (1999) proposed that, as teachers engage in instructional dialogues and informal conversations with their pupils, they gain access to information regarding the students’ needs, talents, habits, and passions. Such important information is key in developing appropriate literacy
lessons for the ELLs’ individual academic progress. Schema theorists view learning as a sophisticated system of conceptual mental structures representing the individual’s perception of the world and in essence builds their background knowledge. Noddings’ proposal parallels with notions found in schema theory and other constructivist reading theories. In investigations examining how the brain works, Anderson (1994) exposed the idea of cognitive schemas (organized experiences or feelings). Students can then grasp a better understanding of abstract concepts once a solid foundation of concrete, relevant concepts has been established (Stateuniversity.com, n.d.). As an individual reads, the activation of schemata is crucial, for it provides an open door for comprehension, learning, and the ability to remember the information read (Weaver, 2009). As teachers attentively listen to their students, they become cognizant of their students’ schemata and are then able to incorporate them into their teaching by activating them and constructing them where needed, thus resulting in effective literacy lessons catered to the exclusive interests of the pupils.

In addition to activating students’ schemata, the caring-centered multicultural teacher may enhance ELLs’ literacy skills through features of effective instruction that elicit the students’ creativity. For example, after reading a story, the teacher can implement activities such as response journals, dialogues, graphic organizers, reader’s theatre, story boxes, story-telling, literature response groups, dioramas, problem-solving approaches, and hands-on strategies which make reading more concrete (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Because the caring multicultural teacher gets to know the student on a personal level, he or she can adequately generate differentiated instruction based on his or her needs.

Caring-centered education calls for constant assessment of students’ needs, goals, and cultural backgrounds as well as the implementation of interventions based on such needs, interests, and schemata. Such concepts fully reflect what research in literacy development and second language acquisition has shown as essential (Echevarria & Graves, 2007). In regards to activating background knowledge, Cary (2007) noted, “the outside story unfolds away from school and is built from a thousand and one experiences hooked to home, home country, and new country factors, including values, attitudes, worldview, family dynamics, communication style, language status, and political climate” (p.29). In addition to constantly assessing the students’ needs, evaluation of learning should be on-going, personalized, and involve the student in judging his own academic and literacy achievement. Teachers who successfully build relationships with their students confirm that personal knowledge of the student enables them to motivate the students more easily and engage them with relevant scaffolding opportunities (Grande, 2008).

**Recommendations in Professional Development**

A state of urgency exists to implement a caring-centered multicultural education pedagogy and to change the structure of society, making it more equitable for all constituents regardless of race, gender and origin. A primary component of teacher preparation programs should be based on aspects of care in order to prepare preservice teachers to be successful in multicultural classroom settings (Noddings, 1992; Wolfgramm, 1999; Pompa, 2006). Higher education courses and textbooks have been developed that expose student teachers to ways of implementing a caring-centered pedagogy (Goldstein, 1999).

In addition to preparing pre-service teachers, staff development for inservice teachers should address the vital components of a caring-centered multicultural classroom. Teachers must be cognizant of how caring can impact student achievement. Caring can be a basis for sound decisions with multicultural curriculum, making it feasible for teachers to better meet the needs of
their students (Noddings, 1992). Caring teachers demonstrate encouragement and support to their students, especially in the early years of education (Ornstein, 2003). In addition, Goldstein (1999) points out that interest in incorporating caring in the curricula of teacher education is necessary to explore the understandings teachers hold about the connection of caring and teaching. Novice and experienced teachers must include present caring as an important subject of their instructional day by designing multicultural lessons based on students’ demographics. Noddings (2003) clearly states that people seem to believe that our educational problems consist largely of low scores on achievement tests. She goes on to say, “First we should want more from our educational efforts than adequate academic achievement and, second, we will not achieve even the most minimum success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and for our children to learn to care for others” (p.59). Through a caring and culturally relevant education process, children will develop skills and become successful in schools, so they can contribute to the creation of a more just society (Dempsey & Noblit, 1996). We assert that as teachers become aware of the power of caring in the multicultural setting the academic and social performance of students, including the ELLs, will surely increase.

The primary goal of teacher education is for student teachers, novice teachers, and experienced teachers to become better educators which ultimately benefit the students. To achieve this goal, experiential learning, the act of learning through experience, is a useful tool for educational professional development. The authors of this paper experience first-hand the value of experiential learning during the summer of 2010. Doctoral students of education from a university in Southwest Texas, attended a Diversity Academy which intended to expose these students, through experiential learning, to various cultures and programs. These doctoral students are all also full-time educators; some are teachers while others are administrators. During a visit to a university in Central Texas near the Houston area, the doctoral students participated in a question and answer segment with of the college students. The students described their experiences, both positive and negative, with teachers in their grade school years and at the university. The doctoral students’ experience taught them more than books, lectures, or powerpoints ever could. “I can’t get those kids faces and words out of my face,” said one student who is a principal at an elementary school. The impact of student/teacher experiential learning opportunities is powerful. A professional development for the ethic of care must include experiential learning with former students, so student teachers and inservice teachers can truly appreciate the impact they have on their students.

**Conclusion**

Being an educator today comes with an abundant amount of daily challenges and becomes more complex as the years go by. According to Eisner (2003), the message we send to students is that their test scores are what really matter in their education and nothing else. Pompa (2006) affirmed that as educators we should look past the short-term goal of academic achievement and focus more towards the long-term effect of molding productive citizens who are competent, skilled, and caring individuals. Stakeholders involved understand the importance of establishing and maintaining a caring multicultural school community in order to achieve success. Furthermore, when students feel responsible, respected and invested in the classroom community, the chance of creating and maintaining a caring school community becomes more likely. In addition, faculty and staff form the most important component in a multicultural school community, and involving them in school-wide decisions creates a more positive atmosphere altogether. Consequently, the discipline of caring should be integrated into the curriculum and instruction for our students. Moreover,
professional development for administrators, faculty, and staff, focusing on the ethic of care must be provided. Ideally, this professional development should include an experiential learning opportunity.

At the beginning of the paper we pose the questions—Why should teachers care about their students when they are striving to meet the demands of accountability? And is their job to teach their students the required curriculum, or is it to nurture them? Providing students with a caring-infused curriculum has been an area that has been neglected by many educators across the disciplines. Teachers make better educational decisions when they take the time to learn and understand their students, which in turn leads towards meeting the demands of accountability. The importance of building a sense of belonging in students from different backgrounds must be reiterated; thus, a caring-centered multicultural classroom offers this sense of belonging that our ELLs need. People develop a strong awareness acceptance when their cultural traits are validated and respected by those around them.


Lin, Q. (2001). Toward a caring-centered multicultural education within the social justice context. Education(122),1, 107-114.