An Ethic of Caring: The Fuel for High Teacher Efficacy

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In this article I discuss ways of increasing teacher efficacy identified as a key belief system in the enhancement of teacher effectiveness. Teacher efficacy is defined and its impact on teacher effectiveness explored. The need to increase teacher efficacy to enhance the design, implementation and outcomes of instruction is discussed with special focus on caring and its potential as a catalyst for expanding teachers' perception of their power to make a difference in the lives and performance of their students.

KEY WORDS: caring; teacher efficacy; teacher effectiveness.

A growing body of research links teacher effectiveness to teacher behaviors (Trentham, Brogdan, and Silvern, 1985; Anderson, Greene, and Loewen, 1988; Benz, Bradley, Alderman, and Flowers, 1992). Agne (1992) asserts that these behaviors are driven by specific belief systems. Some researchers believe that the personal belief systems of teachers significantly influence the behaviors displayed in the classroom as well as the instructional decisions teachers make. Teacher efficacy has been identified as perhaps the most important belief system in terms of its effect on the behavior of teachers

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and subsequently student performance (Ashton and Webb, 1986; Guskey, 1988; Wax and Dutton, 1991; Agne, 1992; Ross, 1994).

Teacher efficacy by definition refers to a teacher's belief in his/her ability to make a difference in student learning (Ashton and Webb, 1986). Teachers who exhibit high levels of teacher efficacy tend to perform more effectively in the classroom environment (Ashton and Webb, 1986; Sparks, 1988; Fritz, Miller-Heyl, and MacPhee, 1995). These teachers tend to: (1) view the role of teacher as important and meaningful work; (2) set high expectations for student performance; (3) take personal responsibility for student learning, examine their own performance in light of student failure and develop improved instructional strategies to meet their students' needs; (4) engage in goal setting for themselves, the profession of teaching and their students; (6) exhibit confidence in their ability to affect student learning; (7) view themselves and their students as partners in the learning process; (8) expend greater effort and persist longer in assisting student learning (Ashton, 1984; Ashton and Webb, 1986). According to McLaughlin:

> Teachers taking this perspective (high expectations) develop broadened (but not lowered) definitions of achievement, new classroom arrangements (such as group work and cooperative learning) and construction of an active role for student learners (McLauhglin, 1992, p. 9).

Guskey (1988) contends that teachers with this philosophy tend to have a strong sense of efficacy (p. 64). In other words, they are firm in the belief that they can teach all children, including the difficult and unmotivated (Berman, McLaughlin, Bass, Pauly, and Zellman, 1977). The importance of this variable has inspired significant research into the nature of efficacy and its impact upon student performance (Berman et al., 1977). Yet limited research has been devoted to identifying ways to develop and or strengthen teacher efficacy (Woolfolk and Hoy, 1990; Fritz et al., 1995).

How do high efficacy teachers develop and sustain such levels of performance? This question posed by Woolfolk and Hoy (1990) is legitimate and important when we consider the need to support and enhance the performance of today's professional educators. The topic of teacher effectiveness has dominated the school research literature for over 20 years. Many opinions have been voiced and numerous programs launched in response to a growing public demand for significant improvement in this critical area. Despite years of research and programmatic experimentation, we still find many teachers who fail to provide quality education for our nations' youth regardless of ethnicity, gender or economic background.

If high teacher efficacy is the key to facilitating more effective teacher performance, how to we develop and support this critical belief system?

THE INFLUENCE OF CARING

Agne (1992) asserts that we may discover answers to the question posed by Woolfolk and Hoy (1990) by focusing on the influence of caring upon teacher beliefs and subsequently teacher behaviors. Noblit, Rogers, and McCadden (1995), define caring as a value; how we believe we should view and relate to others. Caring is critical to guiding instruction and student discipline, the development of school policy and the organization of the daily school schedule.

> Teachers model caring as they work to help students achieve their goals (Noblit et al., 1995). These goals can only be reached when a student is equipped with the requisite social skills, positive self-esteem, a strong knowledge base, nurturing and support. Children may learn without the benefit of a caring teacher. However, the opportunities for learning may be significantly restricted (Noblit et al., 1995).

Russel, Purkey, and Siegel (1982) identify specific behaviors, which send messages of caring from teacher to student. These include eye contact, active listening and recognition of ideas and activities, which make each student unique (i.e., special interests, birthdays). Such behaviors can increase positive self-image, sense of self-worth and connectedness with children (students).

The influence of caring actuates three assumptions regarding teacher beliefs and behaviors (Noblit et al., 1995). First, a caring teacher is committed to his or her students. In other words, the teacher accepts responsibility for student performance whether it involves success or failure. Failure is attached not to the student but to the teacher who must search within to find a more effective way to reach the student. Noblit (1993) observed a teacher who took responsibility for a word spelled incorrectly on a number of student papers. Rather than blame her students, the teacher admitted publicly that she must have made the mistake in spelling during her instruction. Second, the influence of caring can motivate teachers to constantly improve their own skills in order to better meet the needs of their students. This constant striving for personal betterment not only sparks lifelong learning but also models highly desirable behavior for students to observe and adopt. Third, the keystone of teaching is the relationship developed between the teacher and the student. The relational base built upon friendship and trust stimulates the students' attention and commitment to instructional tasks. Caring facilitates a sense of connection from which spring countless opportunities for learning. Through a process of mutual sharing, the teacher and students become one. Fourth, the caring

teacher's behaviors can influence and motivate caring behaviors on the part of the students. By modeling "care" on a consistent basis, students come to know in a real sense what the influence of caring really means. Having experienced the positive benefits of establishing caring relationships with the teacher, students are motivated to subscribe caring behaviors to their own repertoire. Students learn (1) to celebrate the success of others, (2) that service to the group is service to one's self and (3) that caring means freedom to be responsible (Agne, 1992).

In summary, caring can only be seen when actions occur based on accepting responsibility for the well being of another (Noblit, 1993). Moreover, caring is a force binding individual members of a community. Finally, caring motivates action in the best interests of others determined by our base of knowledge of the individual, context and need.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

> "People construct caring relationships even as they construct their definition of what it is to care. It is our argument that caring is contextual also (Dempsey and Noblit, 1993, p. 48).

The nature of caring required to support the behaviors previously described must be relational in nature to sustain its influence over time (Noddings, 1992). The carer must extend to meet the needs of another. However, the cared for has an equally important role to play in this process. In order to complete the caring act, the cared for must accept the gesture with appreciation and visible gratification. Such a response provides personal satisfaction for the carer and serves to motivate future acts of care. Caring requires the context of a relationship to define the meaning of caring for the individual and provide opportunities to execute the caring act (Dempsey and Noblit, 1993). To recognize caring in schools, you must examine the relationships developed between teachers and students. You must focus on these relationships in order to "see caring" (Noblit et al., 1995). These caring relationships require the type of healthy interactions that allow teachers and students to come to know each other as people. In the process of showing concern for their students, caring teachers establish a grounded relationship forming emotional bonds or connections from teacher to child (Elbaz, 1992). The formation of caring relationships has a history that far predates the recognition of its importance by the educational research community (Noblit et al., 1995).

Unlike the technical features of schooling, caring concerns values and how we socially construct them. It enables us to reclaim education as a

moral action. Caring gives priority to relationships (Noblit et al., 1995, p. 681). Noblit et al.'s 1995 study of two elementary classroom teachers details the stories of special students they impacted using the perspective of caring. Through observations and interviews with the teachers and students, the research team discovered that caring is usually not a major part of the school's philosophy or plan of operation. Most often teachers work to develop caring relationships in their practice because they know a student is less likely to commit to the instructional program if the student does not believe the teacher is personally interested and emotionally invested in the success of that student. In other words, the student must believe the teacher cares for that particular individual. For example, students in this study recognized ''good teachers'' as those who; (1) provided respectful support to students in need of help and, (2) established reciprocal dialogue which taught the teacher how to provide the most effective assistance to students (Noblit et al., 1995).

DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY OF CARING

To care within the context of schools means that teachers focus not only on imparting predetermined knowledge but spend significant time and energy on nurturing and sustaining each of their students. By modeling caring behavior to their students, teachers facilitate the development of a caring community within the learning environment.

Geiser (1974) outlines several key aspects that are critical to the development of a caring environment for children. First, caring teachers must practice listening to children with attention and respect. The practice of half-listening and assuming what children have said can lead to incorrect responses to student needs. The perception that adults are not listening also sends the message that a child's needs are not really important, creating the potential for diminished self-esteem and retreat from classroom participation.

Second, a caring learning environment values children by showing friendship, courtesy and respect. Children know they are appreciated when their ideas, feelings and needs are respectfully received. Caring teachers accept a child's right to their feelings and provide guidance in developing strategies for healthy emotional development and well being.

Third, a caring environment allows children to develop a sense of their own competency. Instructional activities are designed to insure a reasonable measure of success for every student and help students develop proficiency in evaluating their own quality of production.

Fourth, a caring environment allows students to practice freedom with responsibility. Reasonable limits are established within the classroom, not to constrain but to free students to fully participate in learning opportunities without jeopardizing the rights and safety of themselves or their classmates. To quote Geiser:

> A child is made anxious and insecure by an absence of limits. Children need firm, reasonable and clearly understood limits...A child who is learning how to relate to other people has to know not only what he can do but also what the other person will not tolerate (Geiser, 1974, p. 19).

Additionally, students learn that a significant part of their development includes providing services to others. Noblit (1993) observed a classroom teacher who created various routine jobs for students to perform each day focused on care of the classroom environment (i.e., distributing work materials, chalkboard cleaning, pencil sharpening). The good of the collective group was served while providing important lessons in responsible, caring behaviors.

The caring environment requires that the adults charged with supervision do no harm to the children in their care. Behaviors that embarrass, ridicule or somehow bring shame to children are not tolerated. Henry's (1992) study of African–Canadian teachers emphasized the importance of creating communities of caring within the classroom to address affective as well as cognitive issues affecting their students. The teachers in this study exhibited "mothering behaviors" deemed necessary given the oppressive circumstances surrounding the lives of their students including poverty and the effects of racism within the African–Canadian community. The teachers in Henry's study assumed a myriad of roles (cheerleader, mentor, nurturer) to assure their student's success.

> The family ethos cultivated in these women's classrooms at Bedford Elementary School provides more than a safe, nurturing place where Black children can feel confident and successful...In their school and classroom practice, these women continue to act as other mothers. In other words, they tend to envisage Black children, whether in classrooms or the community, as part of their "family" (Henry, 1992, p. 399).

Within this "context of family", teachers are able to approach affective issues through discussions which invoke positive behaviors in their students. One teacher spoke to her male students about showing appreciation for their mothers, many of whom worked long, tedious hours to support their families. These lessons were aimed at instilling ideals and motivations to

encourage the adoption of caring behaviors toward significant members in the child's personal environment. Students were encouraged to celebrate the achievements of their classmates in ways that fostered continuous success. Achievements were recognized by spontaneous applause as a collective sign of encouragement and praise.

The teacher's nurturing role as ''othermother'' validates and reinforces the development of a community of caring by the consistent modeling of caring behaviors. Henry observed teachers initiating affectionate interactions (hugs, kisses, etc.). The goal of these caring acts focused on reversing the idea that these African–Canadian children were somehow unworthy of love and acceptance by their fellow citizens.

Henry (1992) maintains that the success of a community of caring lends much to a shared sense of responsibility with each member of the community fulfilling their obligations to themselves and members of the group. Students were expected to arrive at school ready to learn. Visual cues like posters and wall signs displayed around classrooms encouraged students to commit to achieving high educational and career goals. Furthermore, these teachers stressed through their actions that the benefits of academic achievement are gratifying.

Like the teachers in Henry's study, Noddings (1992) believes that the responsibilities of public schools includes more than mere instruction in academic content. Her emphasis is on building learning communities in which students develop into capable, healthy and moral beings. Noddings (1992) suggests a model for moral education from the perspective of the ethic of caring. This ethic is based on relationships with important roles assigned to both the party who gives care and the one who is the object of the caregiving. This ''relational dyad'' finds the carer responding to meet the needs of the cared for. The needs of the carer are submerged as the focus is fully placed on meeting the needs of another. The individual being cared for plays an equally important role by providing recognition and response to the caring act. The similarity between the caring role and that of mothering was identified by Ruddick (1980) in the form of three goals; (1) protecting the life of the child, (2) nurturing the growth of the child, and (3) shaping a moral being. Teachers just like mothers desire to nurture young people into healthy and decent human beings. This feat requires a level of knowledge regarding each student that can only be accessed through regular interactions provided through the mechanism of a relationship. Taking the time to extend friendship and build trust guided by the ethic of caring allows teachers to support students' moral development from a perspective of genuine interest and concern, not unlike the maternal instinct. When the relationship is guided by the ethic of caring, the major factor is always the growth of the subject of care (Noddings, 1992).

Continuity of purpose, place and people is required in order to nurture a community of caring (Webb, Wilson, Corbett, and Modecai, 1993). Noddings (1992) sees continuity of purpose as a perception of schools as places where students receive care and learn to care deeply for themselves. Second, continuity of place supports a caring community by stabilizing the setting or context of care. The students' need for time to adjust to and assume responsibility for their physical environment is facilitated by an extended stay of at least 2–3 years. Finally, continuity of people involves pupil assignments to teachers for three or more years providing teachers and students with the time they need to get to know each other thoroughly and develop relationships built on friendship and trust (Noddings, 1992).

SUMMARY

The relational nature of caring provides a reciprocal reinforcement of well being which nurtures and sustains positive interactions between teacher and student. The act of caring and being cared for forms a loop which provides needed support to enhance student growth, development and performance while refueling teachers with experiences of gratification and appreciation, increasing satisfaction with teaching and commitment to teaching as a profession. Student and teacher success experienced within communities of caring increases confidence or efficacy in teaching skills and student ability to learn. In essence, caring is the fuel for teacher efficacy working in tandem to create the stable, capable and committed teaching force required for the effective education of our nation's children.

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