Chapter 11

Creating a Caring High School Environment by Utilizing a Common Visual Language

Virginia Marie Incao-Rogers
The Balance Between, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter will provide a rationale for the importance of implementing a caring culture in the school community, as well as using instructional tools to provide a high level of instruction and care. A summation of ethics theorist Nel Noddings’s work is presented to the reader as evidence and motivation for embracing the caring model as an invaluable component of teaching. In conjunction with Nel Nodding’s care theory, the author will expand on thinking maps research to demonstrate how thinking maps supports an ethics of care in the classroom, while deepening student learning, enhancing critical thinking skills, and promoting creative thought. Thinking maps are a set of visual tools for supporting instructional practices and improving student performance. It is a language of eight visual patterns each based on a fundamental thinking process. When an educator utilizes this research-based tool, consistently and purposefully in the classroom, the leader is cultivating user independence and fostering a nurturing environment for his/her students.

CARING AT THE FOREFRONT OF TEACHING

My contention is, first, that we should want more from our educational efforts than adequate academic achievement and, second, that we will not achieve even that meager success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and learn to care for others. (Nell Noddings)

In today’s uncertain times, high school students, especially those from marginalized communities, are faced with deep, overwhelming worries that may hinder their ability to succeed. Some of these anxieties may stem from typical teenage pressures such as school, family and/or friends. Other fears may run

deeper and can have a significant impact on the lives of these students. Students will be more apt to grow both emotionally and academically when taught in a caring environment.

Elementary educators understand the value of establishing trust and caring for their youngsters. This loving nature is evident with the bounty of celebratory events to praise and raise the students’ feelings of self-worth. When entering middle school—and especially high school—there is a paradigm shift. The focus of teaching tends to be on the content, not the student. This may be due to the pressures of rigorous high-stakes exams mandated by both the Federal and State governments. Many adolescents do not believe that their teachers care about them, as evidenced by reports that more than 50% of middle school and high school students surveyed feel their teachers would not care if they were absent, while a comparable percentage of students believe that their teachers do not care about them at all (Qualia Institute, 2014). For learning to be optimal, teachers must develop a genuine caring relationship with students, a relationship in which the student is cared for, not simply cared about. The distinction between these concepts is that caring about a person does not require reflection or action. It is without consequence. Caring for another person is actionable. Developing an ethic of care can only be established if receptive attention is an essential characteristic of the caring encounter. The carer (educator) must be open to what the cared for (student) is saying or experiencing. The carer is reflective and responsive to the needs of the cared for. An authentic caring relation, one in which the carer and cared for recognize and acknowledge the efforts of the other, must be demonstrated overtly and consistently as a primary goal of the educator (Noddings, 2002).

American philosopher and care theorist Nell Noddings asserts that building a trusting, nurturing relationship with students is the foundation for teaching (Noddings, 1992). She describes caring in education as “a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding and appreciation” (Noddings, 2002). Caring relations, or developing an ethic of care, are necessary for education to provide the foundation for effective pedagogical activity in a school community. Listening to and acknowledging students’ thoughts promote achievement (Noddings, 2005). Student/teacher relationships will flourish when caring is exhibited and received (Noddings, 1992). In some cases, care may be as simple as an educator giving a student her complete attention during a one-on-one conversation. The student acknowledging the effort shown on the teacher’s part, even by a single word, phrase or gesture, may indicate receipt of the caring.

As educators strive to meet the academic challenges and demands of America’s rigorous standards for their students to become successful, caring must remain at the forefront of teaching. Despite the constraints of time, an ethic of care should be woven into the daily exchanges between teacher and student because caring is an essential component to learning.

Educators must select their teaching tools and strategies to ensure the highest success for their students. If the intent or objective is to build a caring environment in the classroom, teachers must choose their tools or strategies to nurture not only academic growth but emotional growth as well. Research indicates that when students are supported emotionally, they tend to perform better academically. Emotions are essential to learning. If educators ignore the emotional component of a topic, they are depriving their students of meaningfulness (Caine & Caine, 1994). Teachers armed with this vital information will select their teaching tools for the most gainful impact.

Thinking Maps are teaching tools which, when used deliberately and with fidelity, aid caring teachers to deliver both highly rigorous and emotionally supportive lessons. The Maps were developed by Dr. David Hyerle in 1988 as an outgrowth of the cognitive work done by Dr. Albert Upton in the early 1960s that defined six fundamental thinking processes based on semantics, cognitive psychology and problem-
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