

How to Develop a School Into a Caring Community

In *Happiness and Education*, Nell Noddings' (2003) message is surprisingly obvious, but very difficult to achieve. How can school be made a happy place, where children like to be, where they care and they are cared for by caring teachers? To achieve this, Noddings suggests to "organize curriculum entirely around centers or themes of care such as: care for self, care for intimate others, care for strangers and distant others, care for animals, care for plants and the living environment, care for objects and instruments, and care for ideas" (Noddings, 1992, p. 70).

The ideas of creating a caring community of learners are found in developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997) and embedded into the following five principles:

1. All participants consider and contribute to each other's well-being and learning;
2. Constant, positive relationships with adults and children are present where all children are valued;
3. Each child's strengths and interests contribute to the overall functioning of the group;
4. The learning environment is designed to protect children's health and safety;
5. An organized environment and routine are provided.

The reasoning behind caring characteristics of children ranges from biological inheritance, such as a predisposition, to environmental factors, such as identification with others (Kagan & Lamb, 1987). Looking at caring communities, Shabatay (1991) stresses the importance of attitude toward others: "the way we treat strangers reveals as much about us as it does about them (p.138). Vogt (2002) emphasizes that caring within teaching can be understood in a range of ways such as caring as commitment, relatedness, physical care, and expressing affection, such as cuddling, parenting and mothering. She advocates that caring as relatedness can be linked with the concept of ethics of care. Her research challenges the view of caring as being normally related to women, indicating that caring is a characteristic of men as well as women.

If it is accepted that the school should be a caring community, then what are its characteristics? Friedman stresses that "The very existence in genuine community is already a common concern, a caring for one another" (Shabatay, 1991, p.138). Noddings (1995) identifies why caring should be taught: "*In an age when violence among schoolchildren 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. However, many otherwise reasonable people seem to believe that our educational problems consist largely of low scores on achievement tests*" (p.675). Ben-

ninga, et al. (2007) reported on the relationship between academic achievement and the implementation of specific character education programs noting that schools with solid character education programs showed positive relationships between the extent of the character education implementation and academic achievement, not in a single year, but across two academic years. The components of the character education implemented were: good environment, evidence that parents and teachers model and promote good character, high quality opportunities, promoting caring community, and positive social relationships.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), through the program accreditation process, stresses that institutions are encouraged to measure dispositions, such as caring, by translating them into observable behaviors in school settings. The South Carolina Social Studies Curriculum Standards for K-8 stress that, from the beginning, children should be taught respect, honesty, compassion, trust, fairness, courtesy, volunteerism, etc.

Research from Cleveland, OH and Buffalo, NY (Nowak-Fabrykowski & Helinski, 2006) found that kindergarten teachers are developing caring by teaching specific lessons on caring such as respect, patience, responsibility, honesty, compassion and cooperation. Teachers model how to be kind, con-

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Some teachers teach lessons specifically on caring. This includes such activities as teaching lessons from *The Peaceful Classroom* and *Hands are for Helping*, creating a Mother's day booklet of chores, a Father's Day booklet of chores, Christmas family gifts, Thanksgiving treats, and Grandparents' Day songs and treats.

Some schools have school-wide programs, while others have classroom programs. Examples of school-wide programs include:

- *Positive Action* (www.positive.action.net)
- *Peace Builder Program*
- A model of the Center for Non-Violent Communication.
- *Second Step*
- Collection of pennies for UNICEF
- *Mitten Tree* where kids bring in hats and gloves for needy children.
- *Dignity Project* where children donate stuffed animals and 20 health care products. (The teacher told a story about a child who emptied his piggy bank so he could

give the children the 20 items).

Examples of classroom programs include:

No Put-Downs - stresses the importance of being nice and kind to all people.

Be Kind Chain - where a link is added for each time kindness is observed, such as tying shoes, helping others, and sharing. The goal is to make the chain to go around the room.

Top Hopper - where the teacher allows students to share their favorite items from home. The students then give the *Top Hopper* compliments like "I like your book," or "You are my friend," or "I like sitting next to you." They show that they care by listening and asking questions.

Kindness Necklace - where the teacher passes a necklace to someone in the classroom who has been caring/kind. The goal is to have as many people as possible wear the necklace in one day.

Who are Your Heroes? - students study heroes and ask parents' ideas on who is or was a hero to them. They use cassette tapes for each parent and a graphic organizer. They study well-known non-fictional heroes and then each child creates his or her own fictional hero who then is placed in a story.

A teacher of 28 years emphasizes establishing rules from the first day of school. The rules are called "We care." The rules are reviewed daily and written on a chart. A copy is sent home. They are:

- We listen to others
- Our hands are for helping (we don't hurt anyone on the outside or inside)
- We are responsible for what we say and do
- We use caring language (words that are kind, necessary and true)
- We care about each others feelings

One teacher of 23 years uses a *Fishing for Kindness Chart*. A child receives a paper fish on a chart (next to his name) when he is caught being kind to others, helping others, sharing, taking turns, complimenting others, saying please and thank you. On Fridays the child with the most fish wins a prize. *Kindness Chart* is a related program where children fill in hearts everyday if they did something nice for someone. Parents also fill out the form if their child does something in one or more of these categories: showed sharing and caring, respect, responsibility and kindness. This is read in class; parents love this activity. The teacher tells parents at Open House "we are a school family and caring is an absolute must in our classroom."

A teacher of 27 years uses the *ABC Behavior Plan*, which rewards good behavior by using special activities such as pizza parties on Fun Fridays. The teacher identifies the ABCs of good behavior and then teaches the students how to exhibit the behaviors that are desired.

The *Peace Bridge* is used as a program to help children

develop social skills. A teacher with 30 years experience has identified many books that she is using along with the *Peace Bridge* to solve everyday problems.

Another teacher uses "upset" stories where the main character is "upset," like *Alexander and the Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. After reading the book *The Giving Tree*, children add caring "good deed" notes to the tree in the classroom and then discuss: What can you do for others?

Conclusion

While social studies standards do not explicitly use the word "caring" as one disposition that should be developed and nourished by teachers, the concepts of respect, compassion, fairness, courtesy, managing conflict peacefully, volunteerism, and civic-mindedness are readily apparent. To some, character education seems lost while society and schools are becoming more dangerous. There is no doubt that establishing a caring school is both a laudable and essential goal for schools today.

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