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Latino and White High School Students' Perceptions of Caring Behaviors

Are We Culturally Responsive to our Students?

Rubén Garza

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This study examines Latino and White high school students' perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey caring. Major findings of students' perceptions generated five dominant themes: (a) provide scaffolding during a teaching episode, (b) reflect a kind disposition through actions, (c) are always available to the student, (d) show a personal interest in the student's well-being inside and outside the classroom, (e) and provide affective academic support in the classroom setting. I highlight similarities and uniqueness between the two ethnic groups, generating new information that teachers can use to examine their own practice to determine the extent of culturally responsive caring.

Keywords: *culturally responsive caring; Hispanic education; ethnicity; adolescents*

Once students step into the context of the classroom, educators may perceive their unique assets as problems, complex challenges, or differences that are misinterpreted. As a result, educators often label students as unmotivated, withdrawn, or academically incapable. For example, "interviews with Latino high school students found that they did not feel as if they were part of the school or the classroom; they spoke of feeling invisible and of being treated as if they were less worthy than other students" (Zanger, cited in Rolón, 2002-2003, p. 41). If we examine student voices more carefully, I argue that caring for students may look different from what common practice dictates. To conceive that teachers do not care for their students

would be difficult, but what makes caring a challenging notion is student perceptions of how teachers should care for their students. Therefore, race and ethnicity must not be overlooked as an important aspect in the dynamics of caring for students. I also argue that caring for Latino and White high school students may be similar, yet each ethnic group's point of view is unique. Thus, understanding their distinct perspectives may lead to culturally responsive caring to provide more positive experiences for all students. This is more important for Latino students who are invisible in the classroom, experience more failure than success, and ultimately drop out of school.

Although all students do not have the same perceptions about caring in the classroom, differences of opinion may be influenced by their classroom experiences and ethnic background and, more important, may reflect the complex nature of caring for students. "In caring classrooms where all children are represented" (Antón-Oldenburg, 2000, p. 46), students are more apt to be actively engaged in their education (Perez, 2000). Hence, responsive caring for students is a critical "source of motivation, especially for culturally diverse students who may be at risk of failing or who may be disengaged from schooling" (Perez, p. 102). The danger in dismissing student perspectives may be unconsciously reflected in the inadequate actions and disposition that teachers display toward students on a daily basis. Although educators may perceive their actions and disposition toward students as caring, the student may feel quite differently. "Therefore, culturally diverse students need a relationship with their teachers that are mutually respectful if they are to learn. They not only need to like their teachers, but also must sense that their teacher cares for them" (p. 103). A construct that may lead to more positive schooling experiences for students is the ethic of care in ways that are meaningful to them. If we embrace Noddings's (1984) framework of cultivating a climate of caring in our schools, then educators must engage in a critical self-analysis to consider how their actions and disposition encourage and hinder student success and achievement. As a consequence, race and ethnicity must be considered in examining the dynamics of caring for students in ways that are congruent with their belief systems.

The literature describes the ethic of care in different contexts, but this study proposes that caring for students should be a purposeful act or, in other words, behavior that is relevant to each student's unique needs. The actions demonstrated by the teacher may vary for each student, but an underlying espoused belief exists that each student needs to be cared for in ways that make sense to him or her rather than in ways that are the same for every student. "When teachers operate from the ethic of care, they consciously

make a moral commitment to care for and to teach students and to develop reciprocal relationships with them” (Pang, 2005, p. 218). These relationships will also vary in intensity determined by contextual circumstances and the reciprocity of the student. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify attributes of a caring teacher as perceived by Latino and White high school students and to examine similarities and differences that may be reflected by these perceptions.

Ethos of Care

Whereas the literature on care has been illuminated through critical theorist (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; De Jesús & Antrop-González, 2006; Valdes, 1996; Villalpando, 2004), racial and ethnic (Rolón-Dow, 2005; Thompson, 1998), cultural (De Jesús & Antrop-González, 2006; Gay, 2000; Monzó & Rueda, 2001; Pizarro, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999; Valverde, 2006), multicultural (Pang, 2005), and feminist (Noddings, 1984; Thompson, 1998) lenses, caring may involve demeanor and actions (Garza, 2007; M. D. Nelson & Bauch, 1997; Valverde, 2006), virtue and morals (Noddings, 2005), mentoring and processes (Mayeroff, 1971), context and perceptions (Blustein, 1991), and trust, respect, and relationships (Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Mayeroff, 1971; Noddings, 2005; Pizarro, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). A caring ethic “requires commitment and the continual expression of caring behaviors develops the trusting relationships in which growth can occur” (Chaskin & Rauner, 1995, p. 674). What makes this endeavor challenging is the interpretation of caring behaviors. For example, “caring teachers are distinguished by their high performance expectations, advocacy, and empowerment of students as well as by their use of pedagogical practices that facilitate school success” (Gay, 2000, p. 62) and providing the necessary scaffolds (Garza, 2007; Nieto, 2004).

Since some (Alder, 2002; Hayes, Ryan, & Zseller, 1994; J. Nelson, Lott, & Glenn, 1997; M. D. Nelson & Bauch, 1997; Wentzel, 1997) have suggested that empathic listening is a form of caring, Noddings (2005) advances this notion by adding that “caring teachers listen and respond differentially to their students” (p. 19). In other words, caring is demonstrated in ways congruent with the individual’s needs rather than “deciding what the best interests are without listening to the expressed needs of the cared-for” (p. xv).

However, caring for others varies and is also influenced by context and perspective, for example (Blustein, 1991),

a young couple may have a deep affection for each other and call it love, “to care for”; a teacher may be responsible for students, “in the care of”; a health administrator may have a deep interest in generating funds to continue cancer research, “to care about”; or to be concerned that millions of children lack health care, “to care that.” (pp. 27-28)

Therefore, to care for people requires an interest and action for their welfare. In other words, my espoused belief that I care for others is also demonstrated through my actions. As Blustein (1991) reiterates, “In general, I take an interest in the things and people I care about when I make their condition my active concern because I identify myself with them in some way” (p. 31).

Although Noddings (2005) and Mayeroff (1971) agree that the ethic of caring involves a relationship between someone who cares for another, Noddings believes that caring must be a reciprocal act, whereas Mayeroff explains that context dictates whether or not caring is reciprocal. For example, a teacher cares for his or her students out of disposition and job responsibility, but the situation does not guarantee reciprocity. Responding to students’ needs is a developmental process that continues to grow as new opportunities present themselves. Noddings (2005) also speaks of the necessity of gaining the trust of students by continuing the ongoing pursuit of a relationship. Educators must develop meaningful, caring relationships with students to provide channels of understanding that establish respect for students. For example, for some Latino students, respect involves validating their language and cultural identity (Pizarro, 2005). This form of respect helps to cultivate relationships and trust in other people (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004).

Whereas the era of accountability seems to have fostered mechanistic educational organizations that focus on numbers, statistics, and state rankings (Noddings, 2005),

some policymakers and educators believe that caring is a pedagogical virtue demonstrated by forcing students to achieve the skills and acquire the knowledge that has been prescribed for them. From this view, a teacher exercises the virtue of caring by making students do what is thought to be good for them (p. xiv).

As a result, some educators may perceive preparing students to do well on state-mandated assessments as genuinely caring for them.

Finally, Mayeroff (1971) believes that caring is about the progression that transpires between individuals. “Caring, as helping another grow and actualize himself, is a process, a way of relating to someone that involves

development, in the same way that friendship can only emerge in time through mutual trust and a deepening and qualitative transformation of the relationship” (p. 1). This process involves knowing the individual and understanding his or her needs rather than generalizing what he or she may need. Through trial and error, self-assessment, patience, trust, and authentic interest in the other, the caregiver grows through the experience and learns how to effectively care for another. Therefore, according to Mayeroff, caring includes ingredients such as “knowing, alternating rhythms, patience, honesty, trust, humility, hope, and courage” (pp. 9-20) for caring to occur.

Despite the fact that classroom demographics have dramatically changed in many school settings, teachers are especially challenged to understand Latino students’ cultural, social, and linguistic assets. Therefore, teachers must make a conscious effort to know their respective community of learners and respond to them in a culturally responsive way. According to Geneva Gay (2000), “many students of color encounter too many uncaring teachers at all levels of education from preschool to college” (p. 62). On the other hand, Noddings (2005) believes that “teachers do care, but are unable to make connections that would complete caring relations with their students” (p. 2). The act of caring is complete whenever the action is reciprocal; the student acknowledges the teacher’s actions or behavior as caring (Noddings, 2005). “When teachers operate from the ethic of care, they consciously make a moral commitment to care for and to teach students and to develop reciprocal relationships with them” (Pang, 2005, p. 218). These relationships, determined by contextual circumstances and the reciprocity of the student, may vary in intensity, but nevertheless, positive relationships with students promote student effort and engagement in school (Stipek, 2006) and are key to learning (Scales & Taccogna, 2000). “Thus how students perceive their teachers as caring or non-caring has a direct impact on how students perceive the culture of the school” (Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001, p. 25) and teacher disposition (Alder, 2002).

As teachers, we easily communicate to the entire class, but what we need to do is cultivate relationships with students as individuals. Behaviors that reflect caring (Cheng, 2004) and build relationships with students (Wentzel, 1997) contribute to a sense of belonging (Erwin, 2003). Engendering a sense of community, respecting students, and validating who they are is likely to affect students’ disposition in the classroom and their motivation to participate in the educational process. This is especially true for some Latino students. Validating their cultural identity and language (Pizarro, 2005) is a form of respect, key in building relationships and trusting other people (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004).

This means that teachers must cultivate meaningful relationships with Latino students (Pang, 2005; Pizarro, 2005) and promote a culture where students also care for each other in a positive learning environment. Because caring is at the heart of engendering relationships among all stakeholders in an educational community, culture must be included (Pang, Rivera, & Mora, 1999). “Both caring-centered and social justice teachers believe in equality; however, the caring-centered teacher believes that he or she is working toward justice by providing an effective, culturally affirming, and successful learning environment for his or her students” (pp. 27-28). Knowing the cultural nuances and ethnic patterns of students (Gay, 2000) can be used to validate them in the learning process and to understand how group affiliations play a role in the social and cognitive developmental process of students of color (Sheets, 2005).

Student Perceptions

Several studies have examined majority White student perspectives of the teacher–student relationship in the classroom. Thweatt and McCroskey (1998), focusing on the university level, conducted two studies to measure the influence of teacher immediacy. They found that the more attentive teachers are to students, the more they are perceived as trustworthy and caring. In addition, Teven (2001) also found that students perceive teachers who display a friendly disposition and interact with students as caring. Similarly, Teven and McCroskey (1996) found a strong positive association between perceived caring and instructor appraisal, and the affective and cognitive domains. The findings (predominantly White student perspectives) suggested that students who perceived their instructors as caring rated them favorably, identified course content as valuable, and indicated having learned much.

Other researchers have explored middle school students’ perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey caring. One particular study examined perceptions of majority African American sixth-grade students, although other ethnic groups of students were also included. The results noted that these middle school students perceived teachers who are able to foster strong relationships with students, provide affirmation, engender a strong culture for learning, and promote success for all students as caring (Hayes et al., 1994). In addition, this investigation also suggested that ethnic and gender differences may influence how care is perceived.

In another study that included 92% White middle school students, Wentzel (1997) explored student perceptions in relationship to student

motivation. The findings suggested that students' perceptions of a caring teacher reinforce the importance of a supportive relationship with students. Student perceptions seemed to be a critical form of feedback for teachers to better respond to students, thereby promoting their social and emotional growth.

Bosworth (1995) interviewed sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade adolescents from low- and middle-class families in rural, suburban, and urban geographical locations. About two thirds were White students and the other third included mostly African American students. Five central themes emerging from the data included "Helping (friends or classmates), Feelings (empathy, or cheering someone up), Relationships (self, familial, friends, or others), Friendship, and Values (kindness, respect, and faithfulness)" (pp. 687-688). With regard to ethnicity, the findings indicated some differences in the number of responses provided in each theme. Students of color emphasized "relationships and activities," whereas White students placed more value on "friendships and personal values" (p. 689).

In the high school setting, M. D. Nelson and Bauch (1997) interviewed 88 African American high school seniors about their perceptions of caring behaviors. These students attended urban Catholic schools serving lower to middle-class students and magnet schools addressing the needs of students from middle-class families to below the poverty level. Their study indicated that setting high expectations, giving verbal encouragement, orchestrating demanding learning tasks, providing assistance, and building relationships with students were perceived as teacher behaviors that convey caring. In a similar study conducted in a large diverse urban setting, Garrett, Barr, and Forsbach-Rothman (2007) asked 24 African American, 13 White, and 23 Latino sixth-grade students and 22 African American, 27 White, and 46 Latino ninth-grade students to comment on how teachers demonstrated care. Their findings suggested that Latino and African American students perceived providing academic support as critical in demonstrating care, more so than White students. Even though teacher personality and taking a personal interest in students were identified as other aspects of demonstrating care, White students mentioned them more often than Latino and African American students. In summary, their findings suggested that ethnicity did not significantly influence students' perceptions of caring behaviors.

Noddings (1984) expounds on the complexities of caring and suggests that "we might describe caring of different sorts, on different levels and at varying degrees of intensity" (p. 17). Although the extensive body of literature on caring describes schools as caring environments (Noddings, 2005), perspectives from adolescents (Bosworth, 1995; Hayes et al., 1994; M. D. Nelson &

Bauch, 1997; Wentzel, 1997), the importance of relationships with high school students (Cheng, 2004; Fránquíz & Salazar, 2004; Pizarro, 2005; Scales & Taccogna, 2000), teacher disposition and university students (Teven, 2001; Teven & McCroskey, 1996; Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998), and caring in multicultural education (Pang, 2005), high school students' voices are underrepresented. Furthermore, Latino voices are almost nonexistent in the literature. Understanding high school Latino students' perceptions of caring in mainstream classrooms is also important because "student perceptions of whether the teacher cares for them have a significant effect on their academic performance and behavior" (Perez, 2000, p. 102). Including high school students' voices, but especially the Latino student point of view, might reveal a relationship between caring and student success in secondary settings. This would be significant given the achievement gap that exists between Latino and White students.

Methodological Considerations

This qualitative study used constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to allow for identification and description of caring behaviors perceived by Latino and White high school students. This approach allows the data to drive the development of theoretical explanations related to the phenomenon of study (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). This interpretive methodology is framed within the theoretical underpinnings of care (Noddings, 1984, 2005). The purpose of this study was to examine Latino and White high school students' perceptions of teachers' behaviors associated with caring as well as similarities and uniqueness that may exist in these perceptions.

Participants

Responses from 49 Latino (36 female and 13 male) and 44 White (22 female and 22 male) students, ages 14 to 18, from a large suburban high school in Central Texas (population, 54% Latino, 42% White, and 4% African American students) are included in this study. The students, representing low- to middle-income socioeconomic status, completed a prompt on the questionnaire to self-disclose their academic ranking. Table 1 provides demographic characteristics of the students included in this study.

Each participant had to submit a consent form, approved by the university's Institutional Review Board and signed by both parent and student, in order to complete the student questionnaire.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 93)

Characteristic	<i>n</i>
Latino	
Male	13
Female	36
White	
Male	22
Female	22
Grade level	
9	4
10	22
11	20
12	47
Age	
14	2
15	19
16	20
17	39
18	13
Self-disclosed grade, Latino males	
A	2
A-B	1
B	7
B-C	1
C	2
Self-disclosed grade, Latino females	
A	7
A-B	3
B	22
B-C	1
C	3
Self-disclosed grade, White males	
A	9
A-B	2
B	10
B-C	0
C	1
Self-disclosed grade, White females	
A	13
A-B	2
B	5
B-C	0
C	2

This investigation is a follow-up to a previous study that exclusively examined Latino student perceptions of one teacher. The participants in this study also included Señora Alba (a pseudonym), a Spanish teacher, and her high school students enrolled in 3rd- and 4th-year Spanish classes, which included freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. The Spanish teacher was in her 3rd year of teaching at the same high school where she started her career. Although her father is of German descent and her mother is of Mexican ancestry, the teacher identifies herself as a Mexican American. Ms. Loving (a pseudonym), an English teacher, and her high school senior English class students added to this research inquiry. This teacher was beginning her 23rd year in education and her 6th year at the current high school. Although a certified English teacher, she had taught journalism and reading at previous schools. Ms. Loving self-identified herself as White.

Data Collection

Data for this study were gathered and triangulated using interview, observation, and questionnaire methods for data gathering (C. Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Data gathering began with a separate tape-recorded interview of each teacher responding to questions on her disposition and actions toward students, her perspective on caring for students, and her relationship with students in the learning environment. Both teachers agreed to be tape-recorded during their planning period, and the time and date of the interviews were set up to accommodate each teacher's schedule. The interview questions inquired about the teacher's philosophy about caring for students and her ideas on a caring classroom environment.

Field notes made up the second instrument. Notes were taken on teacher-student interaction before, during, and after class at different times of the day on several occasions. The purpose of the observations was to script specific formal (during class) and informal (before or after class) teacher-student interactions that reflected forms of caring as demonstrated by the teacher in addition to comments made during the interview. Real-life incidents are interpreted and the phenomena are better understood through the process of constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During the semester, I observed the teachers' interactions with students both in and out of the classroom environment. Señora Alba and Ms. Loving were always notified the day of my visits to their classroom only to avoid full-hour test days. Field notes describing body language and actual dialogue from the teacher-student interactions were taken while in the classroom. Other times, field notes were taken of teacher-student interactions while visiting with the

teachers before or after class, during their visits to my classroom before or after school, and during their lunch period. In addition to the notes, behaviors were coded based on my experiences and the literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and themes that had emerged in the interviews. This process allowed me to “move across interviews and observations and compare people’s experiences, actions, and interpretations” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 59).

An open-ended student questionnaire with 10 prompts was the third instrument (see appendix). Sample prompts included, “I feel that my teacher cares about me because . . . (provide specific examples to support your opinion),” and “I feel that my teacher does not care about me because . . . (provide specific examples to support your opinion).” The students were told that the prompts inquired only about their teacher; therefore, any examples of caring behavior should only be about the one individual. The students completed the open-ended questionnaire in my university field-based classroom throughout the school day. The students’ age, grade placement, and ethnicity provided a diverse sampling of perceptions conducive to my investigation. An important step in the data collection process involves establishing a rapport with participants (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, both of the teachers and I agreed that it would be more effective to have the teachers explain the purpose of the study to their students and to distribute the parent permission forms, considering their rapport with the students. The teachers also agreed to clearly explain to students that participation was voluntary, incentives would not be given, and the consent form was required to participate. Each student had to submit the consent form to me before completing the questionnaire, which was completed in 10 to 15 minutes.

Data Analysis

The data included (a) teacher interview, (b) field notes from classroom observations, (c) and student questionnaire. The three data sources were analyzed independently using qualitative data reduction strategies to manage, categorize, and interpret data to identify themes (C. Marshall & Rossman, 1995). First, the recorded teacher interviews were transcribed and each teacher was assigned a pseudonym. Before beginning the coding process, the transcriptions were reviewed to validate information on the recordings (Poland, 1995). Then, the transcriptions were read again, and phrases or words related to caring for students and ways the teacher fostered a caring environment were highlighted as a way to “search through the data for regularities and patterns as well as for topics the data covers [*sic*], and write down words or phrases related to the topic” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 166). I

started out with open coding to sift through the data analytically and to reduce the concepts further and identify their properties (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). When the coding was complete, the data were grouped into categories; then, through constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I sorted and further reduced the categories with descriptive statements taken from the interview transcriptions. Rubin and Rubin (1995) stress the importance of identifying themes in verbal communication because behavioral descriptions can be very revealing.

Next, using the same aforementioned process, I coded the field notes from the classroom observations to examine regularities and patterns in the themes (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991). Using constant comparative analysis and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006), the separate categories were sorted and placed into subcategories. "Axial coding relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data to give coherence to the emerging analysis" (p. 60).

Finally, the 83 student questionnaires were also analyzed for recurring patterns through constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I labeled student comments to the open-ended questions across ethnic groups separately during an initial reading and made notes as I interpreted the data. Next, I compared both ethnic groups for emerging categories with the list generated from the interviews and observations and further reduced the categories using axial coding (Charmaz, 2006). Some responses to the open-ended questions may have had more than one thought and were coded as separate items. For example, one student wrote, "She doesn't have us work around her schedule, she helps whenever convenient for us the students"; this was coded as two separate attributes. A deeper analysis of the data was done by comparing initial codes and notes to generate an initial list of recurring themes. A few non-participating researchers were asked to review, refine, and provide feedback on the initial coding and themes to ensure intercoder reliability. I then used their feedback and further sorted the data and identified six themes. All researchers then examined and refined the six themes, their labels, and their descriptive statements before agreeing on the final master list.

Trustworthiness

Señora Alba, a 3rd-year teacher and former graduate student of mine, and Ms. Loving, a 23rd-year veteran and faculty liaison to the field-based program, were purposefully selected for the following reasons. First, as a 2nd-year field-based professor at the high school campus, I had observed the teachers in the classroom and their interaction with students on several

occasions and believed them to be exemplary teachers. My extensive background in supervising student teachers for more than 16 years, scripting lessons and providing feedback to teachers enrolled in an alternative certification program and evaluating classroom teachers for more than 5 years, and professional training in instructional leadership and teacher appraisal supported my assessment of the two teachers. In addition, I observed elements of caring aligned with current research, which was also congruent with my belief about caring for students. Next, through several informal conversations with both teachers about teaching and students, caring for students seemed to emerge as a topic of discussion. Therefore, I was interested in exploring how these teacher–student interactions that conveyed caring were perceived by Latino and White high school students. Finally, dialogue about my research interest with the two teachers sparked an interest in them that compelled me to invite them to participate. Upon joining my study, informed consent was obtained from each teacher. A thorough explanation of their responsibilities, issues of confidentiality in research, and time commitments and responsibilities was outlined (Gall et al., 1996).

Methodological Limitations

This study is limited by the gathering of data through interview, field notes, questionnaire, and analysis of documents, researcher bias, and the selection of participants. In addition, the hermeneutical nature of this study poses limitations to the conclusions that can be derived from the data. As I am a Latino scholar, bias may occur in the gathering, selection, interpretation, and conclusions of data included in this study or in the interpretation of the context in which the phenomena occurred. There also exists the possibility that other researchers might draw different inferences based on the findings of this research investigation. Observations in qualitative research allow the researcher to interpret the behavior that is documented. Observers conducting qualitative research “do not seek to remain neutral or ‘objective’ about the phenomena being observed and may include their own feelings and experiences in interpreting the observed behavior” (Gall et al., 1996, p. 343). In documenting the rich description of observed behaviors in the classroom, it is possible for some aspects to remain unnoticed.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine Latino and White high school students’ perceptions of caring behaviors conveyed by teachers and to

highlight any similarities and uniqueness that may exist between the two ethnic groups. Major findings of students' perceptions generated five dominant themes. Caring teachers (a) provide scaffolding during a teaching episode, (b) reflect a kind disposition through actions, (c) are always available to the student, (d) show a personal interest in the student's well-being inside and outside the classroom, (e) and provide affective academic support in the classroom setting. The themes are listed in the order of priority according to the frequency analysis of comments for each theme. The themes, although similar to other studies in the literature review, are worded differently due to the nature of student comments in this study. I elaborate on the findings in two sections, significant themes and commonalities and uniqueness. The first part of the discussion section begins by describing the theme, illustrating the context of each theme, and expanding with comments from Latino and White students, as well as the teachers. The next section of the discussion highlights the behaviors that both Latino and White students perceived as critical to caring for them in addition to the uniqueness found between ethnic perceptions.

Significant Themes

Provides Scaffolding During a Teaching Episode

Scaffolding, the theme mentioned more often than any other, is defined in this study as the instructional help provided to students in the classroom during a teaching segment. Although similar to the fifth theme—provides affective academic support in the classroom setting—this aspect highlights pedagogical behaviors in the classroom. In other words, the teacher's instructional behaviors facilitate success and encourage self-esteem. In a similar way, Nieto (2004) acknowledges that caring also involves providing students with the support they need. Helping students to understand without embarrassing them seemed to be a common practice in Ms. Loving's class. A White female student expressed, "She helps me understand when I am confused . . . she does not make me feel stupid." A White male student added, "Takes the time to make sure I understand."

One Tuesday morning, during a formal classroom observation, Ms. Loving was calling on students to respond to questions about the previous day's reading assignment. She called on a Latino male student, and when it was apparent that he did not know the answer, she encouragingly stated, "Look at yesterday's assignment." Ms. Loving and the class waited patiently and when the young man responded with the answer, the teacher replied, "Correct," with a smile. Her direction assisted the student and allowed him

to be successful before continuing with the question-and-answer segment of the lesson.

On another occasion, Ms. Loving stated to the class, "Don't panic if you don't get an A, and you are used to it; I want you to improve your writing. I understand that your first college paper made some of you nervous and frustrated." She continued to explain the objective and requirements for writing a college quality essay and ways to improve. The teacher's instructional behavior demonstrates a willingness to ensure student success and is perceived as caring. A White female student commented, "She helps to get us prepared for tests and grades." Students need to know that their teachers will take the time to thoroughly explain instructional tasks to help them feel successful.

A White male student, recognizing the teacher's commitment to the class, exclaimed, "She wants her students to succeed in literature." The feeling was very evident on the day that Ms. Loving provided additional direction to those students who had not yet submitted an assignment. She provided some examples of what was expected on the board and reminded them of the due date written on the side of the dry erase board. Teachers, who focus on helping students succeed rather than on task completion, expect their students to do well and provide the necessary support in the classroom. High school students view taking the time to remind them of upcoming assignments and reviewing expectations as a sign of caring. Whereas some students grasp instruction the first time and have the intrinsic motivation to complete tasks by the designated deadlines, other students need encouraging reminders.

A further example of providing scaffolding for students during a teaching episode is illustrated by the following incident in Señora Alba's class. She had just given an explanation in Spanish and asked, "Does that make sense? Want me to explain it in English?" Her actions suggest a way to monitor students' academic needs and the willingness to seek their feedback before proceeding with the lesson. As one Latino male student asserted, "She tries to help me. Whenever I don't get something she tries to help me by re-teaching the lesson." Another Latino male stated, "She asks if we need help." These two statements reflect how some Latino students appreciate the teacher's readiness to provide varied instructional assistance, but more important, the students believe that their teacher is genuinely interested in their success.

Providing assistance with academic learning tasks and ensuring comprehension are consistent with previous research (Bosworth, 1995; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Garrett et al., 2007; Hayes et al., 1994). This theme suggests that providing a varied and active support system during instruction is critical to student success. Monitoring and checking students' understanding during instruction are ways of ensuring comprehension and providing

necessary assistance. Aside from promoting success for all students, the scaffolding practices ensure a process to assist students who might be timid or embarrassed to ask for help during instruction.

Actions Reflect a Kind Disposition

The second theme—actions reflect a kind disposition—reflected the students' perceptions related to actions that described the teachers' kind temperament. I asked Señora Alba what she wanted her students to say about her when they left the classroom, and she responded, "I want them to know something and that I cared about them individually." Students are impressionable beings who may interpret a teacher's words and actions as caring. A Latina student's statement, "She teaches you like if she were your friend," encapsulates the depth of this teacher's disposition. This demeanor was viewed by White students as well. "She is always nice to me," exclaimed a White female adolescent. My observations of this teacher's interaction with students reflected a caring demeanor that supported the students' perspectives.

Having a good sense of humor was also viewed as caring. Señora Alba stated, "I feel that adolescents are probably the most disrespected age group we have in that their opinions are not respected always, and so I try to validate even if it's absolutely ridiculous." A White female student acknowledged, "She jokes around with us." It is important to realize that learning can be fun and students appreciate when teachers use a humorous approach to teaching. Most important, some students perceive humor as characteristic of a caring behavior.

During a teaching segment in Ms. Loving's class, a student appeared more interested in a mobile hanging from the ceiling than the instructions for a learning task. In an effort to redirect off-task behavior, the teacher admitted, "I know I am not as exciting as that thing on the ceiling," to which the students responded with laughter. This incident points out how a teacher can use humor to redirect students back to instruction without using a negative and demanding tone.

These expectations are consistent with the work of M. D. Nelson and Bauch (1997) and Wentzel (1997). Furthermore, when students are treated with kind words, the message of being cared for is transmitted through the teacher's disposition (Alder, 2002; J. Nelsen et al., 1997; Valverde, 2006). Students are more likely to be motivated when their classroom experiences are positive and when they receive kind words from their teachers. "The way to influence people toward internal rather than external motivation is through positive, non-coercive interaction" (M. Marshall, 2001, p. 1).

Always Available to the Student

Availability refers to teacher accessibility dictated by student needs rather than a prescribed time. The most common factor in this third theme included student responses that perceived a teacher's unrestricted accessibility as a form of caring. On one occasion, I was engaged in conversation with Señora Alba in the hallway. At one point, she moved closer to the intersection of the hallway leading to her room and expressed with a smile, "I have students who come by my room before school; I need to see if they look for me." The teacher's message conveys a commitment to her students and the profession. Two White male students concur with Señora Alba's espoused desire to be readily available to her students. "When I need help with something, she is always there for me." A Latino male student also asserted, "She helps me whenever I ask her something that I need help with." Offering help whenever convenient for the student or just conveying a willingness to be helpful to students is interpreted as caring by some high school students.

Availability, common in other findings (Hayes et al., 1994), suggests that teachers, who convey openness to students rather than only being available during a prearranged time designated by the school culture, are perceived as caring educators. This reflects that the behavior is more than words; it is the physical availability and the commitment to help a student succeed. However, availability coupled with the instructional and administrative demands placed on educators must not be overlooked. Therefore, educators must find a way to balance workload with their interaction with students without being perceived as uncaring due to limited access.

Show a Personal Interest in the Student's Well-Being Inside and Outside the Classroom

Personal interest refers to the teacher's genuine interest in getting to know her students as well as her interactions with students individually and on a personal level. Communicating and interacting daily with a student is conducive to building community and strengthening a relationship (M. Marshall, 2001).

During the interview with Ms. Loving, she explained how she tries to learn something about her students' hobbies and interests through a writing assignment. She added,

I try to keep a few little notes on the students to help remind me of things like . . . maybe they are a parent and they have been absent . . . it's many times because their baby has been sick, so I try to remember to ask how the baby has been doing.

One Tuesday morning, I was standing outside the doorway to Ms. Loving's classroom just observing as the students walked in. "Good morning, where have you been?" Ms. Loving asked. "I was ill. How has your day been?" the student replied.

Also, on another occasion while talking with Señora Alba in the hallway, the teacher smiled and stated to a male student as he walked by, "Arturo, we missed you yesterday." I witnessed how the two teachers' interactions with students conveyed a genuine interest in their students' personal lives.

Some student responses in this theme included, "She always asks me how I am doing or questions about me," "Guides me when faced with personal issues," "She called my parents when I was having trouble and got me on the right track," and "Asks every day how I have been and sincerely responds back to me."

This fourth theme describing actions perceived as caring by Latino students involved showing a personal interest in them but, most important, teaching them with a genuine interest. "When teachers care for students, they want to know about their experiences and backgrounds" (Pang, 2005, p. 219). The findings suggest that students value the student-teacher interaction on a personal level (Garza, 2007). This very act is empowering and culturally responsive to students' needs because it establishes a strong interpersonal relationship. "Relationships are the heart of the caring classroom" (Letts, 1997, p. 9). This theme has been consistently identified by other studies (De Jesús & Antrop-González, 2006; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Hayes et al., 1994; M. D. Nelson & Bauch, 1997; Pang, 2005; Pizarro, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999; Wentzel, 1997) as valued by students, although this contradicts findings by other researchers (Garrett et al., 2007). This behavior also reinforces the notion of an extended family, characteristic of many Latino families. Therefore, a teacher's support and assistance with personal matters becomes another human resource outside the home environment and, thus, is viewed as part of the extended Latino family structure.

Provides Affective Academic Support in the Classroom Setting

The last theme, academic support in the classroom setting, describes a teacher who expresses concern for students when failing but, most important, will do whatever is necessary to help them pass. This theme focuses on the affective domain and centers on providing assistance to students as dictated by circumstances and moral obligation as an educator (Blustein, 1991; Noddings, 2005). According to the findings, Latino and White high

school students view providing academic support in the classroom as a way to demonstrate care for the individual. Other studies (Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; M. D. Nelson & Bauch, 1997; Wentzel, 1997) support this perception of teacher behavior as a form of caring.

"She talks to me about how I can get a good grade in her class," observed a White female student, whereas a Latino female student stated, "She tells me if I'm close to failing and gives me extra work to help my grade or she'll let me do corrections." High school students value teachers who explain evaluation expectations and will allow students an opportunity to learn from their mistakes. In many situations, students are given one opportunity to demonstrate what they know or can do without much regard to whether or not the student learned the material. As a former high school teacher, I can attest to the common practice. A "one strike and you're out" approach is not healthy for every student. The teacher's responsibility is to get through the content and finish the curriculum outlined by the department or district, yet students' authentic needs are neglected.

Another aspect of providing academic support for students in the classroom involves teacher flexibility with deadlines. As a Latino female student attests, "Whenever I forget an assignment, she gives me a chance to bring it in to turn in assignments." A White female high school student echoed the same sentiment, "She gives me second chances to turn in assignments." High school students perceived second chances as caring behavior. Although a more familiar ritual involves subtracting points from the learning task's evaluation for not meeting a deadline, allowing subsequent opportunities indicates that teachers must be willing to reconsider whether respective pedagogical practices are effective for students. Although the teacher's intentions may seem appropriate given the situational context, some high school students need more than one opportunity to be successful. These students expect the teacher to provide multiple opportunities to achieve success. Because our educational system promotes competition and categorizes students according to ability, assessing student progress based on individual needs may seem difficult to accept, especially when our experiences dictate otherwise. However, we cannot dismiss the fact that a state and federal accountability system places undue stress and pressure on schools and teachers to raise academic scores and state rankings on mandated assessments. However, these demands and expectations cannot be used as the scapegoat for dismissing student perceptions or avoiding alternative classroom practices. This theme suggests that teachers should reflect on their practice to identify the type of support conducive to individual academic success rather than the class as a group and, above all, be willing to change what is

ineffective for students. As Mayeroff (1971) echoes, “I allow the direction of the other’s growth to guide what I do, to help determine how I am to respond and what is relevant to such response” (p. 5).

Commonalities and Uniqueness

Results identified five themes that suggest perceptions of attributes of caring behaviors in a classroom setting valued by both Latino and White high school students. The themes reflect a one-way relationship where the teacher is the caregiver and the student is the receiver, contrary to Noddings’s (1984) belief that a caring relationship is reciprocal. Students’ perceptions of caring behaviors provide an opportunity for educators to examine the personal lens and reflect on how their actions and disposition influence student learning and success. Even though both ethnic groups valued the same five themes, the most unique factor was the priority attributed to each specific behavior. Priority for each theme was determined by the frequency of comments in each theme. Latino high school students commented most frequently on *provides scaffolding during a teaching episode*, followed by *provides affective academic support in the classroom setting*, *shows a personal interest in the student’s well-being inside and outside the classroom*, and *is always available to the student*. *Actions reflect teacher disposition* was the least mentioned theme. On the other hand, White high school students referred to *actions reflect a kind disposition* most often, followed by *provides scaffolding during a teaching episode*, *always available to the student*, and *shows a personal interest in the student’s well-being inside and outside the classroom*. *Provides affective academic support in the classroom setting* was the final theme.

Contrary to studies that highlight the importance of cultivating relationships with Latino students (Cheng, 2004; Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Pang, 2005; Pizarro, 2005; Scales & Taccogna, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999), my findings and those of Garrett et al. (2007) suggest otherwise, as perceived by Latino high school students. Although not mentioned as a theme, I would like to suggest that the two teachers, Señora Alba and Ms. Loving, did in fact engender authentic bonds with the students. “When I say I care about my students, I care about human beings and helping each individual student helps all of us,” said Ms. Loving. In addition, Señora Alba explained, “I want them [students] to know that I do care for them.” The statements confirm their conviction and commitment to building community with their students to the point that the Latino students unconsciously ignored the value of the teachers’ affection and selected other attributes to describe caring behaviors.

Furthermore, the Latino students in this study represented recently arrived immigrants and students whose parents were born and educated in the United States. Considering how students have been conditioned to focus on passing state-mandated tests and to navigate the competitive nature of our educational system, it is not surprising that many Latino students would directly suggest a greater value on academic help over relationships. Nevertheless, building community with Latino students continues to be a key element to their success in the school setting.

In contrast to what Latinos in this study value as the most important caring behavior, White high school students spotlighted *actions that reflect teacher disposition*. This finding is congruent with other studies (Garrett et al., 2007; Teven, 2001; Teven & McCroskey, 1996) that suggest teacher attention as key to a caring relationship. Moreover, this finding supports the strong relationships that Señora Alba and Ms. Loving established with their students.

Finally, calling attention to the priorities of perceived caring behaviors by the two ethnic groups suggests an approach that educators can use in caring for diverse students in a culturally responsive manner. Educators can examine their personal lens to determine which approaches are better suited for their students.

Concluding Remarks

Teachers too often interpret student apathy and disrespectful behavior as signs of uncaring attitudes toward school. Educators blame the student and focus on changing the student's unacceptable behavior rather than creating conditions to engage and teach students how to negotiate their actions appropriately. The results of this study contribute to the body of work on perceived caring in several ways. First, there is a lack of focus on high school students' perceptions by researchers. This study focuses exclusively on Latino and White high school students' points of view, thus positioning their authentic voices as pedagogical approaches to unleash the invisible voices in the literature. Their perceptions "are worth considering as viable means in the quest to break down barriers that may prevent" (Garza, 2007) students from succeeding in school.

Second, their statements suggest the best way to demonstrate care for them, which may differ from the norm. Students' perceptions of perceived caring identify behaviors that the teacher conveys toward the student, but ethnicity, as suggested by Hayes et al. (1994), may influence immediate needs. The priority attributed to the distinct behaviors suggests an aspect

teachers can use to examine their own practice to determine the extent of culturally responsive caring (Garrett et al., 2007).

These findings are especially helpful for teachers who are ethnically unique to their students and whose background and experiences may obstruct caring in ways appropriate for their students. For example, high school students' voices could be used as a springboard to shape content in educator preparation courses. Providing preservice teachers with concrete examples of what secondary students view as critical to fostering relationships and a sense of belonging can only enhance their pedagogical knowledge and skills and understanding about high school students' needs. Also, cooperating teachers, supervising teachers, university supervisors, and other individuals who mentor ethnically unique adolescents and student teachers could use these findings as a way to enhance relationships and improve communication. The notion that culture may affect students' perceptions of caring behaviors merits further examination to determine whether culturally and linguistically unique middle school, high school, and postsecondary students have the same points of view.

Finally, although some of the findings in this study support existing work (Garrett et al., 2007; Garza, 2007; Gay, 2000; M. D. Nelson & Bauch, 1997; Noddings, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999; Valverde, 2006), the difference exists in the methodology. This investigation used constant comparative analysis to allow the data to drive the development of the themes in this study rather than using a prescribed instrument (Hayes et al., 1994; Teven, 2001; Teven & McCroskey, 1996; Wentzel, 1997) to ascertain student perceptions on caring attributes. My results present a more accurate picture of what current students need from educators but, more important, offer another source on how to care for students in ways that are culturally responsive.

Appendix

Part I: Please circle the item that best describes you for each of the following items.

1. I am: female male
 2. I consider myself to be:
 - Asian or Asian American, including Chinese, Japanese, and others
 - Black or African American
 - Hispanic or Latino, including Mexican American, Central American, and others
 - White, Anglo, or European American; not Hispanic
 - American Indian or Native American
-

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

Parents from two different groups (please identify):

Other (please identify):

3. I am in Grade: 9 10 11 12
4. I am age: 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20
5. I consider myself to be a/an A B C D student.

Part II: Please respond to the questions by printing or writing neatly with pen or pencil. Leave questions that do not apply blank.

During this semester, my teacher has met my needs best when . . .

I feel that my teacher cares about me because . . . (provide specific examples to support your opinion)

I feel that my teacher does not care about me because . . . (provide specific examples to support your opinion)

My teacher makes me feel a part of the class or included in this class because . . .

I feel comfortable in sharing my thoughts/feelings in class because . . .

I feel uncomfortable in sharing my thoughts/feelings in class because . . .

I am motivated to do well in this class because . . .

I am not motivated to do well in this class because . . .

I feel comfortable in sharing my thoughts/feelings with the teacher because . . .

I feel uncomfortable in sharing my thoughts/feelings with the teacher because . . .

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