

“She teaches you like if she were your friend:” Latino high school students describe attributes of a caring teacher

Introduction

As soon as Latino students step into a context where the dominant educational ideology prevails, they may find that some educators perceive their cognitive and linguistic abilities as problems or challenges rather than assets. Since the standard of measure in the United States is dictated by a White, upper-middle class value system (Nieto, 2004), Latino students are placed in educational settings that may perpetuate a pedagogy that impedes their academic success and teacher-student relationships that feel artificial. Defining students according to their perceived deficits rather than their strengths may make it difficult for teachers to form relationships with students that enable optimal instruction. Recent immigrants and unassimilated Latino students are often the targets of negative teacher comments, uninviting body language, and low expectations due to the perceived notion that these students lack the cognitive resources to function in the classroom. While classroom demographics have dramatically changed in many school settings, teachers have been challenged to understand Latino students’ cultural, social, and linguistic assets. As a result, many Latino students who hope to be educated find themselves navigating institutional barriers, trying to circumvent insensitive marginalization often taken for granted by educators as common schooling practices. Latino students who enroll in current public schools are as likely to have the same cognitive resources expected by the American educational system as students from the dominant group, but in addition, they have the unique experiences and perceptions that are characteristic of others from their cultural background. Therefore, teachers must take deliberate action to know the various members of their respective communities of learners and interact with them in a culturally responsive way. The conditions facing Latino students in schools today, such as low achievement and high drop out rates, are significant enough to urgently demand that educators pay attention to Latino students’ experiences in public schools today (Pizarro, 2005). Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study was to examine what Latino high school students in a high school classroom perceived to be “caring” behaviors on the part of their teacher in order to identify specific traits these Latino students associate with care. I argue that educators have an opportunity to assess their caring behaviors based on what Latino high school students perceive as caring. I also argue that educators must listen to what Latino students have to tell us in order to foster an environment that may lead to more positive schooling experiences for Latino students.

Aspects of Caring

Whenever students are cared for in a classroom, their affective and cognitive needs are met. As Pang (2005) asserts, care is demonstrated when teachers take a genuine interest in getting to know their students beyond the academic setting and develop reciprocal relationships with them. This means that educators must make a conscious effort to take an interest in the student’s academic and personal life by getting to know each student. However, the notion of caring for students may be more complex

considering various viewpoints. “A caring relation is, in its most basic form, a connection or encounter between two human beings – a carer and a recipient of care, or cared for” (Noddings, 2005). If the cared for does not acknowledge the behavior as a form of caring, a reciprocal bond is not established and the behavior is one-sided in nature. Furthermore, “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 (Nieto, 2004). Familiarity with each student in a caring classroom may occur through formal and informal assessments, on-going personal student-teacher interaction, and observation. Whether recognizing and acknowledging a student’s uniqueness and talents, knowing about personal life experiences, or providing adequate academic scaffolding, the teacher’s disposition and actions toward the student may reflect a form of caring. The literature describes the ethic of care in different contexts, but this study proposes that caring for students should be a deliberate act; behavior that is relevant to the particular students’ needs. A caring ethic “requires commitment and the continual expression of caring behaviors develops the trusting relationships in which growth can occur” (Chaskin & Rauner, 1995). In educational contexts where multiple cultures and languages are represented, we need to understand caring as needing to be culturally responsive.

Caring for Latino Students is Complicated

While some researchers have identified prescriptive ways of caring, caring for Latino students may require something different. Latino students, like all students, have home experiences that help to shape their identities and beliefs. Thus, behaviors that a teacher might define as caring may be viewed differently by the student. Among culturally and linguistically unique students, the teacher’s own perspective of caring may not be viewed as supportive from the perspective of the students’ ethnicity or their immediate needs in the classroom. Too often, when teachers believe their caring actions are genuine and student reaction is not reciprocal, the student is blamed for not responding appropriately. As Valenzuela explains, “The view that students do not care about school stems from several sources, including social and cultural distance in student adult relationships and the school culture itself” (1999, p. 63).

Caring and Social Justice

Culture as the focus of a caring ethos may be framed within an ethic of social justice, where prejudices and racism are confronted to address inequities that exist. Since caring is at the heart of engendering relationships among all stakeholders in an educational community, culture must be included: “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” (Pang, Rivera, & Mora, 1999, p. 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 Perspectives about Caring

Other studies examining student perspectives illuminate the importance caring in the classroom. Teven (2001) found that university instructors who display a friendly disposition and interact with students are perceived as caring by students. Previous studies also suggested that trusting relationships between teacher and student were conducive to caring (Teven & McCroskey, 1997; Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998).

Interviews with African-American high school students (Nelson & Bauch, 1997) pinpointed the importance of setting high expectations for students, giving verbal encouragement, orchestrating demanding learning tasks, providing assistance, and building relationships with students as major forms of caring. Conversations with Latino high school students also highlighted the importance of building trust and caring relationships (Franquiz & Salazar, 2004; Pizarro, 2005). White middle class school students suggested in interviews that teachers, who are able to foster strong relationships with students, engender a strong culture for learning, and promote success for all students are perceived as caring. Additionally, their perceptions may be influenced by ethnicity and gender (Hayes, Ryan, & Zsellar, 1994). Furthermore, research in an elementary setting also suggested a strong correlation between learning and caring relationships with students (Monzó & Rueda, 2001).

Nevertheless, even though the literature on caring encompasses student perceptions, Latino students' voices are almost non-existent in the literature. In addition, perceptions of high school students need to be documented. Perez writes that "student perceptions of whether the teacher cares for them have a significant effect on their academic performance and behavior" (2000, p. 102). Understanding Latino high school students' perceptions of teacher caring in mainstream classrooms is critical to their education. The magnitude of a caring relationship can impede or enhance the academic achievement of a student (Nieto, 2004).

Study Design and Procedures

This qualitative study used an interpretive approach framed within the theoretical underpinnings of caring (Noddings, 2005, 1984). The purpose of this study was to examine Latino high school students' perceptions of behaviors that demonstrate caring and to identify specific traits associated with caring in the classroom environment.

Participants

The participants in this study included Señora Alba (a pseudonym), a Spanish teacher, and high school students enrolled in her classes. I selected the teacher for my study through convenience sampling for several reasons. First, as a former graduate student at my university, I had experience with Señora Alba and I witnessed her to be an exemplary teacher of Spanish. Having mentored student teachers and new teachers while a public school classroom teacher and received extensive training in classroom observation, providing feedback, and appraising classroom teachers, I had seen many teachers at work and this helped me recognize one who was outstanding. Next, through informal observations, I identified elements of her interactions with students that aligned with the previously reviewed literature on caring.

The school is a diverse, large suburban school, which I selected because of its large Latino student enrollment. I had been at the high school site for nearly two years teaching field-based courses, so I was familiar with it and had access to participants.

Latino students comprised about 48% of the total school enrollment, and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) rated the school academically acceptable (meeting state assessment standards). The 9 male Latino students included 2 freshmen, 2 sophomores, and 5 juniors, all aged between 14 and 17. The 24 female Latino students included 2 freshmen, 9 sophomores, 10 juniors, and 3 seniors, aged between 14 and 17.

Data Collection

This study used interviews, observations, and questionnaires as techniques of data gathering (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). I began my data collection with a thirty minute tape-recorded interview with Señora Alba. I inquired about her attitude and actions toward her students, her perspective on caring for her students, and the types of relationships she promotes in her classroom. I framed the questions with the intent of obtaining the teacher's espoused beliefs about caring for students and the type of classroom environment she believed conveyed a caring atmosphere. Sample questions during the interview included: How would you describe your culture for learning? How do you show that you care about your students? How do you perceive your students think about themselves in your classes? Do your students think they are an important individual in your class? How well do you know your students? What kinds of things do you know about your students? What do you want your students to say about you when they leave the classroom?

I collected field notes during informal classroom observations and in the hallway at different times of the day. During the semester, I also observed the teacher's interaction with students in and out the classroom and took field notes on the conversations and body language during teacher-student interactions. As Marshall and Rossman point out, "Through observation the researcher learns about behaviors and the meanings attached to those behaviors" (1995. p. 79).

Finally, I administered an open-ended questionnaire to the students on Señora Alba's teacher behaviors. The students were instructed to provide specific examples of her behaviors for each prompt. Sample prompts included: "I feel that my teacher cares about me" and "I feel that my teacher does not care about me." Students' participation was on a volunteer basis, and they received no tangible rewards for participating. Students were required to return a parent-signed consent form by the designated deadline. The students then completed the questionnaire in my university field-based classroom throughout the school day.

Data Analysis

I recorded the interview with Senior Alba and my research assistant transcribed it, each line numbered on the transcript, and the teacher identified with a fictitious name. I then compared the tape-recording with the transcript before proceeding with the coding process (Poland, 1995). Rubin and Rubin (1995) stress the importance of listening for themes in verbal communication because descriptions of how people behave or should act can convey their lived reality. Through thematic analysis, I analyzed 32 student surveys and field notes coding initial units of data. I used qualitative data reduction strategies that consisted of managing, categorizing and interpreting data (Marshall & Rossman, 1995) to create themes. After several readings, I gave a final list of themes to two non-participating researchers for further review and feedback.

Results and Discussion

This study sought to identify Latino high school students' perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey caring. The study was guided by two questions: What are Latino students' perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey caring? What are the characteristics of these behaviors? Although some of the findings from this investigation were similar to results in other studies, both of specific ethnic groups and of students, in general (Hayes, Ryan, & Zsella, 1994; Nelson & Bauch, 1997; Wentzel, 1997) it should be noted that there is some similarity between the themes in my study and those in these previous studies.

Major findings of students' perceptions generated 5 primary themes: (a) provides scaffolding during a teaching episode; (b) provides academic support in the classroom setting; (c) shows a personal interest in the student's well being inside and outside the classroom; (d) is always available to the student; and (e) is an empathic listener. The themes are listed in the order of priority according to the frequency analysis of comments for each theme. The discussion section begins by describing the theme, then illustrating the context of each theme.

Scaffolding during a teaching episode

While scaffolding, the theme most frequently mentioned by Latino high school students, may be viewed as the process of providing the cognitive input to support new learning (Monzó & Rueda, 2001), scaffolding in this study also refers to providing both cognitive and affective instructional support and assistance to students during a teaching segment. The student comment "Asks if we need help," suggests one way Latino high school students perceive a teacher to care about them during an instructional episode. Señora Alba's inquiry was perceived as caring because she responded to the students at the time of instruction and her behavior conveyed a desire to scaffold for the students. Reading students' body language and responding with positive actions and/or gestures contribute to positive learning experiences for Latino students.

Another comment, "Tries to help me when I don't get something," indicates the teacher's willingness to provide assistance to facilitate student learning. Too often teachers focus more on getting through the lesson's content rather than on student comprehension which may be viewed as uncaring behavior. The statement, "She wants me to try and get it," implies Latino students believe their teacher is sincere in caring for their immediate needs, therefore more likely to engage in learning (Daniels, 2005). The comment also seems to suggest a high level of trust and a strong affect between students and teacher, critical to Latino students' engagement (Franquiz & Salazar, 2004; Pizarro, 2005). Furthermore, statements such as "Breaks it down in a way for me to understand," "Works with me on an individual basis," "Helps us out in how to begin a project so we can get a head start," "Helps me by re-teaching the lesson," and "She will do whatever she can do help us understand better," reflect concrete behaviors the teacher employed to scaffold students' cognitive comprehension. Latino students expect a caring teacher to individualize instruction for them, provide guided practice or examples, distribute knowledge in ways that make sense to them, and review content, another form of scaffolding for them. Latino students' clearly articulate the need to abandon a "one size fits all" approach.

One Thursday morning, during an informal classroom observation, Señora Alba had just given an explanation in Spanish and stated, "Does that make sense? Want me to

explain it in English?" The students responded affirmatively to the question and the teacher immediately explained her instructional point in English. Her actions first accommodated the students' affective needs before continuing with the cognitive aspect of her Spanish lesson. Aside from engendering an inclusive atmosphere, the teacher's attention to student comprehension is an approach that may assist Latino students who might be timid or embarrassed to ask for help during instruction. Monitoring and checking for understanding during instruction are ways of assessing student learning. It is critical for educators to make a connection with each student as often as possible to assess whether to continue or review before introducing new knowledge. Providing assistance with academic learning tasks and ensuring comprehension are viewed as ways to care for students (Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Hayes, Ryan, & Zsella, 1994), critical to Latino high school students in this study. This type of scaffolding requires the teacher to be student focused rather than lesson focused. Rather than consciously focusing on covering content during instruction, this theme also suggests that educators need to be consciously aware of Latino students' affective needs to engage them in learning. Scaffolding, in various ways, is perceived as a form of caring that extends beyond the affective domain (Nieto, 2004). These results extend on previous research (Monzó & Rueda, 2001) by identifying specific teacher behaviors that address the affective domain. Latino adolescents believe a caring teacher responds to both their cognitive and affective needs during instructional time with the teacher.

A business like approach to teaching may not meet the needs of Latino students, therefore, teachers must examine the self and reflect on the way knowledge is distributed and the type of support afforded during a teaching segment. This theme suggests that teachers need to orchestrate a variety of ways for students to show what they know and are able to do, and above all, take the time to discover the reason for the student's poor performance or lack thereof. Only then, can a teacher assess and prescribe in a more valid and reliable manner.

Academic support in the classroom setting

According to the findings, Latino high school students view their teacher's candid concern and direct actions to improve failing marks as characteristic of a caring teacher. Providing academic support in the classroom setting, a second theme, is reflected by concrete actions that support academic gains (Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Nelson & Bauch, 1999). The philosophy of anything less than an "A" is not good enough, pervades our educational system, but the academic support for Latino students may be non-existent. What seems to be important to Latino students is the notion of knowing more than one opportunity exists for academic success, rather than one attempt on a prescribed day. This belief is reflected in the comments "Provides extra work to help my grade," "Helps us with our grades," and "Offers ways to bring up your grade in short ways such as extra credit." These actions, perceived as acts of care, help to keep Latino students more focused in school and can build confidence because they know their effort is not fruitless. Latino high school students believe that formally assessing them in different ways is a form of caring. When the emphasis in schools today reflects a mechanistic approach focusing on test scores and state rankings rather than ensuring student success, our educational system is not culturally responsive to students.

Furthermore, comments such as "Talks to me if I am failing," "Shows concern when you are not doing well with grades," "Will not let us fail," and "Worries about my

grades and supports me,” also convey concrete approaches to demonstrate a caring disposition towards Latino high school students. The comments express how providing individualized counseling and assistance in the classroom, and conveying a genuine caring attitude contribute to the Latino students’ perceptions of caring. Although teachers experience a tremendous amount of pressure given the demands and expectations dictated by a state and federal accountability system, those reasons cannot be used as scapegoat for not meeting the needs of Latino students.

Personal interest in the student’s well being inside and outside the classroom

Latino students viewed their teacher’s willingness to know them outside the academic arena and the personalization of her teaching as ways to convey caring. “When teachers care for students, they want to know about their experiences and backgrounds” (Pang, 2005, p. 219). An example of this aspect was documented in the interview with Señora Alba. She stated that she shares something personal with the students at the beginning of the school year. In doing so, she believes the action serves as a model for students because they tend to share personal information with her in private. Also, on several occasions while talking with Señora Alba in the hallway, I witnessed how her conversation with students conveyed a genuine interest in a personal illness or extracurricular activity. On one occasion the teacher smiled and stated to a male student, “Hector (pseudonym), we missed you yesterday.” The student smiled and his body language conveyed warmth toward the teacher for acknowledging his absence. More importantly, her behavior expressed to the student that he was a valued member of the learning community.

Interacting on a personal level with Latino students involves the cultivating of relationships. Reciprocal bonds involve a trusting connection between teacher and student in a warm and accepting learning environment. Señora Alba commented in her interview, “I tend to care a lot about them in that I want to learn something personal about each one of them.” Caring involves finding ways to know the student other than academically. An example of this idea was evident through a classroom artifact. Señora Alba created a poster located at the front of the room for students to place post-it-notes with their personal and extracurricular events. The system ensures a place for students to share their private lives with the teacher and provides a choice for the kinds of information students wish to share. Her system communicates to her students that each one of them is highly regarded and she is authentically interested in knowing who they are as individuals. “We are her students – part of because she sort of has to, but mostly because she wants to,” and “Teaches as if you were her friend,” are two comments that further support the importance of personal relationships and their influence on the affective domain. The students’ views reflect feelings of genuine caring and appreciation for the teacher’s willingness to want to know them as individuals (Valenzuela, 1999). Furthermore, “I want them to know that I care about them individually” was also expressed by Señora Alba. This sentiment is evident by the following student comments: “Asks if I need help with anything;” “Guides me when faced with personal issues;” “Asks me if anything is wrong;” and “She always asks me how I am doing or questions about me.” The comments suggest the value Latino high school students place on interpersonal relationships and more importantly, illustrate another aspect of caring perceived by Latino high school students. The findings suggest Latino students value the student-teacher interaction on a personal level. Strong relationships between teacher and

students foster academic commitment and the tendency to be more engaged in the learning process increases when students perceive acceptance (Osterman, 2000). These bonds are also empowering and culturally responsive to Latino high school students because they suggest a strong link to learning.

“Relationships are the heart of the caring classroom” (Letts, 1997, p. 9). This theme has been consistently identified in other studies (Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Franquiz & Salazar, 2004; Hayes, Ryan, & Zseller, 1994; Nelson & Bauch, 1997; Pang, 2005; Pizarro, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999; Wentzel 1997) as critical to students. Furthermore, getting to know students also reinforces the notion of support from an extended family, characteristic of many Latino families. In this case, the teacher may be viewed as part of the extended Latino family structure.

Availability

A fourth theme, availability (Hayes, Ryan, & Zseller, 1994), refers to the time afforded by the teacher to the student. Rather than meeting with students only during a specific time during the school day, Latino students viewed accommodating their schedule as an act of caring. To illustrate this idea, I relate the following anecdote. One morning during a pep rally, I joined Señora Alba on the second floor in the hallway near her room to watch the band and cheerleaders on the first floor. At one point during my time with her, she moved closer to the hallway and stated “I have students who come by my room before school; I need to see if they look for me.” This theme seems to suggest that those teachers who initiate extra time and opportunities to assist Latino students, rather than only during a prearranged time designated by the school culture, are perceived as caring educators. To further illustrate similar viewpoints students expressed “Helps us when we need it,” “Offers help whenever convenient for the student,” “She asks me to come in for tutoring,” “She is willing to stay and help anytime,” and “Helps whenever I ask.” The teacher’s actions reflect that the behavior is more than words; it is the physical availability and the commitment to help a student succeed.

When students have to work every day, are often absent to care for younger siblings, or have other responsibilities at home after school, their time for studying and homework is limited. Therefore, unrestricted access to a teacher’s support is less likely to marginalize students and consequently reduce feelings of alienation some students experience when their immediate needs are not addressed. Thus, Latino students perceive care when time is made to provide emotional or cognitive support in ways that complement their daily lives and schedules.

Empathic Listening

Empathic listening, a fifth theme, is demonstrated when a teacher’s interactions convey a sincere interest in what the student has to say. This theme similar in nature to results reported by Wentzel (1997), Hayes, Ryan, and Zseller (1994) and Nelson and Bauch (1997) conveyed a form of caring to Latino high school students. Latino students viewed paying attention to them as a form of caring because the teacher behavior communicates that what they have to say is valued. Some students commented “Listens to me when I have a problem,” “Asks for our opinions,” “Cares about my opinions,” and “Listens to us when we are talking.” The statements reflect the importance student perceptions place on being listened to as young adults. The adolescents express the need to have a sounding board when confronted with emotional dissonance. Knowing that a teacher solicits and appreciates feedback from high school students conveys a message of

accepting them as a real person and sign of respect. Likewise, conveying body language that is open and unreserved communicates a form of caring for Latino students. Often teachers, who are more focused with curriculum rather than the humanistic aspect of teaching, tend to ignore or solicit student input. Being ignored in the classroom, whether consciously or unconsciously, only serves to discourage Latino Students and reinforces a negative feeling tone.

Additionally, Señora Alba stated in her interview “I tend to have students before or after school just sitting and wanting to help me do something so they can just talk.” I also witnessed this on several occasions. One Tuesday morning I walked into her class and asked if she were busy tutoring. Señora Alba quickly responded with a smile, “No, we’re just visiting.” Empathic listening is an important quality needed in a diverse classroom setting because it reflects the desire to reach out and understand. Empathic listening, is similar with Nodding’s (2005) belief that “to listen attentively and respond as positively as possible are the very hallmarks of caring” (p. xiv).

Conclusion

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 Latino students’ perceptions. This study focuses exclusively on the Latino point of view, thus adding their authentic voices to the literature. Their statements suggest the best way to demonstrate care for them which may differ from what an educator may perceive to convey caring. “If we go back to the understanding that we live in a system that uses whiteness as the standard and hold white people as normal, then we see that others are being assessed as not normal, as less than the standard” (Kendall, 2006, p. 40). By highlighting Latino high school students’ perceptions of teacher behaviors that are most important as caring traits, their voices may be used to shape the type of care important to them. Fostering relationships, a common thread in the literature, is supported by the findings of this investigation but the Latino high school voice is the most important contributing factor. Second, since much of the previous work appears to focus on White middle school and university students (Hayes, Ryan, & Zsellar, 1995; Teven, 2001; Teven & McCroskey, 1997; Wentzel, 1997), high school students’ perceptions add new knowledge and a different component of what seems to be important and relevant to their positive schooling experiences. Third, while some of the findings in this study support existing work, the difference exists in the methodology. This investigation reported on themes gleaned from student statements rather than using a prescribed instrument to ascertain student perceptions on caring attributes.

Latino high school students are culturally and linguistically unique individuals who have experiences that may differ from the tone of the middle class voice that at times subjugates their ability to claim space within the classroom. These themes can be used as a springboard for future research. Further inquiry might include the following questions: Does immigrant status influence perceptions of caring behaviors? What differences exist between white and Latino student perceptions of a caring teacher? Does teacher ethnicity influence student perceptions of a caring teacher? Does teacher experience influence student perceptions of a caring teacher?

Final Thoughts

“The failure to acknowledge students’ perspectives typically arises from dissonance between the values held by the teacher and the cultural experiences brought to the classroom by the student” (Brooks & Thompson, (2005, p. 51). Latino students’ perceptions can be useful in dismantling teacher false stories about students not caring. Listening to their voices challenges the notion of White privilege to include others’ viewpoints and contexts to understand how subordination may occur. Listening to Latino student voices may be a significant step in removing institutional racism (Gay, 2000) whether conscious or unconscious, validate their Latino essence, and echo a culturally responsive pedagogy to strengthen their academic participation. While Latino voices are not a panacea for improving their educational experiences, ethnicity must be considered in the discourse about caring for Latino students (Rolón-Dow, 2005). Latino students’ perceptions of a caring teacher are worth considering as viable means in the quest to break down barriers that may prevent many Latino students from succeeding in school. In doing so, teachers can then begin to adequately serve the needs of our Latino high school students.

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