

A Caring Teacher: Exploring the Perceptions of Students and Teachers

Ms Garima Madaan

B.Ed, Department of Education, University of Delhi

Abstract

Care is an integral part of human life and hence a crucial part of education as well. When caring relations are successfully established between teachers and students, it helps in the all-round development of a student. This includes not just the cognitive but social, emotional, and ethical development of students. This is one of the goals of NEP 2020 as well. But, caring relations are threatened when there are gaps in the understanding of teachers and students about who a caring teacher is. This paper explores the perceptions of teachers and students about caring teachers and highlights the gaps that exist between them. It uses the interview method to collect data from its participants and highlights that while teachers take a very macro view of caring in terms of hefty ideas like “guiding” and “imparting knowledge”, students take a very micro view of it and tend to relate classroom behaviour and management of teachers to care. Students look for guidance but not from a place of imposing authority, which teachers often end up acting like. Students rather look for freedom and agency. Its conclusion offers some ways through which these gaps could be overcome, and the nurturing of caring relations between teachers and students could be facilitated

Keywords: *Care, caring relations, development, caring teacher, perceptions*

Introduction

We see the word care used ever so often around us. There are so many institutions claiming to care about us, hospitals claim that they care about people’s health, schools claim that they care for students’ education, insurance companies claim they care for people and their loved ones, and the government claims that it cares about the governed and the list goes on. In the realm of personal relations, many teachers and parents claim that the younger generation maintains an “I don’t care” attitude. The same allegedly uncaring generation keeps lamenting that “nobody cares”. Very often, students claim that none of their teachers cares about them at all. Teachers, on the other hand, claim otherwise. It is often with a tone of appreciation that we describe someone as caring, and with a tone of criticism, we say that the person does not care. Care, therefore, appears to be an indispensable part of every human’s life. Its absence is lamented, and its presence is desired. It appears to be an integral part of every human relationship as well. It appears that people care and also want to be cared for. Caring for someone and being cared for can give meaning to people’s lives and make them worth living. It

is a warm human emotion that can make a person feel protected and safe and make the world seem like a beautiful place to live in. Personal human relations are generally considered to be incomplete without an element of care. It, therefore, has a direct bearing on a person’s mental well-being too. Martin Heidegger (1962) declares care to be fundamental for a human being. While trying to answer what the meaning of being is, he puts care at the foundation of being itself. According to him, it is through care that the self authenticates itself. Since care is such an important part of any person’s life, it is undoubtedly an integral part of education as well. According to John Dewey (1897), education is not preparation for life, it is life itself. If care cannot be neglected in a person’s life, it can also not be neglected in their education.

One aspect of care is that it has a component of subjectivity, it is personally influenced and defined. That is, different people perceive and understand care differently. This can give rise to certain challenges at times. Though the one caring might be strongly convinced that what they are doing is out of care, the one being cared

for might not feel cared for at all. In Indian households, parents often persuade their children to marry only with their consent, and they often choose the person. They declare that they do this because they know better and are doing this out of care, as they don't want their child to marry the wrong person. But, very often, the children and parents do not look eye to eye on this. They claim that their parents are “controlling” and not caring. Such gaps, which are endemic to the nature of care, can therefore be observed/seen in education as well.

A study was conducted to investigate the perceptions of secondary school teachers and students about care in Lahore by S. Bashir and A.M. Malik (2020). Its findings indicated that a gap between their perceptions does indeed exist. This can be detrimental to the development of caring relations between teachers and students (Noddings,2005). According to Noddings, a caring relation is one in which there are two parties involved, both of which contribute to the relation in their own ways, and in which care of the one caring is recognized by the cared for too. If the cared-for claims that s/he was, in fact, not cared for, it is not a caring relation. The absence or distortion of such a caring relation between teachers and students can, in turn, impact students' academic achievement (J. Lee,2012). It can also affect their emotional, ethical, and social development negatively (Noddings,2005).

According to NEP 2020, “education must develop not only cognitive capacities – both the ‘foundational capacities’ of literacy and numeracy and ‘higher-order’ cognitive capacities, such as critical thinking and problem-solving – but also social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions”. NCFTE 2009 also emphasizes these dimensions for the “total development of human beings”. Since caring relations between teachers and students are needed to develop both the cognitive and social, ethical, and emotional capacities of students, it is worthwhile to look into the factors that might hinder such relations from being nurtured. One of the factors is the difference in the perceptions of teachers and students about who a caring

teacher is. Therefore, this study was conducted to look into these differences in the Indian context so that the aforementioned goals of NEP 2020 can be fulfilled.

This study, therefore, explores 3 key questions-

- What are the perceptions of students and teachers about a caring teacher?
- How are these perceptions of students and teachers different?
- How can the difference so found about the perception of a caring teacher between the students and teachers be used to facilitate the development of caring relations between teachers and students?

The next section of this paper states the methodology used. The third section discusses the significance of this study, the following section discusses the findings of the study, and the concluding section suggests ways to nurture caring relations between teachers and students.

Methodology

The study was conducted in two parts. In the first part of the study, nine students from different schools in Delhi were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule with questions around the theme of who is a caring teacher. Similarly, twelve teachers from different schools in Delhi were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule with questions around the same theme.

Out of the 9 students interviewed, 3 were in primary classes that are classes 1 to 5, 2 were in middle school (class 6-class 8), and 4 were in high school (class 9-class 12). Out of the 12 teachers interviewed, 5 are primary school teachers, 4 teach classes 6-8, and 3 teach classes 11 and 12. The idea was to keep the group as diverse as possible in terms of the level of schooling they were in (for students) or the grades that they taught (for teachers) to find out how the understanding of care changes across levels or grades for both teachers and students and where do the maximum gaps exist.

The idea behind conducting interviews rather than giving set questionnaires or using other research tools was that interviews allow more

responses to be accommodated and allow flexibility in the questions being asked. Questions asked had to be based on previous responses given by the person. Moreover, since students as young as 7 were also interviewed, questions had to be broken down to make it easier for them to comprehend and answer.

Significance Of The Study

The study would be particularly beneficial for teachers as it can help them identify what qualities and features students look for in a caring teacher. This can also help them recognize some of their unchecked behaviours and acts that may be seen as uncaring by the students or some behaviours and acts that they might perceive as caring, but the students don't. This would help them bond better with the students. This study is therefore significant in helping to establish healthy interpersonal as well as caring relations between teachers and students, which are in turn linked to better academic performance and social, emotional, and ethical development of students.

Findings And Discussion

Discussing Students' Responses

There is a commonality in the responses given by primary school students. They all seek security and protection from their teachers. For them, a caring teacher is one who pays attention to them in class, appreciates their work, and takes action whenever they are facing some issues which they cannot resolve themselves. A class 2 boy finds his teacher's act of not letting anyone bully him for being dark-skinned or not being fluent in English to be that of care. For another, a caring teacher gives them the freedom to be and also pays attention to how they are feeling.

Young Students can differentiate between a teacher who cares and one who doesn't base on how much teachers believe in students. The teacher who reasons out with the students is caring; the one who dismisses them and simply keeps scolding them is not. A student in class 5 said, "she (the teacher) is always angry and keeps yelling for no reason at all. She doesn't care for us". On being asked if a caring teacher

never yells at students, she further added, "no, a teacher can scold us and still be caring. But she should always tell us the reason why she is upset with us".

Since younger students are not mature enough to deal with a lot of situations like bullying on their own, they need teachers who pay attention to them and also are approachable enough so that they can share their issues with them freely. Teachers who scare or intimidate them cannot be said to be caring because they are not able to provide a healthy environment for students to express themselves, and this would hamper their emotional and social development, and many problems that they face in school might not get resolved, and they might not feel like going to school at all. Further, there might be students who have problems in their families for whom the support and care of teachers might be of all the more importance. There might be some students with psychological disorders like ADHD, or learning disabilities like dyslexia, dyscalculia, etc. For these to be diagnosed timely, a teacher must be very attentive toward the needs of the students in the class and must also maintain a safe environment where students don't feel restrained in expressing their concerns.

There is a very drastic difference between the perception of caring teachers for primary students and those in middle school. The older students are found to be mostly parameterizing care in terms of whether or not the teacher teaches well, lets them ask doubts, is impartial, and is ready to repeat the explanation of concepts that might not have been understood well by the students. Their idea of care and teaching seems quite limited to the classroom and academic activities on the face of it. It does not seem to have an emotional component involved. These students seemed to be a bit hesitant while answering the questions and guiltily answered yes to the question that their teachers care for them if they taught well. It seemed like they felt otherwise but could not say it out loud. A class 8 student said, "she (the teacher) keeps sitting on her chair and reads the lesson from the science textbook while we

remain silent. She teaches biology but makes absolutely no effort, as a result of which students have to take tuition. She is very strict and doesn't give me any chance to ask doubts either. She doesn't care about her students. All that concerns her is the completion of the syllabus". On being asked if all strict teachers don't care, he adds "our physics teacher is also very strict. Students are very scared of her, but she teaches well. She probably cares". Though this student says that the teacher probably cares, he doesn't sound very sure.

As students grow older, they start taking care of themselves too in some aspects, like maintaining healthy relations with others, protecting themselves, and having some level of emotional regulation. But, this is a time when their academic needs increase. The number of subjects increases and also diversifies. Students need their teachers to teach well. Their self-esteem also gets linked to performance, and they are also curious about various concepts. Therefore, at this level, a teacher's care is best shown through the pedagogy used. Moreover, since students have almost reached the Piagetian formal operational state or are at the end of the formal operational stage at the least, they already have some abstract concepts like justice, equality, and democracy defined for themselves. They also have the logical capability to figure out inconsistencies in teachers' behaviours too. Therefore, their ideas of caring teachers become more refined. They no longer look for protection or emotional support but rather egalitarian and inclusive classrooms where they also have a voice and freedom to express their opinions.

While middle school students still want their teachers to be impartial and inclusive and are ready to admit that some teachers may be caring in some aspects and not in others, high school students see care in absolute terms. They have firm ideas about what a caring teacher is and do not admit out of guilt that a teacher is caring or not. A class 12 student responds that "He(the maths teacher) teaches well. He can explain concepts but there is no scope for any kind of discussion or doubt-solving. His main focus is completing the syllabus. How can I say that he

cares for his students if his students don't matter to him?"

They logically argue their points as they have been in the Piagetian formal operational stage for at least 2 years now. For them, a caring teacher is one who teaches well and is also concerned about whether or not students are actually grasping the concepts. He/she should be open to answering students' doubts and must also be approachable. They also see care in terms of effort. The efforts made by the teacher to ensure that everybody has understood the concept and not just a few shows that they also link an Inclusive and equal classroom to a caring teacher. They are also able to identify when something is being done just for the sake of fulfilling the mandatory duties like completing the syllabus and refuse to call it to care if it is missing an element of effort and concern for students.

Primary school students have a more emotional connection with their teachers which seems to wane during middle school. As a result of this, their idea of a caring teacher is also very comprehensive. It is not limited to studies or academics. As these kids are not capable of emotional regulation themselves, they seek protection from unbecoming and unsettling situations. But, as the students grow up, they learn to manage other dimensions of their life with the help of friends and family and also develop their own inner strength and emotional regulation. This is very clear from the nature of the responses received that students do not expect intensive care from their teachers on this front. They expect care from them in matters related to studies and classroom conduct. They see freedom and approachability as important parts of the care of a teacher. They value the student-teacher bond and believe that for caring relationships to be established, the hierarchy between the two should be dismantled. The students link the idea of a caring teacher strongly to the values which are upheld in the classroom. They unknowingly showed their desire to study in egalitarian classrooms, not dictatorial ones. They slowly start seeing care in absolute terms and also start looking into the intentions of the

teachers and don't hang their hats on the outcomes alone.

Discussing Teachers' Responses

There is a common idea cutting across all responses given by teachers. This idea caters to the needs of the child. The teachers of primary classes understand how important it is to give special attention to every child and act accordingly. They also don't restrict their idea of care to academics and talk about it very comprehensively. One of them also mentions home-school continuity. She is the mother teacher of a section of class 3 in a government school, and that "school is the second home where students spend 6 hours of their day. As a teacher, I care for them by giving them a friendly environment as the child might miss their parents or their home too. They need someone who can also listen to them".

All primary teachers talk about the holistic development of students. They define care in terms of initiative and responsibility to ensure the holistic development of students and the creation of safe spaces for students so that they can voice their concerns. 3 out of the 4 primary school teachers interviewed linked care to guiding students towards the correct path and taking care of their emotional, social, and academic needs by observing, talking, interacting with them, and also by involving the parents when needed. Surprisingly, only 1 out of the 4 actually talks about forming an emotional bond with them.

Middle school teachers also share similar views about who a caring teacher is. They believe that a caring teacher is one who helps students move on the right path in life, guides them when they find themselves in sticky situations, and also works for their academic betterment. A TGT maths teacher says that "I care for students. I believe in them, affirm their efforts, and place my students at the centre of the educational process". She further adds that caring is essentially linked to the moral component of teaching. All 4 of the teachers interviewed mentioned "imparting knowledge" and "providing guidance" to be qualities of a caring teacher. When asked about how this could be

done, all of them gave almost similar responses revolving around teaching well and telling the students what is right and what is wrong.

The responses given by middle school teachers seem to reflect that teachers focus more on the assumed needs of the students and not the expressed needs. Noddings (2012) specifies this difference between needs. Assumed needs are the ones that the one caring believes to be the needs of the one being cared-for, while expressed needs are the ones the cared for has and expresses.

High school teachers have very different responses from primary and middle school ones. They are more flexible in their take on care and believe that their students really need mentors/friends, especially the ones who have entered the adolescent age. They do look at the details of the classroom as well. They were able to point out that students' feelings also can't be missed completely. Also all 3 of them also consider helping students out academically to be a crucial part of caring for them. A PGT teacher says, "I care for students by making them feel comfortable. At the adolescent age, it is important to make them feel like they have someone on their side as they deal with a lot of problems that they may not be able to share with their parents or peers. They are at a vulnerable age and need a mentor who can also be their friend, who is more experienced and can also be a confidante". All 3 of them state that it is not sufficient to simply focus on the syllabus as the emotional well-being of students also has a bearing on their concentration in class, and the student-teacher bond also affects how receptive the students are to what the teacher says and teaches. One of them also mentions that classroom dynamics also matter. He mentions that a caring teacher needs to focus on the classroom dynamics as well as the students need to be felt valued and heard too.

High school teachers are able to see the students as individuals in their own right who need not be dependent on them. They realize that students have their own opinions and ideas, and they need to be heard out too. They seem to be focusing on

both the assumed needs and the expressed needs of the students.

Gap in the Perceptions of Students and Teachers About A Caring Teacher

There seem to be differences in the perception of students and teachers about who a caring teacher is across all levels of schooling though the magnitude of this gap is different at different levels.

Though primary teachers and students both look at care comprehensively, students expect more emotional care with a sense of connection and personal touch, an idea that most, but not all, primary teachers seem to adopt. The responses given by teachers and students are almost similar and do not indicate much gap between their idea of who a caring teacher is. The difference can be seen in the behaviours that teachers and students consider to be caring behaviours. Though both of them agree that a caring teacher is attentive and considerate of their needs, students also mention that a caring teacher is appreciative and protective also. These ideas do not appear anywhere in the responses of teachers.

Even at the higher levels, the ideas of impartiality and openness that the students iterated in their responses do not seem to reflect in the responses of teachers. They don't seem to be aware of the idea that students look for a democratic classroom. All but one of the teachers talk of care in a very macro way. They talk of care being linked to the hefty concepts of "holistic development" and "guiding towards the correct path". But, they do not talk about the way they manage their classrooms or their interaction with individual students. They don't seem to link care to their behaviour and actions in the classroom. They believe that care lies in guiding the students by occupying a morally superior position- an idea that students seem to dislike a lot. Students want to be guided but not from a position of superiority. They want to be advised, not told what to do. All the students from middle school and high school declared that imposing teachers are not caring. Only one teacher was able to mention the idea that a teacher needs to be a mentor who is also a friend.

While teachers seem to view care as a macro thing, students, on the other hand, seem to perceive care as a micro thing. They do not want to see the teacher as an imposing authority. Rather they want their teachers to be with them, ready to listen to them and also acknowledge their views. Students believe that a caring teacher can uphold the values like democracy and promote dialogue, equality, and mutual respect in a classroom. This is one major difference between the ideas of students and teachers about care. None of the teachers except one mentioned the idea of being impartial toward students. Teachers believe that a caring teacher works for the betterment of the academic capabilities of students as well. But they do not mention anything about being patient with them when they ask about their doubts again and again. Students seem to take note of how freely they can raise their queries and doubts and link them directly to whether or not a teacher cares. Even when a teacher teaches well, s/he is not said to be caring unless s/he clears their doubts and does not criticize them for asking them in the first place. Teachers seem to have missed this point completely.

The teachers and students of high school seem to have a similarity in the idea of who a caring teacher is in one aspect. Both of them believe that a caring teacher considers a student to be a human in their own right, a human who needs to be heard and valued too. As adolescents start developing a certain sense of identity, they also start to respect themselves and want to be respected too. Teachers seem to understand this and treat them as such.

Conclusion

There is a shared understanding of a caring teacher amongst students of a particular age group. There are individual differences, but the broad idea is the same. According to students, a caring teacher is one who makes an effort to bring about their well-being, both academic and non-academic. Teachers who do not give space to students to speak at all are not considered caring by any student. In addition, teachers who refuse to repeat concepts even when they come to know that students have a doubt and are

simply aiming just to complete the syllabus are not considered caring.

There is a difference between the perception of students and teachers about who a caring teacher is. Students look for care in the details of how a class is being conducted and managed by a teacher. They look for features like democracy, equality, equity, etc. in a classroom and expect a teacher to try to incorporate these in their classes. Teachers, on the other hand, miss this point. They view care in education as being linked to the development of individuals. They are looking at a much higher goal and are missing out on the steps that need to be taken to achieve it. They have a perception of what the well-being of students is and are trying to achieve it, but at times are missing their real well-being. This gap between the perceived well-being and the real well-being of the students needs to be bridged in the mind of the teacher.

For this, communication needs to be established between the teacher and the students. This communication needs to be very open, and students must not feel scared or restrained in communicating their needs to the teacher. Teachers must be open to receiving feedback from their students and must try to obtain it from time to time so that a caring relationship can be established. Here, we are talking about dialogue between the teacher and the students.

Teachers need to understand that their idea of what's best for students need not be what is really best for them. They need to be humble enough to accept that they can't always make decisions that will ensure their student's well-being. They need to consider the long-term impacts of their actions as well. A student who is scolded a lot by a teacher who believes that it is a good way to make the student work might not realize that incessant scolding actually shatters the student's confidence, as a result of which he/she may perform even worse.

Teachers often believe that students are too unaware of what is good for them and immature too. As a result of this, they sometimes tend to get imposing. This makes the students feel not only not cared for but also like they have no agency whatsoever. This idea of being powerless

can lead to a lifetime of fear and a tendency not to take action to change one's life at all. When teachers encourage students to take a particular stream solely on the basis of marks, they push them toward identity foreclosure. Actions on the part of the teacher taken with a different understanding of care can scar students for life.

A caring teacher would be aware of what is happening in the classroom. Sometimes, some students bully others, a caring teacher would be careful of such or any other disturbing activities. A teacher also shows care when he/she is ready to step outside the syllabus and really engage with the students. This could be in the form of various activities like games or even simple discussions in the classroom. Listening to what the students have to say and trying to make them reflect on whatever their issues are would help develop critical thinking, a skill that is very important to live. This would also help in forming a bond with the students. This connection would make the teacher more approachable to the students, and the students would be more comfortable in expressing their needs. The teacher may not always be able to fulfil their needs, but she can definitely include them while planning her lessons.

In education, just the virtue of caring does not suffice. The teacher needs to establish a caring relationship with the students. Just claiming that they cared for the students is not enough if the students do not feel cared for at all. There are students who grudgingly and guiltily declare that a teacher who was strict with them and made them complete all their work on time cared about them, while in reality, they don't really feel cared for. A caring relationship between the teacher and student would also establish trust between them. The students would not doubt the intention of their teacher and would be willing to learn what she has to teach. The teacher, on the other hand, would have a better idea of what the students really need and feel. Teaching would be more effective if caring relations were to be established in the field of education.

References

- Bashir, S., & Malik, M. A. (2020). Caring Behavior of Teachers: Investigating the Perceptions of Secondary School Teachers and Students in Lahore. *International Journal of Innovation in Teaching and Learning (IJITL)*, 6 (2), 63-78.
- Noddings, N. (2005). *A challenge to care in schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (2nd Ed.). New York: Teachers College Press
- Noddings, N. (2012). The caring relation in teaching. *Oxford Review of Education*, 38:6, 771-781, DOI: 10.1080/03054985.2012.745047
- Lee, J. S. (2012). The effects of the teacher–student relationship and academic press on student engagement and academic performance. *International Journal of Educational Research*. 53. 330–340. 10.1016/j.ijer.2012.04.006.
- National Council for Teacher Education. (2009). *National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education 2009*. https://ncte.gov.in/website/PDF/NCFTE_2009.pdf
- Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. https://www.mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf