



Constructing the caring higher education teacher: A theoretical framework



Caroline Walker*, Alan Gleaves

School of Education, Durham University, Leazes Road, Durham, DH11TA, UK

HIGHLIGHTS

- We theorize pedagogic caring within a higher education environment.
- The study uses the perspectives of the teachers concerned.
- The methodology utilizes reputational case selection and grounded theory.
- There is scarce research into caring teachers in higher education.
- University caring is a function of personal belief and institutional philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to theorize 'the caring teacher' in the context of the higher education environment. The study was carried out from the perspective of the teachers concerned and adopted an inductive interpretive paradigm and within this, used grounded theory processes and techniques. Emergent categories comprised: a relationship at the centre; compelled to care; caring as resistance; and finally, caring as less than. The four categories were combined in the construction of an integrative model to theorize the teacher in higher education who privileges caring within their pedagogy, from the perspective of the higher education teachers themselves.

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1. Introduction

Good teachers and their teaching matter. According to Walker-Gleaves (2010), through the way that they plan their classes, the questioning techniques that they adopt, the level of aspiration and expectation that they engender, and the way that their classes are organized, such teachers appear to make a difference. However, research exploring the impact of particular pedagogical orientations on learners' experiences and achievements frequently under-theorizes the interactions between teachers and students due to the problematic nature of deconstructing the orchestration of skill and judgment in the dynamic environment of the classroom (Dallavis, 2014; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014a, 2014b). In addition, the literature concerning the links between teachers' interpersonal

pedagogic practices on students' learning gains, for example, the manner in which they address and respond to individual students, or the efforts made to understand their personal contexts more precisely, is very limited and equivocal (James & Pollard, 2011; Kyriakides, Creemers, & Antoniou, 2009). In addition, there is conflicting research about what specific characteristics of relationship-focused teachers are associated with particular and improved outcomes for learners (Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, & Major, 2014; Husbands & Pearce, 2012). Despite conceptual and methodological difficulties, such existing scholarship suggests that many good teachers do exhibit a bounded array of practices and behaviors underpinned by what is termed a relational approach to pedagogy, and an important element of such instructional behaviors appears to be characterized by students and teachers alike as 'caring' teaching (Agne, 1992; Hattie, 2003; Sawatzky, Enns, Ashcroft, Davis, & Harder, 2009).

Caring teaching in practice appears to comprise two main

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: caroline.walker-gleaves@durham.ac.uk (C. Walker).

pedagogic elements – the active fostering of and maintenance of pedagogic relationships above all else, and within these, the privileging of trust, acceptance, diligence and individual attentiveness (Curzon-Hobson, 2002; Docan-Morgan, 2011; Goldstein, 1999; McCormick, O'Connor, Cappella, & McClowry, 2013; Rudasill, 2011). These pedagogic bonds hold at their centre notions of reciprocity, the situation of 'the other' and the significance of reflexivity in responding appropriately (Goldstein, 1999; Noddings, 1986; Rendón, 1994). In turn, caring teachers translate these concepts into coherent bodies of practice whereby they respond to students with timeliness, know students with insight, encounter students with authenticity and treat students with consistency (Artino, Hemmer, & Durning, 2011; Gay, 2010; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014b). According to Thayer-Bacon and Bacon (1996): 'teachers who care about their students are remembered, effect change, stimulate growth, and are more likely to be successful at teaching their students' (p. 255).

However, the literature suggests a complex relationship between the multifaceted nature of pedagogic care, raising questions of how and whether teachers classified as caring enact such practices consistently over time, whether all aspects of caring teaching are necessary for being a 'caring teacher' and the impact upon learning outcomes for students (McCormick et al., 2013; Rudasill, 2011). Although there are several studies that examine first-hand teacher narratives of pedagogic care (Barber, 2002; Docan-Morgan, 2011; Lähteenoja & Pirttilä-Backman, 2005; O'Connor, 2008), and adopt interpretive stances on students' testimonies of being recipients of caring teaching (Larson, 2006; Ravizza & Stratton, 2007), almost all have been carried out in compulsory, school-age contexts, rather than in higher or university educational settings. Furthermore, there are very few studies that seek to comprehend 'caring teaching' more completely and particularly from a perspective of constructing theory about caring teachers themselves (Walker-Gleaves, 2010; Velasquez, West, Graham, & Osguthorpe, 2013). This research seeks to contribute to the scholarship in this area, and theorize the caring teacher within higher education.

2. Literature review

In pedagogic terms, practitioners, teachers and tutors alike are obliged to care (Noddings, 2003; Thayer-Bacon & Bacon, 1996; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). The concept of caring as the basis of a mindful teacher–student relationship is enshrined in the professional standards of education systems worldwide, and evident in the foregoing descriptions of professional practice is care in its diversely relational forms, as human concern, moral responsibility, individual attentiveness and personal responsiveness. Primary and secondary schooling teachers in the UK for example have both common law and statutory duties of care explicit within the Secretary of State's guidelines and the UK Teachers' Standards and they must, 'build relationships rooted in mutual respect' (DfE, 2013, p.14). In the USA, the California Standards for the Teaching Profession exemplify Standard 1 – 'Engaging and Supporting All Students in Learning', by requiring the use of knowledge of students to engage them in learning, and specifically asks teachers to 'build trust with students and foster relationships so that students can thrive academically' (CSTP, 2009, p.5). Similarly, the New Zealand Practising Teacher Criteria have as their first key indicator of fully certificated teachers' practice 'To engage in ethical, respectful, positive and collaborative professional relationships with learners' (New Zealand Education Council, 2015). Furthermore, in the Task Force for Teaching Excellence Report to the Minister of Education in the Government of Alberta, Canada (2014), participants in the consultations said that excellent teachers are:

Compassionate, empathetic, caring, kind, understanding, and relationship builders. For example, a student participating in Task Force consultations said: "Truly having a good teacher is to be able to connect with him or her and their teaching method. More than just the way he or she teaches, but on a personal level as well. To be able to connect with someone will truly make it easier to understand what they are saying and to comprehend material in depth". (p.19)

However, the place of relationships, especially caring ones, internationally within higher education is far less clear and their discourse within the sphere of professional obligation is markedly different. For example, under the UK Professional Standards Framework for Higher Education, academics must 'develop effective learning environments and approaches to student support and guidance' and 'respect individual learners and diverse learning communities' (HEA, 2013, p.3). In the context of the USA, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education Studies (2006) only requires higher education teachers to create educational environments that are 'safe and secure' and to be 'trustworthy and maintain confidentiality' within the arena of teaching effectively but there is no overt and explicit mention of constructing attachments or of building bonds or the reasons for doing so, as with other professional frameworks.

Although there are very few studies in the area of teacher–student relationships in general in higher education, and within these, even fewer on caring relationships, such studies as they exist have repeatedly suggested that creating purposeful relationships within higher education is critical to student learning (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Deakin Crick, McCombs, & Haddon, 2007; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014a). Furthermore, research appears to suggest that caring relationships in particular are of great salience to students, who appear in such studies to be convinced of their educational impact and thus that teachers in higher education should by extension, be 'caring' (Walker, Gleaves, & Grey, 2006; Docan-Morgan, 2011; Hixenbaugh & Thomas, 2006). Qualitative studies analyzing the nature of caring teaching in practice (Walker et al., 2006; Dallavis, 2014; Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Goldstein, 1999; Larson & Silverman, 2005; Velasquez et al., 2013) establish the extensive relational nature of pedagogic care, suggesting that caring teachers have particular 'exemplifiers' in their practices including the ability to: listen to students, show empathy, support students, actively support students' learning, give students appropriate and meaningful praise, have high expectations of work and behavior, and finally, show an active concern in students' personal lives. However, the research that exists in this field does not expose which of these exemplifiers are more significant in the construction of the 'caring' teacher. This study, by seeking the teachers' perspectives on pedagogic care, and allowing possible muddiness between motivations and practices to emerge, offers a rich account of what these exemplifiers mean in a higher education context, and as such, given the complexity of delineating the 'good' and 'caring' teacher, is an important contribution to the literature.

We can assert that pedagogic care manifests itself at several different levels simultaneously, with individual 'caring' teachers constructing a complex web of intentions and actions (Goldstein & Lake, 2003). But what emerges from the literature is the variation in the degree to which such teachers create the conditions, or in some cases, take responsibility for, students' eventual achievements. Related to this, there is evidence to suggest that 'caring' teachers define learning outcomes more diversely and in make fewer distinctions between cognition and emotion as they impact upon learning. Such a vision of teaching is articulated by Rendón (2009) as 'sentipensante pedagogy' that involves the ability to see the

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