

# Caring as Classroom Practice

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Jennifer was anxious, yet excited about the upcoming school year. A beginning teacher, she had a classroom to organize. There were desks to arrange, learning centers to create, and posters to affix to the walls. Jennifer also needed to prioritize her teaching and learning goals for the coming year. She realized the value of bringing thoughtful social studies to the forefront of her second grade classroom. Jennifer wanted a classroom that would nurture emerging citizens. She hoped that, if she created a caring classroom environment:

My students could gain valuable knowledge, values, and attitudes to make sense of their world and grow into thoughtful and humane people. For me, caring stands at the center of building good citizens. It's the glue that holds everything else together.

But, how could Jennifer incorporate caring into her social studies practice and overall classroom environment? Would she only demonstrate caring? What specific instructional strategies could Jennifer implement into her daily practice? Finally, how might Jennifer and her students put caring into action?

## Planning for Caring

When planning for the new school year, K-2 teachers like Jennifer might consider the benefits of creating a caring classroom. Caring has the potential to not only encourage thoughtful social studies practice, but to also enhance it. Indeed, recent research has documented the benefits of a caring classroom for student engagement and pro-social behaviors.<sup>1</sup> The best K-2 teachers also recognize the importance of caring in the development of responsible citizens. Such teachers plan and design their classroom environment, instruction, and the social studies curricula in ways that cultivate effective civic practice and development. Their caring classrooms promote a sense of community and safety in young children.<sup>2</sup> Norms are established which value learning, high academic standards, and positive interpersonal experiences. K-2 learners feel safe when asking questions. Through encouragement, students collaborate and work towards developing life-long learning skills. They discover how to grapple with social problems and issues while making thoughtful value judgments. Each of these skills includes an element of caring, and each one promotes powerful social studies teaching and learning.

Despite differences in gender, background, and cognitive abilities, all members of the classroom desire caring relationships. Encouraging acts of caring helps children feel empowered and develop a moral sensibility. Acts of caring can be part of communal learning and problem-solving. Individual self-interests can be redirected toward common goals, and everybody can benefit from the outcome. For that reason, caring helps young learners to form healthy interpersonal relationships,<sup>3</sup> a hallmark of elementary and early childhood education.

## A Way to Nurture

Social studies in grades K-2 establishes the foundation for the entire social studies curriculum in the years to come. It gives young learners an emergent sense of those values, knowledge, and skills required of citizens. Caring, within the context of social studies education, helps children develop a spirit of inquiry toward knowledge and learning.

Caring for young learners requires a special kind of attention from teachers. When teachers engage in caring practices, they promote feelings of competence and allow students to make choices. In turn, young learners respond by expressing interest, creativity, and sustained effort during academic activities. Caring for students requires more than a style of interaction. It requires teachers to offer children real opportunities to develop their cognitive, social-emotional, and moral domains.

In the classroom environment, a teacher can foster expectations that an individual will do his or her best. These expectations include making students responsible for utilizing learning strategies, exerting effort, and seeking new challenges. Since this requires attention to students' individual skill and progress, teachers must take into account students' developmental needs. In a sense, caring prepares our youngest learners not just for civic participation, but also for life itself by modeling wise learning and healthy relationships.

## Resolving Conflicts

Social studies in the early grades illuminates relationships between people. Children often have a difficult time attuning themselves to the feelings of others. Young children believe the world and everything in it revolves around them. But children also gravitate toward a sympathetic understanding, which can provide them with new choices for resolving a conflict. A caring adult can guide a child to step outside of his or her immediate

perception of a problem and become aware of some of the factors that have created a conflict.

Central to caring is dialogue and reflection.<sup>4</sup> Dialogue involves active listening and responding to the needs of others. Angry responses can be replaced with listening, reflection, and more measured reactions. Dialogue, followed by a successful resolution to a conflict, can promote moral attentiveness and a new sense of confidence.

### Valuing Differences

K-2 learners construct social knowledge as a result of their application of analysis and reason. Their social understanding is influenced by peers, adults, social and educational environments, and institutions. Social studies entails more than helping K-2 learners cooperate with others in the classroom. It concerns K-2 learners' ability to formulate conclusions about such issues as race and ethnicity, individual rights versus the common good, and social welfare.

Caring as a classroom practice requires us to invite students to acquire, collaborate, and synthesize social knowledge from other people while valuing diversity. A focus on caring facilitates a learner-centered classroom sensitive to the cultural practices of our students. When we embrace this approach, we teach more than cooperative learning skills; we teach the generative possibilities associated with working collectively. Some might

argue that this approach somehow limits students' individual success. We feel, on the contrary, that collaboration expands each student's ability to process information. Students come to view thinking not as an isolated event, but as a process that often involves other people.

It is not enough to have students recite to the teacher the benefits of a caring classroom. Nor is it enough to have students discuss ways to make their classroom or community a better place. K-2 teachers must make caring concrete through their actions every day. A caring response requires moving schools toward more caring models, in a way that nurtures and sustains our schools and the communities in which they are embedded.



## Five Strategies for Creating Caring

### 1. Jobs that Matter

This strategy highlights classroom jobs as a time-honored means of increasing students' feelings of responsibility in a classroom community. What is unique about this approach is the use of nontraditional classroom jobs—or jobs that matter.\* These jobs include: friend, listener, helper, mediator, and advisor. Appoint two or more students to each job to provide them with collaborative opportunities.

### 2. The Caring Tree

On the chalkboard, write the word "Caring." Allow students to define the term. Read a children's book that includes a strong message of caring, such as *I Am Caring/Soy Bodadosa*, by Sarah L. Schuette.\*\* Discuss how the main character in the story demonstrated caring as virtue. Explain to students that they will make a Caring Tree. Ask two students to draw and cut out a large tree shape using green posterboard. Staple this to the classroom bulletin board that has been labeled with the header, "Our Caring Tree." Write the sentence stem "I am caring for others by \_\_\_\_\_" on the chalkboard. Ask students to complete the sentence, describing a situation or event. Then they can illustrate their own story, if they wish.

Describe this analogy: An act of caring for others is a gift that a person can give. Invite students to share their ideas for caring for

others. List student suggestions. Refer to the class list of caring behaviors, gifts to be given to others. Each student will select one caring act that he or she will agree to complete during this 9-week period. Encourage each student to create a "gift" in the format of a greeting card using folded construction paper. Each student will write about, draw, or paste pictures cut out of magazines to illustrate the action he or she has chosen. Offer yarn, markers, crayons, ribbon, foil, buttons, etc. for students' use to decorate the front of their gift cards. Label each gift with the student's name and staple it beneath the Caring Tree.

### 3. Picture Books

Picture books that encourage caring behavior are a) written at a K-2 learner's developmental level; b) have a well-developed plot; c) are skillfully illustrated; d) portray colorful and appealing characters; e) emphasize caring characters who help others or show compassion (consider others, share with others, engage in fair play, do their share, keep promises, fulfill commitments, show respect, or offer love and affection). Describe a caring interaction between a person giving care and one receiving care.

### 4. Role Playing

Role playing, skits, and drama provide students

with an opportunity to be creative while learning about caring for oneself and others. K-2 learners could find connections between the book your group is reading, their own experiences, and the world outside.

### 5. Put Yourself in the Picture

Find pictures in magazines of diverse situations. Take turns looking at a photograph or illustration and describing how that person might feel. Start at the physical level. Imagine what people in the picture see and hear. Are they cold or warm? Then imagine what emotions they might be feeling.

### Notes

\* Kimberly Rombach, "Help Wanted: Kids Who Care," *Teaching PreK-8* 32, no. 3 (2001): 58-59.

\*\* Sarah L. Schuette, *I Am Caring/Soy Bodadosa* (New York: Pebble Books, 2003).

Illustrations on pages 9–11 are from Human Rights Silhouettes. Fifth grade students created these wood sculptures and most of the backdrops with assistance from fifth grade teacher Jonette Ford and art teacher Mary Lynn Agnew at West Boulevard Elementary School in Columbia, Missouri.



## Caring as Thoughtful Social Studies Practice

We have made a case for why caring is an integral part of K-2 social studies. Yet, to understand why caring is intuitively a “good” concept only begins to enhance social studies teaching and learning. Like Jennifer, other K-2 teachers want to know how caring translates into classroom practice. Making caring a part of the classroom requires a commitment to creating an optimal learning environment. In such an environment, effective and engaging social studies instruction supports cognitive, social-emotional, and moral development. Here are three goals for creating caring classroom practices.

### Goal 1: Demonstrate Caring

A caring classroom environment does not occur in a vacuum. Young learners need to see caring demonstrated on a regular basis in order to engage in caring acts themselves. The teacher’s modeling of caring behaviors is vital to incorporating caring into the classroom setting. Whether during recess, lunch duty, or inside the classroom, teachers can exhibit such caring acts as courtesy and hospitality. Teachers can model how dialogue works, and can guide students in deliberative discussions. Furthermore, teachers can include positive emotional support and encourage student responsibility.

### Goal 2: Integrate Caring

Caring as a classroom practice means not just creating a sense of community; it means making sure that we differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all learners. Put into practice, caring supports learner strengths and interests in activities and learning experiences. It is reflected in what we want our students to know, understand, and be able to do when the academic year is completed. A caring teacher provides purposeful feedback and gives students opportunities to revise their work. If we are concerned about meeting the needs of all learners, then we will integrate caring into the overall classroom environment. Five strategies for creating caring as a classroom practice are shown in the **SIDEBAR**.

### Goal 3: Put Caring into Action

Often, an attitude of caring is not carried beyond our classroom doors. Why is this so? To what degree are we demonstrating caring in our schools? What projects do we have that show caring in our larger community? Our youngest learners can turn their dialogue and reflection into good works and deeds. As a class, students can engage in conversations about why humans care for each other, or refuse to care, in various situations. Once they have explored this “big question,” students could implement a service-learning project that demonstrates the characteristics of a caring society. They could organize a winter coat drive, collect toys for homeless children, or create a drop off station in the hallway for canned food for donating to a food bank.

### Emotional Safety

K-2 learners share their feelings and information about themselves with teachers who are affectionate and nurturing. Such close relationships with teachers lead to higher levels of student



engagement and achievement. Specific behaviors that promote nurturing relationships with young children include listening to their concerns, responding to wrongdoings kindly and with explanations (rather than sharply and with punishment), and showing positive emotions. When young children are asked how they know their teachers care about them, they describe teachers being attentive; addressing their nonacademic needs; and being fair. The personal relationships that these behaviors engender are particularly valuable for children who come to school lacking social and academic skills.<sup>5</sup>

The best K-2 teachers recognize the importance of caring as a means to enhance social studies teaching and learning. Although standardized tests feature so prominently on the school landscape these days, a well-designed, caring classroom can foster learning opportunities that motivate students to seek an intellectually challenging task and to strive to achieve their personal best.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, a caring, respectful classroom environment fortifies young learners' psychological need to feel a sense of belonging and relatedness to people and institutions. When young learners' needs for relatedness are fulfilled, they are more likely to redirect self-interest toward the common civic goals that are permeating the classroom setting.

Let's also consider that the social context for adults affects the social context for students. Teachers who feel respected, trusted, and cared about as individuals are in a much better position to offer the same support to their students. As a practice, caring cultivates civic and moral virtues and actualizes democratic values. We might construct not only a more stable and nurturing classroom environment, but a more just society, if we focus on caring. 🌍

## Notes

1. Gary W. Ladd, Sondra H. Birch, and Eric S. Buhs, "Children's Social and Scholastic Lives in Kindergarten: Related Spheres of Influence?" *Child Development* 70, no. 6 (November/December 1999): 1373-1400; Gary W. Ladd and Sondra H. Birch, "The Teacher-Child Relationship and Children's Early School Adjustment," *Journal of School Psychology* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 61-79; H. Kent Wilson, Robert C. Pianta, and Megan Stulman, "Typical Classroom Experiences in First Grade: The Role of Classroom Climate and Functional Risk in the Development of Social Competencies," *Elementary School Journal* 108, no. 2 (2007): 81-96; Jean A. Baker, "Contributions of Teacher-Child Relationships to Positive School Adjustment During Elementary School," *Journal of School Psychology* 44, no. 3 (June 2006): 211-229.
2. Chrystal S. Johnson, "Finding Our Place: Using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Teacher Personal Theorizing to Investigate Black Theories of Character Development," *Journal of Research in Character Education* 5, no. 1 (2007): 49-70.
3. Chrystal S. Johnson, "Making Space: Character Education in Social Studies Methods Courses," *Viewpoints* 38, no. 1 (2008): 6-7.
4. Johnson, 2007.
5. Robert C. Pianta, *Enhancing Relationships Between Children and Teachers*. School Psychology Book Series (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1999).
6. Robert C. Pianta, Karen La Paro, Chris Payne, Martha J. Cox, and Robert H. Bradley, "The Relation of Kindergarten Classroom Environment to Teacher, Family, and School Characteristics and Child Outcomes," *Elementary School Journal* 102, no. 3 (2002): 225-238.

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