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## **African-American Students' Perceptions of Caring Teachers**

by  
Carole H. Feddersen  
Cleveland State University  
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"Teacher don't care, she don't do nothing." Probably that phrase or something similar has been spoken by students on many occasions. As a teacher, I would be supervising students on the playground or in the lunch room and hear such despairing comments from the students. Then, later in the faculty lounge I would hear their teachers claim that they care very much about their students. It seems to me that there is a disconnect between the perceptions of the students and the perceptions of their teachers. The purpose of this study is to explore five children's perceptions of a caring teacher to determine if my perceptions of a disconnect between students and teachers has any support from the responses of these students.

While it seems sad that teachers and students do not always understand each other, I considered that part of working with human beings until I read a study by Wentzel (1997), who did a study on the perceptions students have of what makes for caring teachers. Her study focused on white, middle class children. I wondered what

minority children would say because there are differences among cultures as to attitudes and perceptions of schooling and Wilson and Corbett (2001) write about what urban students expect in teachers which emphasize engaging their students in academics.

In informal conversations with other educators, I have had numerous conversations about incidents where teachers claimed that they cared about their students but did not seem to show it in any observable way. Reasons discussed centered on the teacher not knowing how to show caring to students in a professional way and not understanding that behaviors can be interpreted differently by various cultures. For example, many Asian cultures and some African-American cultures consider it disrespectful to look a teacher in the eye. When the teacher tells the student to, "Look at me when I talk to you," leaves the student in a confusing situation. Should he or she be true to the culture or comply with the teacher?

There has been much literature and university coursework centering on the need for knowledge of diversity. Many teacher education programs include a course in diversity training that instructs about the differences that students bring to the classroom. Nel Noddings (1992) and Ronald Ferguson (2002) are two of many authors who have written about the importance of caring teachers. It can be considered common knowledge that teachers need to be aware of diversity and display a caring attitude towards their students.

Literature on effective pedagogy for teachers include empirical studies about caring teachers, such as Katheryn Wentzel's (1997) study, to be addressed in the following section. Teacher trade magazines and Internet resources for teachers provide plenty of ideas on how to show caring for students. "Affective" is an education term that

addresses attitude and when students have a positive one they tend to learn more. "Disposition" is another term that is one of the areas of pedagogy that emphasizes students' positive outlook about an increase in attitudes that positively influence learning.

Over my long teaching career I acquired a reputation as a caring teacher, as reflected in the many notes and feedback I received. Since I have taught in a number of schools in two different states and overseas, the consistent comments indicate I am perceived as caring. Discipline was seldom much of an issue, students seemed to be happy in my class, and often scored well on achievement tests. Thinking about why I developed an attitude of caring, what I come up with is my consistent attempt to see each student as an individual and try to view the world from his or her perspective. Often, when not sure of the student's opinion, I would just ask. Sometimes the answer was nothing I was expecting. When I decided to ask minority children for their description of a caring teacher I expected them to respond in terms of their culture but I was not certain of their responses.

### **Review of Literature**

The purpose of schooling is to acquire an education. But some groups have reason to place more value on schooling. Grand and Gomez (2001) discuss African-Americans valuing schooling for academic excellence. During slavery times they were denied an education and since that time they recognize the value of education. It is a key for them to open doors to better paying jobs. In this era of the information age, it is more important than ever to acquire knowledge.

Ladson-Billings (1994) urges teachers to have an attitude of caring which helps African-American students feel more comfortable in school so that they can learn. In her work with examining characteristics of effective teachers, Ladson-Billings found that African-American students place important value on caring. They expect the ethic of caring they look for in their community and organizations, such as churches, to carry over to the classrooms. There is an emphasis on personal accountability that translates as a caring teacher. Noddings (1992) also writes that the main aim of education is a moral one, that of nurturing the growth of students to be competent, caring, loving and lovable people. Teachers can model these behaviors. Dr. Ronald Ferguson also mentioned the importance of teachers caring. In a lecture at Cleveland State University on Sept. 13, 2002, he described how students are motivated to try harder and achieve more when they feel that their teachers care about them.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs includes caring. At the base of the hierarchy are the physiological needs, followed by safety. After that comes a feeling of belonging and love. This is more important than esteem and self-actualization (Liebert & Liebert, 1998). Once a student's basic physical needs are met, caring is the next important component to enable learning. Maslow's theory is that when all of the needs are met, the student has the best opportunity to learn according to his or her potential.

Culturally relevant teaching is teaching in a way that honors the culture of the students, such as the earlier example of whether or not to look the teacher in the eye when the teacher is talking. A culturally relevant teacher would not demand that students from such a culture look at him or her but would call the student's attention to the topic being explored. Ladson-Billings (1994) contends that culturally relevant

teaching should be sensitive to the student's culture. Noddings (1992) writes that caring cannot be achieved by a formula but needs to be individualized. This takes into account that people are different and one should not stereotype them. In addition, students are learning about themselves, their world and how they fit into it. They can explore how they feel about discovering their world and modify their perceptions.

From personal experience I have taught students with conflicting views of the purpose of schooling. Some saw it as a place to be or "hang out" until they were old enough to get a job or have a baby. Others tolerated school looking forward to recess and physical education to improve their athletic skills to become a professional, athlete. Finally, there were a few who trusted their elders' admonitions to work hard in school so that they could go to college in preparation of a well paying profession.

Following are some examples from my experience that illustrate the different perceptions of students of education. In my experience Asian children are often taught to revere the teacher and consider education a privilege. Latino children in my classes were taught to value education but family circumstances would be more important, especially for girls. I would often have Latina girls miss school to take care of younger siblings at home. My African-American students sometimes viewed education as something white people do. They also like to engage in conversation and dialogue with me while I was lecturing, which was not part of my preparation. Yet, the dialogues often gave me a better sense of what they were understanding of the material I was presenting. Experiences with these groups are supported by literature. Grant and Gomez (2001) in discussing how children are brought up in families, point out that children are taught to be sensitive to others in different ways, which vary with their cultures. So it is

possible for a diverse classroom to have many interpretations of how students can be sensitive to each other and responsive to the teacher. For example, Latinos tend to be affectionate and physically close to one another (Grant & Gomez, 2001). Latino children often touch their friends and their teacher, especially younger students.

Grant and Gomez (2001) continue to describe the differences among other ethnic groups, citing how Native Americans defer to the tribe. This is a communal attitude and conflicts with the values of independence and competition. If the teacher values competition and wants each student to strive for his or her best, there is plenty of room for misunderstandings with children who are not competitive with others. The authors give a further example of a Navajo child feeling very confused when told to look the teacher in the eye to show respect when the child was told to do just the opposite at home. This is an example of a misinterpretation between teacher and child that could be easily remedied if the teacher understood the background and culture of the child.

As well as cultural differences, the diversity could be environmental (Grant & Gomez, 2001). Some neighborhoods have values and traditions unique to them even though they are comprised of a number of ethnic groups. Socio-economic status (SES) can influence behaviors and ways people care for one another, such as having a formal sit down dinner or gather round a pizza using no utensils. Students need to be considered beyond their appearance and perceived ethnicity to what they truly experience in their environment. For example, consider a student who wears the same expensive set of clothing almost every day. While it is always clean and in good repair, it may be the only suitable clothing because the student comes from an impoverished

family. Another student may be excessively chatty and write long stories and reposts regularly in English but speaks no English at home.

Family practices relating to educating their children are more important to student success in school than family structure, SES, and other variables of family life (Hernandez, 2001). What the children learn at home affects how they view the world and their relation to it. Historically, African-Americans have looked to education for success, (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Knowing students' family practices and cultures makes for challenges in school because teachers need to know what each child experiences at home and the attitudes brought to school so that they can provide an effective learning environment for each student.

While family attitudes towards education vary widely, so do attitudes of educators. In response to the diversity of students, Stacy (2002) claims that African-American children act differently than European-American children in that African-American students tend to use louder voices, include more people in their groups, improvise some singing and dancing while socializing, whereas as European-American students tend to be quieter and not as animated. That does not necessarily indicate deficit in an African-American student. It is easy to qualify one kind of behavior as better than another when the teacher should be considering the behaviors as ways of expression. Deficit can be a debilitating attitude and if it is not merited, can negatively affect the student. In contrast, Hernandez (2001) explains that as teachers better understand their students' cultures they are often impressed with the eloquence of expression shown by the students. Sometimes students are reticent to share something of their culture because it is different or unfamiliar. But it may be a valuable learning

tool on which teachers could capitalize. According to Grant and Gomez (2001), stereotyping causes problems because it ignores culturally complex phenomena. When a teacher has a classroom full of students, in an effort to manage all of the activities, grouping and classifying can help keep the numbers manageable. But when the organizing is based on stereotyping, benefits are lost.

As well as teacher attitudes, pedagogy also addresses the need for diversity. For the purposes of this paper I will look at pedagogy as it applies to learning styles and student outcomes. Grant and Gomez (2001) quote Carla Cooper Shaw, "learning style refers to the characteristics students bring to situations that influence how they learn" (p. 48) which reflects their upbringing and perception of the world. A teacher cannot use only one style of teaching and expect a diverse class to thrive. Along with learning styles is a plan for classroom management that needs to be culturally sensitive (Grant & Gomez, 2001). Some groups tend to be more individualistic and competitive whereas other groups are more communal, such as the Navajos. This reflects Ladson-Billings (1994) remarks about culturally relevant teaching, which extends to classroom atmosphere and how students relate to one another in the classroom.

Student outcomes are important to teachers. Wentzel (1997) writes that studies of social support provide evidence that perceptions of supportive teachers are related to student outcomes in important ways. In this day of proficiency tests and emphasis on school achievement, Noddings (1992) cautions that such an emphasis may actually contribute to students' feelings that adults do not care about them. That is a sobering thought. There can be a balance so that students feel comfortable and achieve at their optimum, but it is tricky.

Noddings (1992) continues to urge a moral policy for education that would recognize a multiplicity of human capacities and interests. This seems to be contradictory to standardized testing. But it need not be, if teachers are mindful of the diversity of their students. Ladson-Billings (1994) stresses the need to capitalize on students' social and cultural backgrounds. In another source, Ladson-Billings (2001) claims becoming culturally aware as a teacher is imperative to success for the students.

"Student Motivation in Middle School: The Role of Perceived Pedagogical Caring," (Wentzel, 1997) is a study that I found compelling because it looked at the student viewpoint, something I have done, and reported results similar to what I have experienced. She began her study by stating that the literature examines characteristics of pedagogical caring mostly from adult perspectives instead of those of students. Her question was: how do middle school students characterize a caring, supportive teacher? Of the 248 eighth grade students who participated, 92% were White, 2% Black, 2% Hispanic, 3% Asian American and 1% other. The students answered a questionnaire that included the following topics: modeling caring teaching, democratic interactions, student as a person, student as a learner, teacher's evaluations of student work and other vague answers, (e.g. "nice"). The percent of students who valued each item as pertaining to caring teacher characteristics is as follows:

23	Modeling caring teaching
20	Democratic interactions
13	Student as a person
30	Student as learner
10	Teacher's evaluation of student work
5	Other

While her study was more complex, including looking at student achievement and inventories for psychological distress, pursuing social goals, academic effort and irresponsible and pro-social behavior, I want to focus on the above categories because based on literature and my own experience, I think minority children may answer differently.

### **Question**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions five African-American children have a caring teacher. My question is: how would African-American students describe a caring teacher? I anticipated them referring to valuing education as African-Americans have historically looked to schooling for success, (Ladson-Billings, 1994) mentioned earlier in this paper. What else they would say was difficult for me to predict. Another research question to consider was their relationships to their teachers, were they valued more than learning? Wentzel's (1997) suggested that was the case. Finally, did they perceive being in school as an enjoyable experience or was it required and thus, tolerated?

This study was conducted from a grounded theory perspective because the questions seemed affective in nature, which did not fit into any framework or theory

that I knew. By using grounded theory suitable categories or commonalities may emerge. My theoretical sampling of data collection by asking only three questions of five children seemed very brief, but I felt the last two questions that asked them to describe how a teacher would behave in a given situation would enable their perceptions to surface.

### **Method**

Five African-American students were interviewed. One each was in 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and two were in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. All of the students attended the same school, which was a predominantly African-American parochial school. The students were selected by the principal, who chose one from each grade, except 7<sup>th</sup> which included two students. There were no special instructions for selecting students based on gender or achievement level. The student needed to be willing to talk to the interviewer. The interviews were taped and took place in the computer lab that was vacant of other students at the time. Each child was asked three questions: 1. What is a caring teacher? 2. How does a caring teacher begin the school day? 3. What does a caring teacher do when lots of students are having difficulty learning the lesson? A limitation and bias of the study is the possibility that they knew me as a doctoral student and wife of an elementary principal. Probably none of this affected their answers but it needs to be mentioned.

### **Data Analysis**

In analyzing the data, the answers would be grouped initially under the three questions (1. What is a caring teacher? 2. How does a caring teacher begin the school day? 3. What does a caring teacher do when lots of students are having difficulty learning the lesson?) then further grouped according to topics the students discussed. I

grouped their remarks into six topics: pedagogy, persona, talking, listening, help, rules, and rewards.

## **Results**

Before discussing the topics I will address students' attitudes toward the teachers. The students perceived the caring teacher like their parents, preparing the student for life. This reflects *en parentis loco*, teacher taking the place of the parent while in school. Just as they see parents loving them but being strict or denying them some treat, teachers are the same in that sometimes they must do unpleasant things to help the student to grow. "Tough love" is an example.

One student referred to knowledge being important and valued the teacher helping the concerned student even though the other students did not show a desire to learn. The student phrased it, "they lost that little bit of knowledge" meaning that knowledge is more important to the student than succumbing to peer pressure to this student. Along with the knowledge, teachers having assignments ready was important, especially when the student arrived at school. The student perspective was that the lesson readiness shows that the teacher was prepared and ready to enable the students to learn, using time in school to learn. As well as having an assignment ready, writing the directions on the chalkboard for everyone to know what the expectations are is important. These directions give the student a better opportunity to achieve the learning. This also reflects Vygotsky's notion of scaffolding, which provides the student with necessary helps and prompts to learn the assigned task (Berk, 2002).

Students can influence teacher attitude when they cooperate. According to one of the students, when they cooperate with the teacher, the teacher will be kind, "...if you

don't understand something in your homework she would kind of help you understand it." Another student said, "The ones who are smart and get it quickly put [in] some groups. She (the teacher) can go to each group..." This supports the notion of community (Asante, 2000) that many African-Americans exercise by working together. This is an opportunity to use cooperative groups where the students respond comfortably. Ferguson (2002) also referred to this cooperation that spurs the students to want to achieve their best.

### **Pedagogy**

Most of the students' comments are categorized broadly under pedagogy. Four of the five students mentioned encouragement, giving examples such as, "thumbs up," or say, "nice job." Their more animated voices when talking about encouragement suggesting its importance to them. This is another example of how scaffolding can be used to both show care for the student and assist in learning.

### **Persona**

The next few remarks I group under a title of teacher persona because they refer to personality of the teacher. Showing an interest in the student was an indication of caring. This addresses the whole child, a holistic approach to teaching and the importance the student places on a relationship with the teacher. A caring teacher wants to teach students, which is a choice and desire on the part of the teacher. These children sensed the motives of the teacher and did not question their feelings towards the teachers. This is powerful, that teachers' attitudes can be transparent to their students. "Teachers not giving up" is also important, as one student commented. Even if the teacher was tired or did not feel like teaching, it was important to instruct. A caring

teacher would take time out from lunch to help or counsel with a student. Even though being prepared is very important, a caring teacher will put aside the next lesson if the previous lesson was difficult and needed review. This is important for those educators who are so heavily focused on proficiency preparation that the opportunity to learn a concept is rushed. These students valued learning concepts more. One student used the phrase, "teachers should be their own way" to express that teachers need to be genuine, not phony. That can be extended to the teacher being ethical and trustworthy.

### **Talking**

Quite a few remarks could be classified under talking as a means of communication. A teacher was described as caring when asking students about their weekends and vacations. They considered that showing concern for themselves as a whole person, not just a student in the class that particular year. For these students talking about an issue was important and they appreciated being included in relevant conversations. One of the students mentioned that the teacher would suggest, "we talk about this thing" which the student understood was an issue that they should be included in to gain information and provide input. It reminds me of teachers who use conversation with students to help them understand a concept. Often, when a group of people needs to understand something they talk it through. This activity also relates to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) where the teacher and other more knowledgeable peers help the student to learn. In this case, it could be academic or social.

## **Listening**

Along with talking, the caring teacher listens. Four of the students emphasized that listening to what the student had to say was very important, be it about the weekend, some problem or just the mundane routine events. This is the other side of communication, where the teacher listens beyond hearing the correct answer but pays attention to the whole child.

While teacher-student communications are important, the students felt that student-student interaction was also important. None of them felt it was right to talk during a lesson but during free time, when it is not necessary to be on task, to be friendly, have a community spirit. One student commented, "If you finish with your work they will let you talk with your friend so it's not real boring." This reflects the communal culture the students live in. Also, by talking with their friends they are practicing empathy and imitating the teacher's example. It is important for them to be able to talk to their friends and classmates, share their joys and sorrows. It is yet another example of the communal culture. Teachers model behavior and children often imitate it. When it is positive, there is a positive ripple throughout the classroom. This is an example of hidden curriculum.

## **Help**

Moving to a more academic focus, the students come to school to learn and perceived help from the teacher as a positive indication that it is happening. They valued the teacher being sincere about helping the student, not judgmental or distracted. One student talked about other students playing around, but the teacher was undeterred and helped students asking for help. The student gave no explanation for why some students

were playing around. I suspect there are many interpretations for that. Providing help at any time was important which reflects the busy lives of the students. Although they are all busy, the students view school as a learning environment that must take precedence over other activities.

Keeping with the dignity of the student, the teachers' help was appreciated when they provided clues and explanations so that the students could work at understanding the concept, not just rote memorization. This supports scaffolding and constructivism. Scaffolding is a strategy where the teacher builds the lesson in a way that offers support and clues that encourage the student to take on an increased responsibility for learning the lesson. Constructivism is a way of learning that allows the student to make meaning of the lesson by building on concepts already learned. Because the student has a personal involvement, relating to the lesson is easier (Berk, 2002). Extending the lesson to ensure the class understands what is being taught, was important as was providing more time for the lesson, more review and, if necessary, re-teaching. While this may seem boring to the teacher, these students seemed willing to review in order to understand, emphasizing their desire to learn.

These students took homework seriously and wanted help when they did not understand part of it. They expected a caring teacher to take the time, have the student come up to their desk for special one-on-one attention. Three of the students spoke about that in a way that they liked to come up to the desk for the special attention. Elizabeth Auster, (2002) in a Plain Dealer newspaper article about Ronald Ferguson's presentation at Cleveland State University noted the same, based on his analysis of research findings of the Black-White test score gap. He claims that, "there are few racial

differences in the amount of time students spend on homework and the importance to them of academic achievement." Perhaps, homework assignments should be re-evaluated for the students so that it is something they can do at home if there is no help there.

Reflecting the communal culture mentioned earlier, students suggested another way to receive help would be to put students in groups so that they could help each other, another example of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal development where those more knowledgeable help the others. The students saw interaction as a way to learn and not just so much socializing or party time. They also valued peer tutors that the teacher had selected.

Finally, if the teacher is having difficulty explaining the content, it is appreciated when a tutor is included or asks the student to stay after school. Going the extra mile for the student who is having academic problems was perceived as caring. It seems clear to me that acquiring an education was most important to these children and they gave some suggestions of how to be helped that reflect their socialization.

## **Rules**

The next section I label, "keeping the rules," but it is in the spirit of the teacher being in control of the class, keeping order so that everyone learns and no one is hurt, rather than dominating the students because they are younger and less educated. These five students talked about tough love, doing things that may be unpleasant but will help the child prepare for life's challenges, as ways that caring teachers should manage classes. "Sometime [sic] you play around and need discipline." Another student talking about teachers who are strict explained their behavior as "a caring teacher would feel

like another parent." The students understood that when they grow up life will have many hardships and it is to their advantage to be well prepared. They consider a caring teacher one who will help them prepare themselves. The students also expect the teacher to be strong and uphold the rules. However, the rules must be fair and age-appropriate. Younger children need to be guided differently than older ones. I think this reflects an attitude that these children understand the needs of younger children to be different even though they are part of the group, again the communal spirit. If the student did not follow the rules, it was fair to lose points or receive the consequences. However, learning was not to be compromised. It is easy for teachers to get frustrated and be very strict with a class, having every student stop all activity in order for the teacher to feel in control of the class. However, it is difficult for learning can take place in such a restrictive environment. This kind of behavior was not viewed by the students as that of a caring teacher. While none of the students said so, I understood that they expected the teacher to be in charge of student behavior so that learning can continue and not be waylaid by student misbehavior.

Generally, when caring is mentioned, hurting is seen as the opposite. In keeping the interviews positive nothing was explored or encouraged to discuss that could be considered negative which could be a limitation . Only one student said that a caring teacher would not hurt anyone. I found this to be curious as to why such information was volunteered in the negative way. Do students view teachers as hurting them? Would the hurt be emotional or spoken or physical? I know from my own teaching experience I have heard teachers say some very cruel things, withhold recess and inflict other unpleasant punishments.

But that was only one comment, the rest of the comments focused on if the student were hurt by some other means, either physically or emotionally, the teacher would show concern. The teacher would not care whether it was in school or out, whether it was the result of some deliberate act or just bad luck. They did have more to say about emotional hurts and self-esteem. They expected the teacher to talk to such a student promptly but privately. Whatever is discussed between the two of them remains with the two of them. Confidentiality is important, as is following up and being there for the student. Listening rather than preaching at the child was also important.

One student spoke at length about bathroom privileges and felt that a caring teacher would be realistic about the issue. I interpret this as students want the teacher to be aware of their physical needs and act appropriately. Yet, I sensed the student was trying to describe a feeling of autonomy and trust from the teacher when bathroom privileges were honored. I think of Maslow's hierarchy of basic needs (Liebert and Liebert, 1998). By the teacher meeting the basic needs, this student understands there is more caring and other needs can be addressed.

### **Rewards**

As a reflection of the emphasis on gaining an education, rewards was a small issue. Three of the students brought it up. The students who did, felt that the teacher should acknowledge or validate achievement but nothing elaborate was expected, nor appreciated. In fact, they may be more motivated with a very small reward such as a smile. Other rewards that the students mentioned were "high five," thumbs up and put a star on the board for the whole class. They wanted to be acknowledged as part of the group but nothing more was necessary.

Finally, I asked one of the students if there were a lot of caring teachers and the response was, "no." I do not know what to make of that remark, but overall, what the students described as a caring teacher could be performed by any teacher. In answer to my question, briefly, students valued caring teachers who emphasized education and included the student in the classroom community. While it is difficult to compare these five students to Wentzel's (1997) study, these five seemed more focused on schoolwork and being part of the learning community. I would expect other minority students who are being raised in a more communal environment to lean more towards what these five interviewed students perceived.

## **Discussion**

Students expect to cooperate with the teacher in order to learn. While the students do not perceive themselves as equal to the teacher in knowledge, they expect to be treated fairly. They trust the teacher and expect to be trusted in return. When there is a need for confidentiality, the teacher will honor that.

When the teacher uses the pedagogies implied by the students, the outcomes will include an inclusive community, self-respect and education. The students expect to be included and feel that their ideas are of worth. They also want to show care and concern for their classmates. Self-respect and a feeling of self-worth are important and the teacher does this by caring for the whole child such as asking about the weekend or engaging in other conversation about the student as a person. The outcome of school is education that prepares the students for life. The theory that emerged from this study is that students have an intuitive sense of how they learn and what activities can help them learn. They expect the teacher to know them, treat them with consideration and fairness

while always emphasizing learning and increasing their knowledge. These five students expected school to prioritize learning as the most important activity.

Since these five children were African-American, they reflected the communal approach that many of their ethnicity practice. The students gave directions on how to teach them in a way that takes positive advantage of their communal socialization, just as Ladson-Billings (2001) suggested. In Wentzel's (1997) study, communal and individualized socialization was not addressed but democratic interactions and student as a person were. Wentzel's study showed the two categories, democratic interactions 20% and student as a person 13%, together, 33%, being a little more than student as learner 30%, which I understand that self-respect is about as important as education to the students in the survey. My five students emphasized education in nearly all comments, suggesting education alone was the most important characteristic of a caring teacher.

From literature and personal experience, I expected the students to talk about being part of a community and valuing education but not to the extent that they did. I did not expect to hear anything about suggested pedagogy from them but they covered the topic of effective teaching strategies for them very well. It supports the view of the current Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, that content knowledge is more important than methods or strategies of teaching. In the debate over training teachers, this suggests that being a content area specialist as being most important. If the teacher knows the students, relevant pedagogy ought to be easy to implement.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The three questions seem very small but they produced a wealth of information. There could be more questions or prompts that would elicit more information about the communal or individual kind of socialization. Questions could also be more specific about self-esteem and feeling included in the classroom. The students could be asked to comment more specifically on what they view as knowledge and the importance of education.

Questioning five children of one ethnicity gives results that are difficult to generalize, but asking a few more students of other ethnicities and socio economic groups may give results that could be applicable to a diverse group.

A quantitative study using a questionnaire like Wentzel's (1997) would best serve inquiries as to what percentage of which ethnicities would characterize caring teachers in specific ways. Such results could show if a given ethnic group would have specific perceptions of a caring teacher. There could be information on differences between socioeconomic groups and family structure. A qualitative study asking a few students that represent various social groups may give more insight into how their socialization would affect their education.

One of the topics that came up in the interviews was academic achievement. The students interviewed described the purpose of caring teachers was to help them achieve, which is supported by the following literature. When teachers teach in a culturally relevant way, as suggested by Ladson-Billings (1994) achievement scores rise. Ronald Ferguson (2002, September 13) said the same thing in his lecture at Cleveland State, mentioned earlier. The importance of caring teachers has been documented refer to

(Noddings, 1992), but this was not the purpose of my study, however, the grounded theory approach enabled me to identify this concept.

Currently there is discussion on the best program for teacher preparation, one of the future teacher being an expert at the content knowledge or being versatile in large number of teaching strategies or methods at the expense of studying content in depth. The comments of these five children have pushed me over to content knowledge being most important side of the argument because students can help their teacher use suitable methods for them. It is basically what I have been doing for a long time and advising others. I feel I have a little empirical evidence to support my claims. Another area for future research would be how much do children know about what strategies work best for them and what they need to know?

Using grounded theory of research brought up the following categories of learning: Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development with its scaffolding technique that helps students learn from those more knowledgeable around them. Similar to this is constructivism, where the students build their knowledge with collaboration with their peers and teachers being an important part (Berk, 2002). The categories fall into a communal grouping which are scaffolding, collaboration and constructivism as in a group approach. These categories are reflected in pedagogy as suggested by the students.

In conclusion, I think my idea of teachers knowing their students well is the best way to serve them and enable them to learn. Students want to be treated fairly and seem to have a reasonable idea of how the teacher should act to enable them to achieve at their optimum. While students vary in how they are raised and socialized, a teacher

cannot stereotype or make assumptions. I would like to pursue the importance of teachers knowing their students but also knowing the general culture of the school community and environment. When teachers work in communities different from where they live or were raised, there can be opportunities for misunderstandings. There is need for diversity awareness and multicultural education to continue and improve.

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Carole H. Feddersen is a doctoral student at Cleveland State University. After 27 years of teaching elementary school she is studying motivation and achievement.